

On Christmas Day 300 Years Ago

This year, an important anniversary will be remembered on Christmas Day. According to author Donald Durnbaugh, the first Brethren baptisms and the foundation of the first Brethren congregation in the United States occurred on December 25, 1723, near Germantown, Pennsylvania. Migration within Germany was a common practice after persecution and eviction followed the newly formed Brethren movement in Schwarzenau, which began with the baptisms of Alexander Mack and seven others in 1708. However, religious persecution, disagreements and difficulties sustaining a living led many Brethren groups to emigrate from Germany.

Peter Becker and 20 families who had been a part of the congregation at Krefeld got word of William Penn's invitation to come to the New World. The promise of religious freedom and inexpensive land was inviting, and they arrived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1719.

Weary from the challenges of the long voyage across the Atlantic, the exhaustion of forging a home in their new country, and the lingering memories of painful experiences at Krefeld, regular congregational gatherings of the believers were not occurring. Longing for the consistent fellowship of the Brethren, Peter Becker and others set out in the fall of 1722 to communicate with the Brethren in the region outside of Philadelphia to encourage meeting together.

Finally, on Christmas Day in 1723, the ice was broken on the Wissahickon Creek near the home of John Gumre, and Becker baptized six people. This occasion marked the official formation of the first Brethren church in the United States. A celebratory Love Feast followed the next day, and other congregations soon began to form as the Brethren gathered, worshipped, and expanded into the outlying areas of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

On that Christmas day three hundred years ago, the heartache and exhaustion of struggle, persecution and fragmentation were overcome, and the Mother Church at Germantown was born. May it be so again this Christmas as congregations and families gather to reflect on the gift of salvation through Christ and the bountiful provision of God to gather together.

(Note: Donald F. Durnbaugh wrote "The Fruit of the Vine" and "European Origins of the Brethren")

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