

Elizabeth Brenneman (1758-1835) of Rockingham Co. VA Wife of Bishop Henry Rhodes & Descendant of the Swiss Mennonite Melchior Brenneman

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Elizabeth Brenneman, daughter of Melchior Brenneman, Jr. and Ann Good, was born in New Danville, Lancaster, PA on April 15, 1758 (Swank). At some point she moved to Rockingham County and married Bishop Henry Rhodes. Henry and Elizabeth had at least 7 children: Christian (Roads), Ann (Roads), Henry (Roads), Elizabeth Rhodes, Anthony Rhodes (Roth), Jacob Rhodes, Samuel Rhodes. Maria, Johannes and Joseph, young children buried in the Rhodes family plot, may also have been their children (Showalter, 21-22). Elizabeth is a descendant of Brennemens who originated in the canton of Bern, Switzerland. Indeed, there are references to the Brenneman family dating back to 1479 in this part of Switzerland. (Gerberich)



This example of Fraktur (Pennsylvania Dutch folk art) features a religious poem produced in Bucks County, PA in 1785. (PD; Displayed at the Bucks County Historical Society). In her article on the Brennemens, Grace Showalter has an image of the 1799 fraktur recording the marriage of Henry Rhodes' daughter Ann to Joseph Showalter. In this document, Henry Rhodes' wife is identified as Elizabeth Brenneman.

Much of the material in this article comes from the book by Gerberich, but when it comes to Elizabeth Brenneman, Gerberich falls short on his research. In his book, *The Brenneman History*, Gerberich provides only a short paragraph on Elizabeth. It is reproduced here in its entirety: "Elizabeth Brenneman, b. about 1751, m. Henry Rhodes. There is a belief in some quarters that she was the wife of Bishop Henry Rhodes of the Mennonite Church, b 11-2-1748 in Lancaster Co., Pa., d. 3-18-1827 in Rockingham Co., Va. The historian [Gerberich] has found no evidence to demonstrate this as a fact, and it is mentioned here merely as a theory."

In her article on the Virginia Mennonite Rhodes Families, the historian Grace Showalter supplies the missing link, clearly identifying Elizabeth Brenneman as the wife of Henry Rhodes. She states that a "privately owned fraktur, recording the marriage of Henry Rhodes' daughter Ann to Joseph Showalter in 1799, gives the name of the wife of Henry Rhodes as Elizabeth Brenneman." She adds that "this supplies the evidence that Gerberich lacked to support the information that Elizabeth Brenneman, daughter of Melchior Brenneman, Jr. was married to Bishop Rhodes of Virginia".

Melchior Brenneman, Jr. lists his daughter Elizabeth as "the wife of Henry Road" in his will probated in 1794. Some of the confusion arises because there was another Henry Road married to an Elizabeth in Virginia. However, there are other pieces of evidence to support the claim that Elizabeth Brenneman was in fact married to Bishop Henry Rhodes. Close ties existed between these Brenneman and Rhodes families. Members of both the Melchior Brenneman Jr. and Anthony Rhodes families moved from Pennsylvania and established homesteads in Rockingham County, Virginia. Gerberich notes that Elizabeth's brother David and his wife Barbara are listed as legatees (heirs) of Anthony Rhodes of Virginia (father of Bishop Henry Rhodes) and suggests that Barbara is very possibly a daughter of Anthony Rhodes. Elizabeth's oldest brother Peter purchased land in Rockingham county in 1783. Her brother David is listed in the Rockingham Co. Census of 1785. Elizabeth's brother Abraham had established a homestead in Rockingham County by 1775 and Gerberich refers to him as "one of the founders of the Brenneman family in the valley of Virginia." Abraham Brenneman's daughter Magdalena married Rev. Frederick Rhodes, a younger brother of Bishop Henry Rhodes. (Gerberich)

Further clues that Elizabeth Brenneman was married to Bishop Henry Rhodes lie in the small Rhodes Family Cemetery, located on the Joseph Shank Farm on the west side of Route 42 south of Broadway, Rockingham Co, VA. Burials here include Elizabeth Roth (Rhodes), b. April 15, 1758 d. Jan 14, 1835; Henry Roth (Rhodes), b. Nov 1747 and d. March 18, 1827 and Elizabeth Funk, nee Rhodes, wife of Joseph Funk, d. Feb 7, 1814, age 29 y 11 m 12 d. (Note: It is the tombstone in the Rhodes Family Cemetery that provides the date of birth for Elizabeth Roth (Rhodes) as April 15, 1758.) The names and dates suggest that Elizabeth Brenneman and Bishop Henry Rhodes, along with their daughter Elizabeth Rhodes Funk are buried in this cemetery. Also buried here is Isaac Brenaman, d Dec. 11, 1809 at age 62 y 6 m. (Swank) Elizabeth Brenneman had a brother Isaac, born "about 1746" who spent most of his life in Pennsylvania. Gerberich asserts that he died and was buried in Pennsylvania, but admits that the last known information about Isaac is dated 1803 or 1804. It is quite possible that the Isaac Brenaman buried in the Rhodes Family Cemetery is Elizabeth's brother, as there are no other Isaac Brennemens of the right age known to have lived in Virginia at that time. (Showalter)

Brief Biographical Sketches of Elizabeth Brenneman's Ancestry

(The reader is advised that Elizabeth's ancestry is a little difficult to follow because her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all named Melchior Brenneman.)

Melchior Brenneman, Jr. (Elizabeth's father) Melchior Brenneman, Jr., son of the immigrant Melchior Brenneman, was born in August of 1718 on the family's homestead near New Danville in Lancaster Co., Pennsylvania. Like his father and grandfather, Melchior was a farmer and a weaver. When he came of age, he married Ann Good, the daughter of Jacob Good, a Mennonite from nearby Conestoga, Pennsylvania. Together, they had thirteen children: Peter, Melchior, Abraham, Isaac, Margaret, Rudolph, David, Elizabeth, Jacob, Eve, Ann, John and Henry. Peter, the oldest child was born c 1739. The thirteenth child was Henry, born in 1765. Melchior died on



Mennonite Farm Country, as viewed from the cemetery of the Mennonite New Danville Church, New Danville, Lancaster Co. PA (Photo by SAM 2007)

April 19, 1794 at the age of 77 on the same family farm in which he was born. He had outlived his elder brothers by some thirty years. He, in turn, was survived by his wife and eleven of his thirteen children. Ann, his wife, died in 1800. Melchior was a prosperous farmer, with extensive land holdings in Lancaster County. His Will, dated March 21, 1786, has survived and is reproduced in Gerberich's "Brenneman History." The youngest son Henry

inherited the original Brenneman homestead. Melchior had previously

deeded a portion of the original grant and additional land to his son Jacob. (Gerberich)

Melchior Brenneman, "The Pioneer" (Elizabeth's Grandfather)

This Melchior Brenneman was a son of Melchior, "The Refugee", who fled Switzerland and had probably died in the Palatinate. Tradition has it that this Melchior, our Brenneman immigrant ancestor, arrived in Pennsylvania about 1709, along with his brother Christian. He is said to have been born in about 1665 in Canton Bern in Switzerland. Melchior was a weaver, as was his father. He also served as a preacher in the Mennonite Church, active among the Mennonite refugees in Rhein-Hessen and the Pfalz. Upon coming to America, Melchior purchased land in the so-called Swiss Settlement of Lancaster County and was established on the land as early as 1715. In 1717, the Penns granted Melchior a tract of 500 acres in Strasburg Township, Chester County, PA (now Lancaster Co. and Conestoga Twp.) The land, surveyed on October 10, 1717 was granted to Melchior under the "quit rent of one English shilling, to be paid annually at Chester on the first day of March yearly from the first survey." Melchior established his home on this land and lived there for some twenty years. Melchior was quite successful at farming and over the years he greatly expanded his landholdings. According to "The Biographical Annals of Lancaster County," compiled in 1903, he added several hundred more acres. In addition to farming and weaving, Melchior did some preaching as well, assisting the Rev. Burkholder in ministering to the congregation near Stumpstown (now New Danville). In fact, the village of New Danville is built on part of Melchior's holdings, which extended from the Conestoga and Mill Creeks, some 4 miles south of the city of Lancaster, to the Stone Church located on the other side of New Danville. (Gerberich, 4-6)

We know the names of a number of Melchior's children via his will and various surviving court documents. On March 6, 1730, Melchior transferred 100 acres of land to each of three sons, Christopher (Stephen), John and Adam, in return for about ten pounds of sterling. On March 26

of the same year, he sold 100 acres of land to his daughter (unnamed) and son-in-law John Steiner; the requested payment was 16 pounds. Some 700 additional acres went to his son Christian. When his will was probated, Melchior's plantation consisted of 160 acres and was bequeathed to his youngest son Melchior. Apparently, this son Melchior was also called Michael. (Gerberich, 4-6)

Melchior, "The Pioneer", died on January 20, 1737. His will, written in German and translated into English, was filed at the Lancaster Court House. The English translation reads: "The last will and testament of Mich Breniman being of sound mind and understanding. Imp. it is my will that my plantation be valued at 160 acres. Item it is my will that my wife have the third part of all my personal estate and the use and profit of my plantation until my youngest son Michael Breneman shall marry and after the marriage of my said son Michael my said wife shall have out of the profits of my plantation four pounds a year during the rest of her natural life. Item if my son Melchior shall happen to dye without lawful issue then it is my will that my sons Adam and Christian shall be heirs to my plantation and land. Item it is my will that before any devision be made of my personal estate my son Melchor shall first take out of the same the weaver's loom and tackell, my Bible and my new chest" (Gerberich, 5).

It is not known where Melchior is buried. It is likely that he was buried somewhere on his plantation, as was the custom in the early days of settlement in that area. It is possible that the cemetery connected to the New Danville church contains the remains of the earliest of Mennonite pioneers in the area and might be the final resting place for Melchior, along with many of his descendants. (Gerberich, 4-6)

In Eshleman's book on the Swiss and German Pioneers who settled in Southeastern Pennsylvania in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, he lists a number of instances where the name Melchior Brenneman, or a variation of its spelling, appears in the records of Lancaster County. A man named Melcher Brennen was among the settlers living in the Pequea Valley of Lancaster County in 1712. In 1717, a land grant of 500 acres was made to Molker Preneman (Brenneman) in the Conestoga area of Lancaster County. Melchor Prinnaman was granted this land by the commissioners of property under William Penn, by patent dated November 30, 1717. Melchior "Preneman" was on the property assessment list for Conestoga the following year, 1718. In 1729, a number of German and Swiss Mennonites living in Lancaster County were naturalized. The list included Christopher Preniman, Adam Preniman, and Christian Preniman, three of Melchior's children. In 1730, Melchor Prinnaman and his wife deeded a part of their land to Stephen Prinnaman. In 1755, Stephen Prinnaman deeded a part of this land to what became known as the New Danville Old Mennonite Church (Eshleman, 193, 202, 205, 233, 323)

Mennonites were the first organized religious group in Lancaster County. In the village of New Danville, church and community were inextricably entwined. Melchior Brenneman began his service as a minister back in Germany and continued the ministry in America. In the Conestoga Township, he and neighbor Hans Burkholder organized a Mennonite congregation which met for

a number of years in family homes. In this new congregation, Burkholder served as Bishop and Brenneman as Overseer of the Poor, a position equivalent to a church deacon. Eventually the congregation grew too large to meet in each other's homes. On the Melchior Brenneman-Hans Burkholder property line, a family cemetery had been started prior to 1755. On July 1 of that year, Melchior's son Stephen Brenneman, his wife Margaret and John Burkholder together deeded one acre of land, along with the cemetery, to the elders and trustees of the New Danville Congregation. A stone church was constructed on the site and the cemetery became the final resting place for many members of the congregation. A number of Brenneman descendants are buried here, although there is no grave site for Melchior, his wife, or his son Melchior, Jr. It is assumed that they are buried elsewhere on the family's plantation. (Harnish, 14-22)

Melchior Brenneman, "The Exile" (Elizabeth's Great-Grandfather)



Medieval castle in the city of Thun in the canton of Bern, Switzerland (Photo by Ruedi Fahrni, 2014, Wiki PD) In his book, Gerberich refers to a letter stating that Melchior Brenneman "The Exile" was imprisoned in this castle in 1659.

In his Brenneman History, Gerberich writes, "On January 1, 1672, there was living in the colony of Swiss Mennonite refugees in the town of 'Chriessum' (Griesheim) twenty miles northwest of the city of Worms in Germany, one Melchior Brenneman, age 40 years, together with his wife (age 35) and seven children between the ages of 1 1/2 and 15 years. His worldly possessions consisted on one horse, one trundle bed and bedding, and forty-three rix-dollars. He had been fortunate to escape with his life from the religious persecution against his sect then raging in Switzerland, and was but newly arrived. We know this from a letter written from Griesheim by Valentin Huetwol and Johann Clemeintz to Hans Vlamingh, a prominent Mennonite in Holland." (Gerberich, 1-3)

Gerberich goes on to say that "In the colony at Griesheim were 53 families, or fragmentary families, all in an equally destitute condition. [. . .] The descendants of most of these men found their way in time to Pennsylvania. [. . .] Melchior Brenneman refused to abjure his Mennonite belief, was warned, and finally punished by imprisonment in the castle of Thun in the year 1659. We next hear of his flight to Griesheim in the year 1671, unquestionably due to the severe government mandate of 1670, which caused exiles to leave Switzerland for Germany in large numbers." This Melchior Brenneman is believed to have died as a refugee in Germany. (Gerberich, 1-3)

In his book, Eshleman notes that a Melchior Brenneman is listed among the Swiss Mennonite refugees found living between Brehm and Bingen, a territory outside of Switzerland near the

Palatinate in 1672. According to Eshleman, over 700 Mennonites had fled to this area the previous year. (Eshleman, 118-120)

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