

Lecture Notes for Talk Given at Schürch Family Reunion, August 4, 2006

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"Change of Venue: Interconnections and Divergences among Schürchs of Central Pennsylvania"

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Abraham Sherk of Union County, PA

His grandfather, Casper Schurch, was the immigrant of 1732, aboard the ill-fated Love & Unity, and was a Mennonite by faith. He is said to have settled first at Germantown, then at Chestnut Hill, Lancaster Co., near one Joseph Schurch; then to Bethel Township, Lebanon County, where he took out a land warrant in 1748, which was patented in 1754. He was a preacher in the Mennonite Church and gave land for the Shirksville Mennonite Church on his property. He died in 1770.

Abraham Sherk Jr., his son, born in 1746, was a militia member during the American Revolution. He moved to East Hanover Township, Lebanon County, where he purchased 187 acres in 1809. [Slide 3] On this property, which was sold to his son Peter Sherk, Sherk's Impartial Meeting House was constructed in 1822. Abraham died in 1829. When originally constructed, the meeting house was an Impartial, or Union house, jointly used by United Brethren, Mennonite, Lutheran, and Church of the Brethren (Dunkard) faiths for 20 years. Ultimately, the meeting-house fell into the possession of the United Brethren in Christ by a formal deed in 1844. They have retained possession since that time and, through mergers, are now known as the United Methodist Church.

This particular facet of history is highlighted because it gives an excellent example of what was very common among the Pennsylvania Shirks, and others, in the 1800s. Many were being drawn away from the Mennonite faith and into the United Brethren in Christ. This denomination had its start back in 1767, when what was styled a great 'Pentecostal meeting' was held in Isaac Long's barn in Lancaster County. Pietism, which combined Biblical doctrine with an emphasis on personal holiness, was sweeping the nation, and this meeting was an interdenominational gathering. Martin Boehm, a Mennonite preacher and bishop, preached a sermon in the barn. On descending from the pulpit, he was embraced by Philip William Otterbein, a Reformed pastor, who exclaimed, "We are brethren!" The movement spread from this point until the Church of the United Brethren in Christ was formally organized in Frederick, Md., in 1800. It was for some time viewed as a nonsectarian movement or way of thinking, as Boehm, although excommunicated by the Mennonite Church, came to be ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church while serving as a United Brethren bishop, and Otterbein never left his Reformed pastorate. It is thus easy to see how this broad ecumenical movement swept among all established religions, but particularly it went among German-speaking Anabaptists the same way that Zinzendorf's Moravianism had done among Lutherans thirty years before. Many Mennonites came into the United Brethren Church in the early days, and brought baptism by immersion, some plain ways of living, but these were mixed with other ideas from the Reformed and other faiths, so that the United Brethren became a distinct movement, and finally, a denomination. Casper Sherk Jr., son of the immigrant, became active in the United Brethren movement but never left the Mennonite Church, using his U.B. tendencies to continue Evangelical work in that denomination. Many other Shirks were influenced by the United Brethren Church, so that whole groups of them, together with their faith communities, left the Mennonite faith altogether. It is not therefore surprising to see the Sherk Mennonite meeting-house pass into United Brethren hands within a generation of its founding.

[Slide 4] Abraham Shirk III, son of Abraham Jr., was born probably about 1770. He was but a young boy when his father went off to serve in the American Revolution, and perhaps those events left a firm impression upon his mind. He grew to manhood in East Hanover Township, around his father and

extended family. Around 1803 he married Magdalena Gingrich, of Anabaptist descent and the granddaughter of his step-grandfather, Michael Gingrich (2nd husband of Magdalena Foulck Shirk). Thus, he continued to have ties with his extended family in the greater northern Lebanon area, and probably with their community of faith. He and his young wife purchased 170 acres in East Hanover Township in 1806, at a sheriff's sale, which was probably an easy way for a young couple to purchase property at a cheap rate. The cost of purchase was £347 (PA Money).

[Slide 5] They did not remain long in the scenes of their youth, however, but removed to central Pennsylvania about the year 1814. They settled first at West Milton, and soon bought a tract of land in Hartley Township, Union County.

The Shirks joined the German Baptist Brethren Church, commonly called the Dunkards. The Dunkards are an Anabaptist group, similar in some ways to the Mennonite faith, who have their origins in the ministry of Alexander Mack in the late 17th and early 18th centuries during the pietist period. Abraham was active in a congregation near his home in Hartley Township. This congregation had been founded fairly early and originally met in homes and also in a schoolhouse on land willed by George Keister for a schoolhouse and burying-ground in 1795. In the mid-1800s, after Abraham Shirk's time, the congregation erected a meeting-house across from the cemetery, which is no longer there.

Magdalena, Abraham's wife, died before 1840. He died in 1848, probably close to 80 years old, and left a will. [Slide 6] He directed that his property of 50 acres be sold, along with his personal effects, with the money divided among his children. This was done.

[Slide 7] It would appear that some of Abraham's family remained nearby, and the rest of the family scattered after his death. His sons, Jacob, Michael, Samuel, and John, continued to reside in Union County, with Jacob, Michael, and John, being laid to rest in the Keister Dunkard Cemetery in Hartley Township. [Slide 8] The son, Samuel, prospered in Union County. [Slide 9] A biographical account indicates, "Samuel and Margaret Shirk began their domestic life upon a rented farm in Hartley township, but they made the most of their opportunities, lived frugally, and in the course of time were able to purchase a small farm a mile southwest of Laurelton. Later Mr. Shirk purchased the Laurelton milling property, hired a practical miller, and for twenty years carried on a successful business in that line. Subsequently he purchased a farm of 100 acres in West Buffalo, upon which he lived a retired life. He was a very industrious, energetic man, and as the result of his labor accumulated a handsome property, leaving his family an estate valued at \$18,000. He died at the age of sixty-seven years, and was laid by the side of his wife, who died on March 24, 1873, in Forest Hill cemetery. [Slide 10] In politics he was first a Whig and afterward a Republican. He served in some township offices in Hartley and West Buffalo townships, but never sought political preferment. Reared in the faith of the German Baptist Church, he afterward became a member of the Evangelical Church, and his wife belonged to the Lutheran."

[Slide 11] Another son of the immigrant Casper was Joseph Scherch. He was born while the family lived at Chestnut Hill, Lancaster County, Pa., and moved with his parents to the Shirksville homestead in his youth. On March 2, 1761, he was married to Barbara Kauffman, who was a daughter of (Bishop) Frederick and Elizabeth Kauffman, Mennonites who lived in Lebanon Township, near the village of Annville, Pa.

During their early married life, Joseph and Barbara Scherch resided near her family in the vicinity of Annville. In 1775, however, they made a change. They sold their 100 acre property in Lebanon Township, which they had bought in 1764, to Barbara's brother, Abraham Kauffman (who was married to Joseph's sister, Magdalena Shirk), for L400. and bought a 288 acre tract in Letterkenny (now Green) Township, Cumberland (later Franklin) County, Pa, for £1100. In Franklin County they would make their home for the rest of their lives.

Joseph served for three years during the American Revolution as a private in Capt. John Read's Company in the Cumberland County militia. He was a Mennonite preacher and it is said preached in the Chambersburg Mennonite Church. The church actually met in the upper room of his house from 1790

until a meetinghouse was built in 1804.

The 1798 Direct Tax indicates that Joseph Shirk was possessed of Joseph Shirk, 25 x 30 log house, 2 stories, 12 windows, 96 lights; 24 x 20 log house, 1 story, 4 windows, 28 lights, one bank barn 70 x 30 log, one oil and saw mill, two stables.

[Slide 12] Joseph Shirk died in 1811, having survived his wife Barbara by up to ten years. They were probably laid to rest in the family burying ground on their place, which has become badly overgrown.

Barbara Shirk and Jacob Houser

Barbara Shirk, daughter of this couple, probably met Jacob Houser at an early age. He grew up in Warwick Twp, Lancaster County, PA, [Slide 13] and moved to what is now Lower Paxton Twp, Dauphin Co, with his parents at the age of 10 years, just down the valley from Lebanon County. His parents, Johann Martin and Elizabeth Hess Hauser, were devout Mennonites and often held services at their large homestead farm of 214 acres.

[Slide 14] The distance from Dauphin County to Franklin County was clearly not enough to divide the love of Jacob and Barbara Shirk Houser, as they were married in 1787. Family tradition states that they made their home in Annville, probably among Barbara's Kauffman relatives, for a year.

According to records and family tradition, Jacob Houser, a millwright by trade, was hired by Gen. James Potter to assist him in building mills at his settlement in Potter's Mills, in what would become Centre County, PA. [Slide 15] Gen. Potter was originally from Franklin County, and returned there from time to time, and it is not impossible to believe that perhaps he met the Joseph Shirks during a visit and they told him about their enterprising son-in-law. At any rate, Jacob Houser liked what he saw when he came to the Centre County area. He purchased 600 acres and built a cabin along Spring Creek in the summer of 1788. [Slide 16] It was then a wilderness. The first settlement had begun in 1769, but all settlers fled from 1779 to 1784 for fear of Indian attacks, in what was called the "Great Runaway." Thus, when Jacob Houser settled, conditions were probably not much different than this August, 1775 account by a traveling Presbyterian preacher, Philip Vickers Fithian, who stayed with the Potters. When Jacob Houser first came thirteen years later, he probably had many similar experiences:

"At ten I took my leave, crossed a gap** of Muncy ridge, and rode eighteen miles through wild barren woods without any trace of an habitation or road other than the blind, unfrequented path which I tracked at times with much difficulty. Two or three forsaken Indian camps indeed I saw on the creek bank, and a little before sunset I arrived at Capt. James Potter's, at the head of Penn's valley. This ride I found very uncomfortable: my horse lame with but one shoe, a stony road, I lost my way in the gap of the mountains, more than ten miles of the way I must go and my poor horse without water. I let him feed, however, in the woods, where there is plenty of good wild grass. I fed myself on huckleberries. In these woods are very beautiful flowers, and a great quantity, especially a large orange-colored lily, spotted with black spots. I saw here the first sloe; it grows on a small bush like the hazle, ripens in the winter, and is now like a heart cherry. In these woods are great plenty of wild cherries growing on low spray bushes, which are just now ripening.

"*Wednesday, August 2d.*— An elegant supper, a neat house, all expressions of welcome, not a flea, not a chinch, as I know of, within eighteen miles, so that this morning, by God's mercy, I rise, in part recruited from the ruins of many days' distress. Capt. Potter took me walking over his farm. He owns here many thousand acres of fine land. Some, indeed, I saw, is a most fertile walnut bottom. One great inconvenience, however, attends the place, the want of water. Some few springs there are of good water and in plenty. But there ought to be many unfailing brooks. Oats and flax here are not yet ripe, and there is now the greatest hurry in getting in the wheat and rye. Afternoon I rode down the valley five miles to a smith's;*** he would not charge me anything for shoeing my horse. The people seem to be kind and extremely civil. Indians are here too. It was evening before the captain and I returned. We must pass by their camp. Ten sturdy, able-limbed fellows were sitting and lying around a large fire, hallooing, and in frantic screams not less fearful than infuriated demons, howling until we were out of hearing.

"*Thursday, August 3d.*— I miss here the shady, pleasant banks of the Susquehanna. It is forty-two miles to Northumberland and Sunbury; eight miles to the nearest place where Penn's Creek is

navigable with canoes, almost surrounded with hills and mountains; only a few, and some of these few temporary, springs. The low bottoms now have scarce water sufficient to moisten a hog, which in winter are continually flooded. Capt. Potter has tasted in time past some streams of the Pierian spring. He has a number of books: Justice Blackstone's celebrated commentaries, Pope's works, Harvey's Meditations, many theological tracts; over these I am rambling to-day with a very bad headache and oppression in my breast, the effects of a deep-rooted cold which I have taken some nights past when I was fighting with the fleas.

"*Friday, August 4th.*— The weather has been for some time past cloudy, agueish, and melancholy. I am less pleased with the valley, perhaps on that account or the want of company, not a house is there within three miles.

"*Saturday, August 5th.*— Cloudy and dull. It is muster-day, the captain goes off early. I am not pleased with the captain's plan of farming. He has too extreme a scope of business. Four men servants, two boys, more than two hundred acres of land cleared, much more now cutting down; two ploughs going in a tough rye stubble, one pair of oxen in one and two horses on the other; both too weak. A large field of oats is ripe. Some flax too ripe, and not yet pulled. But it is difficult to be nice in so rough a country.

"*Sunday, August 6th.*— Penn's Valley. I rise early, before any in the family, except a negro girl. Just at my bed-head a window, under which stands a table. Here I laid down my clean linen, finished last night by Mrs. Potter. The night had been very stormy; when I awoke I found a large dog had jumped in through an open light of the window, and had softly bedded himself, dripping with water and mud, among my cleanwashed clothes. At first I felt enraged. I bore it, however, with a Sabbath day's moderation. We have this morning a most violent storm. At one I began service in Capt. Potter's house; only eight men, and not one woman, beside the family, present. I preached two sermons, with only ten minutes' intermission. A most turbulent and boisterous day. I hope my words were not wholly without effect. My little audience heard with eagerness. Capt. Potter tells me there are only twenty-eight families in the valley. Of these twenty-two are subscribers, and they have raised £40 in subscriptions as a fund to pay supplies. I am the second preacher who has been in the valley. Mr. Linn(4*) was here two Sabbaths past first of all, and I, by regular appointment, next. It rained without intermission all day.

"*Monday, August 7th.*— I must stay another day in the valley. Tomorrow I am to have company over the mountains. Miss Potter, the captain's sister, invited me to ride. After breakfast we rode down the valley to one Mr. McCormick. (George McCormick, now Spring Mills.) I like this part of the valley better. There is a brisk creek, good bottoms. It is, however, still encompassed with mountains. One of the people while we were there brought in a fine deer. They have plenty of venison; I see no other meat. I write these lines seated on a log, with my paper on the back of my pocket-book, under a large spruce-tree close upon the banks of Penn's Creek, which runs on the north side and at the very foot of Egg Hill, which appears to me to be a tall pine-covered mountain. The creek runs foaming by me, enlarged by yesterday's great flood. Near Mr. McCormick's is a fine spring. It is bottomless, and rises about fifteen feet square from under a great hill in a large body, I think full sufficient in steady course to turn a gristmill.

"'No, madam, I must dry the butter first.' Mrs. Potter's girl was bringing in a plate of butter. It rained, and butter will retain the drops upon its surface. Innocent miss, therefore, with great care for neatness, was holding the butter close to a large fire. 'What are you at there?' says Mrs. Potter to Peggy. 'I am drying the butter, madam.' In this valley are large open plains, cleared either by the Indians or accidental fire. Hundreds of acres are covered with fine grass, mixed with small weeds and a great variety of flowers. Some conjecture that hot blasting fumes which arise from acres of brimstone have destroyed the timber, and they have found in places fine unmixed brimstone that will burn quite away without leaving any dross.

[Slide 17] Jacob brought his young bride and infant son, Martin, on horseback to his new settlement. He immediately commenced the construction of grist and sawmills on his property and it became known as a commercial center, Houserville. He also constructed a fulling-mill, where flax was carded into wool. An elaborate millrace supplied water-power from Spring Creek throughout the village. Within twenty years' time, the village boasted a wagon-shop where a post-office was also maintained, a schoolhouse, a blacksmith shop, and many other amenities. Barbara Shirk and Jacob Houser found prosperity in their chosen home.

[Slide 18] Jacob and Barbara Houser were raised in the Mennonite tradition, and evidence shows that they maintained ties even after their removal to Centre County. Several of Jacob's children married into local Mennonite families, including Elizabeth Houser Leathers and Daniel Houser, who married Mary Schenck. The nearest place of worship was the Schenck Mennonite Church, which was located near Howard. More on this shortly.

[Slide 19] Jacob and Barbara were said to offer shelter to any traveling preacher who came to their settlement. Their life in the settlement, however, was not altogether peaceful. In 1803, Jacob Houser and Joseph Eckly were accused of assaulting one Susanah Witers, wife of Conrad Witers, and she was accused of beating him "so that his life was greatly despaired of." In 1805, he sued Martin Steele for cutting down five trees on his property. Jacob Houser was often in court, either accusing or defending in matters of land and also a few more assaults. He was elected tax collector in 1809, and was performing his duties when he met with an obstinate tax payer, George Treaster, who beat him severely.

Boundary lines were always in dispute. According to historian John Blair Linn, "Many funny anecdotes are related of old Jacob and his wealthy neighbor, Philip Benner. At one time a dispute arose concerning some land, and Mr. Houser determined to take possession. Benner warned him not to do so, and told him that if he did the crows would bother him so that he could not work. Houser took possession next day, and sure enough the crows came, and kept up such a constant cawing that Houser became frightened and left. The old general had hauled a dead horse to the disputed land, and that had attracted the crows."

Another one of Jacob Houser's nemesis was his Scots-Irish neighbor, Robert Moore. They disputed land boundaries and also Jacob Houser's dam across Spring Creek, which Robert Moore claimed flooded his property. In later years, Moore was working in the field one day with his son John, and he told his son that when his time came to die, that he wished to be buried in the corner of his field, near an old oak tree. The following conversation is legendary:

"John, you see the graveyard and the church."

"Yes."

"I don't want to be buried there. Now look with me. Do you see that big black oak tree standing three rods over there in the woods?"

"Yes, I do."

"That is where my line should be. If younger generations of the Housers live long enough, they'll see the day when this wrong shall be righted. . . . And when I die, I want to be buried in this fence corner on the line."

"Why?"

"You ask me why? Listen! To keep the damn Dutch off my land!"

The line was eventually adjusted as Moore thought, although long after his death, and his body was removed by the Housers in the dread of night to its final resting-place some thirty years later. The gravestone was removed by a well-meaning descendant and taken to a local cemetery in 1926. [Slide 20] In recent years, however, I became involved in a project with two Moore descendants, Marie Blazina and Jessica Elgan, as well as Houser descendant Nancy Stover of the DAR, to have the grave properly marked. On April 24, 2005, on the 174th anniversary of Robert Moore's death, we held a ceremony with about thirty people, marking the gravesite with a substantial granite stone. It was heralded in the next morning's Centre Daily Times, with the headline, "Burying an Old Grudge," and at last the Moore-Houser feud was officially ended.

[Slide 21] Jacob Houser died on February 14, 1832, leaving an immense estate valued at over \$17,000, or about \$294,000 in today's money. Among his estate papers we find an intricate account of his dealings with his children. He was laid to rest in the graveyard at Houserville, which he had established. His wife, Barbara, died on June 18, 1841, at the age of 75 years, and she was buried by his side. He had served in a Lancaster County militia during the Revolution and a flag flies at his grave to commemorate this fact.

Their eight children would diverge onto different spiritual paths. The eldest son, Martin, was indicted for

assault against Samuel Hildebrandt in 1806, aged 18. It is said that he was on a visit to his relatives, the Shirks, in Franklin County, around 1812, when two significant events occurred in his life. He met his future wife, Elizabeth Grove, from Franklin County but a descendant of the Lancaster County Groffs. He also found saving religion through the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. He brought both experiences back to Centre County. He went on to raise nine children with his wife, Elizabeth, and became a licensed preacher in the United Brethren Church. He lived in a humble log cabin at Houserville. [Slide 22] After the death of his first wife, he was circuit-preaching in Huntingdon County when he met his second wife, Catharine Rumbarger, who became the mother of his tenth through thirteenth children. He was fully ordained as a minister in 1835. [Slide 23] In 1853, he and Catharine donated land for a United Brethren Church next to the graveyard at Houserville. He also gave land for a school and it appears was very interested in a good moral education as well as the importance of temperance. He grew sick while his youngest, Samuel Rumbarger Houser, was yet a boy and in his will he states, "it is my earnest wish and charge to my Executors that a Guardian shall be appointed for him who will use the utmost care in his education and religious instruction that he may be brought up to usefulness and in the fear of the Lord." At the time of his death in 1857, Martin Houser owned 153 acres in Houserville as well as another 250 acre tract in Blair County, Pa. Yet, he was content to live in the simple, two-story log cabin he had inhabited for most of his adult life. [Slide 24] He was laid to rest in the Houserville Cemetery.

Among the other children of Barbara Shirk and Jacob Houser, memberships included the Presbyterian, German Reformed, Evangelical Association, and Lutheran faiths. Whatever church they aligned with, accounts are clear that the Houser children were devout in their faith and lived it. The son, Jacob Houser Jr., inherited the woolen mill and conducted it until his death. He lived in this house at Houserville, which he built in 1830, just across the road from his mill. [Slide 25] An interesting man, "Jake," as he was known, was an expert at the fiddle as well as in business. He was a calm-headed man as the following tale, recorded by his grandson, indicates.

"It was during Civil War days when the souls of men were being tried in the immense fires of passion and bitterness. The great social and political upheaval between the North and the South ran flood high, with suspicion and hatred dividing families. It was a serious period even in the village of Houserville. It was a difficult task for one who was idle or not at the front in defense of his country to give a satisfactory alibi.

"It was noon hour at the factory when a tall, slender, pox-marked, pale-faced young man opened the door and inquired for the proprietor.

"I am the proprietor,' said my grandfather ('Uncle Jake' as he was familiarly called). 'What can I do for you?'

"I am a tailor by trade. I was informed you had a tailor shop in connection with your factory,' the stranger hesitatingly replied.

"His accent at once proclaimed him a southerner.

"What is your name? Where are you from and why aren't you in the service?' continued 'Uncle Jake.' 'It appears to me this is the wrong time to be looking for work in the line of tailoring.'

"My name is Nick Warren.' His embarrassment was obvious.

"I worked in the government shops - tailoring - and -

"Uncle Jake,' said Bob, the English foreman, 'he's no tailor. He is probably a deserter or likely a rebel spy. He's from the South, that's plain

to be seen. Listen to his accent. If that isn't Virginia or N. Carolina I'll eat my hat."

"A murmur arose among the other men, who always had respect for Bob's opinions. Uncle Jake, realizing that this was not the time to press the questioning of the tired, weary stranger and understanding the temper of his men said,

"Now men, don't be unreasonable. This poor fellow is half starved and I am going to take him up to the house for dinner.'

"Eliza, his young widowed daughter, was housekeeper for 'Uncle Jake.' She greeted the stranger in her brusque but hospitable manner. 'Here is warm water, soap and towel. When you are ready we'll have dinner.'

"When he was washed and combed he presented a more hopeful appearance.

"I guess you think you've gotten into a nest of Black Republicans and Copperhead Democrats?' remarked Eliza with a friendly laugh. 'Well, you have, for the county jail is full of both.'

"A sickly smile played over Nick's face and he replied to all questions very cautiously.

"News of the presence of a 'rebel spy' at 'Uncle Jake's' factory spread like wild fire throughout the country side that afternoon. The factory hands emphasized the fact that his speech betrayed him. He sure was from the South. Feeling ran high.

"By evening a crowd of several hundred had gathered at the store. Men on horseback, in wagons and in buggies, came from all directions. As the excitement grew, they marched up to the home of 'Uncle Jake.' The house was in darkness except for the faint glimmer of a tallow candle. Dark forms darted across the lawn. Strange, disguised faces peered in at the windows. Groups of men, threatening, cursing, planning, demanded that the stranger be delivered to them. Who was the bold leader to threaten or challenge the honorable Squire Houser? Not his own men. Certainly not.

"While the mob was momentarily growing larger, and the voice of the leader more defiant, Eliza, whose sympathies had been aroused by the wan, frightened face of Nick, was trying to hide him, first in the cellar, then in the attic among the rolls of carpet and factory goods. Her fighting spirit stirred, she seized a shot gun and said to her father.

"I'll get that cowardly leader. Let me out.'

"Don't be foolish, daughter. If they were our men it would be different. I'll deal with them.'

"Produce the rebel, Uncle Jake. We want to hear what he has to say for himself.'

"We're going to hang the rebel. Get the rope boys,' another exclaimed.

"We're going to hang this bird, Squire Houser and we will not be responsible for what may happen to your factory if you continue to defy us and hide this skunk.'

"Realizing that further delay might spell disaster, Uncle Jake appeared at the window and asked for a truce.

"Listen men. This young man is a deserter from the rebel army, a deserter because his sympathies are with the Northern cause.' (Cries of coward and traitor from the mob). 'There are some of you fellows here tonight whose sympathies are decidedly with the South. Are you traitor? Some of you have rejoiced over every time the rebels have won a victory over the Northern Army. Are you brave and patriotic sons of your country? Don't I know you. Some of you have had your front teeth pulled to disqualify you for service. Cowardly rascals, I shall see to it that you'll miss the next call to service. Will you now listen to Nick Warren in all fairness?

"They agreed and Nick stood by 'Uncle Jake' at the open window.

"Ladies and gentleman (for I see there are some mothers and wives here), you ask me why if my sympathies are with the North, I do not enlist in the Army of the North? I again ask you the same thing. Do you not think that it would be even harder for me, a Southerner, to enlist in your army than for you of the North to enlist in your own army? I have a dear old mother in the South, a brother in the Confederate Army and a sister nursing and caring for the wounded and dying ministering to the boys in blue as well and impartially as to the boys in gray. Do you want me to take up arms against that mother, sister, and brother?'

"There was a moment of silence, then 'No, no' came the answer from the crowd. Nick's pathetic appeal brought tears to many eyes and the mob dispersed.

"Nick Warren for the next two months, demonstrated his ability as a competent tailor, a fine organist, an actor, a card shark and a gambler with the manners of a cultured gentleman. At the end of three months he dropped out of sight and the village of Houserville settled down once more into its regular routine."

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[Slide 26] Another son of Barbara Shirk and Jacob Houser, Daniel Houser, was a prominent fixture at Houserville. He and his wife, Mary Schenck, granddaughter of the Mennonite minister Michael Schenck, are seen in this photo.

[Slide 27] Another Schurch family which wended its way into Central Pennsylvania is that of Joseph Schurch, Code C immigrant of 1727. He settled in West Hempfield Twp, Lancaster Co, where he died in 1770. One of his sons, John Shirk, found greener pastures across the river in Paradise Twp, York County, where he married Barbara Schneider. [Slide 28] He owned 200 acres by 1769, 3 horses, 3 cows, and six sheep. John served as a private in Capt. Andrew Bully's Company in the 6th Company, 5th Battalion of York County militia. Both he and his wife died fairly young. John in 1783, aged about 45, and Barbara around 1785 aged in her mid-40s, leaving a large family of eight children, David, the youngest, being only nine years old at his father's death.

[Slide 29] Barbara's sister was Mary Schneider, wife of Christian Bechdel, and they also lived at York County. These Shirks and Bechdels were all members of the Mennonite Church. The children had also closely intermarried with the Leathers family of York County, with daughter Eva Barbara Shirk marrying

Frederick Leathers III; her sister Mary Shirk marrying Jacob Leathers; and her brother Joseph marrying Mary Shirk.

In 1791, the first movement north began. Frederick Leathers III, his wife Eva Barbara Shirk, Jacob Leathers and Mary Shirk, and Joseph Shirk and Mary Leathers, together with the aged father, Frederick Leathers II, came and settled on a tract of land in what would become Howard Township, Centre County. This home was about fifteen miles from where Jacob and Barbara Shirk Houser, from the Code H line, had settled three years before. Frederick and Eva Barbara purchased land from Christian and Regina Spayd on May 16, 1791

That fall, the Leathers brothers advertised their land in York County, some 475 acres, for sale.

Frederick III and Eva Barbara Shirk Leathers left the Centre County area in 1799 and went to Fairfield County, Ohio, being among the very first settlers in that place. Jacob and Mary Shirk Leathers continued to reside on the neighboring farm, where they raised a family of eight children. Jacob Leathers and John Bower, whose wife was a Bechdel, bought Frederick III's old place. Jacob Leathers Jr. tenanted the farm from 1809 to 1838. It is today underneath Sayers Dam. [Slide 30]

In 1795, the Mennonite minister Michael Schenck and his family moved to the near vicinity. They established a meeting-house and began services in the wilderness. The small core of families continued to intermarry. It is particularly interesting to note that Jacob Leathers Jr., whose mother was Mary Shirk, married Elizabeth Houser, daughter of Barbara Shirk, of the Code H line. [Slide 31]

Mary Shirk Leathers gave up the ghost on July 14, 1841, at the age of 83 years. Her husband, Jacob, died on Mar. 23, 1843, aged 85, on the old homestead in Howard Township. In his will, he states that he had two tracts of land containing about 600 acres at the time of his death, which he divided among his children. At his death, Jacob owned many interesting personal items, including a slate, bake oven and griddle, rifle and shot gun, and a hive of bees. He and his wife were laid to rest at Sand Hill Cemetery, the community burying-ground near their home.

The Leathers family became very numerous and prominent. A great-grandson, John Leathers, became well known as a manufacturer of stone ware. Many of the family became prominent in the roofing business. Another interesting aspect of this family is the presence of genetic depression. The earliest known record is found in the will of Jacob Leathers, in which he refers to "the melancholy state of my son John's mind." [Slide 32]

This family were converted by the preaching of the Rev. Nathan J. Mitchell and by the third generation nearly all of them had embraced the Church of Christ (Disciples) faith, which is still very strong in the Howard region.

[Slide 33] Eva Barbara and Mary Shirk's siblings also came to Centre County. These were the brothers, Joseph, John, Jacob, and David Shirk.

Joseph settled a few miles up the valley, near the town of Milesburg, where he died in the fall of 1794, aged only 29 years. He left his wife, Mary Leathers, and four children. [Slide 34] One son, John, was a veteran of the War of 1812, and moved to Mercer County, near the Ohio border. The others stayed in Centre County. Joseph Shirk, Jr., who was but a baby when his father died, went on to become a prominent tanner in the Milesburg area. [Slide 35] He was the father of twelve children by his wife, Elizabeth White, and another illegitimate child, Charles Shirk, who moved to Ohio.

Linn, John Blair. History of Centre and Clinton Counties, PA (Philadelphia, Pa.: Everts & Co., 1883), p 367: "In 1819, Joseph Shirk carried on a tannery on the creek. His bark he ground by means of a rough-mill stone, which was turned by horse-power. George I. Miles had a tannery on the property now owned by William Baird, and when he entered the ministry leased it to Shirk, who tanned there about twenty years. In 1845, Miles sold the property to Samuel McKean, whereupon Shirk built the tannery now operated by Joseph Shirk (his son), and tanned there until his death, in 1868."

Linn, John Blair. History of Centre and Clinton Counties, PA (Philadelphia, Pa.: Everts & Co., 1883), p 367: "Shirk's Tannery. - Since 1868, Joseph L. Shirk has conducted in Milesburg the tannery his father,

Joseph, built in 1845. Joseph Shirk the elder was one of the pioneer tanners of Centre County, and in keeping with the spirit of the times pursued his business in accordance with rude and primitive methods, albeit the manufactured leather was said to have been every whit as good in quality as the leather of the present day. Joseph L. Shirk was bred to the business, and claims that he has been a tanner in Centre County longer than any other resident therein. He tans now about five hundred hides annually, making what is known as Union leather."

Unfortunately the Shirk tanneries burned to the ground long ago and there is no trace of this family industry.

A tendency toward mental illness seemed to continue in this Shirk line. Joseph Jr.'s son, Mordecai Shirk, moved to Clearfield, Pa., 50 miles away, where he opened a tannery. According to a contemporary history, "The business proved unsuccessful, and Mr. Shirk lost his property. Business misfortunes produced insanity, and he was placed in an asylum for insane persons, where he died about two years ago."

[Slide 36] Another son, Robert L. Shirk, worked in a different part of the leather business, and was a shoemaker by trade. He became very wealthy, and at his death, left land to the Milesburg Baptist Church.

[Slide 37] Another of the original Shirk brothers, John, came to the Milesburg area in the early 1790s, and bought some of the land of Frederick Leathers II. He later bought land in Boggs Township, near Milesburg. John's life was seemingly full of misfortune. It began when William Boggs, a neighbor, was killed at the raising of his barn. John also saw much heartache when he was called to serve as a juror at one of the most sensational trials of nineteenth century Centre County, the James Monks murder trial.

[Slide 38] Monks was accused of shooting and robbing one Reuben Giles, then hiding the body in the woods. The crime was considered senseless and heinous, and at the height of the arguments, the bones of the victim were produced as evidence. Monks was convicted and sentenced to hang. He confessed shortly before his execution, in an elaborately penned poem.

Ironically, John Shirk's end came in the same way. The local newspaper, the Bellefonte Patriot, recounts in a September, 1825, issue: "John Sherick, Senior, a respected citizen of Boggs Township, Centre County, put an end to his existence by hanging himself with a rope upon a tree on Saturday morning the 10 inst. Previous to the commission of the dreadful act, he had labored under a disturbed state of mind, and in an insane moment he laid violent hands upon himself. He was found in the evening of the same day a short distance from his late residence." [Slide 39] He left his second wife and 14 children to mourn his loss. One of his daughters, Magdalena, was considered a "Lunatic" in the parlance of the times. One of the daughters, Mary Underwood, moved to Ohio. She looked like this. [Slide 40]

[Slide 41] Another son in the pioneer family, Jacob Shirk, came with his siblings and settled just above Milesburg, in a stone house which was apparently torn down to make way for US Route 220. He died at the young age of 41 years, leaving a widow and seven young children. He left a large farm, called a plantation, next door to his brother John's place. He also carried on a bit of a blacksmith business and willed his tools to his son Daniel, who was to be apprenticed in that trade. After his death, his family united with the Milesburg Baptist Church. His wife, Mary, was baptized at the age of 57 years in 1832.

Another brother, David Shirk, also bought land from the Frederick Leathers place in 1800. He lived there until his death in 1850, leaving his wife, Elizabeth, two sons, John and Jacob.

Conclusions – [Slide 42]

End – [Slide 43]