

Refuge from the War by The Rev. Judith A. Meier, Society Historian

We usually associate the Henry Melchior Muhlenberg House with the fall of 1777 and winter and spring of 1778, when fighting men, both American and British, marched along the local roads, waded across the Schuylkill River, camped around the house and church, and questioned the loyalty of old Father Muhlenberg, torn between the Prince of Peace and his own son, Gen. Peter Muhlenberg.

But the year 1776 held much significance for the Muhlenberg House as it became a house of refuge for pastors and family members fleeing the ravages of the war in New York and Philadelphia.

As “wars and rumors of wars” increased in 1775, Muhlenberg wished that he still owned his old home in Trappe. But as luck would have it, he found a notice in an English newspaper for the sale of a large two-story stone dwelling with four rooms on the lower floor and four on the upper, with a one-story stone house and workshop adjoining, two draw-wells, a large stable and barn, all on seven or eight acres laid out with orchards and vegetable gardens. The location was ideal—near a strong Lutheran congregation, not too close to the city or the Indian frontier, and not outrageously expensive because it had been allowed by its last owner to become run-down. So Father Muhlenberg gathered up the necessary money from relatives and in-laws and made the purchase on January 1, 1776.

The Muhlenbergs couldn’t move in right away; the tenants wouldn’t get out for a couple months. But in mid-March he was able to get into the house, assess the situation, and hire some locals to give it a good scrubbing and some much needed repairs. Imagine the sight when the joiner put in 38 windowpanes! Or the day Muhlenberg burned out the chimneys in the big house. The neighbors’ help was recompensed by a treat of good wine when they wouldn’t accept money.

The old pastor spent his days in the empty house and bunked out at an old friend’s each night. To quote the good *pfarrer*, “One neighbor lent me a massive table, another a chair, a third plucked a few feathers from his goose for writing quills, a fourth lent me ink and paper so that I could do some writing in case I had to, a fifth lent me an ax and fire tongs, etc., so that I enjoyed more convenience than the proud Diogenes Laertius in his tub.” And then there was the outside work: pruning two hundred fruit trees and chopping and splitting firewood. One bitterly cold Sunday he led worship in the old Trappe Church and played Lenten hymns on the organ. That was the same organ that the next year rowdy British soldiers would desecrate.

Muhlenberg discovered that a cold empty house had its advantages. “Inasmuch as there was only one borrowed chair in the large house, and only one person could sit down, this prevented the visits from lasting very long.”

Conditions in New York City, where son Friedrich Muhlenberg was pastoring, had become much too dangerous for his wife and children, so they found refuge with her parents in Philadelphia, where she soon gave birth to their third child. Another son, Heinrich, and his wife were expecting, and son-in-law Johann Christophe Kuntz and wife were also expecting, prompting the old man to commit himself to the effort of establishing a new household in the Trappe house suffering from being “uninhabited and uncared for, in need of repair, and requiring reconstruction.”

When spring came the Muhlenberg family began sending wagonloads of household goods, trunks of clothing, old and new manuscripts, letters, and other such stuff to the house. By July 11 Pastor and Mrs Muhlenberg (“my sick wife”) and their young daughter moved into the house in Providence. Martin Brook’s Negro was enlisted to drive the wagon back and forth from Philadelphia to Trappe, and other neighbors (those who hadn’t already been enlisted to fight the war) helped out where they could.

In August Pastor Friedrich Muhlenberg, who had narrowly escaped from New York to Philadelphia, decided to take the whole family home to his parents. He left not only his home but his pastorate as well. His father observed, “It is hard for young beginners when they suddenly lose their scanty support and are forced to flee with wife and little children, lose part of their necessary household furnishings, and finally have the rest of them smashed to pieces on the journey.”

In September Friedrich's horse disappeared from the garden and was later found about eight miles a way—probably an 18th century version of the “joy ride,” quite common when so many soldiers were marauding about. “We immediately were put in mind to improve the stable and furnish it with a lock, as loss makes one more careful. It would have been a severe loss.”

In late October 1776 Friedrich Muhlenberg's clavichord arrived from New York. He “put it in order,” and the family gathered about to cheer themselves with spiritual songs.

Since the British occupation of New York and the total lack of empty pulpits had essentially rendered Friedrich Muhlenberg unemployable, he determined to establish a shop, some kind of a respectable business. His father-in-law promised to help him out financially through the winter until divine providence suggested a course of action for the young man.

Refugees from Philadelphia continued to stream into the countryside, including the Rev. Heinrich Muhlenberg, Jr., and his in-laws. At this point Father Muhlenberg was at a loss as to where to lodge all these relatives. But then listen to his musings, penned December 31, 1776:

“I concluded this year in my closet meditating upon my favorite hymn, which fits my own life, ‘Ich armer Sünder komm zu dir mit demütigen Herten,’ etc., I myself am old, weak, and infirm in body and mind, an unprofitable burden to the earth. I have a sick wife whose condition grieves me and weighs upon my mind. Around me in our dwelling I have a daughter not yet of age, a nurse for my wife, and a maidservant; in the adjoining apartments two sons' wives, four small grandchildren, a devout mother-in-law of one of my sons, and two maidservants, and in the adjoining cottage a female relative with four little children, a manservant and a maidservant, and off and on my two sons, Friedrich and Heinrich, whose families live at their own expense and provide their own maintenance. When they are all together, there are twenty-two souls under one roof, and in a neighboring cottage there is a family of nine souls who fled from Philadelphia with their beds and other household goods and live here at their own expense. And up to this time I have not been without secret uneasiness about attacks by roving bands since some of the British troops have been encamped only thirty English miles from Providence and they allow their light cavalry, hussars, and the like to roam about and their conduct is similar to that of the Cossacks who are fond of exercising their heroism upon the helpless and defenseless.”

