

Mennonite Preacher Henry Funk of Pennsylvania and Virginia: His Service in the American Revolution

© Susan McNelley



The Betsy Ross Flag of the American Revolution

With respect to the American Revolution, we know three things about Henry Funk, son of the prominent Mennonite Bishop Henry Funck of Franconia Township in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania: (1) He served in the military during the Revolution; (2) He had mixed feelings about his service; (3) As a consequence of his service, he was expelled from the Mennonite community. The American Revolution was a difficult time for the members of this religious group who had come to America to escape persecution and tyranny in Europe. The Revolutionary War brought conflicting feelings and divided loyalties: loyalty to the principles of the Mennonite faith which did not condone war, loyalty to a country which promised freedom of religion, and a deep-seated resentment of what was seen as English oppression. In 1775, enthusiasm for revolution was high, particularly among the Germans. "Even the Quakers and Mennonites took part in the exercises, and in large numbers renounced their religious principles" (Kuhns, 207).

Henry was born in Montgomery County about the year 1729. At the start of the War of Independence, he was forty-seven years old, married to Barbara Showalter, and the father of a large number of children. (He and Barbara would eventually have thirteen offspring.) In addition to farming, Henry had also served as a preacher in the Mennonite Community. It isn't certain where in Pennsylvania he and his family were living when the fighting broke out. According to various documents and descendants, he had spent time in Montgomery, Bucks, Chester and Northampton Counties. Jacob Showalter, Henry's father-in-law, had a large farm in Northampton County.

We have only the most vague of details concerning Henry's activities during the American Revolution. In the Pennsylvania Archives, Henry Funk's name appears on the Muster Rolls for the Northampton County Militia. He was serving as a private under Captain Peter Kooker (PA Archives, 5th Series, Vol. 8, P. 55). Henry Funk is recognized for his service by the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution); a number of his descendants have applied for membership based on his record.

Given his strong Mennonite background, it is understandable that Henry Funk had mixed feelings about serving in any capacity in the Revolutionary War. George W. Beery, grandson of

Susanna Funk and great-grandson of Henry Funk, relates the following story as told to him by his grandmother. "Her father, Henry Funk, was pressed into the service during the War of Independence, to do transportation service with his team. The farmers in the eastern states at that time did their heavy hauling with four horses. He was very reluctant to accept this service and assist the army in this war. Finally Susanna said she would go with him and rode the saddle horse. As they were driving along a cannon ball struck the two horses on the lead, killing them both. This so shocked the father that he immediately determined to leave the service and go home, saying that he would refuse further service whatever the result might be" (Fretz, 235).

Henry Funk's participation in the war came with consequences. In 1781, a Col. Daniel Hiester, Jr. wrote a letter to Joseph Gardner, a member of the council of Shippack Township, in support of Henry Funk. Hiester noted that the man had been a minister among the Mennonites for many years, but because he had taken the "test of State," he was excluded from the Society in the same manner as his brother Bishop Christian Funk. Henry and Christian continued to preach to a splinter group of Mennonites who came to be known as the Funkites. Hiester noted that Henry was a man of good character and there had been no reason to read him out of the society, other than for his devotion to the Revolutionary cause and compliance with the laws of the country. He asked that Henry Funk be treated with kindness and justice (Fretz, 139-140).

Grandson Benjamin Funk of Singers Glen wrote, "About the close of the Revolutionary War, he disposed of his property, and in the year 1786, he with all his family removed to the Virginia Valley, except his eldest son Jacob, who remained in Pennsylvania. They settled in Rockingham county, about eight miles north of the city of Harrisonburg" (Fretz, 142).

In her book, descendant Frances Funk relates, "Henry then came to Virginia. Once more he took up the ministry, and the Virginians, perhaps unaware, perhaps unconcerned about the quarrels in Pennsylvania, gave him no trouble" (Funk, 62).

Sources:

DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) Record: Ancestor # A042629

Fretz, Rev. A. J. "A Brief History of Bishop Henry Funck and other Funk Pioneers including a Genealogical Family Register with Biographies of Their Descendants From the Earliest Available Records to the Present Time". Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Publishing Co., 1899.

Funk, Frances. Joseph Funk: A Biography, together with his lineage and all descendants of his youngest son, Benjamin. Hollywood, MD: St. Mary's Press, 1984.

Kuhns, Oscar, "The German and Swiss Settlements of Colonial Pennsylvania: A Study of the So-Called Pennsylvania Dutch." New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1901.

Pennsylvania Archives, 5th Series, Vol. 8, P. 55, accessed through Ancestry.com, October 2014.