

Elizabeth Myer

On 7 June 1863, in Bareville, Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Myer was born to Samuel Rohrer and Amanda Evans Myer. The Myer family was a well-known German Baptist Brethren family. Samuel Myer was the only English-speaking minister in the Bareville area, and was highly praised among the congregation.¹ As a result, the children were raised speaking both German and English.² Elizabeth Myer was the fifth child of twelve, of those she was the fourth daughter. In her youth, Myer was petite and of a quiet manner. She often would sit by herself thinking, rather than playing with her siblings or other children. An additional peculiarity was from the time of birth, Myer only had sight in one of her eyes. Due to this, it was noted throughout her life she had an odd manner of holding her head.³ Myer, even in childhood, possessed great learning ability. She liked to read, learned lessons quickly, and had a strong memory. Myer also possessed maternal characteristics, shown in the way she assisted in raising two of her younger sisters. After the fact, Myer's mother called her "a disciplinarian in embryo," because of these characteristics which would later be vital to Myer as a professor.⁴

These circumstances did not impede her potential to succeed. Myer was sent to a district school ranking top of the list academically.⁵ In September of 1885, Myer entered the State Normal School at Millersville University. In November of 1886, Myer chose to be baptized under the Baptist Brethren faith. She was a member of the Conestoga Church of the Brethren.⁶ This decision caused significant problems with the State Normal School, as it was their policy never to hire teachers who wore plain clothing associated with the Anabaptist and Pietist groups.⁷ In the Brethren faith, people must dress in plain clothes to demonstrate humility and servitude to God and to the community. Myer was the only student at Millersville University that wore plain garb.⁸ Plain garb, traditionally for the women, is usually categorized by the wearing of what is called a cape dress, which is complemented with an apron, to symbolize her husband or father's role in her life.⁹ The woman's hair is typically grown out to be long, and then is worn pinned up, and accented with a prayer veil that is called a "covering." It can be further adorned with a bonnet. Plain dressers do not wear makeup, nor jewelry.¹⁰

Myer was attending the normal school to be a teacher when this became a legal restriction in 1895.¹¹ After the Garb Law was passed, Myer believed she would have to leave Millersville and notified the office that she was leaving the college. However, due to her academic achievements and admirable character, the president of the college B. F. Schaub, a Mennonite, told her she could stay at the school and continue her studies.¹² Students and faculty did not support Schaub, forcing him to resign as principal in 1887.¹³ On 7 July 1887, Myer was the first "plain" woman to graduate from a state normal school.¹⁴ Never having lost the studious nature of her childhood, Myer graduated as Salutatorian, and gave the address.¹⁵

¹ Chet Williamson, Uniting Work and Spirit a Centennial History of Elizabethtown College (Elizabethtown, PA: Elizabethtown College Press, 2001), 30.

² History of the Church of the Brethren, Eastern Pennsylvania 1915-1965. (Lancaster, PA: Forry & Hacker, 1965), 320.

³ History, 320-321. Williamson, 30.

⁴ Williamson, 30.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Williamson, 31.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Benowitz. "College Steeped in Religious Tradition of Nonviolence," *Elizabethtown Advocate* (Elizabethtown, PA) 2017: 3.

⁹ Williamson, 31.

¹⁰ Ralph W. Schlosser. History of Elizabethtown College (Elizabethtown, PA: Sowers Printing Company) 1971: 47.

¹¹ Williamson, 31.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Benowitz, Jean-Paul Historic Elizabethtown Pennsylvania: A Walking Tour. 2015, 3.

¹⁴ Schlosser, 47. Williamson, 31.

¹⁵ Williamson, 31.

Myer was sent a district school ranking top of the list academically.¹⁶ In 1885, she entered the State Normal School at Millersville.¹⁷ In 1886, she decided to be baptized in the German Baptism Brethren faith. This caused problems with the State Normal School, as it was their policy never to hire teachers who wore plain clothing associated with the Anabaptist and Pietist groups.¹⁸ This became a legal restriction in 1895. As this law was not in effect yet, Myer became a test case.¹⁹ Myer thought she was going to leave Millersville because she was the only student who dressed plain, but the president of the college, B.F. Shaub, a Mennonite, allowed her to stay because of her high academic achievements. Students and faculty did not support Shaub, forcing him to resign as principal in 1887.²⁰ On 7 July 1887, Myer was the first “plain” woman to graduate from a state normal school.²¹ She graduated as the salutatorian of her class.²² For the next fourteen years, Myer taught in Lancaster public schools.

In 1895, David H. Martin, a Mennonite which later became a Brethren in Christ, opened his clothing store in the 1792 Samuel Grimes residence on 21-23 and 25 Diamond Square.²³ In 1911, Martin relocated his store his store across the square to the corner of South Market Street and East High Street in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania.²⁴ He advertised his store as “The Store for Plain Folks.”²⁵ Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, and Brethren in Christ members came to his store to have their suitcoats tailored into plain suits. Martin also carried a complete line of prayer veils, coverings, and bonnets.²⁶ There was also the Grace Blough Dress Shop on 116 South Market Street.²⁷ This specialized in plain bonnets for Mennonite and Brethren women.

In 1895, the Pennsylvania Garb Law passed stating “no teacher in any public school shall wear in said school or while engaged in the performance of his duty as such teacher any dress, mark, emblem or insignia indicating the fact such a teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect, or denomination.”²⁸ In 1899, Elizabethtown College was established by member of the Church of the Brethren.²⁹ In 1900, Myer was the first teacher hired making a clear statement on how Elizabethtown College was formed in response to the Garb Law.³⁰ At the eight board meeting, the Trustees of Elizabethtown College met at S.H. Hertzler’s home on 11 June 1900, negotiations resulted in Myer being chosen as a teacher at a salary of forty five dollars a month.³¹ As she was a woman this set the template for Elizabethtown with a long line of strong female personalities.³²

The Garb Law was put to test with Lillian Risser, a graduate of Elizabethtown College. She was a Mennonite hired by the school board of Mount Joy Township.³³ Many people complained, but the township refused to fire her because of her Brethren clothing. A taxpayer of the township filed suit against the school board for violating the garb law.³⁴ At this time many students at Elizabethtown College wore plain clothing and were aspiring public school teachers. To their delight, the President Judge of the Lancaster County Court declared the law contradicted the Bill of Rights and was unconstitutional.³⁵ This judgement pleased the religiously conservative Lancaster County.

¹⁶ Schlosser, 118.

¹⁷ Williamson, 31.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 3.

²¹ Williamson, 31.

²² Schlosser, 47.

²³ Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 67-68.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 68.

²⁷ Jean-Paul Benowitz, Images of America Elizabethtown (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 61.

²⁸ Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 4.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Schlosser, 33-34.

³² Williamson, 30.

³³ Ibid, 55.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

For fourteen years following her graduation from Millersville, Myer taught in a variety of Lancaster county public schools. In doing this she gained a reputation as an effective teacher and firm disciplinarian.³⁶ There is one recorded anecdote about Myer being instantly accepted in a class primarily composed of “rowdy” teenage boys, who were previously so out of control they picked up and physically threw a previous instructor out of the building. However, due to Myer’s poise, wit, and dedication to teaching the students accepted her readily.³⁷

With such an upstanding and impressive reputation, Myer was selected to be the first professor at Elizabethtown College, and the first female professor.³⁸ An additional reason for her selection was her previous brave opposition to the garb law. She was considered a champion for the cause and an important defender of plain garb in state normal and public schools.³⁹ At the time she was hired, her salary was \$45 for a month.⁴⁰ As a professor, Myer taught Mathematics, Elocution, and English. Additionally, she oversaw the ladies’ dormitory.⁴¹ Myer was often described as having had maternal qualities, which was reflected through her love of her religion and her desire to positively influence students.⁴² Due to these mannerisms she expressed, she was known especially for her lectures in the chapel, which were said to be presented with “good humor, important lessons, curious anecdotes, and knowledge of literature and life.”⁴³

Outside of directly working with students, she was a vital part of a committee on catalog, textbooks, printing, and stationery.⁴⁴ Her committee was also asked to set the time of the first day of classes and to prepare the program for opening day. In August of 1900, the first catalog was published and consisted of sixteen pages. It included the names of the members on the Board of Trustees and the names of the faculty of the college with the subjects they taught.⁴⁵ Myer was the advisor to the Franklin-Keystone Society, which was a group who arranged weekly programs of high caliber intended to add more meaning to weekends at Elizabethtown College.⁴⁶ One of Myer’s larger focuses was her work on *Our College Times*, for which Myer served as an Associate Editor. The *Times* was a monthly magazine with essays and articles by the staff and students. It was created to inform alumni benefactors of college events, promote the Gospel, and advocate for true education on behalf of Elizabethtown College. Throughout early editions of the *Times*, essays written by Myer are recurrent. Subjects on which she composed articles for the *Times* include the importance of education for women, proper manners for students, social culture, and efficiency of teachers.⁴⁷ In May 1904, the first issue was mailed to former students and friends of Elizabethtown College, and was a twelve-page booklet. The issue was made up of short essays by Myer and D.C. Reber, a picture of Alpha Hall, news about the college, and essays submitted by students.⁴⁸ By 1908, she was the Editor in Chief of the magazine. In September 1934, approximately ten years after Myer’s death, the name of the paper was changed to *The Etownian*.⁴⁹

On 19 May 1924, Myer passed away at the age of sixty in her own home.⁵⁰ She was the only member of the original faculty still teaching at the time, and her death was a great loss to the students and her fellow faculty.⁵¹ She was buried in her family cemetery near Bareville, soon thereafter. Myer, while she was unmarried and had no children of her own, was considered a loving surrogate mother to hundreds of students.⁵² To honor and remember her, the dorm room Myer resided in was preserved in the manner she kept it, including her furniture,

³⁶ Williamson, 31.

³⁷ Williamson, 31-32.

³⁸ Benowitz, 56. Schlosser, 47.

³⁹ Benowitz, *College Steeped in Religious Tradition of Nonviolence*, 18.

⁴⁰ Schlosser, 33, 47. Williamson, 32

⁴¹ Benowitz, 56. Schlosser, 41, 47.

⁴² Schlosser, 119.

⁴³ Benowitz, 56.

⁴⁴ Schlosser, 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁶ Benowitz, 47.

⁴⁷ Benowitz, 56. Schlosser, 57. Williamson, 53.

⁴⁸ Schlosser, 166.

⁴⁹ Schlosser, 166.

⁵⁰ Schlosser, 118-119. Williamson, 97-98.

⁵¹ Williamson, 97-98.

⁵² *Ibid.*

and a portrait of her was hung on the wall.⁵³ On 29 May 1961, Myer Hall was named for her.⁵⁴ Thirty-seven years after her departure, Myer was still sufficiently influential and well-remembered to encourage the naming of a residence hall for her.⁵⁵

Myer was never married, and was known to debate the use of “old-maid” as a result.⁵⁶ In 1924, Meyer passed away.⁵⁷ Her obituary from *Our College Times* reads as follows, “While her scrupulous insistence upon a high standard of living and good behavior was sometimes resented by those under her charge, no one could doubt her devotion to the right, her love for the cause of religion, and her sincere desire to influence the young people about her for good... She was also sympathetic and kind, and had a warm place in the heart of many a student, who will bless her memory. Her very eccentricities endeared her to us.”⁵⁸

On 29 May 1924, memorial services were held during the morning chapel service, and classes were cancelled for the rest of the day.⁵⁹ Her memorial service included various speakers.⁶⁰ Of these speakers on her behalf were: H.H. Nye, who addressed and portrayed her as a beloved teacher, R.W. Schlosser, whom greatly described the Christian ideals Myer had lived by, and Ethel M.B Wenger, who spoke of her as a cherished godmother.⁶¹ There were some students who also paid short praises to her memory, which were followed by the Faculty Quartet’s rendition of “Lead Kindly Light” and “In a Far Away Land.”⁶² Myer had been buried on 29 May 1924 within her family cemetery which was located near Bareville.⁶³

The next year, during November, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elizabethtown College had been observed.⁶⁴ It was during this time the President of Elizabethtown College, H.K. Ober had announced the future projects of the college.⁶⁵ Of these projects included the preservation of Myer’s dormitory room as a respect of memory to her.⁶⁶ The furniture was to be kept intact and place as it was during her time spent there, along with a portrait mounted onto the wall.⁶⁷ On the door of the room, a name plaque was placed in to recognize her memory.⁶⁸

In 1934, the Forensic Arts Club was established with the Elizabeth Meyer Extempore Speaking Contest in her memory.⁶⁹ On 11 May 1957, a woman’s residence hall was constructed as recommended by President Baugher on 16 January 1954 to the Board of Trustees.⁷⁰ Four years later, on 13 May 1961, it was named after Elizabeth Myer by the Board of Trustees.⁷¹

⁵³ Schlosser, 116.

⁵⁴ Schlosser, 199. Williamson, 97-98.

⁵⁵ Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 56. History, 324.

⁵⁶ Williamson, 81.

⁵⁷ Schlosser, 119.

⁵⁸ Williamson, 91.

⁵⁹ Schlosser, 119.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Williamson, 97.

⁶⁴ Schlosser, 116.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 56.

⁷⁰ Schlosser, 197. Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 56.

⁷¹ Benowitz, (May 11, 2017), 56.