

## PIONEER DAYS IN NORTHERN COLUMBIA COUNTY

By William M. Baillie

What was life like for the earliest settlers in our area? We can find some hints toward the story in an exciting recent accession to the Society's collections: the *Christian Laubach Daybook* (Unbound MSS Box 76 #1). It is a daily record of work and finance kept by one of the pioneer settlers of what is now Sugarloaf Township.

The daybook is a small leather-bound notebook (6¼" x 4") of about 86 pages, written mostly in German with entries from 1784 to 1795. The booklet was transcribed and translated by descendant John Herbert Laubach of Ohio in about 1975 and published in *The Johann Reinhart Laubach Family in the New World*.

The translator provides the following introductory information: Christian Laubach (1764-1825) was the grandson of Johann Christian Laubach (1699-1768), who immigrated from Germany to America in 1738 with his family, including son Johann George Laubach (1726-1802, the father of the daybook-writer). The younger Christian grew up in Lower Saucon Township near Bethlehem; in about 1791 he came to the frontier to visit his friend Leonard Rupert in then-Northumberland County. He and others explored the Fishing Creek area and eventually he settled at what is now Fritz Hill near St. Gabriel Church, part of the interrelated settler group of Laubach/Godhard/Hess/Fritz families.

There are no entries in Christian's daybook that comment on the migration, but new personal names and different economic activity show that by 1794 Christian was settled in Sugarloaf Township. Among settlers he interacted with were many relatives of his wife Anna Maria Frutsche and her grandfather John Godhard.

The daybook's writer was a practical businessman but also pious. At the front of the daybook is this inscription in English:

*Christian Laubach his Book*

*God give him grace therein to Look*

*The tenth Day of Abrill 1784*

In the first few pages are a dozen Scripture quotations followed by some basic questions and answers from Luther's catechism. When he began writing in the notebook, Christian's religious thoughts were much on his mind.

The writer was also keen on traditional folk knowledge; the book includes a number of curious nostrums, presumably passed down from his German-speaking neighbors; some examples:

- So you want to know something without forgetting it. Take a swallow's heart and carry it with you. First of all you must dip it in milk. Then you will remember everything you hear.
- In order to have good luck at games, catch a bat and chop its head off. Carry it with you, and you will lose nothing when playing.
- In order that hair may grow where you want it, take the milk of a dog and rub it into the spot where you want the hair to grow. It will grow there definitely and truly in perpetuity.
- A tried and true remedy for pains in the side or if a person has fallen and his blood turned green. Take the glowing soot from above the stove hole. Pulverize it with about 30 to 40 barley grains. Swear over it and let it be. Thereafter dissolve it in warm water and give it to the patient to drink repeatedly every 4 to 6 hours.

Unlike this front matter, however, the bulk of the daybook entries concern not piety or folklore but plain everyday business matters: records of day-labor or of goods sold, bought or bartered. Most entries are dated, but the entries are not in date order (or any other apparent order). These few are typical:

- 1790 May 12 – Willem Frutzi, made fences one day. Makes 3.0 ... made cross braces one day – 2.3 [shillings and pence].
- 1794 June 2 Jacob Frutschi got a pair of shoes from me—0.10.0 [pounds.shillings.pence]. Then a yard and a quarter of wer [?] cloth. Makes 0.2.9. then I bought a pair of stockings for him at 0.6.6. Then he got two and one-fourth yards of fine fabric. Makes 0.5.0. He got two and a half yards of fine flax cloth—0.7. He got another pair of shoes from me for 0.9.0.
- 1795 August 21 For Zeke Cole payed 1.16 ... 4 days I was sowing corn at Cole's.

Zeke (Ezekiel) Cole is among dozens of persons mentioned in the financial entries whose names are familiar in the histories of Sugarloaf Township: Jacob Brinker, Jacob Frank, Hannes Frutschi, Paul Gebbert, John Glartz, William Hess, Mare Lang, Elias Long, Jacob Pfiefer.

The daybook makes plain that the pioneers lived in a barter economy. That is, very little cash changed hands; instead, individuals traded goods or labor for what they needed to buy. Every transaction was valued in money equivalents, but usually no money was paid. Even taxes were often paid by day-labor rather than by cash.

The settlers lived “on the edge” financially, and a disaster like a fire or severe injury could lead to hunger and poverty. On the other hand, the community was close-knit and helped each other out routinely. The wealthier members loaned out money for large purchases, charging usually the conventional 6% interest; often the loans were not repaid until after the death of the lender.

The daybook's social portrait is enhanced by numerous other documents in the Laubach Collection. Christian Laubach collected taxes in part of the township, and a dozen of his tax records include assessment lists for poor tax, road tax and state taxes between 1804 and 1818. These allow us to form a clear picture of each householder's wealth (number of cattle and horses, value of lands, etc.).

Other Laubach record groups include: Personal Correspondence, Family Documents (such as wills, accounts, bonds), Land Records, Court Records, and St. Gabriel's Church Records. All of these fill out the story of pioneer life in Northern Columbia County.

The Society is deeply indebted to heirs of Christian Laubach who preserved these documents for over two centuries and donated them for safekeeping, notably James and Elaine Laubach of Elverson, PA.

Incidentally, if you're wondering: daybook writer Christian Laubach was the great-great-grandfather of Benton's native son Dr. Frank C. Laubach, world-famed missionary and founder of the "Each One Teach One" literacy movement.