

# The Proprietor of Bloomsburg:

## John Adam Eyer

by W. M. Baillie

Who founded Bloomsburg? Like most early towns in central Pennsylvania, Bloomsburg did not grow up haphazardly but was laid out in lots by a developer as a moneymaking venture. Traditionally, Bloomsburg's founding in 1802 has been ascribed to settler Ludwig Eyer on the strength of the inscription on his tombstone in the old Lutheran-Reformed cemetery in Bloomsburg (later moved to Rosemont Cemetery):

IN Memory of LUDWIG EYER Born Jan<sup>y</sup>. 8. 1767. Died Sep<sup>t</sup>. 20. 1814. In the 48, Year of his Age. He left a Widow, 6 Sons, & 4 daughters, to deplore his loss. *He was proprietor of Bloomsburg, laid out in 1802, and presented this square [= 3 lots] to the Lutheran and Presb<sup>n</sup> Congregations, for a Church & burying ground, in 1807.*

In fact, however, the man who owned the property and sold the town's first lots, and hence was legally the "Proprietor" of the venture, was Ludwig's older brother, John Adam Eyer, a schoolteacher in far-off Northampton County. Ludwig's widow, in a sworn court petition in 1814, stated plainly that in 1802 John Adam Eyer bought the land in question from his brother Ludwig and "laid out part into Town lots"--and the recorded deeds support her statement. The conflicting sources may both be correct, in a way: the two Eyer brothers evidently acted jointly in an informal partnership to establish the village, John Adam as the financier and absentee landlord and Ludwig, who lived locally in Bloom Township, as the onsite agent (and after 1807, legal agent of his brother). Technically, however, John Adam was the town's original proprietor.

John Adam Eyer was born July 27, 1755 in Bucks County, eldest son of Martin Eyer and Dorothea Beischer. The father was a German Lutheran immigrant from Alsace (now in France) who arrived in America on the ship *Ann* at Philadelphia, September 28, 1749 and settled in Northampton County. When just thirteen years of age, his son John Adam served as a baptismal sponsor for his infant cousin Johan Adam Beischer, and the young man showed precocious abilities in learning languages, art, penmanship and music. In 1779 he began his career as "Shulediener" or schoolmaster in German-speaking Lutheran and Mennonite one-room schools in southeastern Pennsylvania, a career which continued successfully for over fifty years.

The last thirty years of his teaching were at the earliest school in Hamilton Township in (modern) Monroe County, about seven miles from Stroudsburg. In the log school there, next to the Lutheran/Reformed Union Church, he had as many as sixty students enrolled. The schoolmaster was later remembered in an 1886 Monroe County *History* as "very

popular with both parents and children, not less for his tact and discipline than for his genial and kindly nature."

But J. A. Eyer also had other talents in addition to teaching: he was a successful financier and is now famous for his art. The schoolmaster was a shrewd businessman, trusted by his family, neighbors and church with numerous financial dealings on their behalf. At the Hamilton Lutheran church, where he served as organist, he was the secretary of the church council and, when the original log building no longer was adequate, he was named the collector of funds for the building of a new church, a handsome stone structure completed in 1829 and still today in regular use. In the cornerstone of that building was placed the "Articles" or constitution of the church drawn up and beautifully inscribed by Adam Eyer.

Never married, John Adam also was trusted as the head of his extended family. The family farm west of the church in Hamilton Township was deeded in his name, though his parents' funds had purchased the land and they lived there along with John Adam and his brother Henry's growing family. The schoolmaster bought and sold various lots and lands in the area, usually making a tidy profit. The inventory of his estate indicates also that at the time of his death in 1837 he held outstanding loans of up to \$200 to some forty family members and neighbors--he was evidently serving as the local banker, and becoming a wealthy man in the process.

It was in this connection that John Adam Eyer became in 1802 the original Proprietor of the town laid out along Fishing Creek, some seventy miles from his home, first called "Eyer Staeddel" (Eyer's Village) and later Bloomsburg. His brother Ludwig, a fuller and dyer by trade, had settled along the creek and in 1798 bought 92+ acres of farmland nearby from his father-in-law Joseph Long. The surviving records aren't specific, but it appears that Ludwig and John Adam worked together to lay out the northern part of this acreage in lots and streets to form a town (now, First to Third Streets, Center to West Streets). As the learned brother, John Adam probably drew up the plat and surveyed the land. On June 5, 1802 John Adam bought the land from his brother (who may have been in financial difficulties), and just two days later on June 7 he sold the first of the original lots. For a few years, John Adam periodically made the long trek from Hamilton Township to sign deeds and complete sales, but in 1807 he entrusted Ludwig, who lived on the scene, with formal power of attorney to manage sales for him. John Adam, meanwhile, evidently was active back at home in recruiting prospective lot-buyers, for more than half of the early purchasers of lots in the new village were from the area of (then-) Northampton County or the adjacent counties in New Jersey.

Within a dozen years, John Adam had disposed of more than three-fourths of the original ninety-six lots, along with several parcels of "out-lots" nearby. The "unimproved" lots sold for about \$20 at first, rising to \$45-\$56 ten years later; by 1814 the recorded sales total some \$2850, a handsome return on John Adam's original investment of about \$1200. In 1811 he gave 13 lots to his brother Ludwig, apparently to compensate Ludwig for his pains in making sales and recording deeds at the county seat in Sunbury; Ludwig, however, died soon after, leaving ten children in impecunious circumstances.

While the name of John Adam Eyer is largely unrecognized in the town he founded, the name is now famous among collectors of American folk art. In common with many Pennsylvania Dutch schoolmasters, John Adam practiced the art of *fraktur*, adorning text pages with calligraphy and colorful drawings. His work was distinctive, often innovative, and so widely imitated that today's art historians speak routinely of the "Adam Eyer style" in manuscript folk art. The standard guide to *frakturs* lists about a hundred of his surviving works, and many others probably remain unrecognized, since he signed very few of his pieces. Long "forgotten" as an artist, John Adam Eyer since 1980 has had a remarkable rediscovery among collectors; in a 1999 Sotheby's sale, two of his works sold for over \$20,000 apiece.

The term *fraktur* refers to a specific calligraphic style of German Gothic lettering, but has come to be used for a whole class of fancy illustrated texts, hand-written or printed, widely current in Pennsylvania Dutch culture especially from 1770 to 1840.

Schoolmaster J. A. Eyer's decorated hand-written texts were of several types. Most common were *Vorschriften*, exemplars of penmanship executed for his pupils, sometimes as an award for superior learning; these typically included inspiring religious or moral verses--some of which he composed himself--decorated with colorful artwork. Adam's most important innovation was in music-books providing the melody-line of hymns and secular songs (German-culture hymnals at the time printed only the words of hymns, without tunes); this useful production was widely imitated, and Adam's brother and nephew later printed various music books which probably included original music by Adam. Another type of *fraktur* was the marriage greeting--a page celebrating a wedding and encouraging the couple's pious married life, and still another type was gift-texts, such as a circular spiral-written religious text presented to a student, and bookmarks. Curiously, Adam prepared few of the most common type of *fraktur* art, the baptismal certificate. All these varieties of hand-lettered text pages were illuminated with his characteristic designs of twining ivy, tulips, hearts, facing pairs of birds or Sophia angels, and/or occasionally cartoon-like human figures, all usually boldly colored in cheerful reds, blues and greens.

In sum then, the 2002 Bloomsburg Bicentennial is a fitting time to "rediscover" the original Proprietor who, though at a distance, was the force behind the auspicious beginning of the only Town in Pennsylvania. As beloved schoolmaster, honored businessman, and talented artist, the figure of John Adam Eyer is an appropriate emblem of the town's continued fostering of education, commerce and the arts.

## SOURCES

The fullest introduction to John Adam Eyer is Frederick S. Weiser, "IAE SD" in *Something for Everyone — Something for You*, Publications of the Pennsylvania German Society, vol. 14 (Breinigsville: PA German Society, 1980), pp. 437-506; see also Earl F. Robacker, "Johann Adam Eyer: 'Lost' Fraktur Writer of Hamilton Square," *Pennsylvania Folklife* (Spring, 1985), 98-113; works attributed to Eyer are listed in Russell D. and Corinne P. Earnest, *Papers for Birth Days: Guide to the Fraktur Artists and Scriveners*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (East Berlin, PA: Earnest Associates, 1997), 256-60. The deeds for early

land sales in Bloomsburg are in the Register and Recorder offices in Northumberland County (up to 1813) and Columbia County.