



Conrad Weiser

Conrad Weiser stood in his day among Ephrata's most famous members, working as an interpreter for the Pennsylvania government in negotiations with neighboring Native Americans. He also served as a Justice of the Peace and helped to found Berks County and its principal town of Reading, Pennsylvania.



Conrad Weiser Homestead, Berks County, PA

Born in the province of Wurttemberg, Germany, in 1696, he joined his father and siblings in moving to the New World in 1710, avoiding the widespread poverty and violence in the German region where he lived. They settled in the frontier of colonial New York with other Palatine Germans. For a year, his father sent Conrad Weiser to live with the Mohawk nation to learn the language that would later make him useful as an interpreter. Weiser found the people the most civil and respectful he ever encountered.

Weiser married Ann Eve Fegg in 1720. Their family eventually included 14 children. In time, the settlement in New York proved unsatisfactory and community members began moving south to the Tulpehocken region of Berks County, Pennsylvania, in 1723. Weiser followed in 1729. After negotiating agreements between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Pennsylvania Government in 1731-1732, he established a successful business. In 1735, theological disagreements began in Weiser's Lutheran congregation. A religious man, he became disillusioned by these conflicts, and he began experiencing a spiritual struggle within himself. At this time, he met Reverend Peter Miller of the German Reformed congregation, and the two became life-long friends. During the church turmoil, Conrad Beissel came to the Tulpehocken area hoping to find people to live in his newly created community at Ephrata.

Beissel preached a message influenced by Jacob Böhme, a German mystic who told of male and female characteristics in God. Beissel also advocated a strict self-denial of earthly pleasures. Beissel's teachings appealed to both Conrad Weiser and Peter Miller, and both men moved to Ephrata, receiving baptism into the congregation in May 1735.

The devout Weiser fasted, prayed, and worshiped frequently, also joining Beissel on evangelizing missions. At the same time, Weiser remained active in the world outside Ephrata. He held the respect of Native American leaders and governors alike. By the late 1730s, broken treaties threatened war between the Iroquois Confederacy and the English government. Weiser's skills at negotiation between the parties helped avoid early bloodshed on the Pennsylvania frontier but also required his frequent absence from Ephrata. In 1741, he received the commission as a Justice of the Peace. Weiser's wife and family also drew him from the monastic life. During his time as a "celibate" Brother at Ephrata, he made several visits to his home, and a few of his children were born during his years as an Ephrata member.

Weiser remained a member of the Ephrata community for eight years, but with his work for the government and visits home, he likely spent only a total of about a year and a half at the site. Long after he resigned his membership in Ephrata in 1743, he still looked back on the Brothers and Sisters as "his people," and his thirst for simpler and devout practice of religion stayed with him throughout his life. His stay at Ephrata left a lasting mark on him.

Weiser went on to be a great facilitator of Indian treaties and helped organize the defense of the Pennsylvania frontier during the French and Indian War. He also assisted General Forbes in the conquest of Fort Duquesne (Pittsburgh). By 1748, he helped to found the town of Reading, Pennsylvania, and four years later helped establish Berks County, Pennsylvania. Conrad Weiser passed away in July 1760 on his property in Berks County. Today, the Conrad Weiser Homestead is a National Historic Landmark preserving his legacy.

www.ConradWeiser.org.¹

¹ Paul A.W. Wallace, *Conrad Weiser: friend of Colonist & Mohawk, 1696-1760*, (Wennawoods Publishing: Lewisburg, PA 1996).