

History of the Brethren Heritage of Elizabethtown College

Elizabethtown College's Brethren roots date back to the 1700s in Europe. The Brethren are the largest of the three churches to have come out of the original Anabaptist movement in 1708, and were led by Alexander Mack.¹ They fled Schwarzenau, Germany, in the summer of 1729 due to poor economic status and religious persecution and settled in the Germantown region of Philadelphia alongside other Brethren who had fled before them.² During this same time, tensions regarding many social issues began to arise within the church, and the departure of Conrad Beissel to form the Ephrata Cloister in 1728 was the catalyst that caused issues within the church to skyrocket. Eventually, the tensions grew and the church split into three groups: the conservative Old German Baptist Brethren, the progressive Brethren Church, and the German Baptist Brethren, who hovered in the middle and in 1908 adopted the name Church of the Brethren.³

The three divisions of the church agreed that a Brethren school needed to be established, and on 29 November 1898, Reverend Jay G. Francis called a meeting at the Brethren church in Reading to discuss the desires for a Brethren college.⁴ During this meeting, twelve women and twenty-two men voted to establish a coeducational Brethren school, which would serve to be a "home and a church" for the students who would attend.⁵ Even though the group agreed that a school needed to be established, nobody could come to a consensus on when, where, or how the school would be created.⁶ In fact, only a single proposal was settled on during this entire meeting. It was decided that a separate committee of five, still including Falkenstein, would travel the area to pinpoint possible locations for the college, and then call another meeting once enough areas had been explored.⁷ Dr. Nathan Schaeffer, who was Pennsylvania's Superintendent of Public Instruction at the time, wanted to establish a Brethren school in southeastern Pennsylvania after witnessing the benefits Juniata College brought to the church and community in Huntingdon after its founding in 1876, and the majority of the attendees agreed.⁸ Many different school districts and chambers of commerce across Pennsylvania – including areas such as West Chester, Norristown, Mountville, Columbia, Pottstown, Ephrata, and Elizabethtown – were influenced by Schaeffer's ideas and wrote to Brethren leaders with hopes of having the school established in their communities.⁹

George Brooke, Jr., a resident of Birdsboro, Pennsylvania, wrote to Brethren elder John Herr in hopes of convincing the church to establish the school in his hometown. Brooke wrote that Birdsboro was the ideal location for a college because it was along the Schuylkill River, was only nine miles from Reading and forty miles from Philadelphia, and was located right beside the lines of three different railroads. He wrote that "the facilities for getting to and from here cannot be surpassed," explaining that Birdsboro was an extremely convenient location.¹⁰ Brooke even went on to describe the beauty of the landscape near the river, and described all of the modern and

¹ George N. Falkenstein, History of the German Baptist Brethren Church, (Lancaster, PA: The New Era Printing Company, 1901), 17.

² Jean-Paul Benowitz, "Historic Peach Churches & Anabaptist Groups in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania" (Lecture, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, October 10, 2017); George N. Falkenstein, History of the Church of the Brethren of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania (1915), 4.

³ Benowitz, "Historic Peach Churches & Anabaptist Groups in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania".

⁴ Chet Williamson, Uniting Work and Spirit: A Centennial History of Elizabethtown College (2001), 2; Jean-Paul Benowitz and Peter J. DePuydt, Elizabethtown College (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 10; Ralph W. Schlosser, History of Elizabethtown College, 1899-1970 (1971), 2.

⁵ Benowitz, Elizabethtown College, 10.

⁶ Richard K. MacMaster, Elizabethtown: The First Three Centuries (1900), 164.

⁷ George N. Falkenstein, The Organization and the Early History of Elizabethtown College (193-), 33.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ George Brooke Jr., letter to John Herr, December 01, 1898.

up-to-date amenities which would be available to the college.¹¹ Brooke's letter was only one of many received by the elders of the Brethren church, as many people wanted their hometowns to host the college.

Despite agreeing on the necessity of a Brethren school in Pennsylvania, attending the meeting failed to settle on a location for the school, as well as a specific educational platform. The meeting committee explored many locations in Pennsylvania, and visited Elizabethtown on 04 April 1899, where they found two separate places in which they could place the college. On 05 April 1899, Revered Samuel R. Zug of Manheim acted as moderator for a second meeting that took place at the Brethren church in Elizabethtown to discuss whether or not it was plausible to establish a school, and if so, what kind of school they would establish. One group of Brethren leaders wanted a school with a curriculum consisting of Bible studies, agriculture, and commerce, while a second group proposed a curriculum of Bible study and a college preparatory program. Ultimately, the latter was agreed upon.¹²

Throughout the conversation regarding the school's curriculum, the committee kept coming back to the idea of placing the school in Elizabethtown. In May 1899, the committee held a meeting in Heisey Hall, located in the third floor of the Heisey Building on the corner of South Market Street and Union Street, to vote on where the college should be located.¹³ It was narrowed down to either Ephrata or Elizabethtown, and in June of the same year, a final vote was held to confirm the school's placement in Elizabethtown.

Once it was confirmed that the school was going to be built in Elizabethtown, the committee had to choose whether to locate the school on a plot of land close to the railroad station, or on a section of farmland owned by Benjamin G. Groff, the latter of which became the final decision. The Buch family paid for two-thirds of the land, and Groff donated the remaining third to the college.¹⁴ In September of 1899, Elizabethtown College obtained its charter and established its Board of Trustees, which included Simon P. Engle, a Brethren grocer; Joseph G. Heisey, a member of the board of directors for the Elizabethtown Exchange Bank; Brethren storekeeper and reverend Samuel H. Hertzler; and Joseph H. Rider, a Brethren hardware dealer and the first president of the Elizabethtown Exchange Bank.¹⁵

On 10 July 1900, the official groundbreaking of Elizabethtown College's first building, Alpha Hall, commenced. However, the construction of Alpha Hall was not complete in time for the college's opening exercises on 13 November 1900.¹⁶ As a result, the college rented Heisey Hall for the first six students – dubbed the "Faithful Six" – and the first classes were held on 16 November 1900.¹⁷ A week later, the college was moved to the residence of Joseph H. Rider on Washington Street.¹⁸ Alpha Hall was finally dedicated on 04 March 1901.¹⁹ By 1921, Elizabethtown College was able to grant its students degrees, and was officially accredited in 1948.²⁰

Today, Elizabethtown College sits on a 200-acre campus with nineteen academic departments that provide fifty-three different majors and over ninety minors and concentrations to students.²¹ The college still embraces the same service values as the Historic Peace Churches it was founded by, as the college's Center for Community and Civic Engagement offers a yearly community service event entitled "Into the Streets," and offers the students a minor in peace and conflict studies through the campus' Center for Global Understanding and Peacemaking.²² The original Brethren influences have not been lost over years of expansion and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Benowitz, *Elizabethtown College*, 11.

¹³ Jean-Paul Benowitz, *Historic Elizabethtown Pennsylvania: A Walking Tour* (2015), 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵ Ibid., 55-56.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ MacMaster, 147.

¹⁸ Ibid.; Schlosser, 40.

¹⁹ MacMaster, 167.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Benowitz, *Images of America: Elizabethtown* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 84.

²¹ Ibid., 89.

²² Jean-Paul Benowitz, "College Steeped in Religious Tradition of Nonviolence," *Elizabethtown Advocate* 8, no. 19 (Thursday, May 11, 2017): 7, 18.

modernization, as Elizabethtown College still pushes its students to “educate for service” through an emphasis on academics and civic engagement.²³

²³ Benowitz, Images of America: Elizabethtown, 89.