



The Jacob Gorgas Family

Many of Ephrata's Householders practiced a trade in addition to farming. One was a stocking weaver, one a potter, and another a window maker. Few if any of their products survive. For married member Jacob Gorgas, the story is different. The items that emerged from his workshop remain widely collected and prized. Jacob made tall case clocks, both the intricate works and the cases that held them. Jacob Gorgas and other members of his family held direct ties to Ephrata Cloister for only about a generation, but the legacy of the family remains strong in the arts of early America.

Jacob Gorgas may have come to Ephrata as early as 1743 from his home in Germantown, Pennsylvania. His father John had emigrated there from the Netherlands prior to 1708, and had served as leader in the Mennonite Church. John and his wife Psyche (also listed as Sophia) Rittenhouse Gorgas had two daughters and three sons, of whom Jacob was the youngest. Jacob's sister Maria had already been in Ephrata for some time prior to his arrival, for in the 1741 will of their father, John provides more money as an inheritance for Maria if she leaves the Sisterhood. She did eventually marry James Angus, and they both remained as Householder members of Ephrata. When Jacob came to Ephrata, his widowed mother Psyche may have accompanied him. The Ephrata community records note her death in 1748.¹

Where and when Jacob Gorgas met and married his wife Christena is unknown. She was the daughter of Valentine and Margaretha Mack, and a granddaughter of Alexander Mack Sr., a founding member of the Church of the Brethren.² Christena's parents were also Householder members of Ephrata. Jacob and Christena Gorgas had three sons, Solomon (1764-1838), Jacob II (1765-1795), and Joseph (1770-1841), and a daughter Maria Elizabeth (1775-1853). Solomon and Joseph each learned clock making from their father, but only Joseph, who moved to Ohio, carried on the trade to any large degree. Solomon moved to Cumberland County, Pennsylvania where he became a merchant.

An estimate suggests Jacob made more than two hundred tall case clocks.³ He likely learned his trade from an English clock maker, as his clocks resemble English construction traditions rather than German. His earliest clocks have faces of engraved pewter and brass ornaments. By the 1770s, he also used painted dials. His cases display fine Chippendale style carvings. One of his clocks plays five tunes when it strikes the hour. By 1777, Jacob had built a stone home on the main road leading through Ephrata. There, he made clocks and operated a store.

Jacob died in 1798 and Christena in 1804. Both are buried in the God's Acre Cemetery at the Historic Ephrata Cloister. Next to Jacob's gravestone stands a plaque recognizing his service in the Revolutionary War; however, he never served. Misinformation led to the placement of the plaque. Documents show that on the day Gorgas reported for duty, he "provided a certificate from two surgeons of the Continental Army that he is not fit for military duty," and instead he paid a fine of six pounds, seven shillings, and six pence rather than serve. The inaccurate plaque demonstrates the need for constant research.

Researching family history can be complicated. With the case of the Gorgas family, the same given names appear repeatedly, sometimes for cousins of the same generation. There are also incomplete records of birth or death dates in some years. A prime example of the confusion occurs in the tall case clocks marked "Jacob Gorgas Jr." These were not the work of Jacob II (1765-1795) but instead were produced by his cousin, also named Jacob, also a clock maker, who lived about five miles from Ephrata in the village of Hinkletown. At the time "Jacob Jr." was the younger of the two men making clocks bearing the same name.

Today, the prized work of Jacob Gorgas and other members of his family survives as a reminder of the worldly and accomplished life of Ephrata's married congregation.



A tall case clock made by Jacob Gorgas (d. 1798) in the possession of The Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley.

¹ Frances E. Taft, "Gorgas Family," Ephrata People Files, Historic Ephrata Cloister.

² Ardis Krieg Lamb, "The True Identity of Christina (Mack) Gorgas: Wife of Jacob Gorgas, Clockmaker, Germantown, Philadelphia County, PA and Ephrata, Lancaster County, PA: 1734-1763," 1990, Ephrata People File, Historic Ephrata Cloister.

³ Stacy B. C. Wood Jr., *Clockmakers and Watchmakers of Lancaster County*. Lancaster, PA: Lancaster County Historical Society, 1995. p. 39.