

John Caspar Stoeber

Senior Church History

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In modern-day America, we take such things as churches and pastors for granted. Those of us who live here in the bastion of conservative Lutheranism, i.e. Wisconsin, are especially prone to this attitude. In Milwaukee alone, there are nearly three dozen Wisconsin Synod congregations, not counting suburbs. You can't drive anywhere in the state without coming to one of our churches in a relatively short time. And we as a synod represent only a small percentage of the Lutheran congregations that exist. In such an environment, we simply assume the existence of many pastors and when one of our congregations finds itself without the services of a pastor, we call another.

This was not the case in colonial America in the early 1700's. The New World was beckoning to its shores thousands of immigrants from Europe. Settlements were springing up all along the eastern seaboard states. Since many of these settlers were coming from Germany and Scandinavia, naturally there were many Lutherans also arriving. However, the religious climate which they found here was nothing like that of modern America. Churches were non-existent and pastors were even scarcer. The result of the early migrations to this country was that there were many widely scattered Lutherans and practically no pastors to serve them. Children were growing up, indifferent to religion and very susceptible to the various sects which also would migrate here from Europe. This was the atmosphere in which John Caspar Stoever would labor through most of his ministry. In October of 1739, the representatives of the Lutheran congregations in Pennsylvania wrote:

"There is not one German Lutheran preacher in the whole land, except Caspar Stoever, now sixty miles distant from Philadelphia." The spiritual life was what might be expected on the frontier. Baron von Reck writes of Philadelphia, "It is the abode of all religions and sects, Lutherans, Reformed, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Catholics, Quakers, Dunkards, Mennonites, Sabbatarians, Sevent-Day Baptists, Separatists, Bohmists, Schwenkfeldians, Tuchfelder, Wohlwunscher, Jews, heathen, etc." A new heathenism was threatened, with the destitution of pastors and schools. The governor of Pennsylvania wrote a few years later, "The Germans imported with them all the religious whimsies of their country, and I believe have

subdivided since their arrival here."<sup>1</sup>

That one German Lutheran preacher, John Caspar Stoever, would serve as an itinerant preacher in a vast area which covered southeastern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and northern Virginia. When he arrived here in 1728, he listed his occupation as S.S. Theol. Stud. This student of theology would prove himself to be a missionary of untiring zeal. One source summed up his activity in this way:

He... was exceedingly active in his work. Wherever a few Germans had settled he held services for them, baptized their children, began a church record, encouraged them to build a log church, and assisted in the work, and thus he traveled from place to place, year after year, preaching the Gospel and making himself worthy of his hire by exacting no fees. In this way he continued for fifty-one years.<sup>2</sup>

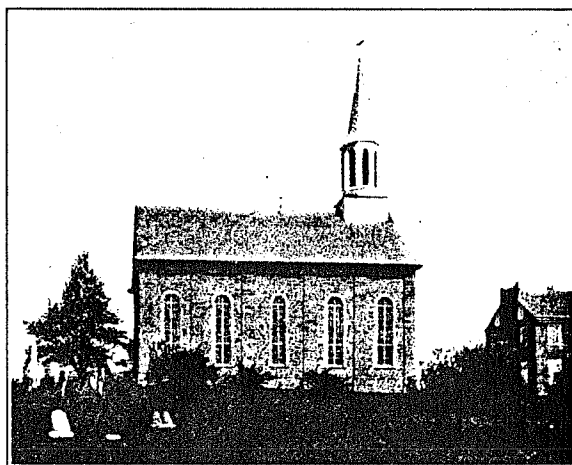
The area in which Stoever would first work had its Lutheran beginnings in 1703. In that year, a large group of German settlers came with Daniel Falckner to southeastern Pennsylvania. They settled at Falckner's Swamp which is today the city of New Hanover. These people formed the first Lutheran congregation in Pennsylvania and built the first German Lutheran Church, no doubt a log structure which was later replaced by a more permanent building. Falckner served this congregation until 1708. In its early history, it would be served by all of the pioneer pastors of the day including Henkel, Schulze, Stoever himself, and Henry Melchior Muhlenberg before the founding of the Pennsylvania Ministerium.

While Falckner was serving the New Hanover congregation, John Caspar Stoever Jr. was born back in Germany. His birthday was on December 21, 1707 at Luedorf. His father was John Caspar Stoever Sr. originally from Frankenburg in Hesse and his mother's name was Gertraudt. The young John soon proved himself to be a quick learner with above average intelligence. At the age of six, his

1. Jacobs, A History of the Ev. Lutheran Church, pg.191

2. Finck, Lutheran Landmarks and Pioneers in America, pg.99

father taught him to read German perfectly in just four weeks. After this, he went on to study Latin under his father. His private education continued under various pastors and he soon became competent in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and theology.



New Hanover Lutheran Church, Falckner's Swamp, Pa.

While John was growing up in Germany, Lutheranism was slowly making inroads in the New World. In 1717, Anthony Jacob Henkel and his family moved to Falckner's Swamp and he served as that congregation's pastor until 1728. Another settlement of German Lutherans also had established a congregation in New York in the Schoharie River valley. This congregation was to face some serious difficulty, however. By 1723, the settlers in the Schoharie Valley had discovered that they had been victims of some fraudulent contracts made by unscrupulous speculators from New York. It turned out that they did not own the land which they thought they had bought and were being forced to pay exorbitant rental on their land. Their situation was critical and finally at the bidding of Governor Keith of Pennsylvania, they moved to that state. They were led there by friendly Indians and finally settled at Tulpehoken Creek near Reading.

Because of the bad deal they had received in New York, future immigrants were diverted from New York to Pennsylvania. Here at Tulpehocken, they were served for a time by pastor Henkel and also by John Caspar Stoever. However, the congregation was influenced by Count Zinzendorf and was literally torn in two; the result being that two separate churches were built. The incident was known as the 'Tulpehocken Confusion'. Yet the churches in this area continued to grow in membership as political conditions in Germany spawned further immigration. Also, land investors known as 'Newlanders' continued to encourage people to migrate to the colonies, especially to Pennsylvania. It was during these mid-1700's that congregations were established in York, Lebanon, Lancaster, Berks, Lehigh, Bucks, and Adams counties. John Caspar Stoever in many of these cases was the man who organized the congregations in these areas.

Stoever actually arrived with his father in 1728 on September 11. John Caspar Jr. was only twenty-one years old at the time. He and his father had preached on Sundays during the crossing of the Atlantic. When they arrived, neither were ordained pastors, but they began to perform many ministerial acts because of the extreme lack of called pastors in the area. John Caspar Sr. moved south and carried out his ministry in Virginia. His son began work in the Philadelphia area and after being instrumental in the founding of the congregation at Philadelphia, he moved inland. The need for his services was critical considering the vast area of scattered Lutherans. This need was more crucial when late in 1728 Pastor Henkel died after falling from his horse on one of his cross-country excursions. This left two pastors in the area, John Caspar Stoever Jr. and John Christian Schulze.

The one serious drawback to Stoever's work at this time was the fact that he was not ordained. He went to Raritan, New Jersey in 1731 to ask the aging Daniel Falckner to ordain him, but was refused. A discussion of this problem can be found in Nelson.<sup>3</sup> The settlers in America probably would have had a

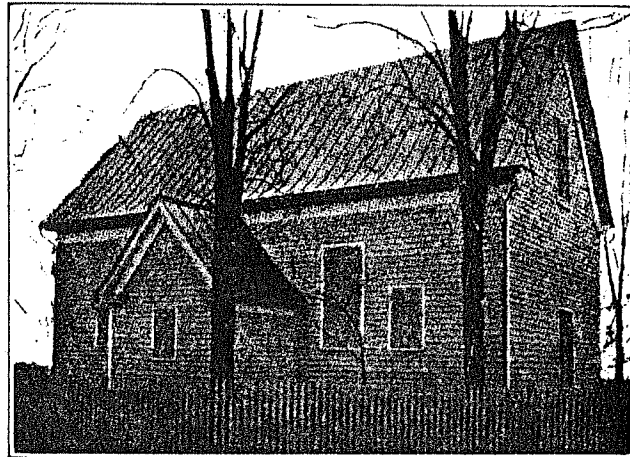
3. Nelson, The Lutherans in North America, pg.47

difficult time explaining just what ordination was, but because of their churchly European heritage, it was only natural that they expect the education of candidates for the ministry to be followed by ordination. Even Muhlenberg and his associates recognized that in cases of emergency, unordained men could be permitted to preach and administer the sacraments. The normal procedure, however, was to ordain. Because of this, many of the early ordinations on American soil were of a questionable nature because very often the pastors doing the ordaining were probably themselves not properly ordained. Such was the case with John Caspar Stoever. He was finally ordained by Pastor Schulze on April 8, 1733. Schulze himself had been privately ordained but no one is sure by whom. It was on this same day that John Caspar Jr. married Maria Catarina Merckling. From Stoever's extensive baptismal records, we find out that God blessed John and Maria with eleven children. Shortly after this in that same year, Schulze also ordained John Caspar Sr. Schulze's questionable nature is evident by the fact that in the fall of that same year, he would return on a fund-raising trip to Germany and would leave John Caspar in charge of the congregations in Philadelphia, New Hanover, and New Providence. History tells us that Schulze's trip was successful and that he did collect a substantial offering, but he would misuse the funds for his own purposes in Europe, and was never to return to America again. His organizational talents, however, and the fact that he had established a loosely knit group of congregations in the Philadelphia area would pave the way for a man such as Muhlenberg.

It was about this time, 1733, that John Caspar Stoever began to make lengthier ministerial trips into Virginia and Maryland. In 1733, he found a congregation of about three-hundred souls along the Rappahanock River in Virginia. This was known as the Hebron Congregation. The Hebron congregation had been without a pastor for about sixteen years, and from this point on, Stoever would make annual trips down here to serve them also.<sup>4</sup> From

4. Wolf, The Lutherans in America, pg.205f

Stoever's records, we learn that he made excursions as far south as Orange County, Virginia, a distance of about two-hundred and fifty miles from Philadelphia. This rugged, New World missionary also traveled as far west as Derry, Pennsylvania, two-hundred and fifty miles across the state.



Helron Church As It Was

One of the reasons for his extensive trips into Virginia was that in 1734 his father, who had been serving as pastor in Virginia, returned to Germany with two laymen to raise funds for the churches over here. Travel from the New World back to Europe was a serious undertaking requiring weeks and even months. John Caspar Stoever Sr. was very successful in his fund-raising drive and he raised 3,000 pounds sterling which was a sizeable sum indeed. While in Germany, he also persuaded a young theological student by the name of George Samuel Klug to return with him to America. However, during the return trip, the senior Stoever became ill and died. He was buried at sea in 1738. Klug would return and take his place serving the congregations in Virginia. In his absence though, John Caspar Jr. took up the slack and made annual trips to the Lutheran congregations

in Virginia. History tells us that at this time there were only eight Lutheran pastors serving in America from New York to South Carolina. Conditions were described in this way:

Between these few laborers intervened distances extending hundreds of miles, with no roads connecting the different localities, with no possible means of travel save on horseback, with no protection against the wild beasts that prowled through the forests and no security against the savage who was ever lying in ambush for the white intruder into his hunting-grounds. The large province of Pennsylvania, with a Lutheran population of sixty thousand, had in all its area one solitary pastor.<sup>5</sup>

1735 turned out to be a busy year for Stoever. Along with his trips into Virginia, he also began to serve as pastor at Tulpehocken and was involved in the problems caused by Zinzendorf, as was previously mentioned. Zinzendorf would end Stoever's brief service as pastor by deposing him from the ministry in 1741. Of course, such a decree held no validity outside of Tulpehocken. The question might be raised, just who was this Count Zinzendorf and where did he come from? Count Zinzendorf apparently was a very charismatic individual who had attracted a large following in Germany. He grew up in the pietistic surroundings of Halle and studied for a time in Wittenberg. He gathered around himself a group of like-minded people whom he called the Moravian Brethren and sought to establish a community of 'heart and soul' Christians. These people caused no end of troubles in Saxony and were finally expelled. Zinzendorf then came to America in 1741 and made Germantown, Pennsylvania his headquarters. He also established a Moravian community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Zinzendorf would have fit well into the modern ecumenical climate because his primary goal in the New World was to unite all the Christian denominations into one church. He held his first conference to do this uniting in 1742. This did not sit well with a confessional, Lutheran pastor such as Stoever.

It didn't sit well with Henry Melchior Muhlenberg either, who arrived in



Philadelphia in 1742. Muhlenberg had been called to serve the Lutheran congregation in Philadelphia and when he arrived he found that Zinzendorf was already in control. In a very humiliating interview, Zinzendorf questioned the new man, Muhlenberg, who was ill from his journey across the Atlantic, but the calm dignity of Muhlenberg quickly convinced the congregation that Muhlenberg was their man. Zinzendorf soon lost the confidence of the people and left for England the following year.

One would think that with a common enemy such as Zinzendorf, Stoever and Muhlenberg would be drawn together. Nothing could have been further from the truth. There was friction between Muhlenberg and Stoever from the start. To understand their deep-seated differences, one has to understand the climate of Lutheranism at this time back in Germany. Stoever represented one school of thought which stressed correct doctrine and a strict adherence to the Lutheran Confessions. These people were usually called 'orthodoxists' and had their roots in the age of orthodoxy which prevailed in the seventeenth century in Germany. The other school of Lutherans had their roots in the age of pietism, the eighteenth century, and they stressed Christian life and piety as opposed to doctrine and faith. These 'pietists' renounced such things as theater, dancing, and other 'worldly pleasures' while the orthodoxists were charged with making the Christian faith a matter of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Evidence of this tension between Stoever and Muhlenberg can be seen when in 1748, Stoever and other orthodoxists were not invited to the first sessions of the Ministerium in North America.

This rigorous animosity between Muhlenberg and Stoever had its origin in their theological differences, but it was no doubt further aggravated by their personality differences as well. Because of his pietistic background, Muhlenberg was of a more refined, dignified temperament. The seasoned, frontier pastor Stoever, who at this time had already served nearly two decades in the

6. Nelson, pg.63f

backwoods of America, was more of a course, earthy disposition. Stoever recorded in great detail his pastoral work, so we know where he was and what he did, but his records give us little hint at his personality. For this, we are indebted to Muhlenberg who in his annals makes many references to Stoever, whom he considered somewhat barbaric. The following quotes are taken from the "Life and Times of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg". It should be noted that perhaps they offer a biased opinion of Stoever, but judging from other sources, there is no doubt some truth in the observations which Muhlenberg made. Muhlenberg made this observation about Stoever, shortly after he arrived in 1742, "J.C. Stoever was in those years not at all exemplary as a pastor in his walk and conversation, and he was somewhat rough and censurable all his life."<sup>7</sup> In 1743, Muhlenberg criticized an associate of Stoever, Tobias Wagner, because he associated with "Stoever and other enemies of ecclesiastical order and pastoral dignity."<sup>8</sup> In 1748, Muhlenberg described the spiritual conditions of the congregation at New Holland (Earltown), "The condition of the congregation up to that time was anything but satisfactory. Under the care of men of the character of Stoever as he was in those years, spiritual life could not increase."<sup>9</sup> When the first meeting of the Pennsylvania Ministerium convened in August of 1748, one of the delegates asked why Stoever and several other pastors had not been invited. To this Muhlenberg replied, "The antagonistic spirit of these men, as well as their character, would frustrate every attempt to harmoniously cooperate with them."<sup>10</sup>

In spite of their theological and personality differences, Stoever and Muhlenberg would both eventually realize that their cooperation was imperative to the well-being of the Lutheran church in America. There were so few pastors

7. Mann, Life and Times of H.M. Muhlenberg, pg.127

8. Mann, pg.148

9. Mann, pg.183

10. Mann, pg.213

and so many German Lutherans, and the number would continue to grow rapidly in the later 1700's, that joint work among the pastors that existed was absolutely essential. The following chart shows the growth of the Lutheran church in the colonies from shortly before Stoever's death until the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup>

## LUTHERANS IN THE TOTAL GERMAN POPULATION

	Estimate of Germans in 1775	Estimate of Germans in 1790	Lutheran Congregations in 1790
New England	1,500	4,120	1
New York	25,000	25,800	25
New Jersey	15,000	15,640	18
Pennsylvania	110,000	140,980	191
Maryland/Delaware	20,500	24,920	27
Virginia	25,000	27,850	18
North Carolina	8,000	13,590	15
South Carolina	15,000	7,010	13
Georgia	5,000	4,020	4
Canada	--	--	2
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TOTAL	225,000	263,930	314

One look at this chart shows the rate at which German Lutherans would be flowing into the country. The first Lutherans arrived in Pennsylvania around 1700. By 1735, there was an estimated 60,000 Lutherans in the state. This chart shows that four years before Stoever's death in 1775, there were 110,000 German Lutherans here and by 1790 there were nearly 141,000. The handful of pastors who were to serve these multitudes would have to cooperate.

11. Nelson, pg.37

Progress in cooperation came slow<sup>ly</sup> between Stoever and Muhlenberg, but it came. Already in 1748, shortly after the first meeting of the Pennsylvania Ministerium, several influential men in America and in Europe encouraged Muhlenberg to write Stoever and invite him to subsequent meetings of the Ministerium. Muhlenberg wrote a kind letter to John Caspar urging him to labor harmoniously and successfully with other pastors who were then forming the Ministerium. An evidence of Stoever's influence on Muhlenberg can be seen in the liturgy which Muhlenberg used from 1748 on. In the Lord's Supper portion of that liturgy, the words 'TRUE body and blood' were used and the footnote in the liturgy indicates that this was a concession made to "Revs. Stoever, Wagner, etc."<sup>12</sup> Other overtures were made by the ministerium. Stoever and his associates were invited to the meeting of the Pennsylvania Ministerium which was to be held in Providence in 1750. The invitation was made personally by Muhlenberg. He met with Stoever, who had just undergone a severe illness, in Lancaster early that year and asked if he would attend the meetings if invited. Stoever replied that he would first have to confer with Wagner and did not give an answer that day. Stoever would not be present at the 1750 meeting and he told the ministerium so in a long, caustic letter. Wagner would, however, attend that meeting and it appears that he gave the delegates of the 1750 meeting of the Pennsylvania Ministerium "a piece of his mind without any reservation, but consented to what Muhlenberg called a 'neighborly amnesty'".<sup>13</sup> It would take some time, but finally in 1763, Stoever joined the Pennsylvania Ministerium which was held that year in Philadelphia.

Stoever continued as a circuit-riding pastor and his records record the many ministerial acts which he performed through the years. The map at the end of this paper shows just a few of the places in southeastern Pennsylvania where he served. His ministry ended on May 13 (Ascension Day), 1779 while he was

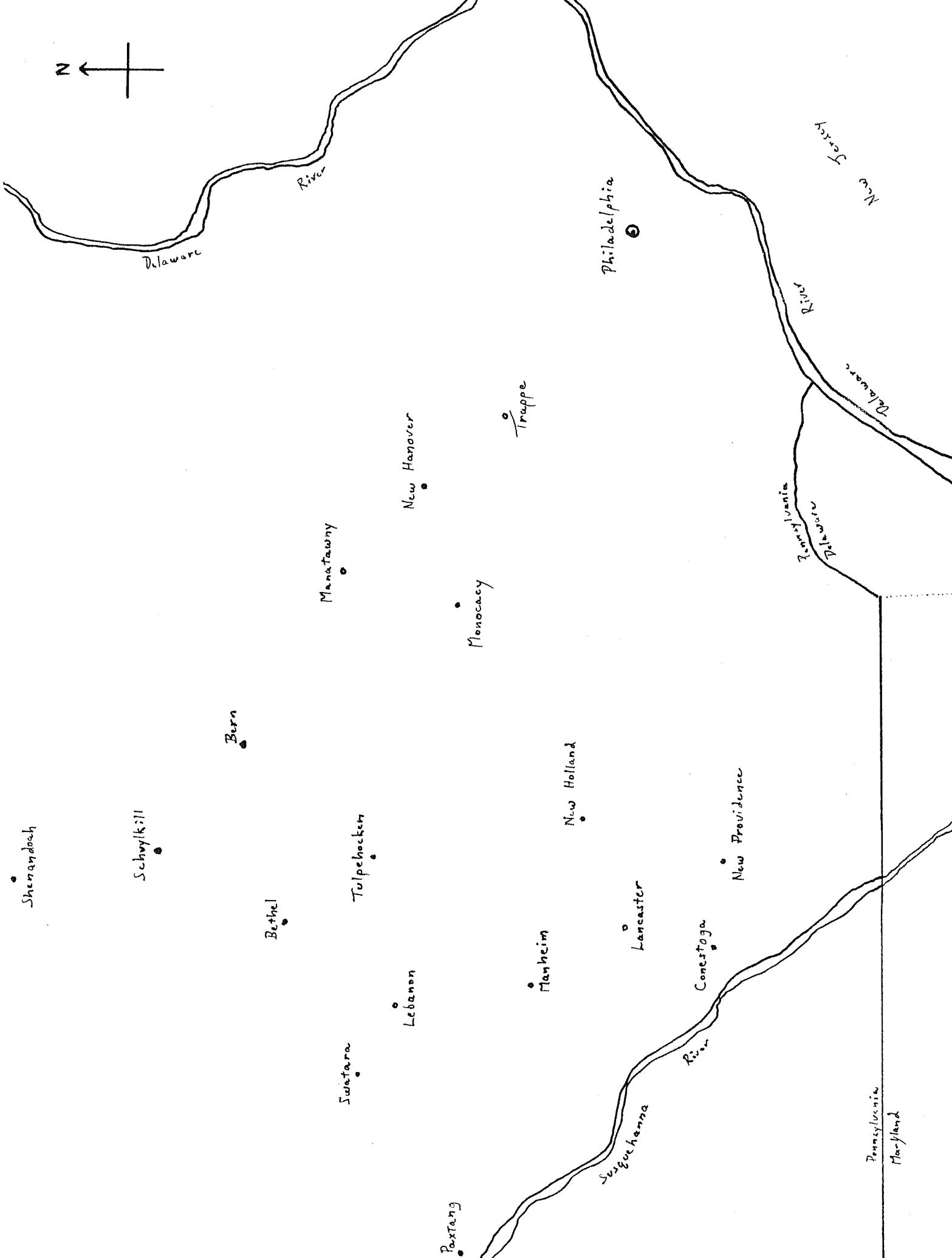
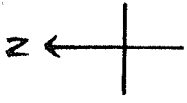
12. Jacobs, pg.275

13. Mann, pg.242

conducting a confirmation service in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. He was buried northwest of Lebanon at Hill Church.

There is not a lot of material written about John Caspar Stoever, Jr.; most of the references are brief and in many scattered sources. Yet a study of his life does reveal the grace of God in the history of Lutheranism in America. At a time when there were many Lutherans coming from Germany to the New World and few pastors to serve them, God provided a man who was willing and able to brave the harsh environment and the rugged conditions of America and serve whole-heartedly for more than half a century. Stoever had the necessary gifts from God to do the work which he did. He was the one who by the grace of God held things somewhat together before men such as Muhlenberg and others could arrive to organize more formally. As one pages through his records, you can't help but be amazed at the thousands of baptisms, marriages and worship services which he conducted for God's people. Humanly speaking, these things could not have occurred without him and thousands of Lutherans would have gone without the spiritual care of a Lutheran shepherd. Finally, along with his missionary zeal, one has to admire his faith and his love of God's Word and of God's people which led him to such a life of unselfish service. We can't tell from history if Stoever was a man who could have entered the WELS by colloquy today if he were alive, but he did relentlessly adhere to the Lutheran confessions and no doubt many souls were brought to faith and strengthened in faith by his labors in the earliest days of Lutheranism in this country.

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Shamong

Schuylkill

Burn

Bethlehem

Susquehanna

Tulpehocken

Lebanon

Paxtang

Manheim

New Holland

Monocacy

New Hanover

Trappe

Susquehanna River

Lancaster

Conestoga

New Providence

Philadelphia

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania  
Maryland

New Jersey

Delaware River

Delaware River

Delaware River

Delaware River

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