



## The Keller Family

In some ways, Jacob Keller was like many people of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Some basic records survive such as his date of birth and death, when he purchased land, and the names of his children. Still, only broad general terms about Pennsylvania German life can offer any glimpse at the details of his daily life. When telling the larger story of history, it might be easy to overlook Jacob and his wife Elizabeth, with one exception. Jacob received an ornate, handmade music manuscript that once belonged to Conrad Beissel, the founder of the Historic Ephrata Cloister. Why did Jacob Keller receive this precious gift?

Jacob Keller (1706-1794) left his home in Switzerland, coming to Pennsylvania in September 1736 with his wife Elizabeth (1709-1787) and their three oldest children: Sebastian (1729-1808), George (1731-1788), and Jacob (1733-1804). In Pennsylvania, three more children were born: Frederick (1737-1771), Esther (1738-1826), and Joseph (c. 1740-1825). Some records suggest an additional three daughters were part of this family; however, records do not clearly document their existence as members of this immediate family.

The Kellers appear to have gone almost directly to Ephrata upon arrival. By March 1738, Jacob applied to purchase one hundred and twelve acres about two miles north of Ephrata. He secured title to the land in 1744. The Keller family may have learned about Ephrata from the Thomman family led by Durt and his wife Margareth. The Thommans, also from Switzerland, traveled on the same ship as the Kellers. Likely the Thommans were influenced to move to Pennsylvania by Margareth's involvement in Pietist activities in Switzerland. Shortly after their arrival, some of the Thomman children joined the Ephrata Community.

Once settled in Pennsylvania, Jacob appears to have been a farmer. A note in the account book of his neighbor and fellow Householder, Michael Miller, suggests Jacob may have done some woodworking. The undated entry notes, "I [Michael Miller] owe Jacob Keller for making a table, bedstead, and dough trough."<sup>2</sup> These were typical wedding gifts from parents to daughters. As members of the married congregation, Jacob and Elizabeth would have contributed both funds and items from their fields to help support the celibate community of Ephrata.

Elizabeth Keller died in 1787, and Jacob died in 1794. An entry in an anonymous death register kept at the Ephrata Cloister provides some clue about Jacob's devotion to his spiritual life. In part it reads, "He was a special man in his doings and his life, and lead a life well-pleasing to God. He was already in his young years seized by the spirit of Eternity especially by God . . . the same spirit moved him to move to this land. He was a faithful worker who bore many cares in the House of God up to his advanced age." The entry also indicates that following Elizabeth's death, Jacob "spent his life in silence [alone]." The notation also reports that both Elizabeth and Jacob were in poor health in their last years and that Jacob did not eat during the last six weeks of his life. Both Elizabeth and Jacob are buried only feet from the grave of Conrad Beissel in God's Acre Cemetery at the Historic Ephrata Cloister.

Of all the members of the Ephrata community, both celibate and married, why did Jacob Keller receive Conrad Beissel's music book following the founder's death in 1768? Only a guess could hope to answer the question, but it appears that his long membership, about thirty-four years at the time, made Jacob one of the elders of the community. His devotion to both the community and his faith must have been strong, as the ornate inscription in the book just below his name hints, "In the inner sanctum, the wise are seldom heard but the souls praise God without word or voice."

Many elements of the past do not survive, but the music book and the inscriptions in the records suggest Jacob Keller and his family provided great support to Ephrata in its early days.



An ornate music book once owned by Conrad Beissel, now holds a page reading "Brother Jacob Keller . . ."

<sup>1</sup> Spease, Rachel Keller. *A Keller History: Descendants of Hans Jacob Keller and Elizabeth Keller of the Cocalico Valley, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania*. Fourth edition. Hummelstown, PA: Rachel Keller Spease, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Clarence E., ed., Alan Keyser, trans. "Michael Miller/Müller of Cocalico Township, Lancaster County and His Debt Book (1748-1786)." *Journal of the Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley*, 1995, p. 53.