

The Early Ikelers: Two Lessons in Research

By Abbott Ikeler

The family histories in Beers (1915 and 1887) are hardly gospel truth, but they offer at least a place to start. In the case of the Ikelers, they are reliable enough in outline: the family came from Germany in the middle of the 18th Century, settled in the New Jersey colony, and migrated west and north after the Revolutionary War to what is now Columbia County, Pennsylvania.

When one closes in on specific people and events, however, the uncertainties multiply. Elijah Ikeler's account, printed in 1887 and again in 1915, claims one "Joseph Oeggler" emigrated from Germany in 1760, and fought honorably against the British during the war; his son Andrew then led the next generation of the family to occupy land in Greenwood in 1804. In the 1915 Beers Book, that story is contradicted by "another account" of one William Ikeler, with no war record, who was the first of the family to arrive in the Bloomsburg area some time after the revolution.

Five years of research make it clear to me the second version is much nearer the truth. The original Ikelers, Hieronymus and Justina Eichler, disembarked in Philadelphia in September 1753 with two young sons, Conrad and Wilhelm, from a British ship that had sailed from Hamburg in July. By the 1760s, Hieronymus and his family had settled among a community of German Lutherans in New Jersey and begun worshipping at the Zion Church in Oldwick. By the 1770s, his younger son, Wilhelm, had a farm and family of his own just north of Belvidere, and was known locally as "William the Loyalist." A newspaper notice from December 1778 indicates his property, along with that of sixty-two other loyalists, was to be confiscated in March 1779. Strong circumstantial evidence suggests that, following the seizure, he traveled under cover to the Jerseytown, PA farm of a close New Jersey friend, Daniel Welliver. Apparently he lived and worked with the Wellivers in relative secrecy from 1780 until 1797, when his only daughter married Daniel's eldest son. Thereafter Wilhelm Eichler (now William Ikeler) established himself as a respectable member of the Greenwood community, and brought his children and grandchildren up from New Jersey to farm adjacent properties near his own 300 acres.

These facts beg an obvious question: why had Elijah Ikeler, when asked for the family's history, created an entirely fictional character, Joseph Oeggler, as the patriarch, claimed patriotic credentials for him, written the quite real Wilhelm out of the family's past altogether, and instead credited Wilhelm's son, Andrew, with resettling the Ikelers in Columbia County? If we consider the circumstances of Elijah's life in 1887, the answers are easy enough to see. He had married a prominent woman with an impeccable D.A.R. past on both sides of her family and, perhaps more important, was about to run for President Judge of three counties in the election of 1888. The fact

that his great grandfather was a New Jersey loyalist and a fugitive from the revolutionary authorities would certainly have been problematic for his wife, and would not have gone down well with the voting public the following year. By 1913, with both the judge and his wife deceased, the 1915 Beers Book permits a rival account from a less self-interested family member, and the inconvenient truths begin to seep out.

The task of untangling fact from fiction has taught me to be alert not only to exaggerations and unsubstantiated rumor in such chronicles, but also to personal motivation on the part of a descendant to obscure or suppress the truth of the past.

A second general benefit of my research into the early Ikelers has been an appreciation for the central role religious conviction played in determining the movements of my ancestors. With the help of my German daughter-in-law, I've discovered a "church trail" that locates Hieronymus Eichler in a particular city and congregation in Germany, and later helps explain both his move to Philadelphia and his eventual residence in the Belvidere area of the New Jersey colony.

In the middle years of the 18th Century, the British were eager to entice hardworking German and Swiss families to settle the still sparsely populated 13 colonies. Recruiters were often sent to persuade large church congregations in Europe to emigrate, and to offer them cheap passage on British ships sailing out of Dutch and German ports. As it happens, the Eichlers came across on The St. Michael, a British ship out of Hamburg. Every adult male who provided a home address on the ship's manifest (the Eichlers, like many others, left the space blank) was a parishioner of St. Michael's Lutheran Cathedral in Hamburg. Thus, although all records of Hamburg's 18th century residents were destroyed in World War II, it's highly probable the Eichlers were residents of the city and members of St. Michael's. The religious connection also helps to explain the Eichlers' interest in Philadelphia, where Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the great patriarch of American Lutheranism, had established a "mother church" in nearby Trappe, PA in 1742. Moreover, in 1759, to stabilize the Lutheran community in New Jersey, Muhlenberg moved from Philadelphia to take over the Zion Church in Oldwick, near Belvidere. Did his move draw the Eichlers to New Jersey in 1760? In any case, it is at the Oldwick church, under the pastoral leadership of Muhlenberg, and later his son, that the Eichler family worshipped for the next twenty years. It is there also that Hieronymus' first six grandchildren were baptized.

A second lesson for me: however far away later generations of my family may have moved from fervent Lutheranism—either toward a secular life or toward Methodism and Presbyterianism—the immigrant generation of Ikelers was in large part guided in its movements both to the colonies and within the colonies, by fealty to its religion and to its religious leaders.