

## Remembering John Dietrich Aurandt Our Church Father

By Nancy M. Anson

He was the first ordained minister of any denomination to preach regularly in this part of the country. Some fifty churches in Huntingdon, Bedford and Blair Counties have their origin directly or indirectly through John Dietrich Aurandt's ministry.

Dietrich's father left Germany with his wife and four sons ages 8, 6, 4 and 2 in 1753. Here is what we know of their journey. Although no one was denied the right to leave Germany, certain requirements were made of the "to be" émigré. All taxes owed to the church and state had to be paid. In addition, ten percent of John's property value had to be paid to the German government as a sort of exit fee. When these conditions were met, he received a certificate authorizing him to leave and it was understood that he could never return to Germany without permission or inherit property there. When it came time to sell his property, John was forced to sell to specific people at a much-reduced price from the property's assessed value. What little fortune that was left after the sale would be needed to pay tolls at various points along the way.

The most direct route to the Rhine River from John's home was on foot down eighty miles of country roads to Cologne. Families typically left by the first of June in order to be in the port of Rotterdam by the middle of July. They made about fifteen to twenty miles/day on the roads, paying tolls as they passed through different territories. At Cologne, they took a raft down the Rhine, a distance of nearly three hundred miles. This part of the journey took an average of six weeks with thirty-six customs houses and tollbooths along the way at which more money was extracted from the family's meager savings. Once arriving in Rotterdam, they waited for weeks while their ship prepared for departure. During this time they had to feed and house themselves at their own expense. After leaving Rotterdam it took ten to twelve more weeks to complete the 3000-mile trans-Atlantic crossing. Due to the often-deplorable conditions on board, epidemics of small pox, diphtheria, typhus and dysentery were common on board ship. Some estimates place the number of immigrants who died at sea at about 20%.

The family arrived in Philadelphia on October 2, 1753. Before getting off the boat, males over the age of 18 were required to sign an oath of allegiance to the King of England. After signing the oath, those who could pay their passage were permitted to take their meager belongings and leave. All others were sold in the market as indentured servants. After two weeks, unsold persons were left to fend for themselves or starve on the streets of Philadelphia. In the year after John arrived in Philadelphia, over three hundred "would be" Colonists were buried in "The Cemetery of the Unknowns" just outside of Philadelphia.

John left Philadelphia and settled in Berks County. He is listed as the resident blacksmith there in 1756. In 1760, he bought his first plantation, a 213-acre tract at Maiden Creek. While living in Maiden Creek, John and Anna added four more children to their family, three sons and a daughter. Our church father, Detrich, was their first-born son after arriving in America. 8 NOV 1761.

After 12 years, John sold his greatly improved Maiden Creek plantation for more than 4 times the amount of money he paid for it. In the sale several dams, a gristmill and saw mills were mentioned that were improvements he and his sons had made to the property. By colonial standards, John was a rich man.

In September of 1772, John moved again. Following the call of the wilderness and planning to capitalize on his forestry and military experience, he set out for Northumberland, which was William Penn's most recent purchase from the Indians. He purchased four tracts of virgin woodland never before owned by a white man except for the Penns. The area included almost all of Turtle Creek Valley, in Buffalo Township. This was just south of Lewisburg on the Susquehanna River. All of John's German born sons, who were by then adults, accompanied him and helped settle the family on the original 278-acre tract he called Concord.

Within 1 year and 8 months, John had added 2000 more acres of virgin forest to his holdings. The 1775 tax record shows that 40 acres of that were cleared land. He also owned two horses, three cows, and had built another gristmill and a sawmill near the mouth of Turtle Creek. His three oldest sons were living nearby on their own farms each with ten or more acres of cleared land, a number of cows and horses.

In January 1777, John Aurandt was elected to represent Buffalo Township on Benjamin Franklin's Committee of Safety. In June he was appointed Justice of the Peace and was one of the first justices appointed in the new and independent State of Pennsylvania, a position he held until near his death. Also in that same year, John's first wife Anna Christina Hoff, after twenty-four years of backbreaking labor as a colonial mother, died. She was buried on a grassy knoll across Turtle Creek from John's mill. Dietrich, age 16, was deeply affected by the passing of his mother and spent many tearful days at her graveside. Meanwhile, his father was left with three children under the age of fourteen and no one to help around the house. As was common in that day, John quickly remarried. His second wife Mary Elizabeth Kunz was quite a bit younger than John. Some historians say as young as 18. John was 52.

There is little doubt in my mind that Dietrich's desire to leave immediately to join the army was in large part driven by the presence of his new step-mother who was scarcely 2 years older than he and had taken over complete control of his father's affections. Dietrich enlisted in the army on January 14 and joined the beleaguered forces at Valley Forge just in time for the terrible winter of 1778. That winter the soldiers received irregular supplies of meat and bread, some getting their only nourishment from "fire cake," a tasteless mixture of flour and water. Animals fared no better. Washington's Chief of Artillery wrote that hundreds of horses either starved to death or died of exhaustion. Clothing was wholly inadequate. Many wounded soldiers from previous battles died from exposure. Long marches had destroyed shoes. Blankets were scarce. Tattered garments were seldom replaced. Undernourished and poorly clothed, living in crowded, damp quarters, the army was ravaged by sickness and disease. Typhoid, jaundice, dysentery and pneumonia were among the killers that felled as many as 3,000 men that winter. Many of the soldiers who did not die suffered physical disabilities that would last for the rest of their lives as a result of these hardships. In his early days at Valley Forge, Dietrich contracted tuberculosis and nearly died.

He was placed in the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Pennsylvania Line under Colonel Stewart. In June of 1778 the Continental Army left Valley Forge and proceeded to Monmouth, New Jersey where it attacked the British columns that were fleeing Philadelphia for New York. After wintering in comfort in Philadelphia, the British had found to their dismay that the French had agreed to come to the aid of the colonies and were sending a vast fleet of ships to fight them. 11,000 British regulars, 1000 Loyalists from Philadelphia and a baggage train of 1,500 wagons, 12 miles long, began their 100-mile march to the northeast across New Jersey to New York. The Americans slowed their advance by burning bridges, muddying wells and building blockades across the roads. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, the day of the battle, temperatures hit 100 Fahrenheit. (After near freezing to death all winter the army was fighting their first battle in 100-degree temperatures.)

The 13<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania was moved into position near the orchards of Monmouth to block a British counterattack. At one critical point in the battle, the 13<sup>th</sup> was pinned against a swamp with the British Grenadiers marching towards them in a column. General Anthony Wayne (mad Anthony Wayne as they called him) ordered his troops to withhold their fire until the grenadiers were close enough to see the whites of their eyes, a command that was frequently issued during the revolution to conserve on ammunition. When the 13<sup>th</sup> opened fire they devastated the front ranks and many of the officers. The fighting deteriorated into hand-to-hand combat but the Colonists prevailed. Monmouth was one of the bloodiest battles of the revolution. Before the expiration of his enlistment term Dietrich's father made an effort to secure his release from the army on the grounds that he was only 16 when he joined. Dietrich declined to leave. He received an honorable discharge from the Army in January of 1781 at the end of his 3 year enlistment.

On November 5, 1782, Dietrich married Catherine Reiber at the Tulpehocken Reformed Church in Dauphin County. Dietrich was 21 and Catherine was 18 at the time. Dietrich had learned the milling trade from his father and spent the early years of his marriage as a miller, first at Weaver's Mill on Yellow Breeches Creek in York County. Then in Dauphin County at Joshua Elder's mill, two miles northeast of Harrisburg. Later he was employed at Christian Over's mill, two miles east of Harrisburg on the Middletown Road. Dietrich and Catherine had four children during the time he worked as a miller. His first-born child, Mariah Salome, my 4<sup>th</sup> great grandmother, is buried here in the Keller churchyard.

In 1794, Dietrich apparently patched things up with his father and returned to Buffalo Valley settling on a 100-acre farm on Turtle Creek that his father gave him. During the period of his residence there he attended what were then called "Big Meetings" similar to our tent revival meetings of today, that were conducted by men who were the founders of the United Brethren Church. Dietrich had become very interested in religion after the death of his mother. By 1798 he began to actively participate in the "Big Meetings" in Buffalo Valley. He became quite prominent with the leaders of these meetings and received a kind of license from them to preach. At that time he was not a member of any church.

In 1801, the Reformed congregation of Buffalo Valley came together and invited Dietrich to preach a sermon in their church, which he consented to do. His words were so inspirational and revered so highly by the church parishioners that he was immediately and unanimously elected as their pastor. The congregation at New Berlin joined with them in their effort to petition the German Reformed Church Synod to formally license Dietrich. It appears that Dietrich felt the license issued to him by the Brethren was sufficient for him to go forward as a minister and even administer the Holy Sacraments. He afterward deeply regretted being misled this way because the Synod had heard of the ministerial prerogatives he had taken with the Brethren and they did not approve. Although Dietrich apologized profusely for administering the Holy Sacraments without ordination, the Synod did not forgive him for these transgressions. They did not restrain him from preaching the gospel and serving his congregations. Instead, he was directed to complete several tasks, which included studying under the direction of a minister connected with the Synod, learning Latin, memorizing numerous catechisms and completing an extensive course of study in the Old and New Testaments. He was also required to complete a missionary tour to distant regions.

Dietrich suffered some hard times in Buffalo Valley and had to sell his 100-acre farm back to his father after several years of extended drought and more than a few bad loans he made to unscrupulous "friends" rendered him penniless.

In September of 1803, Detrich started his exploratory missionary tour. His course lay through Brush and Penn's Valleys in Centre County then through the counties of Huntingdon, Bedford, Fayette, Washington, Westmoreland, Allegheny and Cambria, reaching as far west as Pittsburgh. He decided that the greatest need for spiritual guidance was among the settlers of the Juniata Valley. He was so impressed by their need for Christian leadership that he felt a strong calling to go back and preach among them. Accordingly, in October of 1804 he moved with his family to Huntingdon County (now Blair) and settled on a 112-acre farm one mile east of Yellow Springs. His tract lay on both sides of Yellow Springs Run in the beautiful little valley known as Pole Cat Hollow. The location of the farm can be found in the 1873 Pomeroy Atlas of Huntingdon and Blair counties on the page depicting Catherine Township. The book Aurandt Panorama by Miriam Harbaugh contains a relatively recent picture of the Aurandt homestead farmhouse. In 1979 the owners tried to tear the house down but gave up when they discovered that part of it was built with logs and was too sturdy to be torn apart. The barn, which was built by Detrich's son in 1840, is also still standing.

From here Dietrich began to lay the foundation of his Water Street Charge. Water Street is where the Arch Spring of Sinking Valley passes down a ravine and empties into the Little Juniata River. An old Indian trail, later named the Frankstown Road passed through this narrow ravine and for some distance the stream and the road coursed their way through the canyon together. Travelers along the road were obliged at this point to wade through about a foot of water until the road reached the end of the ravine. This circumstance induced the settlers to call the place Water Street and for a long time it was a center for commerce for this area of the country. Water Street was the drop off point for supplies for Fort Roberdeau, "the lead mine fort", and the pick up point for the lead ore that was shipped from there to Middletown for smelting. A small supply depot was located there. Hunters and trappers profitably plied their trade and panther and wolf hides were common commodities. Water Street, being thusly located on a main transportation corridor was the natural hub from which Detrich expanded his charge into the wilderness.

The first congregation Detrich organized was in Williamsburg. A log church, school and cemetery were erected for use by the German Reformed and Lutheran congregations there. The deed given to the German people of Williamsburg for the building of their log church was dated a year before President Washington died. The Declaration of Independence had only been signed 25 years prior and the national capital was still at Philadelphia. It would be 33 years before the first canal boats passed through Williamsburg. My 4<sup>th</sup> great grandfather and grandmother are buried in the cemetery that was affiliated with this church.

The second oldest church in Morrisons Cove is St. John's United Church of Christ in Martinsburg. In 1804, Detrich was pastor at its first meeting in a log cabin several miles southwest of town on the Simmon's farm. This church was rebuilt and moved into town in 1832-33. This weatherboard building was shared with the Presbyterians and was replaced in 1858 by a brick edifice that is still being used today. In 1961, a beautiful new sanctuary was added to the 1858 brick structure. Its beautiful stained glass windows depict Biblical characters and figures from ecclesiastic history. One window dedicated to the memory of Reverend John Dietrich Aurandt shows a circuit rider with his Bible and his horse. This same church is also in possession of a wooden stool that Detrich sat on in his later years to preach his sermons.

On January 2, 1804, Tobias Henline leased about ½ acre of land, in Clover Creek for the purpose of "promoting public worship and the education of children." The lease required that a church of hewn logs 22 feet by 26 feet be built and roofed with clapboards and that the parcel

be properly fenced and the building kept in good repair for a period of 20 years. Detrich was the guiding spirit in the building of that log church and cemetery, which later came to be known as St. John's Lutheran. The first person buried in that graveyard was my 6<sup>th</sup> great grandmother who died December 2, 1804. This church was shared by both Lutheran and German Reformed congregations until 1840 when the Reformeds left to build a separate house of worship, Salem Reformed, a few miles south in Beavertown. On May 10, 1884 the corner stone was laid for the present Lutheran church, which is still standing today and has an active congregation.

The Zion Reformed Church at Water Street in Morris Township was built in 1818 with Dietrich's help and served as a meetinghouse for both German Reformed and Lutheran congregations. Dietrich, my 5<sup>th</sup> great grandfather, was buried in the graveyard connected with this old stone church. The stone church is no longer standing. In its stead is a red brick edifice dedicated to the Evangelical faith.

The Williamsburg congregation was disbanded after 1843 and in 1846 two new churches were built to accommodate those settlers wishing to remain faithful to the teachings of the German Reformed church. They were the Keller Reformed church in Canoe Valley and the Old German Reformed church in Sinking Valley. These sister churches, although not built until after Detrich's death are considered part of his original Water Street charge.

The Old German Reformed Church in Sinking Valley was built on land that originally belonged to the Wecht family. The first worship services there were held in the family's homestead house. A white wood frame structure was built in 1846. Only the crumbled remains of the stone foundation are left to mark where the church once stood. According to the Penn State on line digital library, there were 47 members in 1870. After 1926, there were no longer enough members to sustain the church and the various congregants went their separate ways. My 3<sup>rd</sup> great grandfather and grandmother are buried in this cemetery. This old church and cemetery are located very near the intersection of Arch Spring or Kettle Road and State Route 453.

The Keller Reformed Church was built on land donated by "Long John" Keller, so named because he stood over six foot five inches tall. It was built with bricks made on site and has a planked wooden double entryway, one for men, and the other for women. The pews are divided down the center of the church by a solid railing that further separated the men from the women while worshipping.

One very treasured feature of the church is its library. In the left front corner of the sanctuary is a wood and glass bookcase that contains numbered spaces for 356 books. When in use, it held a variety of church related books in addition to the many Bibles and hymnals belonging to the congregants. In days past, books were very expensive and out of reach for many families. As worship was an integral part of their daily lives the church was a logical place for a library so that those who could not afford their own books had easy access to those of others. I also suspect that for those who had to travel great distances to church that they may not have wanted to carry their own Bible back and forth, especially in foul weather, and so, kept them in their own numbered space in the church library. The gravestones in the church cemetery bear the names of many of my ancestors. One very special stone marks the grave of my 6<sup>th</sup> great grandfather, "Long John" Keller, a Revolutionary War soldier, upon whose land this church was built. Another stone marks the resting place of my 4<sup>th</sup> great grandmother Mariah Salome Aurandt Rhule, daughter of Detrich\_Aurandt who founded this church. Two additional stones mark the resting place of my 5<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather and grandmother, Tobias and Anna Catherine Harnish.

When Dietrich moved his family to Yellow Springs in 1804, he was 43 years old and had 2 sons that were old enough to be a great help to him on his Yellow Springs farm, which allowed Detrich to focus on his ministry. He was officially licensed to preach at the Synod in Hagerstown, Maryland in 1806 and was ordained on May 1, 1809. Now having the power to administer the Holy Sacraments, Detrich found the field of his labor greatly increased. He was constantly on journeys as his congregation grew in size and importance. By 1812, Dietrich's oldest sons had reached age 21 and were called to service in the second Great War with England. Dietrich's pastoral duties kept him away from the farm for long stretches of time and by 1815, he was once again having financial problems. His churches were small and their congregations paid little for his services. Even though he attended an incredible number of funerals, marriages and baptisms, for many of them he received no pay because the people for the most part were very poor.

In 1818, Detrich applied for and was granted a Revolutionary War Pension, which entitled him to a stipend of \$8 a month, which allowed him to keep his farm operational for a few more years. That same year his ministry kept him busy baptizing 76, confirming 100, communing 140 and burying 6. Also in 1818, at the urging of his friends, Detrich agreed to serve in Harrisburg as a Pennsylvania State Assemblyman for Huntingdon County. However, due to his physical condition, there were many times when he was unable to attend the meetings. Besides traveling over his extensive field in Pennsylvania, he twice a year made trips on horseback to Cumberland Maryland.

The names and preaching places that figured prominently in Detrich's early ministry were: Mathom's (Spruce Creek), Breidenbach's (Shaver's Creek), Wecht's (Sinking Valley), Roller's schoolhouse (Water Street), Christian Harnish (Morris Township), Henline's schoolhouse (Cove), the Union church in Williamsburg, Fouse's and Weinbrenner's (Martinsburg), Entriken's (Raystown Branch) and Grove's schoolhouse (Woodcock Valley). He often preached three times a Sabbath, riding as much as fifteen miles between services "*over rough roads and along narrow paths, in all kinds of weather, day and night, willingly facing the dangers from wild animals.*"

This made him many warm friends in remote regions. But he did not make enough money to save his farm. In 1822, it was divided up and sold by the Huntingdon County Sheriff for back taxes.

By 1825, Detrich's congregations had increased in size so dramatically that he could no longer cover the Juniata Classis by himself. The Classis was divided into two sections and Reverend Gerhart was brought in to help Detrich minister to the settlers. In 1825, Reverend Aurandt and Reverend Gerhart together reported 406 baptisms, 231 confirmations, 975 communions and 30 deaths.

Detrich's periodic afflictions with gout and rheumatism increased with age to the end of his life. In the latter years of his ministry, he was so afflicted that he had to preach from a sitting position of a high chair or stool, one of which can still be found at the Martinsburg church.

On December 26, 1829, Detrich delivered his last sermon in Zion's Church at Water Street. Shortly thereafter he moved into the home of a friend in Hartzlog Valley in Porter Township, about three miles southeast of Alexandria. His last opportunity to minister to the settlers came in the later part of the summer of 1830 in a schoolhouse on Clover Creek. It was Communion Sunday, the last of his life. The congregation sent for him in a two-horse carriage, carefully

conveying him to the schoolhouse, which was their church, and just as carefully returning him to his home again, a distance of seventeen miles.

The last year of Detrich's life was spent confined to his room, mostly sitting in his chair gladly receiving visits from his numerous friends and entertaining them with worthwhile conversation. Detrich was confined to his bed for about four months prior to his death during which time he "prayed much and increased greatly in his spirituality". On the morning of April 24<sup>th</sup> 1831 at about two o'clock in the morning, while his son Jonathan was at his bedside, he laid his hand on his breast and said, "*See there, my breast is cold, my end is here. God here I am!*" These were his last words. Dietrich spoke and preached only in German.

Dietrich suffered greatly during his life from tuberculosis of the joints, which he contracted during the winter of 1778 at Valley Forge. In his later years, the tuberculosis bacterium spread to other parts of his body until it eventually caused his death. He was buried in front of the old stone church at Water Street that he had helped build in 1818. There is a Revolutionary War marker near his grave. His wife Catherine died eighteen years later is buried with him.

It has been said of Detrich: "*In person he was straight and tall, six foot two inches in height made up of bone and sinew rather than of flesh. He was a man of great physical strength. His hair, which he always combed back, was straight and light brown in color. His face was somewhat long, his forehead high and prominent. He had a Roman nose and very brilliant blue eyes.*" His voice was strong and deep and there was much tenderness in his appeals and exhortations. Though Detrich was earnest he was not a rigid man. He possessed in a great degree a spirit of kindness and good will toward all men. He was particularly fond of children whom he loved for their gentleness. His charity toward the poor and strangers often exceeded good judgment. He was gifted with a fine mind, a good memory and a quick and ready flow of thought and language. He was fond of politics and his mind would frequently glide into that current in conversation, even in his preaching."

Dietrich was an ordinary man who did extraordinary things. Natural gifts and divine grace rather than a formal education made him what he was. By modern standards he died a pauper but he was rich in his faith and steadfast love for God and his country. He cheerfully devoted his talents to the service to his church and her interests. We are indebted to him today for the rich heritage he left us.