



The Zerfass Family

Johann Nicholas Zerfass (1720-1784) arrived in Philadelphia from Germany in 1740. By 1750, probably earlier, he lived near Ephrata. There, in 1745, he married Elizabeth Klop, the daughter of Householders Peter and Magdalena Klop. Tax records for 1758 list his occupation as farmer and blacksmith. Between 1765 and 1772, he likely operated a grain and saw mill. By 1779, he operated a distillery. Nicholas and Elizabeth had four children, the oldest of whom, Samuel, fathered a line of descendants that continued their affiliation with the Historic Ephrata Cloister until the twentieth century.

Samuel Zerfass [1] (1746-1773) was the son of Nicholas and Elizabeth Zerfass. Like his parents, Samuel [1] may not have been a baptized member of the Ephrata German Seventh Day Baptist congregation. Samuel married Sibina Baltz, with the service performed by a local Lutheran minister in 1767. Their marriage was short, ending with Samuel's [1] death in 1773 at the age of 26. They had four children, and their oldest son, Samuel [2] continued to live in the Ephrata area.

Samuel Zerfass [2] (1767-1743) followed the occupation of shoemaker. Like his parents, he does not seem to have been affiliated with the congregation at the Ephrata Cloister, although he and his wife Magdelina (Eckert) Zerfass are buried in God's Acre Cemetery at the historic site. They had two children, Sarah (1799-1852) who never married, and Samuel [3], both of whom became members of the German Seventh Day Baptist Church.

Samuel Zerfass [3] (1802-1872) married Elizabeth Royer in 1823, and they lived about two blocks from the Ephrata Cloister. A carpenter by trade, he produced some items on exhibit at the historic site. Samuel's account book suggests he built full household suites of furniture including tables, chairs, cupboards, beds, and chests. Between 1828 and 1850, he also built something he called a washing machine. He did odd jobs for people of the neighborhood and made repairs at the congregation's grain mill. Samuel [3] was an active member of the German Seventh Day Baptist Church at Ephrata, filling the role of Trustee (manager) of the congregation for nearly thirty-three years between 1839 and 1872, with a few brief interruptions in his service. Elizabeth (Royer) Zerfass died in 1860. Elizabeth and Samuel [3] had five children. After Elizabeth's death, Samuel [3] married Judith Berger, but they had no children. Samuel [3] and both his wives are buried in God's Acre Cemetery at the Ephrata Cloister.

Joseph Josias Royer Zerfass (1836-1911) was the youngest child of Samuel [3] and Elizabeth Zerfass. A farmer, he lived at various locations on the Historic Ephrata Cloister property including Fairview Farm, adjacent to the Mount Zion Cemetery, the building by God's Acre Cemetery now interpreted as the Weaver's House, and in his last years in the east end of the Saron (Sisters' House). J. J. R., as historians know him, was an active member of the German Seventh Day Baptist Church. Like his father, he served as a Trustee between 1876 through 1910, except for two years in the 1870s when he resigned, likely over internal disputes within the Board of Trustees. In 1859, he married Maria Young (1843-1907), and they had four children, Elizabeth Y., Samuel G., William Y., and M. Kathryn. After disagreements, this generation would secure the future of the historic site.

Elizabeth Young Zerfass (1861-1909) married William Weiker and lived at the Cloister. She had two children, both of whom died as infants.

Samuel Grant Zerfass (1866-1929) served as the minister of the Seventh Day German Baptist Church at Ephrata from 1904 until a few months before his death. He lived in building currently interpreted as the Weaver's House. For a short period of time, S. G. Zerfass taught in area schools, and people sought him as an orator for events across the county. In 1903, he became a Church Trustee and Secretary for the Church, positions he held until his death. In later years he suffered poor health and relied on assistance from Rev. William Bechtel from the German Seventh Day Baptist congregation in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. At Samuel Grant's death in 1929, Bechtel took on both the ministerial and secretarial work of Zerfass. Bechtel's presence at Ephrata caused a fracture to form between family members who remained after Samuel Grant's death.



J. J. R. Zerfass seated in the Meetinghouse. His children helped determine the fate of the historic site.

One side of the dispute included Samuel Grant's brother, William Young Zerfass (1871-1950), his daughter Helen and her husband Harry Meck, all of whom lived in the Fairview Farm on Mount Zion. William Y.'s wife, Annie Stoudt (1866-1926), had died just before the tensions broke into court battles, but she may have known a turbulent outlook was on the horizon at the time of her death. William Y. and his family supported the ministry of William Bechtel, but his sister M. Kathryn and her family did not.

M. Kathryn "Katie" (1882-1953) and her husband, Reuben Kachel (1878-1967), lived on the Shady Nook farm with their six children. The farmhouse stood next to the current Visitor Center, and the barn now serves as the location for The Museum Store. Living close to the historic buildings, members of the Kachel family were most often the ones to guide visitors through the site. They recognized the historic value of the buildings and their contents.

By the early 1930s, the William Y. family and the Kachel family found themselves arguing in court about the future of the historic site. In 1934, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania closed the German Seventh Day Baptist Church at Ephrata, opening the way for the state to acquire the property in 1941. Because the Kachels played a key role in helping the Commonwealth save the historic site, Katie and Reuben received the right to live in the Shady Nook farmhouse until their death. The mid-19th century building was removed in 1978.

While the earliest generations of the Zerfass family held no direct affiliation with the congregation at the Ephrata Cloister, by the mid-nineteenth century they played important roles as stewards and preservers of this important National Historic Landmark.¹

NOTE: The numbers in bracket [] have been added to help distinguish different generations of men who share the same name.

¹ Clarence E. Spohn, "The Zerfass Family of the Cocalico Valley," *Journal of The Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley*, Vol. XV, (1990): 1-56.