



Johann Heinrich “Brother Ezekiel” Sangmeister

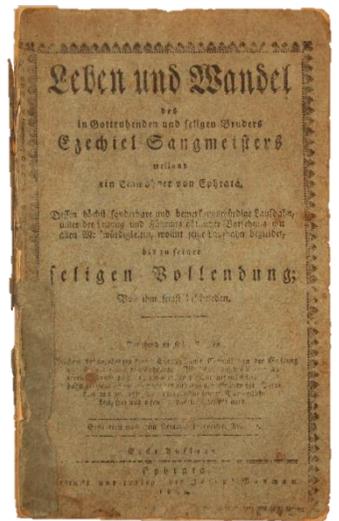
Ezekiel Sangmeister spent four years at the Ephrata Cloister, leaving behind an unflattering account of the people and their actions in the early community. His journal, published under the title *Leben und Wandel* [*Life and Conduct*],¹ offers information that sometimes expands but often contradicts the records offered in the *Chronicon Ephratense*,² the community’s history published by Peter Miller in 1786. Differences between these two narratives continue to challenge historians with opposing views of the Ephrata Cloister experience in the eighteenth century.³

Johann Heinrich Sangmeister was born in 1723 in what is now Saxony, Germany. Raised in the Lutheran Church and orphaned by the age of nine, he became apprenticed to a carpenter at age 16. Sangmeister came to Pennsylvania about 1745, paying off his passage by becoming an indentured servant in Germantown. After Sangmeister’s term of service ended, William Jung, acting as a recruiting agent for Ephrata, introduced the young man to the community. He arrived just as the settlement was recovering from a fire at the mills, leading Sangmeister’s talents to be of service. When he arrived, he received baptism from Conrad Beissel and took the name Ezechial, a name he legally adopted in 1765. While considered a member of the Brotherhood, Sangmeister did not fit well into the Ephrata way of life. He disliked many of the members, especially Conrad Beissel whom Sangmeister regarded as dictatorial and erratic. Sangmeister also disliked many of the community activities and often took actions contrary to the wishes of other members. All of this led to his departure from Ephrata in 1752. He joined a few other disaffected community associates in settling near present-day Strasburg, Virginia, at a spot known as “Sandy Hook” on the North Fork of the Shenandoah River.

Among his neighbors at Sandy Hook was Samuel Eckerlin, last of three siblings who left Ephrata in 1745 amidst controversy. Other residents of the area included members of the Funk and Kelp families. In the area, a small Sabbath-keeping community of people developed with Sangmeister as a leader. In 1764, under threat of attack by hostile Native Americans during Pontiac’s War, Sangmeister guided twenty-five of his Virginia neighbors back to Ephrata, where Samuel Eckerlin still had a claim on the Cloister land. When he returned, Sangmeister refused to take part in Ephrata worship services, although he lived in a house on the community’s land.

Sangmeister died in 1784, but the location of his grave is unknown. The introduction to his printed journal, issued by Joseph Bauman in several parts in the mid-1820s, states that Sangmeister’s writings remained hidden in the house he occupied until their discovery about 1824. While Bauman promised to issue the journal in six parts, only four were printed, and the location of the original manuscript remains unknown. A cooperative project of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and The Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley saw the translation and publication of the journals by the Historical Society.

The stories Sangmeister wrote about Ephrata shed an interesting and negative light on Beissel and other members of Ephrata. Some, in fact, are simply contradictory to what other contemporaries wrote about people and events at the time. Sangmeister received both praise and condemnation for this work, and some even speculated whether he was the actual author. His accounting of life on the Virginia frontier documented more fully many episodes that only appeared fleetingly in the historical record. Sangmeister’s view that God wanted him to suffer to become a good person also led to a very negative narrative of life. Modern scholars read Sangmeister cautiously, balancing his words with other accounts from the period. Sangmeister provides a unique insight into life at the Ephrata Cloister and allows the reader to find a different perspective on life in the Ephrata community.



Cover of *Leben und Wandel*, published 1825.

¹ Sangmeister, Heinrich, *Life and Conduct of the late Brother Ezechiel Sangmeister*, Translated by Barbara M. Schindler, Ephrata, PA: The Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley, 1986.

² Lamech and Agrippa, *Chronicon Ephratense* (Ephrata, PA: Ephrata Brotherhood, 1786) translated by J. Max Hark, (Lancaster, PA: XX Zahm Co., 1889). Lamech was Brother Jacob Gass, Jr. and Agrippa is the penname of Peter Miller.

³ Clarence Spohn, “The Historical Significance of the Writings of Ezechiel Sangmeister,” *Journal of The Historical Society of the Cocalico Valley*, Vol. 13, (1988): 41-54.