

A Special 1818 New Berlin Hymnal

Last spring the conference archivist received a phone call from Selinsgrove PA regarding a German hymnal found while cleaning out the house of a deceased relative. Two inscriptions in the hymnal read as follows:

“Presented to me by Sister Harriet Newcomer, a relative of Bishop Newcomer of the U.B. Church. 1874 – A. Stapleton, Kralltown, York Co. Pa.”

“This Hymn Book is one of the first editions published by our Church. It was once the property of Bishop Benjamin Erb of the United Brethren Church.”

The hymnbook is indeed a rare – especially in such good condition – an 1818 first edition of the *Geistliche Viole* (Spiritual Viole) of the Evangelical Association.¹ The first publishing house of the denomination was established in New Berlin, Union County PA, in 1816.² In 1817, the denomination published its first church hymnal, *Das Geistliche Saitenspiel* (Spiritual Psalter) – of which the conference archives has a copy in very good condition. This was a rather bulky book of 444 pages that was beyond the cost of many families. The following year, the publishing house produced the *Geistliche Viole* to be a smaller, more affordable hymnal suitable for camp meetings and eliminating many of the more formal English hymns that had been translated into German. Because this hymnal was well-used and went through so many editions, very few first editions have survived – in fact, the earliest *Geistliche Viole* in the collection at the conference archives had been an 1830 third edition.

Three Prominent Names

The hymnal was received for the archives as a gift from Mr. Ronald E. Wolfe of Selinsgrove. But in addition to the hymnal itself, the names associated with this particular book are worthy of special attention and clarification. Those named include three prominent persons and the person whose gift of the hymnal set the stage for this story.

Bishop Christian Newcomer (1749-1830) has often been called the St. Paul of the United Brethren denomination. Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813) and Martin Boehm (1725-1812) were already elderly and well-beyond the rigors of circuit-riding when they formally organized the United Brethren Church in 1800 and became its first two bishops. It was Christian Newcomer, elected third bishop of the denomination in 1813, who spearheaded the development of the movement

¹ The Evangelical Association was organized by Jacob Albright (1759-1808) in 1803 and, following a split and re-union, became the Evangelical Church in 1922. Through denominational mergers it became part of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the United Methodist Church in 1946 and 1968 respectively.

² The 1816 New Berlin site of the first church building and first publishing house of the Evangelical Association is a Heritage Landmark of the United Methodist Church. Interpretative markers at the site explain the importance of New Berlin as the denomination’s de facto headquarters for most of the nineteenth century.

and ensured its survival. He was born in Bareville, Lancaster County PA, and moved in 1775 to Beaver Creek, Washington County MD, where a great number of his extended family eventually settled. He is buried in the Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren Cemetery.

Bishop Jacob Erb (1804-1883) was the ninth bishop of the United Brethren Church. He received his license to preach from Bishop Newcomer in 1823 and proved to be an extremely influential and visionary leader. He was born in Lancaster County, but his family moved to the “west shore” of Harrisburg when he was six years old – and that would be his home base for the rest of his life. He is buried in the Shopp Cemetery³ in Shiremanstown. His influence spread well beyond the denomination, and he is noted for being the one who re-baptized John Winebrenner in the Susquehanna River when the latter broke away from the German Reformed Church to found the Church of God denomination.

Rev. Ammon Stapleton (1850-1916) set the standard for archival and historical work in the entire Evangelical denomination. His definitive 1900 *Annals of the Evangelical Association* and 1908 *Flashlights on Evangelical History* gathered and preserved much early information that otherwise would have been lost. His personal collection of artifacts and publications became the basis for the denomination’s archives – and much of that material now resides in our own conference archives. He received the 1818 *Geistliche Viole* hymnbook from Harriet Newcomer when he was a young licensed pastor – not yet ordained – serving Conewago circuit during his third year in the ministry. This hymnal may well have been his very first archival acquisition. He died while serving St. Paul’s in Williamsport, and he is buried in Lewisburg PA – the twentieth century “Jerusalem” of our conference’s Evangelical work.

Miss Harriet Newcomer (1818-1900) is listed year after year in the journals of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Association as a faithful contributor of missionary offerings within the Kralltown class. Local church records show that she joined the Red Mount⁴ congregation on profession of faith at the age of 18 in September 1837 and was a regular within the charge for 63 years – until her death in 1900. She and her sister Anna are buried in the Red Mount church cemetery. More details about Harriet appear in the next section.

³ The Shopp Cemetery is part of the conference’s extended Shopp Historical Site.

⁴ In 1829, Michael Bower deeded land for a schoolhouse and cemetery. The Evangelicals organized a congregation known as the Bowers appointment and held regular meetings in the school house. The congregation included several classes, one of which met in Kralltown. In 1853, the schoolhouse was replaced by the Bowers Church. In 1888, that was replaced by the present, larger Red Mount Church. Harriet joined the congregation when it met at the Bowers Schoolhouse and was a member of the Kralltown class of the Red Mount congregation. In 1889, when the Kralltown class erected a building (in conjunction with the Mennonites) and organized as a separate congregation on the charge, Harriet joined the Kralltown congregation. After the church at Kralltown was discontinued, the Evangelicals sold their ½ interest in the building to the Mennonites in 1950.

Necessary Clarifications

The reader may have noticed one obvious inconsistency in the material presented. The inscription states that the hymnbook “was once the property of Bishop Benjamin Erb of the United Brethren Church.” This appears to be a misstatement. The first name of the noted United Brethren bishop was Jacob and not Benjamin. In truth, the hymnbook belonged to Benjamin Erb (1810-1870), who was a brother to the noted bishop. This is verified by an inscription on an inner page of the book that reads “Benjamin Erb 1835.” This further agrees with the 1874 presentation date of the book to Ammon Stapleton from Harriet Newcomer. As Benjamin died in 1870, it would not be unreasonable for his hymnbook to be in circulation among interested parties a few years later.⁵ As Jacob did not die until 1883, it seems unlikely that he would have parted with his hymnbook in such a manner.

But there is a more subtle possible inaccuracy within the inscriptions in the hymnal – the statement that sister Newcomer is “a relative of Bishop Newcomer of the U.B. Church.” While Harriet Newcomer remains somewhat of a mystery, there are some non-church records that provide information about her personal life and her ancestry. An obituary for her appearing in a York PA newspaper⁶ reads as follows:

Mrs. Harriet Newcomer died at her home, at Hall, York County, on February 3. She was aged 81 years. The deceased was an exemplary Christian lady, served the Master faithfully for more than three quarters of a century, always using her influence for the ‘good of the Master’ cause. Ever ready to assist those in need, her counsel was freely sought, freely given and always appreciated. Her ministrations at the bedside of the sick and afflicted, too, made her a desirable neighbor and a welcome visitor. Her life was truly well spent, and at its close it may be truly said of her: “Servant of God, well done.”

Newspaper articles and census records also allow us to identify Harriet Newcomer’s immediate family as summarized in the Appendix. The “Looking Back” section of a Hanover PA newspaper⁷ included the following item, confirming the family connections and its closeness:

February 6, 1900 – D. McG. Newcomer, Miss Grace Newcomer and Mrs. Maggie Newcomer and son Clinton attended the funeral of Harriet Newcomer at Kralltown yesterday.

The family is descended from Christian Newcomer (1723-1784), well documented in Warrington township on tax tolls and as a witness in various

⁵ While Shiremanstown and Kralltown are within reasonable commuting distance, the circumstances under which the hymnbook would have passed from the Erb family to Harriet Newcomer have not yet been determined.

⁶ *The York Daily*, 2/19/1900, page 2. While the article reads “Mrs.” Harriet Newcomer, Harriet was never married. “Hall” is another designation for Kralltown.

⁷ *Hanover Evening Sun*, 2/7/1958, page 5.

proceedings. The following entry from the official records of York County⁸ indicate when his will was written and when it was probated,

NEWCOMER, Christian. Warrington Township.

September 2, 1784 April 22, 1785

Executors: George and Christian Newcomer.

Wife: Anna Newcomer.

Children: George, Christian, and Sally m. Isaac Deardorff.

The important item of interest is that the Christian Newcomer in the direct family tree of Harriet Newcomer is Christian Newcomer (1723-1785) of Warrington township, York County PA – and not United Brethren Bishop Christian Newcomer (1749-1830) of Washington County MD. Despite major efforts, no connections have been found between these Newcomer families. Christian Newcomer was not an uncommon name, as Harriet’s ancestor also had a son named Christian – and the 1850 U.S. Census, for example, lists 23 households headed by a Christian Newcomer.⁹ The most likely scenario might be that Harriet was asked by young Rev. Stapleton whether she was related to Christian Newcomer – to which she answered in the affirmative – and an unwarranted conclusion was made from the conversation.

The Final Piece of the Story

Even apart from the fact that the hymnal may have no direct connection with Bishop Christian Newcomer or Bishop Jacob Erb, its significance as an excellently preserved first edition of the *Geistliche Viole* cannot be overstated. But one final question remains: how was the hymnal separated from the bulk of Ammon Stapleton’s collection to re-surface in Selinsgrove in the spring of 2021?

Ronald Wolfe discovered the hymnal while cleaning out the Selinsgrove home of his parents in preparation for putting the home up for sale. In a box in the back bedroom closet, he discovered a big wooden box that had belonged to his father’s step-mother Iva Elizabeth Wolfe (1916-1989), the second wife of Mr. Wolfe’s grandfather. Some 30+ years ago, before Iva Wolfe died, the family helped her move out of her house in Williamsport and into a nursing facility – storing that box in the back bedroom in the process. The hymnal was in that box, along with other older materials belonging to Iva Wolfe. As she happened to be born the very year that Ammon Stapleton died – in fact, exactly two weeks after his death – there certainly was no direct contact between Iva and Ammon

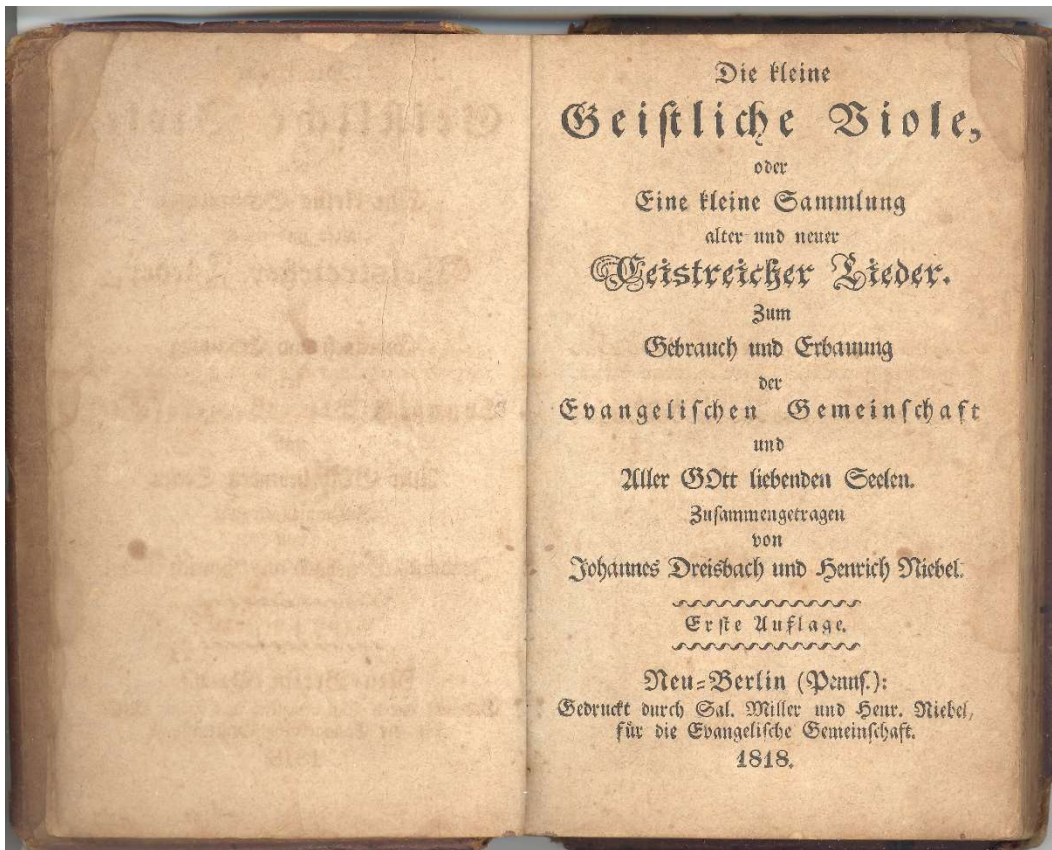
The point of contact, however, appears to be St. Paul’s Church¹⁰ in

⁸ <http://files.usgwarchives.net/pa/york/wills/willabstrl-o.txt>, accessed 4/13/2021

⁹ <https://www.familysearch.org/search/record/results?q.givenName=christian&q.surname=newcomer&f.collectionId=1401638&count=20&offset=20&m.defaultFacets=on&m.queryRequireDefault=on&m.facetNestCollectionInCategory=on>, accessed 4/13/2021.

¹⁰ Originally St. Paul’s United Evangelical Church, the congregation received the members of a nearby former Methodist Church and is now the St. Paul Calvary United Methodist Church.

Williamsport. Both Iva Wolfe's house and St. Paul's Church, of which she was a member, were on Memorial Avenue – and St. Paul's was the church that Rev. Ammon Stapleton was serving when he died. The most likely scenario is that Rev. Stapleton had the hymnbook in his office when he died – and not with the rest of his extensive collection of materials. It may be assumed the hymnbook then stayed in the church, its value not fully appreciated, until some well-meaning persons decided to “clean house” and discard items that appeared to be of no use. At this point Mrs. Wolfe, who from the appearance of the other items stashed away in the box was a collector of things old and interesting, asked for or was offered the hymnbook. Thankfully, by this or some other scenario, the book was preserved and now joins its subsequent editions in a place of honor at the conference archives.



Title page of the 1818 first edition
of the *Geistliche Viole* (Spiritual Viole) of the Evangelical Association

Appendix – Harriet Newcomer’s Immediate Family

A. Family Tree

Persons named in the article are given in **bold**

1. [Undetermined parents] ^a

2. David Newcomer (4/24/1809 – 11/24/1874) ^b

m. Elizabeth Bentz (9/2/1816 – 10/31/1864) ^b

3. Jesse Newcomer (2/2/1840 – 3/21/1874)

m. **Margaret Lowther** (3/19/1841 – 3/10/1924) ^b

4. **Clinton Lowther Newcomer** (7/6/1866 – 5/29/1947) ^b

3. **David McGaughey Newcomer** (3/10/1847 – 11/17/1931) ^b

m. Frances E. Lowther (10/9/1857 – 5/19/1930) ^b

4. **Emily Grace Newcomer** (6/6/1878 – 7/19/1948) ^b

m. Robert Frank Rodgers (1/29/1874 – 11/20/1933) ^b

2. **Anna Newcomer** (8/20/1810 – 11/18/1866) ^c

2. **Harriet Newcomer** (7/11/1818 – 2/3/1900) ^c

a. believed buried in Warrington township, York County (possibly unmarked)

b. buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery, Hanover PA

c. buried in Red Mount Evangelical Cemetery, Kralltown PA

B. 1850 U.S. Census results for the David Newcomer household

Latimore township, Adams County

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Birth</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Student</i>
David Newcomer	41	PA	merchant	
Elizabeth Newcomer	33	PA		
Louisa	18	PA		x
John	17	PA	clerk	x
Sarah	15	PA		x
George	12	PA		x
Jesse	10	PA		x
(Elizabeth Binder)	11	PA		x
Franklin	8	PA		x
David	3	PA		
Anne Newcomer	40	PA		
Harriet Newcomer	30	PA		

In the 1860 U.S. Census, Anna and Harriet are living together in Washington township, York County, and David’s family is living in Hanover borough, York County – where David McG. Newcomer became extremely prominent and successful as, among other things, a cigar manufacturer.