

BENDERSVILLE: TALES OF AN EVANGELICAL CONGREGATION

The Evangelical Association was once relatively strong in Adams County, but the denominational split of 1894 wounded the movement beyond recovery. By 1900, only the Idaville Church in the extreme northern part of the county remained. It was the zealous enthusiasm for things religious that at the same time empowered growth of the Evangelical Association, fueled the split, and aroused the opposition of the established churches. In that last area, Bendersville and Adams County is a microcosm of the Evangelical Association in Central Pennsylvania, and the vignettes recounted here could be repeated with different names to tell the stories of several counties.

The more established Lutheran, Reformed and Presbyterian denominations were highly critical of the emotionalism and proselytizing associated with all three of United Methodism's predecessor bodies: the Evangelicals and Methodists and the United Brethren. But it was the Evangelicals, because they were generally the most outspoken and less conciliatory of the three, that tended to bear the brunt of the persecution. The first vignette describes an incident in the apple country of Bendersville that made it all the way to the Big Apple of New York City.

Individual congregations in all three of United Methodism's predecessor bodies typically met in homes, schoolhouses, or community churches before erecting their own structures. And sometimes once a building was in place, the real underlying personality and financial problems began to surface. The second vignette follows the Bendersville congregation through such a cycle.

The material in the second vignette comes from the research notes of Charles Gladfelter of the Adams County Historical Society. *The Chronicle* thanks Dr. Gladfelter for granting access to his notes and for permission to print them in this form.

The endnotes are numbered continuously and follow the second vignette.

PERSECUTION OF “THE ALBRIGHTS”

New York Spectator, 1818

editor’s note: The following article appears on page 2 of the *New York Spectator* for Thursday, November 19, 1818. It represents one of the earliest reliable documented accounts of the kind of persecution that the followers of Jacob Albright had to endure. Note that the preachers were not only harassed, but also actually beaten. Purchased by the conference archives in 2006, the original newspaper is kept in the Bendersville EV folder in the closed church files. The article comes from the *New York Spectator*, as reprinted from the *York Gazette*. The endnotes, which appear at the end of the second vignette, have been added by *The Chronicle*.

RELIGIOUS RIGHTS VINICATED

From the York (Penn.) Gazette

Court of Quarter Sessions, Adams County

present – Hamilton¹, president

Scott², associate

Shaeffer³, associate

Commonwealth vs. Christian Arndt⁴ and several others

Indictment – first count: riot

second count: assault and battery

In this case it appears that a number of those religious people called “Albrights” (who agree in doctrine with, but differ in discipline from, the Methodist Episcopal Church) had assembled at the house of a Mr. Bender⁵, a member of the society, for the purpose of religious worship. The defendants also assembled there and committed several acts of improper conduct in and about the house – such as disputing with and contradicting the preachers, using opprobrious language, and finally beating them.

This being the case – involving not whether the “Albrights” are perfectly right in their doctrine and discipline, but whether any people of any sect and denomination of Christians have a right under our law and Constitution to “assemble and meet together” and worship God without molestation – it excited not a little interest. The testimony having been closed on the part of the Commonwealth as well as for the defendants, Judge Hamilton delivered a very able charge to the jury in substance as follows.

“If there be any one blessing which, more than another, distinguishes this country from all others, it is that of religious liberty. In other countries there is an established religion, a religion of state, and all others and sects differing from it are either considered as heresy or are merely tolerated and merely suffered to exist – without any rights, without the hope of protection from outrage and

molestation. In a word, other countries protect one sect and tolerate or suppress the rest according as it may suit their prejudices – while this country gives equal protection to all.

“Nevertheless, such is the proneness of our nature to oppress those who differ from us in points of religious doctrine and discipline, that sects which have themselves been persecuted become the most violent of persecutors in their turn, when the arm of civil authority is on their side. Civil and ecclesiastical history are full of examples. Even the celebrated Knox, the father of the Presbyterian Church, was so eager to suppress all sects not worshipping as he did that he is said to have exclaimed that he would not advise to wait the form of legal process – but that they should be cut off unheard and untried.

“This court is not only bound to execute our laws in favor of religious liberty, but would be bound to declare unconstitutional any act made to abridge it. The world is strangely apt to persecute any sect professing to be more rigid, and endeavoring to live a more pure life, than those about them. But we are not to condemn – much lest molest them. We do not know but that they are as we profess to be – the sincere followers of Jesus Christ.

“In a word, all denominations of worshippers of Almighty God, whose doctrine and mode of worship are not subversive of morality, are to be protected in this country. It is true that in a neighboring state the sect of Christians called Shaking Quakers had excited the public attention of late – and it did appear that their tenets were such as to break down all the distinction of sex and condition, and struck at the very root of society, and were apparently subversive of civil government. But whatever may be the effect of their tenets, we are not now called upon to give them a judicial investigation.

“It is clear, however, that the ‘Albrights’ (or ‘Evangelical Association’) are not such. Their doctrine is that of the greatest proportion of the Christian world. They appear to correspond with the form of Gospel Truth, etc., etc.”

The Judge, in truth, very ably and eloquently charged the jury. The above sketch is far from doing justice to him. It is very probable his honor’s language has been misrepresented and his sentiments not fully stated. But such appears to the writer of this to have been the substance of it.

The jury, after a few hours of deliberation, returned a verdict against three of the defendants of guilty of assault and battery, and against four of assault only, and two they acquitted. The court sentenced Christian Arndt to pay a fine of thirty dollars and undergo an imprisonment of three weeks, and to pay the costs of prosecution. The others were sentenced to fine and imprisonment, or fine only, together with costs, according to the greater or less degree of the crime they appear to have committed.

We commend the course pursued in Adams County, by the Grand and Traverse Juries, to those of a neighboring county where, in a similar case, the preachers of the Gospel were sentenced to pay the costs – in addition to having been beaten while preaching.

THE BENDERSVILLE CONGREGATION

Charles Gladfelter, 1975

The Evangelical Association work in the Bendersville area began about 1810 when Conrad Bender received early itinerants. A class was formed in Bendersville in 1814. Originally the preaching was done in private homes. The Methodists and Evangelicals held services for a time in the “yellow house” along the Hunterstown road – this is believed to have been a log structure owned jointly by the two denominations. The first church building in the village of Bendersville was a frame structure erected in 1839. All denominations worshiped in this church. The Methodists erected their own building in 1840, the Lutherans in 1857, and the Evangelicals in 1858.

Early References

The following references to Evangelical Association activity in Bendersville appear in the diary of William B. Wilson. These meetings would have been held in the 1839 frame building. It appears that there were October/November revival meetings each fall.

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| October 26, 1839 | Albright meeting began |
| June 11, 1843 | Albright meeting in Bendersville |
| November 4, 1844 | Albright meeting in Bendersville |
| October 18, 1845 | at Albright meeting |
| October 21, 1848 | Albright meeting |

Transfer of Property

On February 6, 1858, Benjamin Irvin of Bendersville and his wife Sarah granted a lot along Main Street to the following trustees⁶ of the Evangelical Association: Henry Bender⁷, William Walhey⁸ and Daniel Rice, all of Menallen township. The price was \$150, and the size was 5484.5 square feet. This is part of the property conveyed

| | | |
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| by patent | May 15, 1811 | to John Schlusser |
| from John Schlusser | August 31, 1814 | to William Sadler |
| from William Sadler | March 29, 1819 | to Jacob C. and Henry Bender ⁹ |
| from J & H Bender | April 1, 1840 | to Benjamin Irvin |

An 1858 map shows an “Evangelical Association Church” on the east side of Main Street. It was known as the Bendersville Chapel of the Evangelical Association, and the 1872 atlas identifies it simply as the “Bendersville Chapel.”

When the split in the Evangelical Association occurred in 1894, Bendersville followed the majority of the Central Pennsylvania in siding with the dissident United Evangelical faction. As the courts ruled the Evangelical Association to be the legal owner of all the property, the congregation had to re-purchase their own building or erect a new one. Accordingly, on September 3,

End Notes for both vignettes.

¹ James Hamilton (1752-1819) was President Judge of the Ninth Judicial District, which included Adams County, 1805-1819. He was born in Ireland and immigrated to America sometime before the Revolutionary War. He resided in Carlisle and was a member of the Board of Trustees of Dickinson College from 1794 until his death March 13, 1819. Charles Coleman Sellers' Dickinson College: A History (page 146) states that he was an Episcopalian, married to the daughter of an Anglican priest, and "very hostile to religion" – but that "on the bench he was inclined to be heavily dignified and prolix."

² Adams County was created from York County on January 22, 1800. In early April 1800, Governor Thomas McKean established the local judiciary system by appointing William Scott (who had been in charge of organizing and training the York County militia from 1780 to 1792) and two others as the county's first associate judges. In the words of the Adams County Bicentennial Committee, "These three men would handle many of the cases coming before the courts. They were not lawyers, but citizens in whose judgment and good sense the governor and those on whom he relied had confidence." That confidence was apparently justified, for 18 years later William Scott was still serving in that position. The obituary of William Scott in 1823 asserted that he had been "intimately acquainted with many of the important changes of his country, and especially with the eventful circumstances by which it became a free and independent republic."

³ Daniel Sheffer (1783-1880) was born in York PA, attended Harvard University, studied medicine in Philadelphia and commenced practice at York Springs PA. He was associate judge of Adams County 1813-1837. After serving one term (1837-39) in the US House of Representatives and failing to be re-elected, he resumed the practice of medicine. He was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1848, died in York Springs, and is interred in the Old Lutheran Cemetery there.

⁴ Christian Arndt was born in Arendtsville on March 15, 1795. He was the son of Peter Arndt and Catherine Oyler Arndt, and the grandson of immigrant Jacob Arndt who came from Germany in 1731.

⁵ This is likely Conrad Bender (1755-1823), who is known to have received itinerant Evangelical preachers as early as 1810 – or it could be his son Henry Bender (1786-1863), who was also an active Evangelical.

⁶ While this may or may not have caused any problems in the congregation, it is interesting to note the relationship between the three original trustees. William Walhey's mother was a Bender and his wife was a Rice. Trustee Henry Bender was either an uncle (Henry) or a cousin (Henry H.) to William Walhey. While the exact relationship between trustee Daniel Rice and Catherine Rice (Mrs. William) Walhey has yet to be established, it is believed to be a close one.

⁷ This is likely Henry Bender (1786-1865), a brother to Elizabeth Bender Walhey (1776-1864), the mother of fellow trustee William Walhey – although it may be his son Henry H. Bender (1838-1878).

⁸ William Walhey (1816-1894) was likely no stranger to the conflicts experienced by the spiritual sons of Jacob Albright – his father John Walhey (1769-1819) was a Catholic, and his mother Elizabeth Bender Walhey (1776-1864) was an Evangelical. Following the death of his first wife Catherine Rice (1825-1871), he married Ruth Wilson Wills. Even though he was an original trustee of the Evangelical property, for some reason he did not remain with the domination. By the 1880's, he and his second wife were active members of the Bendersville Methodist congregation – and he was serving as a trustee and steward.

⁹ Jacob C. Bender (1782-1865) and Henry Bender (1786-1863) were brothers.