

Berks County Amish Historical Tour by Elam Stoltzfus

On November 2, 2024, the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead hosted a Berks County Amish Historical Tour, and the clear crisp blue-sky day was the perfect day for a history tour. The day started early for many of the Lancaster County participants who were picked up at the Candle Barn or CVS parking lot in Intercourse. The bus then headed north to the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead where the tour officially began. As tour members registered and received tour packets, they enjoyed a delicious breakfast of biscuits and sausage gravy, eggs, fresh fruit, and donuts made and served by Joe and Linda Miller and Esther Stoltzfus.

Shortly before 10AM the 55-seat touring bus, which was filled to capacity, began on its journey to explore our rich history in Berks County. The tour began in Wyomissing, Shillington and West Reading where there are still remnants or markers of old homesteads and graveyards. This included the Stoltzfus, Schmucker, Miller, Coblenz, Zug, Grabers, Kurtz and other family names in this corner of Berks County. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Wyomissing area was home to a thriving Amish community and church. The Amish families operated mills and stone quarries and most of the farmers grew grain and flax.

This part of the tour is always a bit depressing for me, because of the destruction of the burial areas of our ancestors. The Miller graveyard is under the pavement of S. Wyomissing Ave. and the Gerber-Fix cemetery is partly under Route 422 and other documented graveyards that no longer exist.

We worked our way north through Muhlenberg Township to view the Stoltzfus, Konig, and Rickenbach homesteads on our way to Mohrsville. We stopped at the Mohrsville Church of the Brethren to view Widow Barbara Yoder's Bible and her son Jacob Yoder's Bible. We were able to meet and visit with some of our distant relatives on the Yoder side of the family. Widow Barbara's Bible has stayed in their family for many generations and is still in the Yoder family to this date. This was a special stop and we did not have near enough time to share in-depth conversations or view all the documents from the Yoder families in Mohrsville, who came to the area in 1742.

The tour continued through Centerport, where Mortiz Zug owned a large tract of land. We also viewed lands occupied by the Kurtz, Kauffman, Miller, and Berkey families and made a short stop on Jungle Road. We drove down the gravel Jungle Road to take a look at the remnants of what is left of the 1700 two story log cabin that Joseph Renno had built for his family. There was animated discussion about saving some of the logs to create a memorial in remembrance of the Renno family. One idea under consideration is starting a project using some of the logs or lumber to build a pavilion at the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead. This would be a fitting memorial for many of the Berks County Amish family descendants.

We traveled through the Irish Creek Valley then north up to the old 222, now known as Hex highway. Our lunch break was held at Tilden Township park which was on the original farm of Stephen Kauffman. After lunch we stopped at the Jacob Hertzler farm and walked to the Hertzler family cemetery that is still intact and protected. Jacob was an Amish bishop sent from Germany to oversee the churches in Berks County and is buried on the home farm cemetery.



We wound through the back county roads in northern Berks county to view farms and homesteads of the following families: Kauffman, Yoder, Fisher, Lehman, Hooley, Zug, Beiler, Gnagi, Stutzman, Hochstetler, and Detweiler. One highlight was to see the land believed to have been the homestead where Ludwig Riehl was raised by Jacob Kauffman. Research is still ongoing to discover and verify other Amish farms in that area.

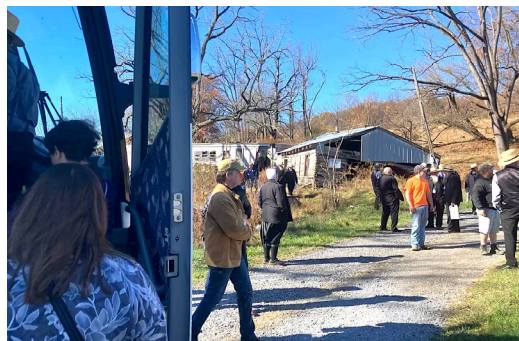
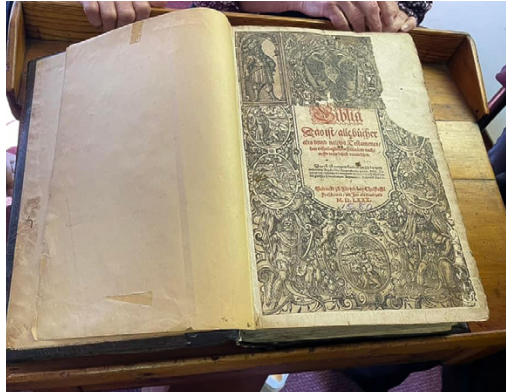
Due to a scheduling conflict, we weren't able view the Jacob Hochstetler homestead. This is the well-known site where several family members were killed and/or taken captive by Native Americans. However, we had the unique privilege of touring the adjacent farm belonging to Jacob's son John Hochstetler who was married to Catherine Hertzler. The current owner of this property welcomed the tour participants and showed us the site of the log cabin and spring house where John lived during the time of the massacre.

After we completed the loop of the Irish Creek and Northkill regions we made two final stops. We stopped to see the Heister Mansion which is now the site of a golf club. One section of the clubhouse is where John and Barbara Stoltzfus Schmucker had lived with their young family before moving to Wyomissing. The last stop was the Daniel Zug farm, currently owned by the Penn State Berks University and is used as a site for agricultural research. Daniel was the Amish preacher for the Maiden Creek/Reading Amish church district..

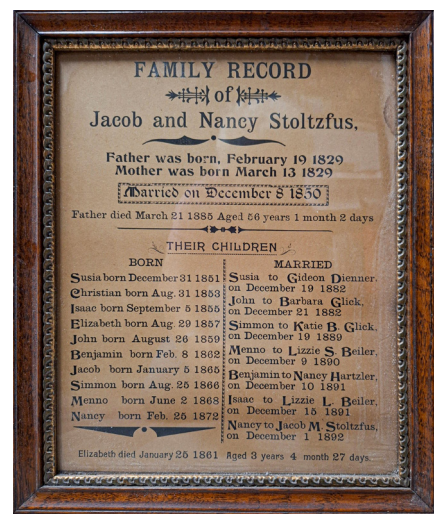
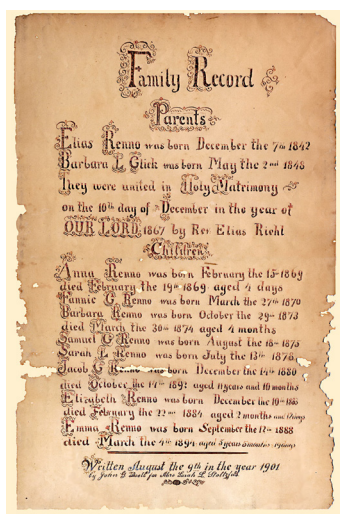
We enjoyed seeing a bit of remaining fall foliage along the edge of the Blue Mountain range and across the Irish Creek valley. As we traveled the roads of our ancestors, it warmed our hearts to see some of the farms and buildings intact and in use. This tour was a wonderful time to share stories and learn about the interconnectedness of many of our families. We enjoyed hearing about old family legends and even a few tall tales. As the leader of the group, I enjoyed watching strangers become friends and individuals of diverse backgrounds find ways to connect with each other. It was obvious that we shared a common interest and respect for our ancestors and the history that weaves us together.

The Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead will plan another Berks County Amish Historical Tour on October 18, 2025. If you are interested, let us know soon because we expect the tour to fill up fast.

Thank you to everyone who participated and made this tour a great success!



2025 Exhibit of 1800s Family Records



The Homestead is thrilled to announce a family records exhibit starting in January 2025. This exhibit includes privately owned family records of Nicholas Stoltzfus descendants and other Berks County Amish families dating back to the 1800s. These family heirlooms -- which have never been viewed by the general public -- have been painstakingly preserved over multiple generations. The records are comprehensive in scope and include essential dates and genealogy information, and they are also intricate works of art that include fine needlework and classic fraktur designs.

The Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead will be open to the public every Friday and Saturday from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm, starting on January 24th to December 13th, 2025. All other visits may be made by appointment by calling 484-878-2916. Share this information about these family heirlooms with your family, neighbors and friends.

Contact: Elam Stoltzfus, 484-878-2916 or email NicholasStoltzfusHomestead@gmail.com

Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead Historical Update

Things are moving along with the application to get the Homestead on the National Historic Register. Dr. Anne Lindsay, the historical consultant we have hired to complete and submit the application on our behalf, has made contact with the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission in Harrisburg.

According to Anne, "Overall, they were really excited about the prospect of the nomination and while they can't guarantee that it will be determined eligible, they felt good about it based on the information I was able to provide. The restoration work was particularly exciting to them..."

Submitting the application to PHMC is the next step on the process, which Anne will do in the coming months.

Stay tuned, and we will provide another update in the spring 2025 newsletter!



Photo from 1920 - Grings family

Printing The Ausbund, Part 1: Origins - By Elam Stoltzfus (Part 1 of a 8 part series)

It's Sunday morning, your family and community arrive to worship and be together at church. You take your place on the church bench or pew. You open your songbook and join everyone else in the church in song. Singing together is foundational for our emotional expression, and we teach Christian doctrines in the form of worship through song. Today, we take it for granted that Sunday morning worship will include all of us lifting our voices together in song.

On the eve of the Reformation in the early 1500s, it was a taboo to sing together as a group of worshippers and the Catholic church did not provide or support congregational singing.

Even as the Reformation changed how Christians practiced their faith, there were still some early Protestant groups who limited singing in the church: Ulrich Zwingli, leader of the Reformation in Switzerland, prohibited music altogether, while John Calvin, a French theologian, limited singing to Psalms without musical instruments.

Martin Luther, however, encouraged congregational singing. Luther composed music and lyrics for the worship experience of the churches that believed in salvation, grace through a believer's faith and Jesus Christ as a Redeemer from sin. Even today, many sing songs written by Luther, a popular one being A Mighty Fortress Is Our God ("Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott"), which is also my all-time favorite hymn. In addition, his influence of music are reflected in the Ausbund.

Singing was also important to the Swiss Anabaptists. In the early years, they had to meet in secret, for fear of persecution. They met in forests, barns, and caves to listen to teaching, preaching, and to sing together. Music was used to worship, to encourage believers, and tell stories. The believer's songs contain a rich desire to experience the Holiness of God's presence in their lives, even as they suffered.

And how the early Anabaptists suffered! In the 1500s, hundreds were persecuted and martyred for their faith. Some Anabaptists took to writing songs, sharing their hearts in the midst of many tribulations. The core of the Ausbund - fifty-one songs - were written by a group of Swiss Anabaptists who were imprisoned in a castle in the city of Passau from 1535-1540. Many of these Anabaptists were later martyred for their beliefs. Their songs were collected together and printed in 1564, likely in the city of Cologne. This was the first printing of the Ausbund. Today, only one known copy is known to exist, and it is located at the Mennonite Historical Library in Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana. This first edition actually didn't contain the word "Ausbund" in it; this 1564 hymnbook was titled "Etliche schöne christliche Gesäng wie dieselbigen zu Passau von den Schweizer Brüdern in der Gefenknus im Schloss durch göttliche Gnade gedicht und gesungen warden. Ps. 139" translated "Several Beautiful Christian Songs Which Were Written and Sung Through God's Grace by the Swiss Brethren in the Passau Castle Prison."



Nearly twenty years later, the hymnbook was printed again—but with over twice as many songs. The 1583 printing contains 130 songs; today's American printings of the Ausbund contain 140 songs, so this printing from nearly 500 years ago contains all the songs still printed today in America, minus ten that were added in later editions.



Ausbund means “paragon” or “virtue” in German, and the songs reflect early Anabaptists’ desire to be virtuous. Quite a few of the songs were written by Anabaptists who were martyred: Felix Mann (Hymn #6), Michael Sattler (Hymn #7), and Hans Hut (Hymn #8) all wrote songs included in the Ausbund. The songs mainly come from Anabaptists all over Europe, reflecting the shared experiences that many were dealing with: persecution by state and religious leaders who refused to accept their beliefs.

For example, one of the most well-loved songs of the Ausbund, the Lob Leid/Song of Praise (Hymn #131), was not written by Swiss Anabaptists in Passau, but rather a German Mennonite minister who later settled in the Netherlands; his name was Leenaerdt Klock.

Take a look at the lyrics to the first verse of the Lob Leid/Song of Praise (Hymn #131) the second song sung at every Amish worship service.

O Gott Vater, wir loben dich,
Und diene Güte preisen:
Die du, o Herr, so gnädiglich,
Un uns neu hast bewiesen,
Und hast uns Herr zusammen g’führt,
Uns zu ermahnen durch dein Wort,
Gib uns Genad zu diesem.

O God Father, we praise You
And Your goodness exalt,
Which You, O Lord, so graciously
Have manifested to us anew,
And have brought us together, Lord,
To admonish us through Your Word,
Grant us grace to this.

As in any worship service, when many human voices blend together in sounds of praise, God is honored. Music has a way to pierce into the inner parts of our soul, and singing unites us as a body of believers. The apostle Paul wrote to the saints: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace ...” (Col. 3:16).

The songs in the Ausbund contain important statement about our Christian faith and heritage. When I was a young and restless Amish boy, I viewed this nearly 500-year-old hymns books as tired and irrelevant. I questioned why I had to sing these dusty old songs that felt more like a funeral dirge than an upbeat worship song. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve gained a new appreciation and respect for the richness of these old songs. In a time when missionaries are under attack, being held hostage, and killed, the Ausbund and its songs of persecution are more relevant today than ever. May you find renewed interest and worship in the collection of Ausbund songs and the interpretation of our ancestors’ journey in the Christian faith.

Let us end by reflecting on the 30th verse of Hymn #112 in the Ausbund. This song was written sometime between 1535-1537 by one of the leaders of the imprisoned Anabaptists in Passau, Hans Betz, who died in the Oberhaus dungeon in Passau, Germany.

To this end may the eternal God help us, Who rules everything.

What He has begun in us, He wants by grace to complete.

Lord, this is our prayer to you. Keep us always in your peace, Unto eternity. Amen

- Ausbund 112 Leid - Hans Betz - Passau 1535-1537

Sources of research and quotes.

Wikipedia - Ausbund, Songs of the Ausbund @Ohio Amish Library, The Earliest Hymns of the Ausbund - Pandora Press



Veste Oberhaus, Passau, Germany

The perfect Christmas gift for all ages. Collect the four seasons of the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead. A limited collectors item of high quality 1000 piece jig-saw puzzle.

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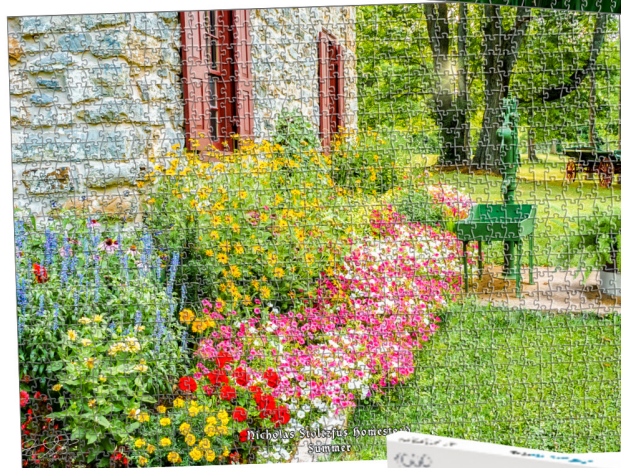
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The Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead is now taking donations for books, old, used and new for the 2025 Benefit Auction. If you have any books let us know and we will arrange to pick up the books.

If you have any new or used items to donate for the auction, either stop by or give us a call to arrange a pick up.



2025 Calendar Fund Raising
for the Stoltzfus Homestead

Collection of 12 photographs of the
Homestead by Elam Stoltzfus

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Joseph Miller, Board member
S. Nicholas Stoltzfus, Secretary
Debra Allgyer, Treasurer
Elam & Esther Stoltzfus, Executive Directors

Annual Benefit Auction Saturday May 3rd, 2025

Accepting donations of items to be sold at the 2025 auction or bring your item to the auction.

Call Elam at 484-878-2916



Like and share the FaceBook page, which is a place to tell stories, share images, videos, and stay informed with updates.

<https://www.facebook.com/NicholasStoltzfusHomestead>

Web site - www.NicholasStoltzfus.com



The 2025 calendar at the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead is open and accepting bookings for family, company, or youth group events. Schedule early to reserve your desired date. All Stoltzfus descendents receive the special family donation rate.

Call Elam or Esther Stoltzfus at 484-878-2916 to reserve.

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