

## M. A. Smith History

This is a brief early history of the church written in 1867 by its pastor, the Rev. M. A. Smith. The original is written in a magnificent script and is available in the church archives.

History of Wenrich's Church  
Lower Paxton Township Dauphin Co. Pa.

Drawn up by M.A.S.

Precisely when the so-called Wenrich's Congregation was organized cannot now be ascertained, inasmuch as the Church Book does not give an account of its organization. Nor is it known whether the Lutheran or Reformed Congregation was organized first or whether both were organized at the same time. The Church Book was commenced in 1791 which is the date of the first Baptisms. From this it may be inferred that the congregation or rather congregations were organized in that year. In the year 1793 certain Rules and Regulations were adopted under the title, "Regeln und Einrichtungen der Gemeinschaftlichen Kirche Welche unter des Namen von Wenrich's Kirche bekannt ist." These "Rules" which are very strict were in all probability drawn up by the Rev. William Kurtz of Jonestown, who was at that time Pastor of the Lutheran Congregation. They were printed in 1833 with a view, no doubt, of counteracting Weinbrennerianism which was at that time threatening the congregation.

The first church was built in the year of Our Lord 1791 or rather it was commenced in that year, for it was not finished till 1794, which is the date which stood over the pulpit in the old church. It was made of hewn logs – "eine Block Kirche" – about 35 x 40 feet in size. The timber was given by the members, each furnishing his part as he was able. There was preaching in the church long before it was finished. Temporary seats were formed on which the people sat – without fire in winter – during divine service. The reason why the church was not finished at once, was because they did not feel themselves able to do so, and it was a principle with our German forefathers not to go beyond their means or run into debt. The church was erected on a piece of ground containing about four acres, conveyed to the two congregations for that purpose by Francis Wenrich and Elizabeth his wife.

The first German Reformed Ministered [sic] who labored here stately [sic] was the Rev. Anthony Hautz, the founder of the German Reformed Church in Harrisburg. Rev. William Kurtz was the first Lutheran Pastor. Rev. Anthony Hautz continued as pastor of this church until about the year 1797. Mrs. Elizabeth Heckert (Rev.d. Peter S. Fisher's motherinlaw [sic]) was confirmed by him, and is, as far as I can learn, the only surviving Catechismen of Mr. Hautz in all this region in which he once labored.

After the resignation of Rev. A. Hautz there seems to have been a long vacancy, for I cannot find that any one served the Reformed Congregation till the year 1808. Though it is likely that the congregation had at least occasional preaching. Possibly the Pastor of the Lebanon Church may have supplied it with occasional preaching.

In July, 1808 the Rev.d. Philip Gloninger of Lebanon Pa. (a brother of Dr. Gloninger still living in that place) became Pastor of this Congregation in connection with Harrisburg, Middletown, Hummelstown and Schupps. Mr. Gloninger had studied Theology under Rev Dr Becker the elder of Baltimore. He is said to have been an "able man and a fine speaker." His labors were blessed and the congregation rapidly improved under him. He

had large Catechetical Classes and received many into the Church by the solemn rite of confirmation. His communions, according to the lists of them found in the old Church Book, were comparatively large. A few of his Catechisms are still living. These speak of him as having been an earnest devoted man of God's faithful in dealing with his Catechisms, warning them against Sin, and urging them most earnestly to give themselves to the Savior. The text of his introductory Sermon was Esther 4:16 last clause: "Komme ich um, so komme ich um." Mother Heckert who related this fact to me said, "Und ganz gewiss er ist auch umgekommen." It seems that on a certain occasion in going to his appointments, he crossed or attempted to cross the Swatara on the ice. The ice gave way and he and his horse sank into the deep water. But providentially he made his escape. Yet from that day was dated the decease which some time after that terminated his earthly existence.

In June 1814 on account of declining health he was compelled to close his labors in this congregation. Then followed another vacancy which continued nearly two years. In April 1816 the Rev. Frederick Rahausen took charge of the congregation and continued its pastor till April 1819. This father died at East Liberty, Pa. July 15, 1865 at the age of 83. He was present at the first meeting of the General Synod which convened at Pittsburg in Nov. 1863. Rev. Mr. Rahausen was also an earnest faithful minister, who doubtless did all he could to advance the cause of Christ among the people to whom he ministered in holy things. It seems he gave some attention to the invention of perpetual motion. This involved him in pecuniary loss.

In October 1820 the Rev. John Weinbrenner of Maryland became Pastor of Harrisburg and affiliated congregations, of which Wenrich's Church still continued to be one, though after the resignation of Mr Weinbrenner it was separated from Harrisburg. He continued to serve this congregation till April 1826. Mr. Weinbrenner was a student of Rev. Samuel Helffenstein, D.D. who died in October 1866, and was a man of respectable ability and of fair preaching talents, such as gave him considerable power over the feelings of his auditory. As a preacher he was zealous and earnest. Yet like all men he had his weaknesses, among which was unquestionably no small amount of vanity. He was also self-opinionated. There is a father yet living in the ministry to whom he remarked at one time: "You and I could just as well start a new sect as any one else." But this father would not join him, and so he started a new sect himself. During the last two years of his ministry in the Harrisburg Charge Mr. Weinbrenner began to deviate from the faith and practice of the German Reformed church, left its "old paths" and ran out into various errors and vagaries. These things were noticed and disliked by those who were well grounded in the faith. Finally he rejected Infant Baptism and preached against it. This aroused the congregation who were unwilling to tolerate such gross departures from the standards of the Church of their fathers. And accordingly an election was held in the month of March 1826 to decide whether Mr. Weinbrenner should any longer continue as Pastor or not. The decision was given against him by a majority of one vote. After the election was over and finding that he had lost it, Mr. Weinbrenner, walking out from the church through the graveyard, he said: "Diese Wenrich's Kirche will zerstoren, und wenn sie mich nicht in den Hausern (Schulhausern) predigen lassen, so predige ich auf der Strasse." This I have from the lips of Jacob Hicks Esqr. Having lost the election Weinbrenner preached his farewell sermon in April 1826. After this he preached in the

Schoolhouses and in private houses in the neighborhoods, and did all he could to break down Wenrich's Church.

Some time after Weinbrenner had preached his farewell sermon the Congregation held an election for Pastor. This resulted by a considerable majority in favor of Rev. d. Peter S. Fisher of the neighborhood of Hain's Church, Berks Co. Pa. Mr. Fisher was a student of Rev. L. F. Herman D.D., and a fellow student of Rev. B. S. Schneck D.D.. Richard A. Fisher, D. S. Tobias and others. He accepted the call of the congregation and preached his introductory sermon in the month of July 1826 and continued his labors here, at Schell's Church and at several other points till the 17th of June A.D. 1832.

Mr. Fisher, who is still living and serving some churches in Buck's County Pa., is an earnest zealous preacher, and faithfully preached the unsearchable riches of Christ Jesus to the people of Wenrich's Church. But he labored under great disadvantages in this Congregation on account of the influence and exertions of John Weinbrenner, who did all he could to thwart Mr. Fisher's labors to build up the church. And indeed Mr. Fisher kept the Congregation together as well as could be expected under existing circumstances. The first year he added 35 persons by the solemn rite of Confirmation. But when in the summer of 1827 John Weinbrenner introduced his New Measures in the neighborhood – the Mourners' Bench, Camp Meetings, Immersion, Feet Washing, a number of members, who had been his warm friends when he was pastor of the Congregation – and Weinbrenner had talents to make friend for himself – left the church and fell in with Weinbrenner's movements, favored his heresy and schism. And now the struggle commenced in good earnest. Mr. Fisher did all in his power to save the congregation, and he succeeded as well probably as any other man could have done. He labored in season and out of season. To use his own words: "I preached oftener" he says "introduced prayer meetings in private houses, visited the families more frequently, conversed with them on religious subjects and prayed with them, and by the assistance of God, I succeeded in keeping a considerable number together." – Mr. Fisher added in all about 75 members to the Congregation. When he took charge of it there were from 70 to 90 members, and when he left it numbered about the same. The large additions that he made just about counterbalanced those who were drawn away by Weinbrenner. When Mr. Fisher resigned he took charge of a number of Congregations in Centre County Pa.

The Rev. d. Augustus Pauli became the successor of Rev. Peter S. Fisher. He labored in this congregation for about a year, with what success I have not been able to learn. Mr. Pauli was succeeded by the Rev. Mr. Raschig, now of Cincinnati Ohio, who also left at the end of about a year. Of course these frequent changes could result in no good to the Congregation: it could not in this way be built up.

In the fall of 1835 Rev. David Bossler became Pastor of Wenrich's Church in connection with Hummelstown, Schupps and some other churches. He continued his labors in this Congregation until some time in 1852, and labored here altogether between 16 and 17 years. Of course Mr. Bossler also had difficulties to contend against on account of the Weinbrenner Schism and Heresy. For at this time Mr. Weinbrenner was at the height of his glory. In 1830 he became the founder of a new sect, which with characteristic vanity and arrogance he called the "Church of God." During Mr. Bossler's pastorate the congregation scarcely held its own. The Communion were much smaller than formerly; and when he left the membership could hardly have exceeded 40 or 50. So that one might almost have thought that Weinbrenner's threat would be carried into execution.

After another vacancy Rev.d. D. G. Heisler of Lewisburg, not Superintendent of the Orphans' Home at Bridesburg Phil.a. received a call and became Pastor of the Hummelstown Charge of which Wenrich's Church is a part. He commence his labors here in February 1853. Under the Pastorate of Mr.Heisler a reaction took place. English Preaching was introduced. The services of the Church were better attended, Catechising which had been much decried by Weinbrenner and his adherents, and so had lost it hold of the affections of many, again came into favor. Mr. Heisler's labors were blessed and he added a considerable number to the Church, the Communion were larger than under the previous pastorate – in a word the Church was revived. Mr. Heisler resigned in May 1856 and accepted a call from the Sunbury Charge.

In 1856 it was resolved to build a new Church, as the old one which had now stood about 55 or 56 years was becoming dilapidated, and was no longer adapted to hold divine Services in. Accordingly subscriptions were taken and preparations made for building a brick Church in dimensions \_\_\_ by \_\_\_ feet. A spot was selected a short distance from the place where the old Church [sic]; but on the outside of the graveyard – the old church having stood in the graveyard. And on the \_\_\_ of August the Cornerstone was laid. (editorially note: It has been determined from a German Reformed Messenger article of that time, that the cornerstone was laid on September 13, 1856) Rev. D. Gaus D.D. C. A.Hay D.D. and Rev. G. J. Martz the Lutheran Pastor conducted the services on the occasion. The Reformed Congregation was still without a Pastor.

On the 26th of July 1856 Rev.d. M. A. Smith then Pastor of the Aaronsburg Charge Centre Co. Pa. preached a trial sermon before this Congregation. He was subsequently chosen Pastor of the Hummelstown Charge composed of Hummelstown, Shupps, Union Deposit, Sandy Hollow and this church. A call was extended to him, which he accepted, and in Dec.r. of the same year entered upon his labors in this field. On the 28th of December he preached his first Sermon in this Congregation, founded on Heb. 13:8.

The new Church was completed during the summer of 1857, and was solemnly dedicated to the Triune God on the 4th of October 1857. Services were held on the day previous. On this occasion Rev.d. C. H. Leinbach of the Reformed Church preached from Ps. 84:1, and also Rev.d. John Stein of the Lutheran Church. The Dedication Sermon on Sabath was preached by the Rev. P. S. Fisher former Pastor. Rev. C. A. Leinbach preached in the old Church in the morning and in the new Church in the afternoon both times in English. Thus the old Wenrich's Church instead of being destroyed had strength and vitality enough to erect a new and commodious House of Worship.

Mr. Smith continued his labors in this Congregation until December 1866, and labored here altogether for the space of ten years. He preached his farewell Sermon Dec 2d in German from 2 Cor. 13:13, and in English from Acts 2:42. During his pastorate he baptized 49 infants and 1 adult, confirmed 40 persons, attended 21 funerals and preached about 200 regular sermons.

March 27, 1867