



The Kimmel Family

Brothers Valentine and Johann Jacob Kimmel (also spelled Kimmell) arrived at Ephrata in 1751, fleeing oppressive religious intolerance in their home of Gimbsheim, Germany.¹ Letters sent by Conrad Beissel, Ephrata's founder, to family in Geimsbheim likely encouraged their voyage to Pennsylvania. With the brothers came their wives and some children. Valentine (1701-1768) and his wife Anna Maria (1706-1767) received baptism into the Ephrata congregation and spent the winter in the community, moving to the Bermudian Creek area of York County, Pennsylvania the following spring. Johann Jacob (1705-1784) and his wife Maria Barbara also remained at Ephrata for a few months, reluctantly accepting baptism in spring, then moving to York County. After living in the Bermudian area for about a year, Maria Barbara died in 1753, and Jacob returned to Ephrata, living with the celibate Brothers for the remaining thirty years of his life. In 1775, the Brothers published a small devotional book for Johann Jacob listing "Parthenopols," meaning *virgin city*, as the place of publication rather than Ephrata.



"Jacob & Esther Kimmel, 1795"

Among the four children of Johann Jacob and Maria Barbara Kimmel who joined their parents in coming to Ephrata in 1751, Jacob Kimmel Sr. (1739-1823) and his son, Jacob Jr. (1757-1814), made the largest impact on Ephrata Cloister's history. In 1821, a member of the congregation reported that Jacob Kimmel Sr. served as the congregation's minister since the death Peter Miller in 1796. The next year Jacob Sr. reported his membership in the Cloister congregation for "upwards of sixty-five years." His wife likely died before 1821 when Jacob Sr. drafted his will; her identity remains a mystery. In 1789, Jacob Sr. purchased fifty-three acres of land adjacent to the Cloister mill. He owned the land for the remainder of his life, but the house built on the land holds the name of his only child, Jacob Jr., on the facade.

In 1787, Jacob Kimmel Jr. married Esther Fahnestock, daughter of Householders Dr. Dietrich and Esther Fahnestock. Eight years after their marriage, they and their two daughters moved into their new home located along State Street in Ephrata displaying the date stone "Jacob Kimmell, Esther Kimmell, 1795." Unfortunately, Esther died the following year just months short of her thirtieth birthday. In 1797 Jacob Jr. remarried, this time to Elizabeth Graver, twenty years his junior. Together they raised four more children. Jacob Jr. was a shopkeeper; after 1811, he operated a tavern. He also served as one of the first Trustees of the German Seventh Day Baptist Church at Ephrata but held the position for only weeks before his sudden death in 1814. Jacob Jr.'s father and Jacob Jr.'s widow Elizabeth continued living in the home, operating the store and tavern. By 1837, Elizabeth lived with her son in Adams County, Pennsylvania. She returned to Ephrata in 1851 and died there in 1861.

Between 1787 and 1789, tax records identify Jacob Jr. and Esther as holding an enslaved person. The records recognize her only as "Negro woman" and "schlav" (slave). These records provide the only known mention of her presence, and do not disclose her name, age, origin, or where she went after the last notation. Pennsylvania was the first state to take steps to abolish slavery in 1780, but the law only freed enslaved people born after that date, and only after their twenty-eighth birthday. This record of enslavement is unique in Ephrata and questions the position taken by members of the Cloister on slavery. In 1763 the Brothers printed an abolition pamphlet authored by Quaker Anthony Benezet. Peter Miller's notation in a 1784 letter calls the institution one of the "greatest follies ever committed by any human being" saying, "in countries, where slavery receives sanction from government, . . . [there] is no room for Superior Light (God)." An enslaved person in Jacob Jr.'s household demonstrates a worldly element in the lives of Ephrata's married congregation.

After the death of Jacob Kimmel Sr. in 1823, the Kimmel family had no formal association with the Historic Ephrata Cloister. Today, the 1795 home of Jacob Kimmel Jr. now welcomes visitors as a bed and breakfast. The family's story remains an example of an immigrant's flight from religious persecution for the opportunities presented in the New World.

¹ Spohn, Clarence E. "The Kelp/Kolb Family of the Cocalico Valley." *Journal of the Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley*, Ephrata, PA: Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley, 1993.