

JOHN NEIDIG (1765-1844) UNITED BRETHREN PREACHER

John Neidig was a fellow-worker with Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm, the co-founders and first bishops of the United Brethren in Christ. According to one of the denomination's prominent historians A. W. Drury, "The history of John Neidig is largely the history of the formation of the United Brethren Church." In 1793, his efforts led to the erection of a church building at the site of Neidig Memorial United Methodist Church, Oberlin. That structure was the second such in the entire United Brethren denomination, and that location marks the oldest site of continuous worship in the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church.

INTRODUCTION

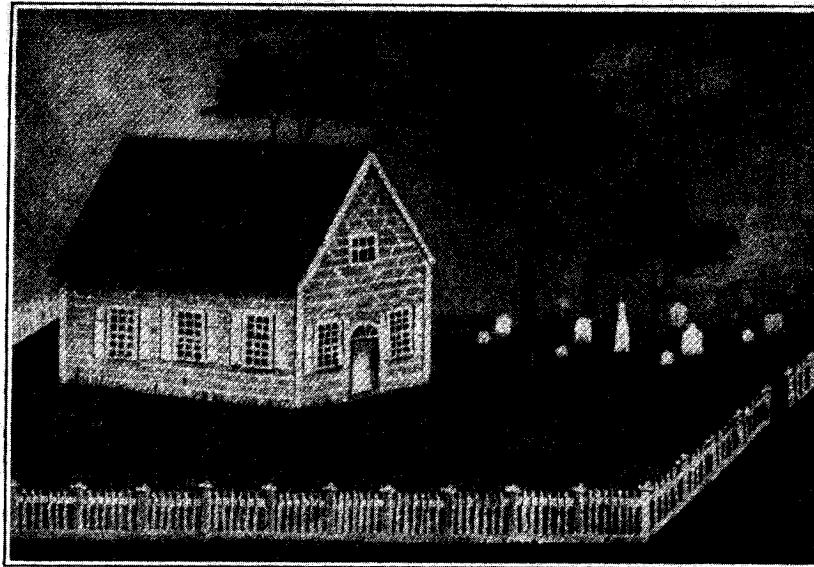
The 1995 volume of THE CHRONICLE honors Rev. John Neidig by publishing two related articles written exactly 100 years apart. A Lecture on John Neidig, Sr. was delivered by Daniel Shearer at the pilgrimage of the Conference Historical Society held July 31, 1994, at Neidig Memorial Church. Raised in the former United Brethren Church in Jefferson, York County, Rev. Shearer has a ministerial record that includes service as the conference council director, two district superintendent appointments, and nine years as the bishop's administrative assistant. He is a recognized scholar of United Brethren history.

The article titled A Biography of John Neidig was cited by Rev. Shearer as a primary source for his address at the pilgrimage. This little-known biography, written by Neidig's son Isaac and dated May 30, 1894, has never before appeared in print and apparently has never been used as a reference for any other scholarly work on John Neidig. The copy of the biography used by Rev. Shearer was discovered among historical papers at Neidig Memorial Church. It was a typewritten transcription of the original manuscript, made by a secretary instructed "to copy the document just as she found it, repeating the very self-evident errors in spelling. The typewritten document seeks to be a true copy of the original document as it was written by Isaac Neidig."

The original manuscript was apparently handed down within the Neidig family until the typewritten version was prepared in 1947 at the direction of Mrs. Harold R. Megill of Kansas, a great-granddaughter of John Neidig's son Isaac. THE CHRONICLE has been unable to determine the present whereabouts of the original manuscript. In the version appearing in this volume and prepared from the 1947 transcription, spelling errors have been corrected and some sentences have been restructured. Otherwise, the style and vocabulary are those of Isaac Neidig. Endnote #8 addresses some of the issues involved in presenting an accurate and readable article from a typewritten transcription prepared by a secretary unfamiliar with the subject from a manuscript that was difficult to read.

There can be no doubt that this biography of John Neidig is a valuable document previously unknown to United Brethren historians. As discussed in

the first three end notes, the account of John Neidig's son Isaac contradicts some of the details given in Phares Brubaker Gibble's 1951 **History of the East Pennsylvania Conference**, the most widely accepted authority on the Neidig family's involvement in the United Brethren Church. In addition, the biography provides new insight and information regarding the development of the United Brethren Church in both Pennsylvania and Iowa that will be appreciated by scholars and casual readers alike. It is for these reasons that **THE CHRONICLE** is extremely pleased to publish for the first time this unique contribution to the personal story of John Neidig and the history of the United Brethren Church.



This likeness of the original United Brethren Building at Oberlin, Dauphin County, was painted from memory. The 30x40 foot limestone building, which stood from 1793 to 1850 was the second place of worship in the entire denomination erected by the people who were to become the United Brethren in Christ. Now the location of the Neidig Memorial United Methodist Church, the property has been occupied continuously by that congregation for 202 years -- longer than any other site in the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

A LECTURE ON JOHN NEIDIG, SR.
One of the four early leaders of the United Brethren in Christ:
George Adam Geeting, John Neidig,
John George Pfrimmer, Christian Newcomer

by Daniel Shearer, 1994

Henry Spaeth, writing in 1819 and 1850, and John Lawrence, writing in 1860, both historians of the United Brethren in Christ, record conferences in 1789, probably held in Otterbein's Baltimore parsonage, and in 1791, at John Spangler's home, eight miles west of York, "of all the preachers in order to take into consideration, how, and in what manner they might be useful."

Both historians give a total of twenty-two preachers in attendance at the meetings or who were regarded as members of the fellowship. The church background is known of all but four of these men. Ten were from the German Reformed tradition -- William Otterbein, George A. Geeting, Adam Lehman, John Ernst, John George Pfrimmer, Henry Weidner, Henry Baker, Frederick Schaefer, Christian Crum, and Benedict Swope. Six were Mennonite -- Martin Boehm, Christian Newcomer, John Neidig, Sr., Martin Crider, John Hershey, and Simon Herre. Abraham Troxel was Amish. Christopher Grosh was Moravian. The four whose religious affiliation is not known were Benedict Sanders, G. Fortenbach, Daniel Strickler, and J. Hautz. Of the ten Reformed preachers only Otterbein, Geeting, and Swope were formally ordained.

In the list of preachers attending the conferences of 1789 and 1791 are the names of four men whose contributions to the movement leading to and culminating in the formation of the United Brethren in Christ were outstanding. They were George Geeting, John Neidig, John George Pfrimmer, and Christian Newcomer.

Our attention today is centered on John Neidig, Sr., born April 10, 1765, to Abraham and Elizabeth Neidig, a German Reformed family residing on a farm in the Tulpehocken area of Berks County, Pennsylvania. When John was around the age of five, his father moved the family to Paxtang (now Swatara) Township, Dauphin County, near the river town of Highspire. For reasons unknown, John came into fellowship with the Mennonites.

Using materials gleaned from the following sources, we will now try to weave together the threads and patterns that made up the life of John Neidig: **A Biography of John Neidig** written by his son Isaac and dated May 30, 1894; **The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church** written by J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller; **History of the East Pennsylvania Conference** written by Phares Brubaker Gible.

John Neidig, Sr., married Mary Bear of Lancaster County. Twelve children were born to this union: 9 sons and 3 daughters. A daughter and a son died as infants. Eight sons and two daughters grew up to establish homes of their own, some on the east shore and some on the west shore. At least three

eventually migrated to Iowa, not only to homestead there but also to help establish the United Brethren of Christ Church in that state.

When John was twenty-five years old, he was chosen by lot to be a preacher in the local Mennonite Church. His son Isaac describes his father's struggle with this chosenness in the following manner: *Father Neidig was a member of the Mennonite Church. His church elected him as one of the three preachers by ballot of the congregation. He was at that time the age of twenty-five years. But it was not his wish to become their preacher, for it seemed to him a hard task for him to do the work of the ministry -- having but little education and no Christian experience, or change of heart as he called it. But he thought after the church elected him for the work he ought to obey the call of the church and do the best he knew how. But the more he tried to preach, the more he felt the need of a change of heart. So he got to reading the scriptures more and more, and so he found it needful to have a change of heart and be born again to be a successful preacher. So he did not resist, but went to God in ardent prayer. Seeking for a change of heart he kept on praying until he found the desire of his heart -- until he was sure he was converted, as he called it.*

He then told of his experience of the change of heart he obtained by fervent prayer to God. He then preached the same to his church -- that they must be born again and have a change of heart in order to please God and to get to heaven at last. But the members of his church would not receive his good doctrine, as they called it. So in the course of time they shut the door down against him and cast him over the fence, as they called it. So when he was thrown out nearly all the young people of his church came out with him and upheld him in his new doctrine, as it was called. The young people would follow him and attend his meetings at nearly all of his appointments. He soon had plenty of places to preach -- both in school houses and in houses of families. Then his followers were called "Neidig's People" in place of Mennonite. He kept up his new work, which increased all the time in numbers, for now he preached the true gospel to the people and the new birth and a change of heart, which were all needful for salvation and to enjoy the religion of Jesus Christ.

In 1793, "Neidig's People" built a church at Oberlin, a mile south of Paxtang. This was the second church to be built by people who were later related to the United Brethren Church. Neidig himself contributed about eighteen pounds to its cost and worked for sixteen days breaking stone and lime. A record of contributions of time, money, and materials by the people was kept. It includes an item of six gallons of whiskey contributed to the workmen by one generous brother. In the record of these contributions, a name is used for the people of the congregation -- *Die Vereinigten* or "United (People)". For years the congregation followed an independent existence, but in 1840 it united in full measure with the Pennsylvania Conference of the United Brethren Church.

John Neidig continued his itinerant preaching while also serving as pastor of the Oberlin church. He attended several of the early United Brethren conferences. In the conference of 1801, he was named along with nine others as "willing to take charge of a circuit and preach at the appointed places." Isaac Neidig refers to the 1791 conference held at the Spangler home in York County and writes, *so they found all their work of labour was all the same, that is, the salvation of souls and the up building of God's kingdom on earth and they gave*

it the name of United Brethren in Christ. The name of Neidig's People and Otterbein's People was done away, and instead they were called the United Brethren Church -- and still to this day, May 5, 1894, the Church has the same name.

Son Isaac also writes, *Father Neidig preached the gospel 51 years and was quite a popular preacher. He preached more funerals than any other man, sometimes going as far as thirty or forty miles preaching a full sermon -- sometimes an hour or more long. People would come to a funeral from far and near. Preachers in those days felt that they ought to preach to the living and not to the dead. Great crowds would attend funerals in those days. Father Neidig attended campmeetings, or "big meetings." He most always was called to preach the Sunday morning sermon. He had a strong clear voice and always preached with earnestness in presenting' the truth of the gospel. He never took charge to travel a circuit -- but if the circuit preacher would get sick or have some ills in a way that he could not fill his appointments, then Rev. Neidig would fill his appointments until he was able to fill them again. Father Neidig would be away from home sometimes two weeks or more. He also had more weddings to attend to than any other minister in his community.*

In 1828, Neidig became the pastor of the Baltimore Evangelical Reformed Church (Old Otterbein) and served for three years. He then returned to the Paxtang area and lived there until his death. Persons who heard him preach commented on the beauty and simplicity of his speech, his gentle nature, and his convincing earnestness.

Phares Gible indicates that Neidig was officially assigned overseer of the work east of the Susquehanna River in the years 1812, 1820, and 1826. In 1812, he served jointly with Christopher Grosh. He probably served unofficially other years.

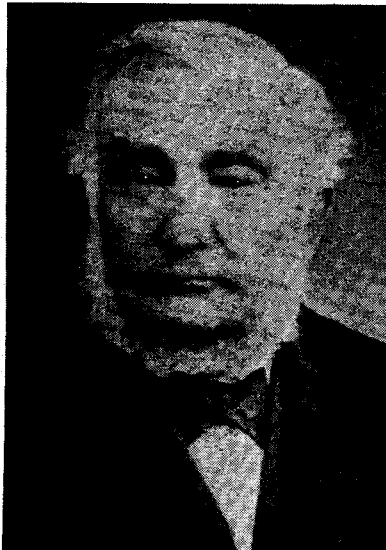
John Neidig died at his residence near Highspire, Dauphin County, January 11, 1844, at age 78 years, 9 months, 2 days. Mary Bear Neidig had died about three years previously at age 74. Their family has an illustrious history in the United Brethren Church tradition. H.H. Huffman, one of the organizers of U.B. mission work in Puerto Rico, was a grandson of Isaac Neidig and a great-grandson of John and Mary Neidig. As already indicated, the Neidig family helped fashion and frame the United Brethren Church in Iowa.

The closing words of Isaac Neidig's biography of his father John are very interesting and inspiring. He writes, *Isaac Neidig is the next of the youngest of the Neidigs' family and the only one living at this time, and on the 8th of October, 1894, he will be at age 85. He enjoys good health -- both body and mind. Sound in body without having any aches or pains, the only complaint he has is lameness in his knees -- but he is able to get around real well by going slow in his walks. The foregoing was all written by him without using eye glasses, he having received his second sight [?!] for the past four years. Isaac Neidig was converted at the age between 16 and 17 years at a revival meeting held in Highspire, which is now over 60 years ago, and from that time till the present time he has tried to live a Christian life. When he was first married, he then erected a family altar -- and the fire never was allowed to go out on the altar so long as he had a family. His trust always was with that Friend who*

sticks closer than a brother, and he found that Friend to be a never failing Friend.

Isaac Neidig has been a member of the United Brethren Church nearly all his life time. He was always loyal to his church. He has been honored with the office of class leader at two different places -- in the east where he was living, and in the first twenty years living at Muscatine, Iowa. He has been a trustee in Muscatine since the first church was built in 1850 up to the present time of September 15, 1894. Neidig loves his church and God's service, and he is much determined to make heaven his eternal home when God sees fit to call him home.

It is out of this rich tradition that God has blessed us on our way. Our journey is not our own. A multitude of John and Mary Neidigs and their faithful children cheer us on. God help us to tell our own stories with appreciation and assurance of God's abiding joy and hope in Christ.



John Neidig, Sr.
1765-1844