

Dreisbach Family Association

June 2014 Newsletter©

This is the first of several newsletters about the incredibly full life of Reverend John Dreisbach. Much is known about the Reverend because he kept a diary. The value of these diaries was recognized by the Evangelical Association and as a result they were preserved, translated and archived. In this issue of the newsletter we follow Rev. John from his entry into the ministry until his wife died in 1815. The newsletter ends at this point because the following year, 1816, was a momentous one filled with important events. If this single year were to be included, the newsletter would nearly double in length! Therefore it, and subsequent years, will be covered in an upcoming newsletter.

The Beginning: Where does the story of the Reverend John Dreisbach begin? We could say it begins with his June 5th, 1789 birth to Martin Dreisbach Jr and his wife, Sophia Fredericka Buchs, in Union County, PA. But there were events which happened before John's birth which influenced his career, so we will start there.

(ca 1787): Martin Dreisbach Sr, John's grandfather, clearly believed that the worship of God, and a church in which to do this, was important. Sometime around 1787, he donated 7 acres of his land, as well as money, to build a Union church to serve both the Reformed and Lutheran congregations in Union County.¹ Called "Dreisbach's Church", the log structure was built and dedicated in 1789 - but no minister was willing to serve the new congregation in this scarcely developed section of Pennsylvania. To remedy this, Martin Sr recruited visiting itinerant preachers.² Unfortunately, such visitors were few and far between. For the most part the church was closed. Unused, it fell into a poor state of repair.³



Fig. 1. Birthplace of Rev. John Dreisbach as it appeared ca. 1930. From a "lantern slide" of Rev. F. Solver, a minister in the Evangelical United Brethren church who gave talks on the history of the EUB church.⁴

(1789): John was born 5 June 1789, in a log cabin, which by this time may well have been covered with clapboards (see Fig. 1). He was the first child born to Martin Jr and Sophia Fredericka Buchs. In addition to John, the family consisted of: Anna Eve, his oldest sister, (20 April 1792 - 3 Jun 1871) who married Andrew Wolfe; Susanna (15 Dec 1793 - 17 Mar 1881) who married John Bookwalter; followed by Leah (17 Dec 1795 - 11 Jan 1884) who married John Dunkle. Next was Elizabeth (12 June 1798 - 4 Oct 1883) who married David Dunkel. The last child was a boy, Martin Dreisbach III, born 6 Dec 1800, died 15 March 1880, who married Elizabeth Kleckner.



Fig. 2. Circuit rider approaching a small town. Sketch by an unknown artist.

(1795): In 1795, two itinerant preachers came to Buffalo Valley.⁵ Martin Sr was a widower by then and his son, Martin Jr had taken over, and probably enlarged, the original Dreisbach homestead. Like his father, Martin Jr felt the need for Christian worship to be part of his life. He welcomed the two preachers into his house and invited them to use it as a preaching place. Other people also offered to house the ministers for a period of time. Among them was Martin Jr's brother-in-law, John Aurand and his wife, Catharine Dreisbach Aurand, who also had a 'preaching place' at their house.⁶

(1799): Jacob Albright enters John's life: Martin Dreisbach Sr remained a committed member of the Reformed Church until he died in 1799. Martin Jr continued this dual alliance. He maintained his affiliation with the Reformed Church, but he also actively supported the evangelical movement sweeping across Pennsylvania. A generous man, he opened his house to "all who preached the gospel in its purity".⁷ It was through this hospitality, that young John Dreisbach, first met the person who greatly influenced his adult life - Jacob Albright.

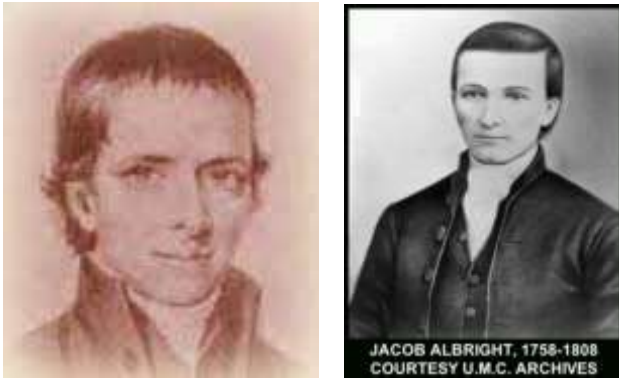


Fig. 3. Portraits of Jacob Albright as a young man. (1759-1808) Artists unknown.

Albright was a traveling minister who founded the Evangelical Association, which later became the Evangelical United Brethren and finally merged into the United Methodist Church. He had not trained to be a minister. In 1790 he was pushed to the depths of despair by the deaths of several of his children. For months he sought, but did not find, comfort in faith. Then, in 1792 Albright underwent a personal conversion experience and by 1796⁸ had begun his evangelizing career to bring the possibility of a similar conversion to the German speaking population living in south central Pennsylvania.

(1806): Spiritual awakenings: In spring of 1805, Albright and two colleagues spoke at Dreisbach's Union Church.⁹ Then, on October 25, 1806, they held a large evangelizing meeting at Martin Jr's house.¹⁰ The house was crammed with people and the rooms were filled to overflowing. Three powerful preachers spoke that day, Jacob Albright, George Miller and John Walter. According to people who were there, "Albright and Walter preached so powerfully ... that the congregation was visited with showers of divine grace, and in every room the cries of penitent sinners were heard, and many souls were converted."¹¹ This meeting kindled "the fire of the Lord" and energized everyone present. Religious classes were organized to study and maintain the commitment of those who had found salvation that day. Martin Jr was made a class leader¹² and apparently this meeting had an effect on young John Dreisbach as well.

Years later, Rev. John described this period in his life. He had pious Christian parents, he said, but he did not heed their instructions and went astray early in life. "Frequently" he said, "I tried to become a praying youth and break off my bad habits, but soon relapsed into sin, and into even a worse condition than before." Although it is hard to imagine young John as a strident sinner, it's clear he felt he did not know 'the grace of God'. And so he prayed. And prayed. And read his Bible. Then he said, "While thus engaged ... I was enabled to exercise faith in Christ so that I embraced God's promised pardoning grace and felt his love in my heart ... and I was filled with peace and joy. Such was my Christian experience in the month of November, 1806."¹³ That this event occurred shortly after the powerful preaching of Albright and Walter was probably not a coincidence.

(1807): John becomes Reverend John: Within weeks John decided it would be his life's work to bring the news of salvation to his fellow Germans and more specifically, to join Albright and his followers to do this. By spring of 1807, John was traveling with Albright. He attended a quarterly meeting of Albright's followers in Penn's Valley, Center County, PA. where he received his "local" preacher's license from Rev. Jacob Albright on the Sunday after Easter in 1807.¹⁴ He was 17 years old.

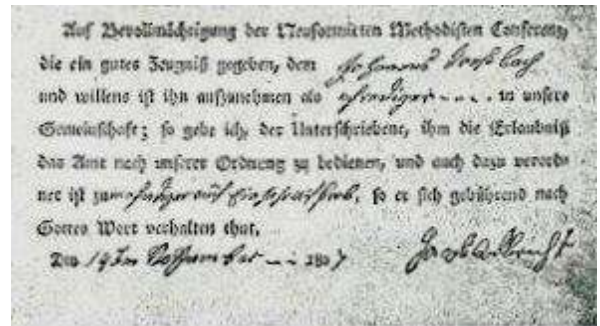


Fig. 4. Photocopy of John Dreisbach's license to preach as a "local" minister, signed by Jacob Albright.

During the next months, John Dreisbach accompanied the 48 year old Jacob Albright on the preaching circuit. Albright took a great interest in young John. Some of the fine qualities that characterized Rev. John Dreisbach were certainly nurtured, if not acquired, during this period. In later years, Rev. John told his own biographer that he had "...derived great benefit from (Albright's) paternal instruction and pious example.. (which) ...made a deep impression on my mind and was highly useful to me afterward...".¹⁵ It is clear that John knowingly modeled his behavior after that of his mentor. Albright, we are told, was diligent and scrupulously exact, but he was never autocratic or arbitrary and in the face of difficulties, he always consulted others.¹⁶ These same phrases have been used to describe the mature Rev. John Dreisbach. "**Albright's People**", as the group was known, convened their first regular conference on November 13-15, 1807 at

George Becker's house at Mülbach in what is now Lebanon County. All of the officials of what would become the Evangelical Association (EA) were present: Jacob Albright, John Walter, George Miller, John Dreisbach and Jacob Fry, the last two being still trainees.¹⁷ A few 'local' preachers (men who stayed home and preached locally) such as Christopher Spangler and others were there as well. At that time the whole church numbered little more than 120 members.¹⁸ It was, indeed, a very small band of men.



Fig. 5. Home of George Becker in Mühlbach, a small town near Lebanon, PA. Site of the first regular conference of the Evangelical Association in 1807, which John attended. Solver lantern slide.¹⁹

Crisis: Within a half a year, this small band faced the first big threat to its existence - in May 1808 Jacob Albright died of TB. It was not clear the EA would survive. John Walter, although a powerful preacher, lacked executive ability. The role of leader was given to George Miller while John Dreisbach, who now had sufficient experience, took over Miller's preaching circuit. John was now 19 and working the large Northumberland County circuit alone.²⁰

There were other difficulties too - serious ones. Persecution of evangelicals, both ministers and believers, was rampant. The mainstream churches were fearful of losing their parishioners to the new evangelical movements. Their ministers spoke often and strongly against these itinerant preachers, calling them false prophets and deceivers. Violence was often threatened and sometimes carried out against the evangelical groups and their ministers. Members were beaten and some had their barns burned.

(1808): Rev. John is attacked! In August 1808, Rev. John Dreisbach met with overt hostility in Jonestown, PA.

He had preached there before and encountered heckling and threats so this time he decided not to post where or when the service would take place. That evening, as a precaution, the doors to the building where he would preach were locked. The windows were shuttered and fastened from the inside, but the sound of people singing filtered to the outside and people discovered the meeting. In a short time a mob gathered. They forced open the doors and shutters and "...rushed into the house with fearful noise and still more fearful imprecations." Rev. John, who was a 6 foot tall and imposing man, took a lantern and went among the crowd to restore order but he was grabbed and dragged roughly toward the door. The lantern dropped, the flame went out, and the room became pitch black.

"Those who were dragging him hallooed to their companions outside and said 'Boys, open the door, we got him now!' From outside they replied 'Give it to him! Kill the priest!' At this point Rev. John raised himself up and then flung himself down, tearing himself out of their hands. "As the ruffians were groping for him in the dark they got hold of each other, letting torrents of blows descend on one another, each fancying that he was beating the 'priest'." Rev. John managed to reach the door and escape, but others were seriously hurt including a woman who was knocked unconscious.²¹



Fig. 6. House where Rev. John was mobbed in Jonestown, PA. Solver lantern slide.²²

"The following day the seven ringleaders were charged in court by the brethren, but the mob brought retaliatory charges against the brethren. A jury subsequently found the mob guilty and acquitted the brethren. After this the brethren *paid* the persecutors court costs, "thus showing that they had not brought suit against them for malice or

revenge but to teach them that the Evangelical Association enjoys the protection of the law."²³ This was not the first time, nor the last, that Rev. John encountered threats and outright persecution.

(1809): Rev. John ordained an elder: In April, all of the ministers met again for their second annual conference and John Dreisbach was elected secretary. At this point, it was not clear who - or what - "Albright's People" were. It was not yet a denomination. What was clear was that the itinerant ministers who traveled large 'circuits', preaching in homes, schools and even some established churches, were gaining more followers.

At a previous meeting, the ministers had discussed beliefs and church structure. In response to this George Miller compiled "*The Book of Discipline*", which contained rules of behavior and guides to theology. Now he was instructed to publish it at his own expense because the EA had no funds. A *Catechism*, which John Dreisbach had translated from English to German, was accepted for use in classes and he, too, was to have it printed.

At this same conference, Henry Niebel, who was to become both a brother-in-law and a trusted co-worker of John, was made a probationary minister. Most importantly, the three men who had worked closely with Albright: George Miller, John Walter and John Dreisbach, were ordained as *elders*.²⁴ John later wrote about this event that "It was in truth a solemn, and also a quickening time for all of us. From this time onward, I felt myself more established in the work and realized a stronger confidence in God."²⁵ John was 21.

(1810): Campmeeting! English-speaking revivalists, largely Methodists, had developed a way to attract people to religious services - holding weeklong campmeetings. People brought their own tents and supplies to a designated field, set up the tents in a circle and held outdoor religious services, three times a day. It seemed that being away from regular chores gave people a fresh mindset and opened their hearts to hear the Word coming from the evangelical preachers.

On the 30th of May, 1810, Rev. John helped to organize the first German-speaking campmeeting. It was held in a field near New Berlin, just south of Martin Dreisbach's house and was very well received. Large numbers of loyal members of the EA came, some from as far as 80 to 100 miles away, bringing tents and wagons. For everyone this was a new experience. Horses needed to be taken care of, food cooked, and sanitation arranged for the crowds who had come to see what might take place.

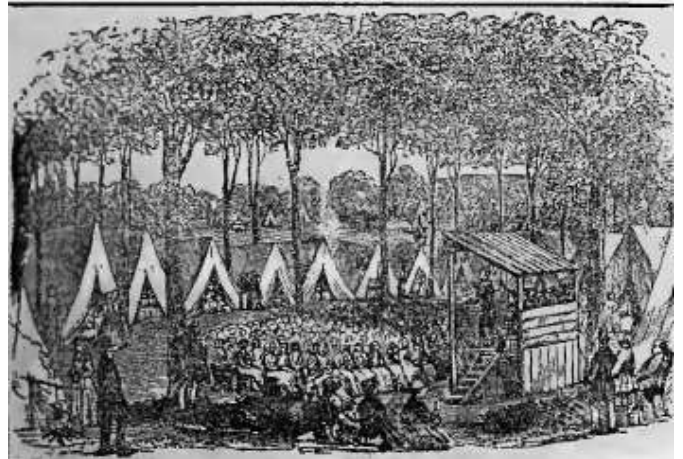


Fig. 7 and 8. Two views of an early camp meeting, ca. 1830.²⁶

There was an "outpouring of the Spirit" and many were converted.²⁷ Rev. John attended, and one can imagine the tall, good looking, young minister standing together with other people on the last night of the campmeeting when "... the entire group, clergy and laity, formed a large circle in the grove, and with hands joined, sang hymns of Christian fellowship."²⁸

John meets Bishop Asbury: On the 2nd of August of 1810, Rev. John was headed to a preaching appointment when he met Bishop Asbury of the Methodist Episcopal Church and his companion, Rev. Boehm, going in the same direction. All three were well traveled itinerant ministers, the two older men having years of experience preaching on the road. The three rode together along the hot, sun-dappled shore of the Susquehanna River. News of Rev. John's preaching and organizational abilities had reached the Bishop who now made a "very respectable" offer to Rev. John to join with the Methodist Church. There were conditions of course - that John withdraw from the EA and that he preach in English as well as German, according to the audience.

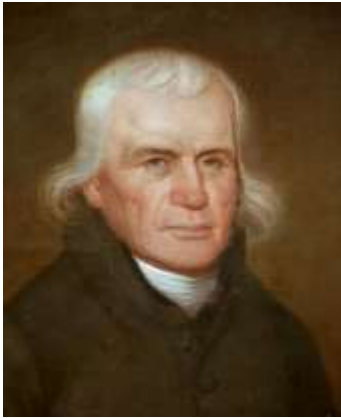


Fig. 9. Bishop Asbury (1745-1816) by John Paradise. This picture was painted ca. 1812 and thus portrays the mature man who met young Rev. John Dreisbach in 1810.²⁹

No doubt John found the offer appealing, but, he said "I could not resolve ... to take such a treacherous step toward the Evangelical Association" and "I ... told the Bishop that we considered ourselves called of God to labor among the German population." The Bishop replied that he expected the use of German, among settlers, would disappear soon. John disagreed and then made a counter offer to the Bishop. "If you will give us German circuits and conferences, we are willing to make your Church *ours*, be one people with you, and have one and the same Church government." "This would be inexpedient." was the Bishop's reply.

As they rode, Bishop Asbury and Rev. John continued in discussion. Apparently recognizing that the young John was desperate to learn more about theology, the bishop parted with a book of his own and gave John Fletcher's *Portrait of St Paul*. This was a very generous gift - books were scarce and itinerant preachers, even such well known ones as Bishop Asbury, carried minimal goods with them as they traveled.

They parted near Harrisburg, in a friendly manner. The Bishop embraced Rev. John and wished him "prosperity in the work of the Lord". The two never met again.³⁰

(1811): Rev. John the circuit rider: John was now fully engaged in circuit preaching and in the administrative work of the Evangelical Association. Somewhere he found time to court Catherine Eyer, born 11 March 1785, the daughter of Abraham Eyer, a stalwart supporter of Albright and then of the Evangelical Association. There were many EA meetings at Eyer's house providing opportunities to meet and speak with Catherine. John must have impressed her with his kindness and good looks because he had little to offer Catherine in 'worldly goods'. He had no money, no house and no farm and he would be away, on the road, ten months of the year, able to be home only at irregular intervals. That she agreed to marry him

on April 11th, 1811 speaks volumes for the kind and caring personality he must have had.

Circuit riders had an incredibly demanding job, both physically, spiritually and emotionally. Nearly half of the circuit riders died of disease before they were 40. Each preaching circuit was composed of 20 to 40 appointments (scheduled preaching places), most appointments were 30 or more miles apart. They rode for hours at a time though every sort of weather. Traveling could not be postponed if the weather was bad because people left homes and farms to come to the preaching places - and waited there for the arrival of the minister.



Fig. 10. Circuit rider in the rain. Unknown artist.

When it was raining the itinerant ministers wore waxed leather capes for protection, aided, perhaps by an umbrella. If the rain was hard enough or lasted long enough, water soaked through to the skin. If it was cold, they had only a single blanket to wrap over their coat, little protection from sleet or blowing snow. If it was hot, they still wore black jackets or home spun shirts to provide protection from hordes of mosquitoes (which carried malaria) and biting deer flies.

Rev. John, like the other itinerant preachers, wore homespun, mended clothing. Often he lacked food and still more often he had no roof to sleep under, sleeping on a ground sheet with the saddle for a pillow. He carried only a Bible, a hymnal and "*The Discipline*" in his saddle bags. The destinations for preachers were stuffy dark houses or barns filled with hay dust. They drank water from streams and sometimes got ill. They preached daily, sometimes several times a day. If they were lucky, they were fed a decent meal after preaching for two or three

hours and occasionally they were provided with food for the road.



Fig. 11. Circuit rider reading the Bible as he rides. Constantly on the road, this is nearly the only opportunity they had to study and prepare.

Itinerant preachers ministered to the well and to the sick. Pneumonia, malaria, dysentery and tuberculosis were always present threats, and many succumbed. In the early years, they were paid about \$35 a year. Bad roads made travel difficult for horses and riders. On some of the newer circuits, there were only rough Indian trails. In spite of this, they tried to read the Bible, pray and meditate as they rode, for this was their only time to prepare their sermons. Hecklers threw stones at the itinerant preachers when they passed by farms. In some parts of the country, all houses were closed to them in reaction to local pastors counselling their congregations to have nothing to do with the roaming preachers.

(1812): Rev. John has a breakdown: Rev. John spent years surviving the rigors of being an itinerant preacher. He also strove to discipline his body through extended prayer and by fasting every Friday.³¹ He attended the fifth EA conference which was held at his father's home on April 2 and 3 in 1812. Here Rev. John was delegated to travel through western New York State in an effort to set up a new circuit there. They did not find enough German speaking people there to merit a missionary effort and returned home, discouraged. When they got back to Pennsylvania, they discovered that some of the established circuits, which had been entrusted to young, new, ministers - were floundering. So after a long and hard trip, John was immediately sent out on the large Northumberland circuit to repair the damage.

In addition, Rev. John was now a father. Catherine had given birth to a baby girl, Salome, just nine months after they were married. This may have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Feeling discouraged about the

failed New York mission, and the dismal state of the Northumberland circuit, compounded by years of physical stress, Rev. John became ill with depression. As his depression increased, his preaching "became weaker". Noticing this, an "older preacher" severely reprimanded Rev. John, saying that his preaching had declined because John had been "captivated by the love of the world".³² Rev. John's world came apart.

He wrote in his diary that he was forced into the 'Slough of Despond' and "my harp became an instrument of lamentation and song was turned into weeping".³³ For months depression rendered Rev. John incapable of preaching. Rest and prayer, and probably a loving wife, brought him through and he recovered in time to attend the sixth annual conference, again held at his father's house on April 21-23 in 1813. He was 23 years old.

(1813): Moving westward: There were now 15 itinerant preachers and 796 members in good standing of the EA. And Rev. John was back on the circuit! Rev. John and Adam Hennig were sent west across the Allegheny mountains into the wilderness of recently settled Somerset County. Arriving with zeal and energy, they were rewarded with great success. They attracted 60 new members to the EA and from them 3 classes were formed. The ministers' duties were not confined to preaching, teaching and attracting new members, they also had to find locations for meetings by asking inn-keepers, school masters, relatives and friends of friends.³⁴



Fig. 12. Settler's house in Somerset County ca. 1800³⁵
Courtesy of Somerset Historical Center.

When Rev. John returned he was instructed by members of the EA conference to visit several circuits in the *eastern* part of Pennsylvania - many miles from Somerset County. Here he was to help set up and run camp meetings, an enjoyable but exhausting job. In the midst of all this, Rev. John's second daughter, Elizabeth, was born on July 12, 1813. One wonders if he was home for the event.

(1814): John is an 'acting bishop': For the third time in a row, the annual EA conference was held at the home of Martin Dreisbach Jr. This time, Rev. John Dreisbach was elected chairman of the conference, and his brother-in-law, Henry Niebel, (who had married another of Abraham Eyer's daughters) was elected secretary.

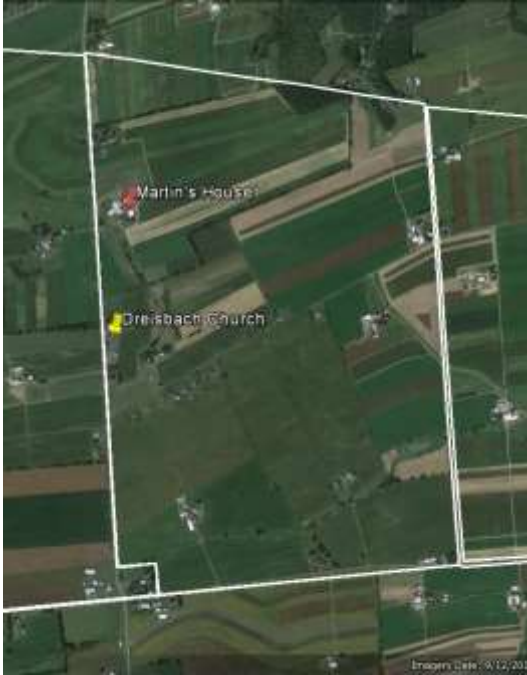


Fig. 13. Aerial view showing outline of Martin Dreisbach's original land purchase. Martin Dreisbach's home was located at yellow pin and the Dreisbach Church is located at green pin. Google Earth.

The most important outcome of this conference was that Rev. John Dreisbach was elected as Presiding Elder of the Evangelical Association - which meant he acted, essentially, as a Bishop. It was agreed he was well suited and adequately prepared. He had served as a junior preacher with Albright, had covered almost all of the circuits in the entire church, had done missionary work, was "well established both spiritually and doctrinally", was fluent in both German and English, was gifted with a strong mind and fine administrative talent, and he was an excellent preacher. He had an impressive appearance and he commanded respect from all who knew him, yet he also had a kindly spirit and was approachable.³⁶ It is difficult to find a more glowing description of anyone.

Rev. John apparently lived up to this description. It was said that "Though he governed and superintended kindly, yet when it became necessary he administered discipline very firmly and inflexibly, as his diaries frequently indicate." His diary also records the incredibly difficult duties the position of Presiding Elder put upon him. "At this conference I was elected Presiding Elder, to travel over all the circuits as follows: 1. Union, 2. Bedford, 3. Somerset, 4. Franklin, 5. York, 6. Lancaster, 7.

Schuylkill; which will require 1000 miles of travel in making one round."³⁷ Four complete rounds a year were expected.

The sheer amount of work this man performed is mind-boggling. In addition to all of the above, he attended and preached multiple sermons at four different camp meetings, officiated and preached at fourteen big meetings and stayed up all night, praying and preaching for eight "watch nights".³⁸

(1815): Catherine Eyer Dreisbach dies: On the 4th of April, 1815, John's wife, Catherine, died at the age of 30 leaving behind two small daughters. On the very same day that Catherine died, the eighth annual conference of the EA was convened in York County and the minutes of the meeting indicate that John Dreisbach was in attendance. He was not with his wife when she died. Her death may have been sudden and unexpected, but the fact remains that her husband was not beside her when she died.

Ten days later, on April 14th, Rev. conducted a public sale of his house and household items and he and his two daughters moved in with his parents who lived nearby. Then he rode to Reading, PA to purchase a tombstone for his wife's grave.³⁹

A month after the death of his wife, Rev. John traveled to Philadelphia and on Sunday, May 7, 1815, he preached in the newly built Masonic Hall. There is irony in this because in subsequent years, Rev. John was strictly opposed to 'secret societies' in general and to the Masons in particular.

While Rev. John was in Philadelphia, he was investigating the purchase of a printing press and associated equipment. He felt that it was important for the EA to print books that would help people in their faith. {to be continued in another newsletter}

Many people have helped in compiling information for this newsletter. Particular thanks go to *Bettijane Burger* who took the time to go through her files, photocopy relevant articles, make notes and send the whole package to me by mail. *Sidney Dreese*, the archivist at Albright College in Reading, PA, has been of enormous help, finding, photocopying and mailing me large chunks of relevant books. My sister, *Ardis Dreisbach Grosjean*, has helped in many ways, with information and feedback as well as proof-reading.

Thank you one and all,
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- ¹ DFA Newsletter of March 2013
- ² Stapleton, M.S., *Annals of the Evangelical Association of North America*. 1900. pp 75 to 78.
- ³ Ibid. p 76
- ⁴ <http://contentdm1.accesspa.org/cdm/search/collection/churchslide>
- ⁵ Ibid. p 76
- ⁶ Ibid. p 78
- ⁷ Ibid. p 76
- ⁸ Ibid. p 18
- ⁹ Stapleton, A. *Flashlights on Evangelical History*. 1908. p 3
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p 77
- ¹¹ Ibid. p 77
- ¹² Stapleton, A. Op cit. p.4
- ¹³ Yeakel, R. *Jacob Albright and his Co-Laborers*, 1883. pp 281, 282
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p 282
- ¹⁵ Albright, Raymond W. *A History of the Evangelical Church*. 1942. p 90
- ¹⁶ Ibid. p 83
- ¹⁷ Ibid. p 83
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p 369
- ¹⁹ <http://contentdm1.accesspa.org/cdm/search/collection/churchslide>
- ²⁰ Yeakel, R. *History of the Evangelical Association. Vol. 1, 1750-1850*. 1909. p 72.
- ²¹ Ibid. p 99
- ²² <http://contentdm1.accesspa.org/cdm/search/collection/churchslide>
- ²³ Ibid. p 99
- ²⁴ Albright, Op cit. pp 94-97
- ²⁵ Yeakel, Op cit. p 104
- ²⁶ Stapleton Op cit. p 37
- ²⁷ Ibid. p 107
- ²⁸ Ibid. p 100
- ²⁹ <http://explorepahistory.com/>
- ³⁰ Ibid. p 108
- ³¹ Ibid. p 131
- ³² Ibid. p 116
- ³³ Ibid. p 117
- ³⁴ Beal Jr, W. C, The Planting of the Evangelical Association in *Methodist History*, 1978 - 07 p. 221
- ³⁵ <http://www.somersethistoricalcenter.org/>
- ³⁶ Albright, Op. cit, pp 109, 110
- ³⁷ Dreisbach, first Daybook, p. 43
- ³⁸ Ibid. p 120
- ³⁹ "Humble Beginnings of a Great Enterprise" in a 26 Feb 1967 publication entitled "Builders". pp 15-19