



The Fahnestock Family

The Fahnestock family was large, and family members intermarried with other Householders, creating a web of relationships that extended well into the mid-nineteenth century. The first immigrants, Dietrich (1691-1775) and Margaretha (1702-1783), came to America in 1726 with their two-year-old son Casper. Entering through the port of New York, the family settled along the Raritan River in New Jersey at a place called Amwell. While there, Dietrich began writing letters to his brother still in Germany encouraging him to come to America. Dietrich continued writing letters until at least 1765, and they provide a great source of information about life in early America.¹



Dietrich Fahnestock built this house in 1752, although the interior has undergone many alterations through the years.

Dietrich and Margaretha raised five more sons in New Jersey: Andreas, Peter, Dietrich Jr., Johannes, and Daniel. It was in Amwell where they also met proselytizing Brothers from Ephrata. After a failed attempt to establish a satellite congregation of Ephrata in New Jersey, the Fahnestocks joined other families in moving to Ephrata in 1741. Dietrich wrote: “We did not move because of lack or want of material things as we had plenty But because . . . we looked for people who had the same desire to lead a blameless and God-fearing life . . . for as bad company can destroy good habits so can good company destroy bad habits.”

When they arrived in Ephrata, Dietrich purchased a home and farm. In 1752, he built a new home for his family that had grown to include a daughter, Joseba, and two more sons, Benjamin and Boris. Eventually he owned over two hundred acres near Ephrata and a grain and saw mill in York County. In his will, Dietrich left both of the mills to his two youngest sons. The Fahnestocks seemed to have been what people of the time might call “the better sort.” They certainly appeared among the wealthier members of Ephrata’s Householders. The inventory of items owned by Dietrich taken after his death suggests fine furnishings in the Fahnestock home.

Dietrich’s letters offer a range of information related to many aspects of Pennsylvania German life. He advises his brother about the immigration process, suggesting his brother bring trade goods in short supply in America and sell them for cash once he has arrived. He speaks with amazement how much “richer” the Americans are compared to people in Germany. He talks of amazingly inexpensive beef and mutton in a land that also offers good wages. The description he gives of his farm and crops offers insight into agricultural practices in early Pennsylvania. He even provides information about the government of the country saying, “we all enjoy a complete freedom of thought and everyone can live according to his own conscience. We are not oppressed by the aristocracy.”

Dietrich and Margaretha are buried in God’s Acre Cemetery at the Historic Ephrata Cloister. In 1878, descendants added a special memorial stone between their graves calling them the “Father and Mother of the Tribe of Fahnestocks in the United States.” One of their grandsons, William Morrell Fahnestock (1802-1854), published the first widely circulated history of the Historic Ephrata Cloister in 1835. Another grandson, Andrew (1780-1836), became minister at Snow Hill, a daughter congregation of Ephrata located in Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Andrew Fahnestock also served as pastor at Ephrata for a few years.

Dietrich Fahnestock’s letters of daily life and economic expectations provide wonderful windows into Pennsylvania German culture in the 18th century.

¹H. Minot Pitman, *The Fahnestock Genealogy: Ancestors and Descendants of Johann Deidrich Fahnestock*, The Rumford Press, Concord, NH, 1945.