

VIII. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY HISTORY

I started exploring the roots of the Kerstetter family out of simple curiosity, with no particular expectations of adding to my knowledge of the world. Years later, however, I find myself with a far better understanding of the contribution of ordinary people to the human spectacle we call history.

None of my ancestors would have been featured in a traditional chronicle of “movers and shakers.” Most of the Kerstetter men were farmers, millers, carpenters, blacksmiths or boatmen, and most of the Kerstetter women stayed at home to manage the households and raise the children. Yet I continue to be impressed with the challenges they overcame, the way they coped with the constraints of their times, and their contributions large and small to the common good.

No challenge was greater or more dangerous than the Atlantic crossing endured by Martin and Maria Dorothea Kirstätter in 1727. Whether they made the trip out of desperation to escape from Europe or as a search for opportunities in the New World, it was the ultimate step into the unknown in those years.

The same sense of adventure led later generations of Kerstetters to leave their new homes in Pennsylvania and strike out for unseen lands on the fringes of the wilderness. A few Kerstetters moved late in life, at an age where less adventurous people would simply have stayed put and spent the rest of their lives in familiar surroundings close to friends and family.

While the early Kerstetters had considerable freedom when it came to moving from one part of the country to another, they were anything but free when it came to economic realities and social conventions. I often wonder how their lives compared to our own. The choices we have and the differences we respect strike me as two of the defining characteristics of life in North America today.

In the old days, everyday living was simple, as evidenced by the lists of personal possessions in wills and accounts of estates. People normally did what their parents did for a living, and the idea of going to school to expand a person’s choice of career or view of the world was virtually unknown in rural communities. Socially, the early Pennsylvania Germans tended to congregate in areas that shared their native language and religion. People married within their own communities, husbands and wives stayed together in the vast majority of marriages, and it is impossible to know whether most marriages were “for better” or “for worse.”

Finally, I continue to be impressed by the role played by my ancestors in the building of a new nation. Among the most celebrated of the Kerstetters were those who served in the Revolutionary War and witnessed history in the making at close range. Joh. Georg Kerstetter crossed the Delaware with Washington on that cold Christmas Eve in 1776 and

routed the Hessians at Trenton, and he suffered through the winter at Valley Forge as the Continental Army struggled to survive to continue the fight against Great Britain.

Most Kerstetters led ordinary lives, however, and their accomplishments were not often preserved in the public record. A few had formal titles as local government officials, school trustees, church elders or constables. Others were just upstanding citizens who did their best with what they had. Either way, they are worth remembering, and we are in their debt for the contributions they made.