

Two-Part Harmony: Piano from Speaker's House Loaned to Historical Society

by

Lisa Minardi, Chair of the Restoration and Collections Committee,
The Speaker's House

The Historical Society and The Speaker's House are partnering in order to share with our members and visitors an exciting piece of history that has both Trappe and Muhlenberg connections. Several months ago, The Speaker's House was offered a gift of a c. 1790-1810 piano for its collection, made by a former occupant of the house. Given the unrestored condition of the Speaker's House building, we could only accept the piano if an alternative display or storage location was found. The Historical Society then came to our rescue. Through many conversations between the Speaker's House and the Historical Society we agreed that placement of the piano on loan at the Henry Muhlenberg House for an initial period of two years was the best solution. This arrangement provides visitors to the Henry Muhlenberg House with the opportunity to see the piano and enables The Speaker's House to acquire an important object for its collection.

The piano is significant to both Trappe and the Muhlenberg family. Its maker, Charles Albrecht, was one of the first piano makers in America. A number of his pianos survive, including examples in the collections of the Smithsonian, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, State Museum of Pennsylvania, Vassar College, and Colonial Williamsburg. Like most other early piano makers in America, Albrecht was a German immigrant. By 1789, he was producing pianos in Philadelphia in a workshop on Vine Street.¹ In 1803, he purchased the Speaker's House from Francis and Mary Muhlenberg Swaine and relocated to Trappe. In the deed he is identified as a musical instrument maker. It is possible that he may have used the general store on the Speaker's House property—built in 1782 by Frederick Muhlenberg—as his workshop. In 1808 Albrecht sold the property in Trappe and returned to Philadelphia.

In addition to Albrecht's ownership of the Speaker's House property from 1803 to 1808, his relationship with the Muhlenberg family extended to his profession as an instrument maker. On August 5, 1803, Peter Muhlenberg recorded a payment in his daybook, "To Albrecht \$125 for Fortepiano."² Four years later when preparing his will, Peter Muhlenberg bequeathed "the forte Piano" to his daughter Esther. Given the 1803 date when Peter Muhlenberg purchased this piano from Albrecht, stylistically it would have appeared very similar to the one now owned by the Speaker's House. The exception to this would be that the legs on the latter piano have been replaced with turned legs of the c. 1850-1875 period, whereas the original ones would have been square tapered legs in the Federal style.

Although the 1803 purchase by Peter Muhlenberg of an Albrecht piano is the only direct documentation of Albrecht making instruments for the Muhlenberg family, it is possible that he made other instruments for them as well. From several sources it is evident that the Muhlenberg family owned various musical instruments and included music as part of their daily lives. When Frederick Muhlenberg died in 1801, the inventory of his personal property included a violin as well as a "Spinnet" valued at £7 10 shillings.³ The latter was likely the instrument to which

Henry Muhlenberg referred on Easter Sunday in 1787, when he noted in his journal, "In the afternoon my wife persuaded me to crawl with her once again, and perhaps for the last time, to the home of our son Fr Aug. He gathered his wife and seven children about him and together they played and sang several edifying hymns."⁴ It may have also been the instrument to which Henry Muhlenberg referred on October 23, 1776, when he wrote "Fried[rich] M[uhlen]b[erg] had just received his clavichord and put it in order last evening, and so we were able to cheer ourselves this evening with spiritual songs, which were the more needful because we had just learned that a bloody battle had recently occurred at Ticonderoga..."⁵

Peter and Frederick Muhlenberg were likely not the only family members who owned pianos. Their sister Mary, who was married to Francis Swaine, also appears to have been musically inclined. Both vocal and instrumental music lessons were available by the early 1800s in the region. In 1803, a Charles Fortman, "Master of Music," placed a notice in the *Norristown Herald and Weekly Advertiser* stating that he "gives lessons on the Piano Forte at 3 Dollars per month..."⁶ In his 1884 *History of Montgomery County*, Theodore Bean wrote that among Fortman's students was Mary Muhlenberg Swaine, "probably one of the first owners of a piano in Norristown."⁷

Be sure to visit the Henry Muhlenberg House to see the piano on view in the front parlor. Research into both Charles Albrecht and the Muhlenberg family's ownership of musical instruments is ongoing by Speaker's House volunteers. To contact the volunteers or learn more about the Speaker's House, please visit www.speakershouse.org or call 610-489-2105.



¹ A piano by Charles Albrecht and dated 1789, in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, is the earliest known extant piano made in America.

² Muhlenberg family papers, private collection.

³ Probate inventory of Frederick Muhlenberg, taken June 17, 1801. Private collection.

⁴ Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, trans. and eds., *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, 3 vols. (1942-1958; reprint, Camden, Maine: Picton Press, [1980]), vol. 3, p. 705.

⁵ Muhlenberg, *Journals*, vol. 2, p. 751.

⁶ *Norristown Herald and Weekly Advertiser*, 22 April 1803. Cited in Judith A. H. Meier, *Advertisements and Notices of Interest From Norristown, Pennsylvania, Newspapers, 1799-1821* (Apollo, Pa.: Closson Press, 1987), p. 19.

⁷ Theodore W. Bean, *History of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1884), p. 763.