

# Bishop Benjamin Hirschi Notes

Was a bishop and the most prominent Mennonite leader in Lancaster County of his generation.

Immigrated to Chester (now Lancaster) County from the Palatinate in 1717 with his parents, brother Andrew and sister Anna.

Inherited his father's land in Lancaster Township. See PMH vol. 1, no. 1, p. 8. The land was "one mile west of Lancaster Town" along the Little Conestoga Creek near Wheatland.

Ordained Minister, Rohrerstown, by 1719 and Bishop by 1725.

In 1725, as "Benedick Hearsay," together with Wendel Bowman and "Martin Meitung," signed a petition "on behalf of themselves and others called Menists" for a law that would allow them "to hold and enjoy Lands, Trade and Merchandize." (Pennsylvania Archives, 8th Series, 2:1717)

In 1725, as "Benedict Hirchi," signed "The Christian Confession of Faith of the ... Mennonists" for "Canastoge" together with Hans Burgholtzer, Christian Heer, Martin Bear and Johannes Bowman. They signed the Confession as "Servants of the Word of God and Elders in the Congregation of the People called Mennonists ..." (The Christian Confession of the Faith of the Harmless Christians, in the Netherlands, Known by the Name of Mennonists ("Amsterdam. Printed and Re-Printed and Sold by Andrew Bradford in Philadelphia, in the year, 1727"). The Confession is an English translation of the Dordrecht Confession. See further Irvin B. Horst, "The Dordrecht Confession of Faith: 350 Years," Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage V (July, 1982) 2).

On April 1, 1728, "Bentz Hirschi" and about 200 other German-speaking Swiss Mennonites who "for Conscience Sake [could] not swear at all" signed a declaration of loyalty to King George II at the home of Martin Mylin. (See Barbara L. Weir and Laurie A. Rofini, "German Qualification for Naturalization in Pennsylvania, 1728" in Pennsylvania German Roots Across the Ocean, Marion F. Egge, Editor). The Declaration of Loyalty opened the door for citizenship, which in turn allowed the Mennonites to own land. The original declaration, written by Justices Henry Pierce and George Aston, is at the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania. A photocopy is at the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society.

In 1755, as "Benss Hirschi," signed a petition to the Pennsylvania Assembly expressing fear that their affirmation of loyalty to King George II at the time of naturalization might require them to "defend him with Sword in hand," this being "**exceedingly repugnant to the Articles of our Faith.**" The petitioners expressed willingness, "as far as we have divine assistance, to pray for the King, that he may have a long and prosperous Reign," but stated **they would not "take up Arms in order to defend our King, our Country, or our Selves ... according to what we think is the mind and Will of our Lord Jesus."** (Conscience in Crisis, pp. 91 - 93)

In May, 1758, during the French and Indian War, the Mennonite community in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia suffered from an Indian raid. One family was killed and 38 other families fled their homes for the safety of Lancaster County. Bishop Hershey wrote a letter on behalf of the Virginia Mennonites requesting aid from the Dutch Mennonite Committee for Foreign Needs: "We

come, therefore, with a prayer to you, brethren and co-fellows in the faith for help, by way of charitable aid, if your love will persuade you to show mercy on us, so that we may with God's help, and the aid of good friends, be guided through this Valley of Grief; the dear Lord will reward you for it, here in this life and finally in eternity for what you will do for us." The letter was delivered to the Netherlands by Martin Funk. (Conscience in Crisis, p. 128)

In 1775, with the threat of war looming again, Bishop Hershey wrote a declaration of belief to the Pennsylvania Assembly on behalf of Lancaster Mennonites. "We have dedicated ourselves to serve all men in every thing that can be helpful to the preservation of men's lives, but we find no freedom in giving, doing or assisting in any thing by which men's lives are destroyed or hurt. ... **We are not at liberty in conscience to take up arms to conquer our enemies.**" (Leonard Gross, "Through the Eyes of Benjamin Hershey and Benjamin Eby: Insights into Lancaster Mennonite History and Theology," Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage XIX no. 1 (January, 1996): 2 at 5 and 6). This declaration has been described as "the most memorable statement made by the Lancaster Mennonites in their first two centuries." (Ruth, The Earth is the Lord's, p. 325)

Bishop Hershey died on July 29, 1789 at the age of ninety-two years after being bedfast for five years. His obituary was published in the Lancaster German newspaper, *Zeitung und Anzeigs-Nachrichten* on August 5, 1789. He was buried in a cemetery along the Abbeyville Road where the first Mennonite meetinghouse in Lancaster County was built. In 1791, the location for worship was moved to a site along the Rohrerstown Road where the Rohrerstown Mennonite Cemetery is now located. Here, a brick meetinghouse was constructed which was then demolished in 1895. The old cemetery on Abbeyville Road was destroyed when building development took place. See Landis H. Brubaker, "The Brubakers And Their Lands In East Hempfield Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania," Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage 5 (April 1982):10 at 14.

Wenger Book, p. 1067-68 and R. Davis, "Emigrants, Refugees and Prisoners" Vol. 1 at p. 210 gives names of his children. Names of his spouses are from Richard W. Davis, "Emigrants, Refugees and Prisoners" Vol. 1, p. 210.

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