

Early Harrisburg's Swedenborgian Challenge

Harrisburg in 1826 was a microcosm of the American religious scene, and the main issue was the how to handle the Second Great Awakening. The First Great Awakening, the introduction of “the heart-warming experience” to mainstream Protestantism in the 1700’s, was led by John Wesley and George Whitefield. Among the American denominations that arose from this movement and were active in the Harrisburg area were the Brethren in Christ (Jacob Engle), Evangelical Association (Jacob Albright), Methodist Episcopal (Francis Asbury), and United Brethren (Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm). Most of these denominations and individuals came out of the mainstream Mennonite, Lutheran, Episcopal and/or Reformed traditions.

The Second Great Awakening of the 1800’s was the result of the continued influence of these new experienced-oriented denominations on their more established creed-oriented predecessors. It threatened to split local Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Reformed congregations and conferences/synods. Complicating this was the resurgence of interest in the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a distinguished Swedish scientist and mathematician. He studied the relationship between science and the spiritual world, claimed to have direct communication with the spirit world, and left a large body of writings. Although commonly called Swedenborgians, his followers dislike that name because it suggests a human origin for his teachings. Officially known as the Church of the New Jerusalem, they refer to themselves as the New Church.

The group was organized in London in 1783, when interested persons came together to print and study Swedenborg’s writings, and the first society in America was formed in Baltimore in 1792. The following letter is among the earliest surviving American Swedenborgian documents. It was written from Harrisburg in 1826, and is part of the collection of the archives of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church.

While the denomination today emphasizes moral living consistent with one’s religion, this letter suggests that some in the New Church of 1826 may have been caught up in the experiential enthusiasm (and some of the fringe practices and doctrines) associated with the Second Great Awakening. Manning B. Roche was apparently a dynamic apostle of that cause.

The letter is presented without interrupting comment. The comprehensive appendix of referenced personal names provides insights into the individuals and issues mentioned in the document. The footnotes for the appendix give more detailed information, documentation, and suggestions for further reading.

addressed to: Richard B. McCabe, Esq.
Huntingdon

dated: Harrisburg
June 22, 1826

Dear Sir,

My last to you was from Philadelphia with a few of Mr. Roche's books of sermons. It was all what he had left.

I am now returned to this place since Friday last – after an absence of 4 weeks. My time was spent very agreeably, though not without expenses. Yet if I have succeeded as I hope in making some openings for my future advantage, I will be repaid.

No convention, except the first, has passed so agreeably – all were united, no jarrings, no disputes. The Bostonians are quite different men from what they were at first. My York County friends are the same. Lancaster has now a church where the New Doctrine is preached. The members were called Independent Methodist. Their minister has now received the New Doctrine and preaches it.

You know that the Philadelphia Society has sold their church. They could not make up the ground rent [of] \$300 a year, and besides that Mr. Carll would not preach without a salary – yet he preaches now to a very small number [at] 2 o'clock every Sunday for nothing. Thus the Philadelphia Society is broken up and Mr. Carll a minister without congregation or church. Mr. Roche preaches as before at Southwark in the Community Hall. His congregation is increasing. They have a lot which is paid for, and they are gathering money for a church very fast – but do not intend to build until they have as much as is wanted. They do not like debts. The principal Quaker minister Doctor Atlee has now openly come out in favor of the New Church. He preaches Northern liberties in the Community Hall. Thus far Philadelphia is doing well.

Mr. Schlatter is employed in a House in New York, where he receives \$2000 a year as salesman. I think he will get over his inclination to d[rink]. I was several times in his company but did not see any thing wrong. His son Charles [Schlatter] is here learning under Strickland, the engineer for the state.

New York I found in a flourishing condition, very much changed, and my old acquaintances the same – yet some of them had met with severe losses. One that was rich before has lost his whole property – others are thriving and doing well. The Society there is prosperous, yet does not increase fast. Mr. Doughty their minister is loved by all – dare I say parties? Yet there has been a division, and in some measure exists yet, between some families. His preaching (Mr. Doughty's) is not calculated to please the men of the Old Church – nor any natural man. It is apparently cold, because he is not boisterous or declamatory – but he is interior and too deep for those not acquainted with the New Doctrine.

Mr. Brown whom you saw escalated in the Missionary [meeting] is but a bladder skate. He was fishing for fame and a name. Seeing that was not to be obtained in the New Church, he gave up preaching – which was the best he could do. The New Church has evidently undergone her first state in America – they

are no more Ishmaelites. The love of controversy belonging to the natural man is gone. They are now, generally, in a more interior state – more interior (I, with others, think) than the church in England or the New England states – certainly about the highest.

A Society is now also forming in Charleston, S.C. Several very wealthy persons have received the class. You will receive the Journal of our Convention, which will give you further news.

I became acquainted in New York with the commodore of the Swedish frigate there, Major Nordenskjold. He related to me several curious facts concerning magnetism – or the operations of the sphere of one person on another. They are true. They (the operations) took place in his own family by his niece. He has the notes taken down, with the questions he himself gave, and the answers.

Mr. Woodworth I found in a very low state. He was sickly. He drinks a great deal, has nothing else to do but to go ‘round and collect subscribers for a Presbyterian Church, for which he receives \$2 a day – poor masters we are.

Mr. Roche is now on a tour¹ to Bedford, Greensburg, Petersburg, etc. He went through here, but none of all the churches here could be opened for him.

Mr. DeWitt (who, by the way, has impressed himself very favorably to the [cause] of Roche) when he lately was in New York and seeing the Missionary on the table of one of his old members here now living in New York, invited him – whom I also invited. Mr. DeWitt, I said, has no objections at all to let Mr. Roche preach in his church, but they are now building a school house in front of it and part of the wall of the church is torn down – thus the vestry of that church had an excuse. Helfenstein, Lochman, the Methodists – none could allow him to pollute their church. In the courthouse he could not preach after night, as it is against the new law. Mr. Roche was here the whole Tuesday. The people here were very anxious to hear him preach, which the preachers and elders here at the different congregations did not like. Mr. Roche is now in Bedford.

I started a question in Philadelphia. The laymen misters Condy and Lamot are on my side, the ministers against me. I had long conversation on the subject with Misters Hargrove, Atlee and Carll one evening – and afterward with Mr. Roche. Does the Lord’s providence only regard the general good of the spiritual man or woman, and thence the individual good – or does he particularly regard the individual good, and thence the general good? The latter part of the question was maintained by me, and the former part by the ministers.

They say look at the sufferings of individuals in wars, in public calamities, and in the religious persecutions. The Lord had a general end in view. The sufferers were so far individually profited as the general barely was profited. In practical words, individual good must give way to general good – so in regard to

¹ While there were very few organized New Church congregations with ordained ministers, there were a surprising number of “circles” of believers led by approved “readers.” This was Birkman’s role in Harrisburg. In Greensburg the reader was the Hon. John Young; in Bedford it was Dr. Barclay. In Methodist terminology, these people would be class leaders and Roche would be a circuit rider who made annual tours to offer the sacraments, etc.

the spirit. They (individuals), like any member in the natural body (such as a toe or finger) which is corrupted, are cut off for the general good.

I maintained that individuals could not be compared to toes or fingers. All toes and fingers have no rationality – have no soul. We have no right to call any man or number of men corrupt because they suffer. The Lord says a hair does not fall from our head without him. Thus every, the most particular circumstance – whether at good or evil, whether of pain or happiness – that happens to man is for his final good. And so far as it is for his final good, so far it is for the general good. If you understand me, give me your opinion.

Mr. Condy said: Do you remember when some men were taken up to a heavenly diety and presented to the prince. He did not send ministers or priests to instruct them – but the laity or wise men. We must keep our ministers straight, or else the love of power and dominion will lead them astray – which has been and is the case rather too much.

My regards to Mrs. McCabe and my love to Mary. From your,
Peter A. Birkman

Appendix: Names Given in the Letter

Atlee, Dr. Edwin Augustus (1776-1852) – prominent Philadelphia Quaker physician² and religious activist. Born in Lancaster, he attended Dickinson College and was converted at a Methodist camp meeting – even serving as a Methodist pastor before turning to the simpler and more sacrificial lifestyle he saw in within the Friends. In 1825, letters were published between Atlee and Elias Hicks, leader of the 1827 Hicksite split in the Society of Friends. In 1826, Atlee embraced Swedenborgianism. After the original New Church congregation lost its temple, mainly due to the financial collapse of William Schlatter, Dr. Atlee and Manning Roche led separate societies that met in community halls. He resigned from the denomination in 1832 in a letter which reads in part: “Although I am fully persuaded and convinced that the doctrines of the New Jerusalem are Heavenly, and as a system perfect, yet I am equally convinced that by reuniting with Friends I shall best qualify myself for realizing in life the Divine Truths of the Word, and for usefulness in the vineyards of the Lord.”

Birkman, Peter A. (?-1837) – author of this letter and possibly at least one book³. A Swede who had been brought up in New Church doctrines, he first appears in Swedenborigan documents in 1823. He attended the Eighth General Convention of the denomination, held in New York City June 1-3, 1826, as a member from Harrisburg. Interested in and knowledgeable about church affairs, he attended each of the 10th-16th conventions, 1828-1834 and died in St. Louis.

² In 1804 Atlee, a student of the noted Benjamin Rush (1745-1813) published "An Inaugural Essay on the Influence of Music in the Cure of Diseases." This essay, in which he recommended the use of music in rehabilitation due to its unique qualities and instantaneous effects, is believed to be the first scholarly paper ever published on the subject of music therapy.

³ The simplified German Grammar, or, Die Vereinfachte Deutsche Sprachlehre, P. Birkman, printed by William White: Harrisburg (1823).

Brown, Solymon (1790-1876) – poet, teacher, clergyman, dentist, and one of the founders of dentistry as an organized profession. He studied at Yale and was licensed as a Congregational minister in 1813. Due to opposition by Lyman Beecher, he was denied a renewal of his license and turned to teaching and writing. A very dynamic speaker, he embraced Swedenborgianism and was elevated to the office of lay reader at the national convention of 1822. It is not clear whether he was ever actually ordained at this time – but according to Birkman, by 1826 he had given up any interest in preaching. Brown took up dentistry in the 1830's and gained prominence in the field – maintaining a private practice, publishing numerous papers on dentistry and dental hygiene, and founding a dental manufacturing and supply company. He pastored Swedenborgian churches while continuing to practice dentistry in the 1840's and 1850's. Beginning in 1862 he pastored full-time until his retirement in 1870. A recent book⁴ includes "Solymon Brown and his epic poem of dental hygiene" near the top of its list of works not known for their beauty, elegance or profundity.

Carll, Rev. Maskell Mills (?-1856) – school teacher, author⁵, and pastor of one of the two Swedenborgian congregations in Philadelphia in 1826. His unusual first name appears to be his grandmother's maiden name, as circa 1726 records indicate the marriage of an Abia Carll Jr and Mercy Maskell. His congregation, the city's original one, met in his school room at 226 Arch Street until the erection of their first building in 1816. The group was not faring well in 1826, and they had to sell their church building. In 1880 the city's second congregation disbanded, returning its property and membership to the original group – which continues today in its 1883 buildings designed by Theophilus P. Chandler at 22nd and Chestnut.

Condy, Jonathan William (1770-1828) – Philadelphia lawyer. A member of the US House of Representatives, he was elected clerk of the 5th session and served 1797-1799. In 1816 he was chosen president of Philadelphia's Swedenborgian congregation. Son of Benjamin Condy and Elizabeth Lathberry, he and Elizabeth Hopkinson Condy (1772-1840) were the parents of 1 son and 3 daughters. The nationally and internationally prominent and colorful character named Condy Raguet (1784-1842), also associated with the Philadelphia congregation at this time, was a nephew of Condy.

⁴ In Search of the World's Worst Writers: A Celebration of Triumphantly Bad Literature, Nick Page. Trafalgar Square Publishing, 2001.

⁵ A check of library holdings reveals several books, mostly having to do with education and child-raising: (1) Introduction to Arithmetic published by Auner & Young (Phila) in 1825; (2) Infant Instructor and Mother's Manual published by Thomas T. Ash (Chestnut Street, Phila) in 1832 – this went through at least 4 editions, and was still being published in 1845; (3) a book on the origins of words, designed to help teach vocabulary, published in 1834; (4) Child's Book of Natural History published by A.S. Barnes & Burr (New York) in 1860. These books are typically kept in rare book rooms and do not circulate. Other significant MM Carll materials in print include an address delivered before the Philadelphia Academy of Teachers (1822) and a report on the state of education in Pennsylvania – along with two bills for the establishment of a general system of public instruction (1830).

Doughty, Charles John (1784-1844) - leader of the New York congregation. A successful lawyer of Quaker stock, Doughty was ordained in 1818 but continued his law practice and served unpaid until 1833 – when he was formally installed as pastor at an annual salary of \$800. Birkman hints at “parties” in the New York congregation in 1826. In 1838 there was a split, a number left the congregation, and those remaining were forced to sell the large Pearl Street church they had purchased in 1821 – the present site of the New York County Court House on Foley Square. The group continued to hold services in the Lyceum on Broadway and has operated at its present site on 35th Street since 1859.

DeWitt, Rev. William R. (1792-1867) – Presbyterian pastor in Harrisburg. He was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of New York in April 23, 1818, and was called to Harrisburg October 5, 1818 – a position he held until his death. He also held the position of State Librarian 1854-1860, at which time (1854) the church began employing an associate pastor. This was the first Presbyterian congregation within the city – located at Second Street and Cherry Alley in 1826, and now the Market Square Church. In 1837 a division occurred within the denomination over the Old-New controversy. The Presbytery of Harrisburg was formed in connection with the New School General Assembly, and this congregation became a part of that Presbytery.

Hargrove, Rev. John (1750-1839) – Swedenborgian minister in Baltimore, and the denomination’s leading national figure. President Jefferson invited John Hargrove to preach in the Capitol rotunda before Congress. His theological perspectives can be ascertained from a published sermon⁶ on the millennium that he delivered on Christmas Day 1804 before both houses of congress. Hargrove was reportedly a Methodist Episcopal minister who set out to refute Swedenborgianism before being re-baptized and ordained in the New Church in 1798.

Helfenstein, Rev. Albert Jr (1801-1870) – Reformed pastor in Harrisburg. Helfenstein is a prominent surname in the German Reformed ministry. Rev. John Conrad Helfenstein (1748-1790) came to America as a missionary in 1771. He had four sons who followed him into the denomination’s ministry: Samuel (1775-1866), Charles (1781-1842) Jonathan (1784-1829), and Albert (1788-1869). In addition, three of Samuel’s sons became German Reformed pastors: Samuel Jr (1800-1869), Albert Jr [who, of course, was not really a junior – but used that designation to avoid confusion with his Uncle Albert], and Jacob [who later left the denomination for the New School Presbyterians]. Albert Jr graduated from the University of Philadelphia in 1820 and pursued theological studies toward ordination under the supervision of his father. He was ordained in 1822 and served Salem Reformed Church (where his uncle Jonathan had served 1805-1808) from March 1, 1824 to September 8, 1829 – when he accepted a call to Germantown. Being the pastor of record following John Winebrenner, he was

⁶ “A Sermon on the Second Coming of Christ, and on the Last Judgment. Delivered the 25th December, 1804 before both houses of Congress, at the Capitol in the city of Washington,” John Hargrove, Baltimore: Warner & Hanna, 1805.

well aware of the New-Old controversy the Presbyterians were facing.⁷ It appears that he originally served only Salem Church, but that Shoop's and Wenrich's were added to the charge within a year or two.⁸

Lochman, Rev. John George (1773-1826) and **Rev. Augustus Hoffman** (1802-1891) – Lutheran father-son pastors in Harrisburg. John G. was licensed to preach in 1794 and accepted a call to Salem Church in Lebanon, where he ministered for 21 years. In 1815 he was elected pastor at Harrisburg Zion, Middletown St. Peter's and Shoop's – a position he held until his death. In 1817, he was president of the German Lutheran Synod of the United States. Augustus H. was licensed in 1824. He was living in Mechanicsburg (where there was not yet a Lutheran congregation) and serving Peace Church (now relocated to Shiremans-town), Trindle Springs and Langsdorf (now relocated to New Kingston) when his father's health began to fail. He moved to Harrisburg in early 1826 and assisted his father until his death on July 10, 1826. Augustus H. then succeeded his father at Harrisburg and remained there until called to Christ Church in York in 1836.

Lammot, Daniel Jr. (1782-1877) – Philadelphia layman prominent in the New Church. After his father embraced Swedenborgianism, Daniel endeavored to teach his father “the error of his ways” but became converted himself and joined the church under John Hargrove in 1802. He was a staunch opponent of the denomination's “conjugal heresy” [aka the “Boston principle”], which affirmed that a pastor was related to his congregation in the same mystical way that Christ was related to the Church. He presided over at least one General Conference and founded the work in the state of Delaware.

McCabe, Richard Butler (1792-1860) – addressee of the letter. This resident of Huntingdon was secretary at the time of the Mount Moriah Lodge (Masons), No. 178, a position he held for several years until 1827. At that time he moved to Blairsville, Indiana County, and attended the 9th –17th Swedenborgian General Conventions (1827-1835) as a member from that community. A detailed biographical sketch of McCabe was printed in an 1865 local history⁹.

Nordenskjold – commander of a Swedish frigate. Nordenskjold is a prominent Swedish name, and the family was ennobled in 1757. Prominent Swedenborgians were Augustus (1754-1792), involved in the resettlement of

⁷ Harbaugh's The Fathers of the German Reformed Church (vol IV, p 204) notes he was “largely influenced by distinctively English modes of thought, and also to a certain extent carried away by what was technically called the New Measure system, practically at least, if not theoretically. This proved injurious to him in prosecuting the work of the ministry in the Reformed Church.”

⁸ Shoop's [Schupp's] Lutheran and Reformed Church in Lower Paxtang township was organized in 1783. Wenrich's Lutheran and Reformed Church in Linglestown dates from 1730. Like other Reformed churches in the area, it has had an interesting involvement in the Old-New controversy over the years. Early United Brethren activist John George Pfrimmer, who like Otterbein began his ministry in the Reformed Church, served here in 1791. When Reformed pastor John Winebrenner served here in the early 1820's, he was convicted of violating church law and ousted by a single vote. He organized the nearby Bethel Church of God as an independent congregation in 1826, four years before the formal organization of the Churches of God denomination.

⁹ The Valley of the Conemaugh, Thomas J. Chapman, Altoona: McCrum & Dern (1865).

former slaves to Africa,¹⁰ and Carl Fredrik (1756-1828), a student of animal magnetism. This commander was likely a relative of Carl – if not actually Carl himself. Although there is no other evidence that Carl was ever in America, the Nordenskjolds were definitely wide-ranging travelers.¹¹

Roche, Rev. Manning Brinckle (1796-1862) – one of two Swedenborgian ministers in Philadelphia. He was originally an Episcopal priest, born in Wilmington DE, but not much is known about his ministry in that denomination. He served in Bradford county in 1814, was ordained by Bishop William White on May 6, 1818, and served as a missionary at New London (PA) Cross Roads the following year. In 1821 he succeeded Rev. Richmond in Philadelphia and served the Southwark (Trinity, at the Schuylkill) and Hamiltonville (St. Mary's, on Locust Street between 39th and 40th Streets) congregations. The archives of the Episcopal Church record that he was deposed from the priesthood in 1822. Having received the Swedenborgian doctrines, he tendered his resignation to the Episcopal bishop and made an affectionate farewell address to his congregation. A number followed him, and the second Swedenborgian congregation was formed – meeting in 1826 at the Community Hall in Southwark. The author of several books and pamphlets, he was a dynamic preacher and traveling advocate for the Swedenborgians. A published letter¹² to Roche from prominent German theologian Johann Friedrich Immanuel Tafel (1796-1863) indicates his significance to the movement. Denominational minutes for April 17, 1842 state that “Rev. M.B. Roche resigns from the pastorate of the Philadelphia Second Society, and from the ministry, and from the membership of the New Church.”¹³

¹⁰ Plan for a Free Community Upon the Coast of Africa, Under the Protection of great Britain: But Entirely Independent of All European Laws and Government, Augustus Nordenskjöld, London: Robert Hindmarsh (1789).

¹¹ Nils Adolf Erik Nordenskjöld (1832-1901) explored the Arctic and a northern route to Japan, while his nephew Nils Otto Gustaf Nordenskjöld (1869-1928) explored southernmost South America and Antarctica. They descended from older brothers of Augustus and Carl Fredrik: Nils Adolf from Adolf Gustaf (1745-1821) and Nils Otto from Otto Henrik (1747-1832). In addition, the sister of Nils Adolf married a distant relative and was the mother of Nils Otto.

¹² Letter to the Rev. Manning B. Roche of the New Jerusalem Church, by John Frederick Immanuel Tafel, D.D. is a bound, fifteen page pamphlet published in Philadelphia in 1830 by “Thomas S. Manning, Printer, No. 11 South Sixth Street.” Tafel had recently declined an invitation to become minister of the German Swedenborgian congregation in Baltimore to continue his prestigious position as the librarian of the University of Tubingen, Germany. While the document mainly details the history of the movement in Germany, it contains interesting references to Mr. Roche's personal spiritual journey.

¹³ A brief Swedenborgian biography of Roche states: “His case was a remarkable one. A brilliant young priest of the Episcopal Church, he came over to the New Church in 1822, bringing with him a great part of his former congregation. He soon rose to great influence in the General Convention, but after some years became a dipsomaniac, and finally fell into a critical illness. On recovering he had completely forgotten everything which he had known before respecting the New Church and its teachings. He spent the latter part of his life as a physician in New Bedford.” The 1845 New Bedford city directory lists Dr. Manning Brinckle Roche as a homeopathic physician with an office at 39 Fifth Street. His wife Sara E. died in 1851 in New Bedford, and he died in Meads Basin NJ, apparently survived by his 24-year-old son James.

Schlatter, Charles Lyon (1808-1886) – son of William Schlatter, and an engineering apprentice under William Strickland at the time of Birkman's letter. In 1839 he was commissioned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to explore the feasibility of a cross-state railroad to replace his mentor's system of canals and inclined planes. He suggested three routes, and favored the one along the Juniata and Conemaugh rivers later used by the Pennsylvania Railroad. It was his reports that first demonstrated conclusively the possibility of crossing the Alleghenies without inclined planes. His sister, the daughter of William Schlatter, was the mother of America's pioneer architect Theophilus P. Chandler (1845-1928), founder of the University of Pennsylvania's department of architecture.

Schlatter, William (1783-1827) – once a successful Philadelphia merchant, at 129 High Street, transporting supplies to Pittsburgh and the west. Because of his strong financial ties to the DuPonts of Wilmington DE, he was thought to possess great wealth. About 1815 he built a large double mansion on the south side of Chestnut Street, east of Thirteenth. In 1816 he was chosen vice-president of the city's Swedenborgian society. Some time later he lost his property, and such was his state when Birkman encountered him in New York in 1826. He died within six months of this letter, on January 27, 1827. William was the son of Richard Schlatter (1753-?) and grandson of noted Reformed missionary and pastor Michael Schlatter (1716-1790), whose dramatic 1752 plea in Germany inspired Philip William Otterbein and five others to go to America as German Reformed missionary pastors.

Strickland, William (1787-1854) – Philadelphia engineer who had studied under Latrobe. He joined the Swedenborgians in 1816 and designed their first Philadelphia church building – the unique structure at the southeast corner of 12th and Sansom Streets that at the time of this letter was the Academy of Natural Sciences. In 1825 he was sent to England to share and gather information regarding Pennsylvania's railways and canals. His subsequent reports are the starting point of American railway engineering. The engineer for the Delaware Bay Breakwater begun in 1829, he designed the famous system of canals and inclined railways to transport goods between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh that opened in 1834 and operated for about 20 years. 1835 he made a reconnaissance for a railway from Wilmington DE to the Susquehanna in order to bypass the difficult lower reaches of that river.

Woodworth, Samuel (1785-1842) – prominent New York printer, publisher and poet. Born in Massachusetts, he was the author of a historical romance of the War of 1812 entitled *The Champions of Freedom* (1816), as well as two volumes of poetry (1818, 1826), which included his most famous poem, "The Old Oaken Bucket." A strong force in the early days of the movement in New York, he published the first American New Church monthly magazine, *The Halcyon Luminary*. When the local society was formally organized in 1816, Woodworth was its vice-president. Although never clergy, he was appointed a lay reader at the national convention of 1822. If Birkman's account is accurate, by 1826 he seems to have fallen on hard times.