



Dreisbach Family Association Newsletter January 2013 Issue ©

Pennsylvania German Fraktur:

Fraktur is one of the best known forms of folk art, and is one that defined Pennsylvania German communities in the 18th and 19th centuries. John S. Dreisbach (1825-1867), who was both a printer and a photographer, was part of the development of this medium.

Fraktur is a German word describing a style of decorative black letter writing in which parts of the letters were ‘broken up’, or not connected. However fraktur came to mean the decorative art form, first hand drawn and later printed, that represented what was most important in the lives of Pennsylvania Germans.

Types of fraktur pieces: Fraktur celebrated births (*Geburtschein*), baptisms (*Taufschein*), confirmation and weddings (*Trauschein*). It was used to teach writing (*Vorschrift*) and to record births and deaths in the family Bible. House blessings (*Haus-Segen*) were done in fraktur and framed for display. Treasured books had decorative bookplates. Occasionally fraktur consisted of only pictures, usually of birds, floral motifs or angels, with no accompanying text. It was sometimes used to commemorate the life and death of a child. It was a precious document and was often stored in the family Bible or in a chest, which has helped to preserve these amazing works of art.



Fig. 1. A fraktur by Friedrich Krebs, commemorating the 1788 birth of Jonathan Seidel in Berks County, Pennsylvania. From: Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fraktur_%28Pennsylvania_German_folk_art%29

A religious-based art: Fraktur is essentially a Protestant form of religious art¹. It was part of the mainstream Lutheran and German Reformed communities but equally was used by Mennonites, Brethren and Schwenkfelders although the documents took somewhat different forms. For example, baptismal certificates (*Taufscheine*) were limited almost entirely to Lutheran and Reformed families since baptism of children was not done by the Anabaptist groups.



Fig. 2. Tool kit used by a fraktur artist - containing brushes, quill pens from goose feathers, woodcut stamps, pencils, paints and knife. Used by permission of the Rare Book Department, Free Library of Philadelphia.: www.freelibrary.org

Fraktur artists: In the mid-1700's, beautiful fraktur was produced by anonymous inhabitants of the cloistered colony in Ephrata. They saw this artwork as a means of glorifying God. Soon numerous people emerged as fraktur artists including Daniel Schumacher, Christopher Dock, Adam Eyer and Christian Strenge.

Although most artists were men, Susanna Hübner, a Schwenkfelder woman, is famous for her many lovely fraktur pieces. Some artists were known for particular designs and people with a trained eye can differentiate among fraktur pictures by the artwork alone. Friedrich Krebs, for instance, used an easily recognized “three hearts” design (at left), making hundreds of these during his long career.

Scriveners: Sometimes the fraktur artist carried out all the work. Other times the artist who painted the designs worked with a scrivener – a person who specialized in calligraphy. It is clear that most early fraktur was lettered by professional scribes, not by the family purchasing the certificate. Indeed, well known scriveners, such as Henrich Dulheuer, tramped about the countryside, selling certificates and filling in names and dates.

Not limited to Pennsylvania: The center of fraktur artwork was in southeastern Pennsylvania, but fraktur was found wherever there were communities of early German-speaking immigrants and their descendants. Ohio, Virginia, the Carolinas, New Jersey, Maryland and Ontario, Canada all produced beautiful examples of fraktur.

Demand exceeds supply! By the end of the 1700's, Fraktur had become increasingly popular. People wanted a *Taufschein* not only for the newly baptized baby, but also for older siblings and sometimes even for themselves!² Fraktur artists could not keep up with demand and prices for their works skyrocketed. Printers who previously produced mainly broadsheets (single page announcements or single page newspapers) realized there was a market for printed fraktur.

Early printed fraktur was still largely decorated by hand and was horizontally oriented (see fig. 3 below). Made by Ehrenfried & Co. of Easton, PA., the central and flanking texts in the example below were the only parts printed. The artwork was done by Martin Brechall³. It's a good example of text printed in a block.



Fig. 3. *Taufschein* made for Jacob Illick by M. Brechall. Jacob was born 25 October 1813 at 8 in the evening to Christopher and Susanna (Brodin) Illick in the township of Upper Mount Bethel, Northampton County. He was baptized 14 November 1813 and confirmed 29 October 1831.⁴ Courtesy of Russell and Corinne Earnest. www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com

The next evolution occurred about 1790 when the type was set in a heart shaped form (see Fig. 1). By 1810 this style was replaced by one that had two angels placed on either side of the main text which was printed in rectangular format. Usually the angels were accompanied by other printed designs and most certificates were now vertically oriented.

Thousands of these 'angel *Taufscheine*' must have been printed. A number of printers directly copied the angel designs from the work of others. Most printers, though, made small or larger changes in the design of the flanking angels. These certificates were printed in black and white, but many angels were hand painted - some were well done, others seem amateurish. Klaus Stopp did a fascinating comparative study of the many types of angels found on certificates made throughout the 1800's⁵ (see Fig. 4.).



Fig. 4. Angels by (L to R) Blumer & Leisenring, Ritter, Sage, Dreisbach⁶. Courtesy of Klaus Stopp. From: *The Printed Birth and Baptismal Certificates of the German Americans*, Vol. 1.

Printer John S. Dreisbach enters the scene: A printer, John S. Dreisbach, produced some highly collectible baptismal, confirmation and marriage certificates between 1845 (when he bought a printing press from Samuel Siegfried) and 1867 when John S. died.

Who was John S. Dreisbach? We know from his tombstone in the New Cemetery in Bath, Northampton County, PA., that he was born on 21 June 1825 and died on 5 February 1867 at the age of 41 years. Born in Lehigh Township, he is certainly a descendant of 1743 immigrant Simon Dreisbach Sr and the initial "S" probably stands for Simon. By checking the census data for 1840, 1850, 1860 and beyond, we can make some reasonable deductions about John's parents and siblings.

Most probably John S. Dreisbach (JSD) was a son of John Conrad Dreisbach (1781-1846) and Elizabeth Fenstermacher (1792 -1878). The father, John Conrad, was a son of John Dreisbach (1735-1796) and Elizabeth Waldman (1742-1821) and a grandson of Simon Dreisbach Sr. We do not know how many siblings JSD had, however he did have two older sisters, Mary Anna (1812-?) and Louisa (1814-?) and appears to have had at least one older brother, Edward Frederick Dreisbach.

Nothing is known about JSD until 1845 when he purchased woodcuts, types, tailpieces and probably also a printing press from Samuel Siegfried.⁷ Siegfried was a generation older than JSD and had been printing certificates first in Millgrove (now Aluta, PA.) and then in nearby Howertown. It is possible that JSD apprenticed with Siegfried at the shop in Howertown, but no evidence supports this hypothesis.



JSD set up his printing press in or near Zion Stone Church in Kreidersville and worked from here for the next four years. As early as 1846, he began printing broadsides and booklets. Possibly the first book he printed was the 1846 edition of "*Die Kirchen-Ordnung der Zion's Kirche in Allen Taunship*"⁸. He also printed birth and baptismal certificates. Some of these certificates were in English as well as in the more usual German⁹ indicating the changing language of the population.

In 1849, for unknown reasons, JSD, along with his now widowed mother and his sister Louisa, moved to Bath, PA. He set up his printing press in *The Temperance Hall* and worked from there for the rest of his life. By 1850 JSD's work was in demand and he was printing baptismal certificates for people living in a wide area of Pennsylvania and even in New York. In spite of this, John was not wealthy. The 1860 census listed him with a personal worth of only \$400 and no real estate. However he was printing highly desirable certificates.



Fig. 5. Birth and baptism certificate printed by J. S. Dreisbach for his sister, Mary Anna. It also gives her wedding date and her husband's name (7 June 1832 to George Milteberger). It may have been a birthday or anniversary present from her brother. Courtesy of Russell and Corinne Earnest. www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com

Living in Bath, Northampton Co., PA. At this time, living just down the street from JSD, his mother and sister, was the family of the Lutheran minister, Augustus Fuchs (also written Fox). The family consisted of his wife, Charity, a daughter Elenora born in 1837 and a son Augustus Theodore Fuchs, born in 1843. Rev. Fuchs was a busy pastor, in charge of three Lutheran congregations, and he conducted numerous baptisms, weddings and confirmations. For each of these, a certificate was needed. Conveniently, there was a printer located just down the street. Shortly, JSD was producing certificates of all kinds for the good Reverend.

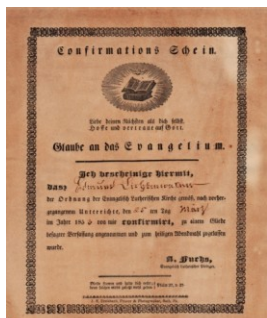


Fig. 6. Confirmation certificate printed by J.S. Dreisbach in Bath, PA., for Edmund Lichtenwalner, confirmed 25 March 1853 in the Evangelical Lutheran Church by Rev. A. Fuchs. Courtesy of Russell and Corinne Earnest. www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com

John S Dreisbach – 1853 photographer! At the bottom of the confirmation certificate in Fig. 6, JSD lists himself as a Printer and Photographer! This is the first indication that JSD was an early photographer. So far no photos of his have been found.

John and Elenora: No doubt it was through a business arrangement with the Rev. Fuchs that John met his future wife. We can imagine the young man and his widowed mother being invited to the Fuchs house for tea. There John meets Elenora, after which nature takes its course. JSD married Elenora Fuchs on 22 Jan 1856 when he was 31 and she was 19. Nine months later, on 12 Oct 1857, their son, Allen Franklin, was born and JSD created a birth certificate for his son, which, interestingly, is in English. As was becoming the custom, the certificate indicates that the godparents were the actual parents rather than relatives or friends. Five years later, in 1861, JSD and Elenora have another child, a daughter, Sevilla, but there are no known certificates for her.

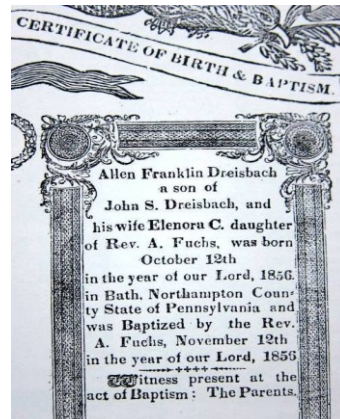


Fig. 7. Birth certificate printed by JSD for his son, Allen. It was printed with one strike of the press and there are no other known copies of this edition¹. Courtesy of Russell and Corinne Earnest. www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com

Other products of JSD's press: In Bath, John S. Dreisbach continued to print booklets, including the one in Fig. 8, *“Der Sympathetischer Haus-Freund”*. This is a compilation of prayers and blessings to be used by ‘faith healers’ or ‘pow-wow doctors’ and was printed in 1857. (Pow-wowing will be the subject of an upcoming DFA Newsletter.)

Another book, *“The Painter's True Guide”*, by J. S. Dreisbach and P. Nagel had been published before this, in 1855. It is not known if the “painter” in the title refers to the topic of house painting or to fraktur painting.

There are no other known booklets that came from the press of JSD. His specialty seems to have been printing Taufscheine and probably more ephemeral notices for things like farm sales and horse sales, notices that did not survive the years.

Fig. 8. A “faith healer’s” (or pow-wow) handbook published by JSD in 1857 in Bath, PA and perhaps compiled by him as well. Booklet owned by Marcia Falconer.





Fig. 9. A birth and baptismal certificate printed by John S. Dreisbach in 1854 and used at the birth of Emmi Fehnel of Moore Twp., Northampton Co. in 1867.¹⁰ Courtesy of Russell and Corinne Earnest. www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com

The rest of the JSD story: Between 1850 and 1860, JSD's sister, Louisa, married a carpenter, Henry Fenstermaker, who was probably a distant cousin. The 1860 census shows them living in the town of Catasauqua in a middle class home, worth \$1800. Living with them was 60 year old Elizabeth, the mother of Louisa and JSD.

In this same time period, Edward F. Dreisbach, tailor and the presumed brother of JSD, owned a house not too far from John in the town of Bath, PA. Living with Edward were two people, probably his children, William Henry, about 17, and Anna M., 22, who was working as a tailoress.

John S. Dreisbach died, probably suddenly since no will has been found, on 5 Feb 1867. He left behind an almost destitute widow, 30 year old Elenora, as well as a son, Allen (age 9), and a daughter, Sevilla (age 6). Elenora did the best and probably only thing she could do. She remarried as quickly as possible. The 1870 census shows now 33 year old Elenora married to 65 year old Samuel Sloan. Her children, Allen and Sevilla, are living with them, seemingly in the same house they had shared with their father JSD. There also is a new addition to the family - a baby boy. Samuel Sloan Junior is 1 year old.

Elenora's new husband, Samuel Sloan, had been born in Germany. At that time, German immigrants and immigrants in general, were at the bottom of the social scale. He was quite poor with a personal worth of only \$200 and he owned no property. Elenora had remarried, but she had not remarried well.

Ten years later, in 1880, Elenora was not listed in the census under Sloan or Fox/Fuchs. However in 1900 (the 1890 census burned), Elenora Fox, now using her maiden name, was living with her brother, Dr. G. T. Fox and his wife. The census also says that Elenora had FIVE living children! We know of three, two with JSD, one with Samuel Sloan. Who are the others?

As for the two known children of John S. Dreisbach, Allen became a house painter, never married, and died in the Northampton County Almshouse sometime after 1930. The last time we see Sevilla is in 1880. She was living with her grandmother, Charity, in the home of her uncle, Dr. G. T. Fox, where she was working as a servant. Hopefully she married and had a good life.

Fraktur: After 1840, printed fraktur became dominant, replacing the hand drawn designs. JSD produced fraktur certificates, with hand colored pictures, at the height of the printed era. By 1875 most certificates became more official looking documents, often with minimal or no designs. The only personal touch was the scrivener's lettering. Anti-German feeling arose during WW I and many culturally distinctive German-American things disappeared. As the Pennsylvania Germans distanced themselves from things German, fraktur production faded away.

Genealogy Information: Fraktur certificates are clearly useful to the genealogist. This is particularly true when trying to trace ancestors who lived in the 1800's. By this time the population was large and official record keeping was spotty. Often the only record of a child's parents, especially one which includes the mother's maiden name, is found on the birth and baptismal certificate (see Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. This ca. 1790 fraktur by Friedrich Krebs was printed using wooden blocks. Genealogical information obtained: Anna Margaretha Labachin (the feminine ending of the name Labach), born Sept. 1790 to Michael Labach and Catherina (born Reinheimer) in Williams Twp, Northampton Co., PA. Sponsors: Joseph Ritscher and his wife Elisabetha¹¹. Courtesy Russell and Corinne Earnest. www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com

Dreisbach Fraktur: Although John S. Dreisbach was a fraktur printer, most birth and baptismal (b&b) certificates for Dreisbach children were made by other printers. The b&b certificate for Heinrich, the son of Hilarious Dreisbach (from the Rockhill Henry Dreisbach line) and his wife, Christina Loh, was made by Victor Blumer. That b&b informs us that Heinrich was born 9 March 1856 in Upper Salford, Montgomery Co., PA. It would have looked much like the one below (Fig. 11) but with different colors.



Fig. 11. Printed birth and baptismal certificate done by Victor Blumer, Charles Busch & Co., Allentown, PA.¹² Courtesy Russell and Corinne Earnest. www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com

“Dreisbachs on Fraktur” by Corinne Earnest: This is a book in progress containing pictures and information from 30 plus fraktur done for Dreisbach family members. The booklet will be for sale at the upcoming DFA Reunion in August 2013 or can be purchased through the Earnest’s website: www.earnestarchivesandlibrary.com (Editor’s note – I would be very pleased to receive information about any fraktur in the possession of the readers.)

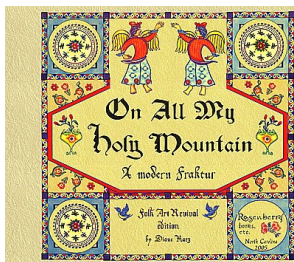


Fig. 12. A modern book in fraktur style by Diane Katz. <http://rosenberrybooks.com/hand-bound-editions/spiritual/on-all-my-holy-mountain/>

Fraktur by today’s artists: There has been a huge revival of interest in both the old fraktur and in newly made ones with artists also producing beautiful, hand-painted

fraktur for special events. An internet search will turn up *many* interesting works including a book done in fraktur style and sold to benefit an inner city community house. It was featured in the Washington National Cathedral catalog! Fraktur is alive and well. (Fig. 12).

Interested in Fraktur? A Google search of ‘fraktur’ will turn up many good websites. The website hosted by the Earnests has links to more sites and posts a free newsletter. Plus there are museums with very good fraktur collections including the Mennonite Heritage Center in Harleysville, PA. which features a fraktur type design on its website banner.



The Newberry Library in Chicago is worth a visit as well, to see the collection of more than 1,200 fraktur donated to the library by Klaus Stopp.

Special thanks go to Corinne Earnest who introduced me to fraktur at the Palatines to America conference in October 2012. She told me about John S Dreisbach’s fraktur printing and soon I found myself besotted by the whole concept of fraktur. Without the help and ‘permission to use’ of Russell and Corinne Earnest, this newsletter could not have been done. Thank you both!

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¹ Bird, Michael S., *Ontario Fraktur, A Pennsylvania-German Folk Tradition in Early Canada*. 1977. M.F. Feheley Ltd., pp. 17-19.

² Stopp, Klaus, *The Printed Birth and Baptismal Certificates of the German Americans*. Pub. by the Author. Available from R. D. Earnest Assoc., P.O. Box 1132, Clayton, Delaware 19938. Vol. I, p.86

³ Ibid. p.152.

⁴ Ibid. p. p.153.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 54-62.

⁶ Ibid. pp, 59, 61, 57, 62

⁷ Ibid. p. 249.

⁸ Shoemaker, Alfred L. *A Check List of Imprints of the German Press of Northampton County, Pennsylvania 1766-1905*. Northampton Co. Hist. and Geneal. Soc., Easton, Pa. 1943. p65.

⁹ Stopp. Op cit. p. 249.

¹⁰ Stopp. Op cit. p. 261.

¹¹ Stopp. Op cit. p. 142-143.

¹² Stopp. Op cit. p. 197.