

The Christian Oberholser, Jr. Family Letter to the Jacob E. Heisey Family Describing the Confederate Invasion of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, in 1863

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The Background of the Letter

In looking through some old papers from my father's collection recently, I discovered a ledger book with many handwriting exercises, arithmetic exercises, and handwritten essays that obviously had been written by a schoolboy. The name at the top of the papers was Henry L. Heisey (1844-1912). I knew from my genealogy records that he was my great-grandfather, but I never had known anything about him. I then learned that he was a bishop in the Brethren in Christ Church in the Manor-Pequea District, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The finding of his papers sparked my interest in discovering more about him. My subsequent research resulted in a published biographical article, "Henry L. Heisey: Bishop of Manor-Pequea District, Lancaster County," in *Brethren in Christ History and Life* (2007).

Among the Henry L. Heisey papers, I found a letter in poor condition that had been written by his father's sister, Frances (Heisey) (1804-1894), and her husband, Bishop Christian Oberholser, Jr. (1803-1872) of Franklin County, Pennsylvania. It was dated 1863 and contained a vivid description of the Confederate invasion of Franklin County in the summer of 1863. The letter was addressed to Henry's parents, Jacob E. (1815-1895) and Barbara (Light) Heisey (1820-1896), who lived in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. In 1863, Henry would have been 19 years old. There is no record of Henry serving in the Civil War which would have been consistent with the belief and practice of his church, the River Brethren. The record does show that he was converted to his church's faith in 1860, prior to the beginning of the Civil War. Henry obviously kept the letter to his parents, possibly because he was interested in preserving history (Heisey, 2007, p. 440). That Henry L. Heisey was interested in history is confirmed by one of his drawings at age 11, dated February 2, 1856, reproduced below as an example of his interest.



My finding of this Civil War letter of 1863 set in motion a search for more information about the Confederate invasion of Franklin Country to see how the Oberholser description lined up with the history of the time. There are some aspects that are consistent and others that are different. One of the most important aspects is that the Southern soldiers did go through the houses, most likely including the Oberholser house seen below, to secure food and supplies and take grain from the barns and their horses and cattle, even though the execution of General Lee's orders "would and did prevent

entering private houses, and the indiscriminate plunder of private property” (Hoke, 1959, p.122).



The Christian, Jr. and Frances Oberholser Homestead built in 1803 located near Green Village, Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Courtesy of Karl and Connie Oberholser. Christian Oberholser, Jr. and his first wife, Nancy Wenger Hoover, moved from Lebanon County to Franklin County in 1827, when they were married and bought this house shown above which was on a 106-acre farm located on what is now Rowe Run Road (Zook, 2009 and Oberholser, 2009), becoming farmers in Greene Township in the fertile Cumberland Valley area. Nancy died in 1837 after giving birth to six children. Christian, Jr. then married Frances Heisey, also from Lebanon County, who was the writer of the letter. The farm remained in the Oberholser family for over 100 years, until 1929 (Zook, 1985, p. 205) when it was lost during the Great Depression (Oberholser, 2009). In 1863, when the letter was written, Frances (1804-1894) would have been 59 years of age and Christian, Jr. (1803-1872) would have been 60. The history shows that the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania began on June 15, 1863 (Hoke, 1959. p. 114). Mohr provides a scenario for this invasion. “Chambersburg lay squarely in the middle of the valley up which Lee launched his second and last great offensive in June 1863. The evacuation of local militia units left the town undefended, and it was rapidly occupied by the advancing Southern army. Chambersburg was used as a central staging area by the Confederates; its importance to their operations increased when the massive confrontation began to develop in Gettysburg, approximately twenty-five miles east across the South Mountain ridge. Following their defeat at Gettysburg, the Confederates withdrew from Chambersburg toward the Potomac River” (Mohr, p. 328). The Franklin County Mennonite, Michael Hege, described the Civil War as “A very great unrest in the whole land” (Burdge and Horst, 2004, p. 220) and another Mennonite, Jacob Stouffer, called the beginning of 1863 which brought the invasion of Pennsylvania as “No sign of peace” (p. 241). Other letters and diaries describe the reactions of the ordinary citizens of the area to the invasion by the Confederate troops. Rachel Cormany (see photograph below), age 27, born in Canada and educated at Oberlin College and at Otterbein College in Ohio, where she graduated, was the wife of Samuel Cormany, a Union soldier who had enlisted from this area. They had met in college but moved back to a farm near Chambersburg where now she was living in a rented room while he served in a number of Civil War battles in the east. She wrote in her diary that for days they had been anticipating with great fear the coming of the “Rebels.” Finally, they came. She wrote on June 23, 1863, “The Reb's have been cutting up high. Sawed down telegraph poles, destroyed the scotland bridge [two miles from the Oberholser

farm] again took possession of the warehouses & were dealing out flour by the barrel & mollasses by the bucket ful -- They made people take them bread -- meat -- &c to eat -- Some dumb fools carried them jellies & the like -- Not a thing went from this place” (Cormany, 1863).

A week later she wrote of difficulties when she had a “bad luck” morning. The washboard fell and broke, the water in the boiler boiled down, became empty so that the tin melted off and she couldn’t fix it as long as the “rebels” were there. “After I was dressed,” she wrote, “I put the baby to sleep then went down to Ditmers & got a Gallon mollasses for 50 cts—Also to Hok[e]s & got 3 qts syrup for 45 cts—Hoke told me that the Rebs had taken about 500 \$ worth of sugar & mollasses—they went into the private cellar & took Mrs. Hokes canned fruit & bread” (Mohr, p. 338).



Photograph of Rachel Cormany in Mohr’s *Cormany Diaries*, p. 295.

The Oberholser letter gives at the opening of its page three what could be called the heading for the story of the Confederate invasion of Franklin County--“O what a fearful time was thes[e] four weeks.” The details of what this meant for them will be described later when we come to the letter’s contents. From another perspective, the invasion had a different tone. Though the Pennsylvania invasion by the Confederates was “O what a fearful time” for the Oberholser family in Franklin County, for President Lincoln it was viewed as “nothing.” He wrote to his wife, Mary, who began vacationing with their son Tad in Philadelphia on June 8, 1863, just as week before the invasion, “I do not think the raid into Pennsylvania amounts to anything at all.” He told her she could decide whether she should come home or not. As the Confederates advanced further, however, she rejoined her husband in Washington while the Confederate Army went further north into the Chambersburg area (Goodwin, 2005, p. 531). Though the war continued for another year, Lincoln was wrong in this particular assessment, for the ultimate result of the Pennsylvania invasion was the Civil War’s critical battle of Gettysburg that Lincoln a few weeks later would call “a great battlefield of that war” and that helped to turn the direction of the war in favor of the North, as General Lee retreated south.

To give a human face to the Confederate soldiers as they advanced into Pennsylvania, giving “a fearful time” to the Franklin County residents, we portray a photograph of a Southern soldier whose face and name have been preserved for historians. It is the photograph of Confederate soldier named Edward Francis Jemison (17 years old) taken from <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=13976014>



From the June 1863 diary of a local minister, we read, "Gen'l Imboden and his staff came into town this morning and made the following requisition of the inhabitants of the town, namely, 5000 lbs. of bacon; 20 bbls. of flour ..2bbls of molasses, 2 bbls. of sugar, 2 sacks of salt and 150 pairs of shoes. There was no alternative... , we were powerles, and it had to be complied with by 11:30 a. m." (Creigh, 1863, quoted in Turner, 1940).

We have evidence of stories that have come down through the Oberholser family to today's generation, of memories of the Confederate invasion. For example, one of the great-great-grandson's of Christian Oberholser, Jr., Karl Oberholser, writes, "My father, Christian, told a story about the farmers hiding their horses in a valley, which is now called Horse Valley, beyond Blue Mountain" (Oberholser, 2009). This obviously is a reference to what the local newspaper had reported at the time. Ayers writes, "The Rebels wanted horses more than anything else, but 'sore was the disappointment of [Confederate General] Jenkins at the general exodus of horses from this place. It limited his booty immensely. Fully five hundred [horses] had been taken from Chambersburg and vicinity to the mountains'" (Ayers, 2003, p. 404). One of the local farmers, Amos Stouffer, who lived east of Chambersburg, writes in his diary for June 23, 1863, "The rebs are coming again. J. Landis got me to take his horses down the valley this morning" (Stouffer, 1863). In the next generation after Karl Oberholser, Sue Zook Felix, a great-great-granddaughter of Christian Oberholser, Jr., writes about the invasion, "Daddy remembers Grandma (Velva Oberholser Zook) talking about a calf not being taken during the Civil War" (Felix, 2008). This memory specifically corroborates the letter from Christian, Jr. and Frances Oberholser that the Confederate soldiers did not destroy everything as the Pennsylvanians had feared would happen. General Robert E. Lee had issued General Orders Number 72 "to avoid injuring or destroying private property" and "to appropriate "horses, cattle, and other goods the army needed to survive while in enemy territory"

(Miller, 2007), but that people “shall be paid the market price for the articles furnished” following “such requisitions” (Hoke, 1959, p. 121). The order for “no private property shall be injured or destroyed” was waived if “any Northerner hid property ‘necessary for the use of the army’” because then “the officers could take all property” (Ayers, 2003, p. 401).

The Southerners took much from the Franklin County citizens and also from the surrounding counties. One report was that they took from the other areas “nearly a thousand head of livestock” and when they came to Jacob Stouffer’s mill near Chambersburg, Stouffer writes that they “took, or stole, all the corn the others had left me, ... emptying flour, feed, and chop from the bags and taking the bags along—carrying the oats and corn off on their horses” (Ayers, 2003, p. 411). Amos Stouffer enters in his diary for June 26, 1863, “The rebels are in Newburg. Took about 100 head of cattle.... Lee’s army is in our valley—about 90,000 men” (Stouffer, 1863).

Coming to the letter itself, the four pages are reproduced here in order to observe the handwriting of the author and the deteriorated condition in which I found the letter among the Henry L. Heisey papers. Pruett and Black, in their study of Civil War letters (1985), call four pages “lengthy” (p.vi). There are portions missing due to a large section torn away in the upper left and the lower left. Further, a large portion of the letter is invisible because of a blotch of ink covering it on the lower half. However, the section of the first page does show the date of the year (1863) but not the month or day and the section of the last page shows the signatures. The size of the original letter is 9 ½ inches high and 8 ¼ inches wide where the page is whole. Note that the folds where the letter had been folded are visible, giving evidence that the letter had been sent through the mail. The postage rate in 1863 was 3 cents for a half ounce. A hundred years later in 1963 the rate was only 5 cents per ounce. (<http://www.akdart.com/postrate.html>). 1863 was also the year in which the postal rate was standardized by the government, regardless of distance. (<http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blmailustimeline.htm>).

A photocopy of the four pages of the Letter from the Oberholser family in Franklin County to the Heisey family in Lebanon County in 1863

Photocopy of the Letter

A.D. 1862
 Dear beloved
 Cousins I will now try and
 tell you a little
 how the war is in our neighbourhood but the
 evil is not all in our neighbourhood but still it
 is imposable for me to write what has happened all
 in our neighbourhood it is now four weeks that
 we have not heard much of any thing but of war
 and desolence in the its fifth picture the some they
 Southern Soldiers arrived where they they
 moved down to Greenville so that they had
 Camps just a mile or two from Greenville they did not
 destroy more than Greenville they did not
 those things that they had said they
 would do about a week ago but they did not get
 many that they had said they would
 have the Government to the Government
 they are in the future
 at Greenville
 they are still
 as they are
 they are
 Court house

and they also took their
they moved on towards E
not moved on fast it sp
houses what they found
what goes ahead with these
went across the river to La
hid hear they dit not find b at a colt of
sove they took of age a year they also took
^{grain} ~~fruit~~ cattle from farmers they took 4 bushel
of oats from us three head of Cattle in Carriage
house I can't not mention all but they dit not
forget to visit us some they forget but still some
dit harder than what they dit ^{grain} along the turn
pike town is a good deal of ~~fruit~~ destrud in
^{grain} fruit is not destrud they dit not destrud farmer
houses but few ~~grain~~ had ~~dit~~ there none
thoes ar all ~~dit~~ a ~~dit~~ some horses they
whert thro ~~dit~~ wanted ~~dit~~
houses they dit ~~dit~~ out ^{are} that
god shall watch ~~dit~~ we have observed
nothing good ~~dit~~ from our home
we can't ~~dit~~ we would
have to say
some what we
knows & all
this could
god help

I will now come to a close for this
 if you receive this letter please write
 us again write how yours are coming on
 we all sent our best love and respects
 to yours if I have written any thing
 that is not true it was unknown
 to me so no more at present
 but we remain your weak
 brother Christian Oberholser
 and sister Berding Oberholser
 Jacob & Keisy
 Barbara Keisy
 written from Barbara Oberholser

O what a fearful time was this ~~to~~ four weeks
 I had some times to think we perhaps fear
 him more he has might to kill the body
 then him he has might to cast our souls in
 hell. O Dear friend let us be in prayer
 for each other if it goes through weakness let
 us not be weary in well doing for every day
 takes us a step neder to our grave
 I let you know that we received your letter
 we were ^{glad} to here of yours and we ^{are} all
 at this present time and the friends as far
 we know. A little about the weather
 have much rain here our men have
 no hay get but still the weather dite
 through them back it was the worse of
 they have now commenced eating mecat
 I must say a few more words of war
 they say the boats are all across the potomac
 so they dont expect any more this time
 here was a ~~boat~~ ~~boat~~ ~~boat~~ we dont
 but ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~boats~~ ~~are~~

The Text of the Letter

The portions of the letter that are readable allow us to provide the following text that will use the original spelling, punctuation, and spacing. In some cases only individual letters are visible and in others the whole word is guessed with brackets. The large spaces are where the paper was torn off or where ink blotches cover the words.

nothing good from our home
 we could if we would
 have to say
 some what we
 knows all
 this could
 god help

Page Three:

O what a fearful time was thes four weeks
 I had some times to think we perhaps fer
 him more ho has might to kill the body
 then him he has might to cast our soals in
 hell O Dear friend let ous be in prayer
 for each outhar if it goes through weakness let
 ous not be wearry in welldoing for every day
 takes ous a step neder to our grave
 I let you know that we received your let[ter]
 we where glad to here of yours and we ar w[ell]
 at this preasent time and the friends as far
 we know A little about the weather s[till]
 have mush rain hear our men hav s[till]
 no hay yet but still the weather ditent
 through them back it was the uprore of
 thay hav now commenced coting weeat

I must say a few more words of war
 thay say the [soldiers] ar all across the potomic
 so thay dont many more this time
 how sor that we dont
 but now thay up an
 [six more lines with
 partial words at right side]

Page Four:

I will now come to a close for this
 if you receive this letter please wright
 ous again wright how yours ar coming on.
 we all sent our best love and respects
 to yours if I hav writen any thing
 that is not true it was unknown
 to me, so no more at preasent
 but we remain your meek
 brouther Christian Oberholser
 and sister Frany Oberholser
 Jacob E. Heisey
 Barbara Heisey
 wrighten from Barbara Oberholser

Analysis of the Letter's Content

The letter has four main sections. The first part, which is very brief, is the usual greeting found in a personal letter. The second section contains two pages of description of what the Southern soldiers did to their area and to their personal belongings. The third section consists of a reflection on what the invasion means to them, but it does move into a discussion of the weather, another usual element in personal letters, and then, interestingly, reverts back to giving more information about the war. The fourth section, which is page four, is the formulaic closing for the letter.

The greeting in section one is very brief, sounding as if the writer is in a hurry to write about the war. Filling in the missing words would probably result in something like, "Dear beloved brother and sister and Cousins. With your consent, I will now try with the help of God, to write a little about how the Southern soldiers came into our neighborhood, but their evil was not all in our neighborhood and it was still unfortunate for me to write all that happened in our neighborhood."

The second section describes the activities of the Southern soldiers. It is interesting to observe that the writer never refers to them as "rebels" as did her contemporary writing in her diary, cited above. Another local resident who kept a diary writes almost every day during the month of June 1863. Each time Stouffer refers to the Southern soldiers as "Rebs" (see Stouffer, 1863, for June 23 and 26). In fact, even the Mennonites living in the same area called the Confederates "rebels" (Burdge and Horst, p. 226). There is a clearly more objective tone in the Oberholser letter. The tone is not accusatory nor does it appear to take sides in the conflict by denigrating the South or blaming them. The letter definitely does not take a hard line against the Southern soldiers. One interpretation of this tone is that the writer seems to be almost dispassionate about the conflict as far as the soldiers personally are concerned. The letter proper begins by saying that it was now four weeks since the soldiers had come on June fifteenth with their disturbance, which means that the date at the top of the letter torn off must have been about July fifteenth or later.

The soldiers first came to Chambersburg but then moved towards Green Village. In fact, the letter states that the Southern soldiers "camped just a mile above Greenvillage," which would have placed them precisely near the Oberholser farm, which is located exactly one mile north of Green Village. The letter does not mention this in the sections that are readable but the military map of the Civil War (Davis, et al., 1983) shows the route taken by the Confederates would have been very close to the Oberholser farm on their way to the next town above Chambersburg, which was Shippensburg. The top section of page two of the letter is missing and the words approaching the tear suggest the possibility of their mentioning the soldiers coming close to their farm, as it says, "they also took things [when they camped near our farm before]" "they moved on towards Carlisle."

Though historical accounts do not mention the Confederates camping at the Oberholser farm, they do indicate that before going north of the city where the Oberholser lived, the Confederates camped east of Chambersburg and General Robert E. Lee "had also set up headquarters for himself in Shetter's woods" near Stoufferstown east of Chambersburg, from June 26 to June 30. The area was "overrun with rebels everywhere" (Burdge and Horst, 2004, p. 246). Hoke reports that on other occasions the Confederates camped at specific locations, such as "upon the farm of Rev. J. Loose," near Greencastle (p. 131) and that on June 23rd "part of Rodes' division advanced toward Chambersburg, encamping over night near Marion" (p. 135). As a result of the Oberholser letter, the record can now show that the Confederates also camped near the Christian Oberholser farm north of Greene Village.

To illustrate what the Confederate camp near the Oberholser farm might have looked like, reproduced here is a drawing taken from Harpers Weekly in 1861 that shows a Confederate camp in Virginia. As the Confederates had come from Virginia to Pennsylvania (Ayers, 2003, p. 271), these troops pictured here could have been the ones who camped near Green Village. The Confederate troops photograph is from www.sonofthesouth.net/.../Rebel_Flag.htm

The letter confirms that the soldiers did not destroy Chambersburg but they took what they needed and did not get everything. The letter mentions the court house in Chambersburg, but the part surrounding that reference is missing. Hoke reports two possibilities for mentioning the court house. One was when General Jenkins arrived on June 23rd, his staff “made a requisition of the citizens of Chambersburg for a large amount of provisions for his command which were to be brought to the court-house pavement within a stipulated time” (p. 132) and the other was when General Ewell on June 24th appointed Colonel Willis to be provost-marshal of the town who proceeded to make “his headquarters in the court-house and from its cupola a flag was displayed” (p. 137). The Oberholser letter may have been referencing one of these incidents.

The writer also says of the soldiers that “they scouted about [looking for hors]es but they did not find many.” As we have seen from other reports, the horses had been taken by the farmers up to the mountains for safe keeping. According to the letter, the soldiers did not find the Oberholser colt, which is likely the source for the Oberholser family story that the soldiers did not take “a calf.” But the letter does state that the soldiers took 400 bushels of oats from farmers and three head of cattle from the Oberholser and one carriage horse. The writer says s/he can’t mention all that happened but the soldiers did not forget “to visit us” but some they did forget. They apparently did more damage to some along the turnpike than to them. They destroyed some grain but not the Oberholser’s grain. The soldiers did not destroy the farmer’s houses but they went through their homes and the farmers had to get their horses for the soldiers, if they had not already been removed to the mountains. Apparently, the soldiers did not take anything “good” from the Oberholser home.

One of the areas the Oberholser letter does not mention is the treatment of the blacks in the Chambersburg area which “proved to be even worse than the white residents of Franklin had anticipated” (Ayers, 2003, p. 405). The census identified nearly 1800 residents as black, giving Franklin County the fifth highest number of blacks among Pennsylvania counties. (Ayers, p. 14). When the Confederates arrived, of the blacks, Hoke writes, “These poor creatures...sought concealment in the growing wheat fields...and many were caught after a desperate chase and being fired at” (quoted in Ayers, 2003, p. 405). Cormany also writes of the rebels hunting down the “colored people who were raised here,” driving them “by just like we would drive cattle” (quoted in Ayers, 2003, p. 405). Mercersburg, close by, was on the route of the Underground Railroad and Chambersburg had been the location where John Brown had unsuccessfully persuaded Frederick Douglass to join him in the Harpers Ferry attack (Ayers, p 15). One explanation for the Oberholser letter not mentioning the rounding up of the blacks is that it may have been more pronounced in the immediate vicinity of Chambersburg. The Oberholser farm was located several miles north of the town.

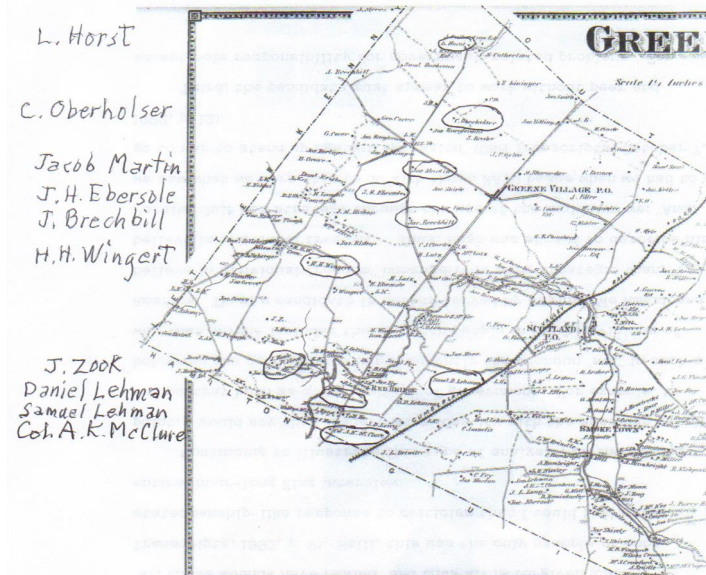
It is of interest to note that the letter does not describe what happened as in a first-hand, eye-witness account. The letter reports the results of what had occurred, not what they saw happening at the time it happened. There is no reporting of engaging the soldiers in conversation or in negotiation of what they should or should not take.

This report from the Oberholser family confirms the historical accounts that the Southern soldiers did not destroy everything in their path like the farmers had feared would happen. For example, one Confederate soldier, Jedediah Hotchkiss, wrote to his wife that the Yankees “confidently expected us to burn every thing and lay waste the country and they thought we would be justified in so doing” but instead “they found us doing all things decently & not disturbing them except to supply our army with everything it needed...” (Ayers, 2003, p. 400). At least some effort was made to follow General Lee’s orders in this regard in the summer of 1863. One of General Lee’s soldiers stationed at Chambersburg writes to his father on June 30, 1863, “I have heard of no case of outrage to person or property. Such is Genl Lees [sic] order” (Pollock, 1863). The local newspaper, *Valley Spirit*, however, reported great loss to the citizens of Franklin County. “And all those farmers who did not send away their stock had them taken, some of whom cannot well afford the loss. What the general loss in this county will be when booked up, we have yet no means of telling; but it is safe to say, that, leaving out of consideration the general damage to property and land, it will not fall under two hundred thousand dollars. So much for three weeks of rebel rule in Franklin County.” (*Valley Spirit*, July 8, 1863). Though this confirms considerable loss to the merchants and farmers, it also confirms that the destruction was limited. As Mohr (1982) concludes, “The Confederates were doing somewhat randomly in the spring of 1863 [in the Chambersburg area] what Sherman—and many others on both sides—decided to do more systematically as the war dragged on” (p.331).

The third section of the letter consists of a reflection on the events that had been described. The writer characterizes the four weeks of the invasion as having been “a fearful time” in their lives. It caused some people to want to leave. Rachel Cormany wrote in her diary that she felt “like getting out of this place” and did pack her trunk to start for Philadelphia. She didn’t actually go, but it highlights how people were feeling. It was so frightful for the Oberholseres that they began thinking, unlike the scriptural reference, that it might even be worse to fall into the hands of the Southern soldiers who could harm the body than to face God who could “cast our souls in hell.” This brought a request to be in prayer for each other for they needed strength to endure and keep well in their weariness. The writer reminds her younger brother that “every day takes us one step nearer to our grave.” These reflections of “O Dear friend, let ous be in prayer for each outhter” and we are “nearer to our grave” are remarkably similar to a letter written by a Mennonite bishop, Peter Eshleman, in the next county who wrote to a friend in Ohio during the war, “[God] will take care of us and keep us.... we should all be subject one to another and hold fast onto humility.” What Burdge and Horst (p. 232) conclude about Eshleman could also be said of the Oberholseres, “[Eshleman’s] call to go in through the narrow way of humility contrasted sharply with the posturing patriotism of most Americans.” There is no mention in the visible portions of the letter of going to meeting during these four weeks which, if they had, would have been in their homes since the invasion happened 18 years before the original Air Hill meetinghouse was built in the summer and fall of 1881. (<http://www.bicweb.org/alleggheny/airhill/>). There is evidence that the local residents were afraid to go out during the occupation by the Southern soldiers. In fact, the letter does give a hint that they were not out and about at this time for they say that “we are well at this time and the friends as far as we know.” The letter, though making the events sound frightful, does not recount any particular incident such as happened to Michael Hege, a Mennonite farmer who lived south of Chambersburg. Michael Hege wrote of the time that three rebels came to his house demanding his money, taking away his wife and children at gunpoint and then threatening him with his life by pointing a gun directly at his head, saying, “You shall die

now,” if he didn’t produce more money. He said, “I pled to the Lord” and then they let him go (Quoted in Ayers, 2003, pp. 407-409). Quoting more at length from his twenty-four-stanza poem about the incident, Hege wrote, “He said, not joking, to me: ‘You shall die now!’ He aimed at me and put his hand on the trigger. Holding the gun to my side, everything was ready. Only one step. Only a hair between death and life. I turned my head, not wanting to see him fire. I closed my eyes and thought, ‘This is it.’ Then I pled to the Lord Sebath in my need, and as soon as I had prayed, he let me go.... It was an hour that cannot be described. I wrote this poem, not wanting to make for myself a name or an honor, only to tell what happened” (Burdge and Horst, p. 249).

Ayers concludes that “the farmers felt the brunt of the invasion” because “officers were scarce and the soldiers could do as they please[d]” out in the countryside (Ayers, 2003, p. 407). Other neighbors to the southeast of the Oberholzers, according to the 1868 atlas of Franklin County (Beers, 1868), such as John Lehman and John Long, endured devastation. We don’t know if Col. Alexander McClure (see photo below) was impacted but Rachel Cormany wrote in her diary “that the dismounted rebs are drawn up in line of battle out at McClures & expect a fight” (Mohr, p. 330). His residence was just several miles south of the Oberholzers. He was a very well-known politician and owner of the *Chambersburg Repository and Transcript*—a Republican newspaper. As seen on the Greene Township map below, their farms are located southwest of the hamlet Scotland and the Oberholser farm is located almost straight north of Greene Village. The scale on the map is one and a fourth inches to the mile.



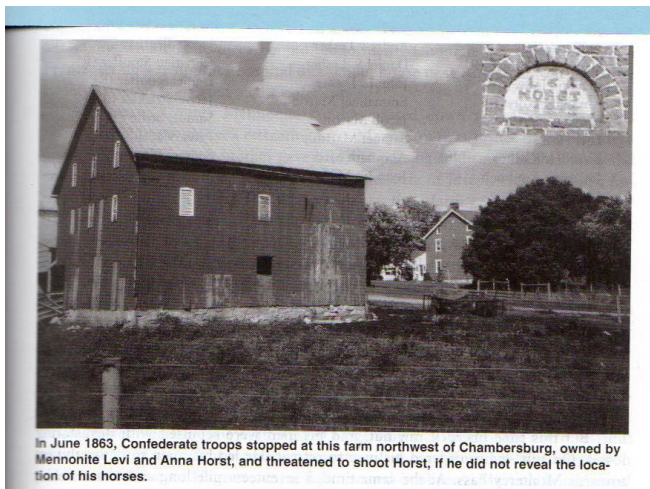
Alexander K. McClure

(Photo from Ayers, p. 13)

William Snider wrote of the occupation of his employer's farm that was located in this same area:

The took all our feed; the wheat in the garner they left destroyed all our grass so that we cant make no hay but left the hay in the barn be; they destroyed some of our grain by riding, driving, and walking through it, and they destroyed a great many rails; there was not a field on the farm that the fence was not throw[e]d down; they burnt several fences entirely so that we have one field that we can keep our cattle in; they took four head of young cattle but left all the cows; took two horses and four hogs and all our front gears and spre[a]dder single trees and many other things out of the barn but left all of our waggons and our neighbours suffer[e]d likewise" (quoted on p. 247 in Burdge & Horst, 2004).

Another neighbor of the Oberholsers was Levi Horst who lived up the road. The Confederates threatened to kill him if he did not reveal the location of his horses. Horst's daughter wrote that he told them he did not know where they were, which was true because his hired man had hid them, but the "rebels 'said if he did not tell, they would shoot him....'" Horst did not yield, so they left him and went away. (Burdge and Horst, 2004, p. 250). This photo of the Horst farm is from Burdge and Horst.



In June 1863, Confederate troops stopped at this farm northwest of Chambersburg, owned by Mennonite Levi and Anna Horst, and threatened to shoot Horst, if he did not reveal the location of his horses.

In the face of these losses, we do not know if the Oberholsers submitted claims for damage to their property, but according to one report, sixty-four Mennonites in this area "submitted damage claims for losses to Confederate raiders during those days" (Burdge and Horst, 2004, p. 250).

It was in the context of the above events that the Oberholser family endured these four weeks. In this reflective portion of the letter, the writer digresses to let her brother know that they received their letter—which possibly had inquired about how the Oberholsers fared the Southern invasion, which would have been widely circulated in Pennsylvania, and were glad to hear that all were doing well. A further digression reports the weather—always an important topic to farmers. The rain had been so much that the farmers had not been able to take in their hay, but some of the words that are legible suggest that maybe it was not all the weather's fault, as "the uproar" or the invasion may have contributed to the delay. Now they had begun cutting the wheat.

In this section, the writer suddenly remembered she had not said everything she knew. She says that she wants to say a few more words about the war. She apparently had heard that the Southern soldiers had now all crossed the Potomac River. The next few words are garbled, but it could be that she was saying she hopes that the soldiers will not any more come up their way.

The fourth part of the letter is the closing, which includes a request for a response to this letter to let them know how they are doing, and a sending of their “love and respects.” This much is formulaic in personal letter writing. What follows, however, is a curious statement of disclaimer: “If I have written anything that is not true, it was not known to me.” The writer’s conscience came to the fore in claiming there was nothing intentional in stating anything that might not be true. This would be consistent with the conscientious nature of the River Brethren Christians who disapproved of any form of lying or stating untruths. It was common practice among the River Brethren that if “they became aware of wrongs which they had committed, they assumed that those wrongs should be made right immediately.” Their concept of pietism included obedience to “their understanding of God’s leadings” (Wittlinger, 1978, p. 42). One minister preached a sermon deploring those Christians who “substitute prayer for confession and faith for honesty. Confession and restitution were first in order, without which no further progress could be made” (Baker, 1890, p. 259). Apologizing for any unintentional error of fact was an accepted form of confession.

One observation about what was not included in the reflection section or the closing section is in order. Nothing is stated about their son, Martin Oberholser (age 17 in fall of 1863, the same age as the Confederate soldier pictured above), or the Heisey son, Henry (age 18 in fall of 1863), both of whom would have been near the age of being drafted or enlisting in the army. Contemporaries of Martin and Henry, Reuben and Martin Reinhold from Lebanon County, did serve in the Union Army and are pictured below to show what these River Brethren young men would have looked like had they gone to war. River Brethren people, however, were in the group called the historic peace churches, like the Mennonites and Quakers. They were opposed to military involvement, so these sons would not have enlisted. Had they been drafted, they likely would have registered as conscientious objectors or paid the commutation fee of \$300 (equivalent to a workingman’s annual salary) (Heisey, 2004, p. 208) to avoid going to war, as some of the River Brethren in Pennsylvania and Ohio did (Wittlinger, 1978, p. 106).

Might the Oberholsters have commented on their gratitude for their sons not being involved in the military at this time? Rachel Cormany (1863), their contemporary who is quoted above, writes in her diary that she is very concerned about her husband and his safety during the invasion of her region. On June 20, she writes, “Got a letter from My Samuel. it is but short. He is still safe -- but were under marching orders again.” It was a common fear of the families at this time that they might lose their husbands or sons in the war. The Oberholsters make no comment about their son or his cousin in Lebanon County not being involved, even though the greeting in the letter mentions “cousins.” Perhaps their belief was so strong in not going to war, that even mentioning anything about it was not considered necessary or appropriate.

One other item is absent in the letter of the Oberholsters that seems interesting. There is no comment about the terrible battle of Gettysburg. This battle occurred during the first week in July, 1863, which would have been during the time of the four-week period after the invasion had begun in the middle of June. Why would there be no reference to Gettysburg which was the culmination of the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania? One may speculate that for ordinary farmers and devoutly religious pacifists, comments on the overall conduct of the war and voicing perceptions of its campaigns by either side were not of interest or in order by family members to one another. The will of God prevailing would be of paramount importance. The Gettysburg campaign did not have an immediate impact on their daily lives as had the coming of the Confederate soldiers into their rural community.

Though the letter is from a sister to her brother, it is signed with the full name of the husband, Christian Oberholser, Jr., and the wife, Frany Oberholser, followed by the full names of the recipients, Jacob E. Heisey (Frany's brother who was 11 years younger than she) and Barbara Heisey. If this listing of the full names of the senders and the recipients was the usual practice for letter writing in mid-nineteenth century, it is an interesting practice that for historical record keeping is commendable.

Reuben and Martin Reinhold: Photograph of these Union soldiers from Lebanon County is from <http://www.pacivilwar.com/cwpa162c.html>



We don't know whether the Oberholseres were comfortable writing in English, but apparently not, because the letter concludes with the words: "written from [by] Barbara Oberholser." Further evidence for concluding that the Oberholseres were not literate in English is what Karl Oberholser found in the court records. In the copy of the deed transferring the farm to their son, Martin, dated March 1869, at the two places for Christian Oberholser to sign his name, there is a note saying, "In German" and at the place for his wife to sign her name, a note says, "Her X mark." Karl Oberholser writes, "This confirms that they needed someone to write the letter for them" (Oberholser, 2009, Sept. 11). But the Oberholser wish for education to be provided to future generations may be seen in the restriction of the deed "that neither Martin nor any of his descendants could sell the land which they had donated for the construction of the school" (Oberholser, 2009, Sept. 11).

Barbara (1844-1910), the middle of their three children, who wrote the letter for them, would have been at the time of writing 18 years old, a year older than her brother, Martin, and in two years would marry Jacob S. Lehman of Green Village district and have eight children (Cassel, 2006, p. 3). We do know that Pennsylvania German was spoken in the homes of both of these families because each family had a son who later was called to the ministry and elected a bishop in the Brethren in Christ Church and who lived during the era when they both preached to their congregations in German (Zook, 1985 for Martin Oberholser; Heisey, 2007 for Henry L. Heisey). Since no photographs could be found of either the writers or the recipients of the letter, I provide photographs that are available of their children—in the case of the Oberholseres, their son, Martin, in old age and in the case of the Heiseys, their daughter, Annie, at the age of marriage.

Photograph of Bishop Martin H. Oberholser, Christian Oberholser, Jr.'s son, at about age 80.



Martin H. Oberholser (1845-1938), son of Christian Oberholser, Jr., and Frances (Heisey) Oberholser. He was bishop of the North Franklin District of the Brethren in Christ Church from 1880-1923. This photo is a copy of the original which is in the possession of the owner, Avery Zook. (Used by permission of the owner.)



Photo of Jacob Book and Annie Heisey Book, Jacob E. Heisey's daughter, at age 17. Jacob Book (1840-1870) and Annie L. Heisey (1843-1920) at the time of their marriage in 1860. This photograph is copy of the original which is in the possession of John Ebersole. (Used by permission of the owner.)

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to make public and provide an analysis of a letter that is 146 years old that sheds some light on how the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania was viewed by the ordinary residents of Franklin County in the summer of 1863. Publishing such a letter from common farmers in the region perhaps will encourage readers to examine their own boxes of old papers in their attics or basements to discover artifacts of history. In my case, the letter was among some papers that were found in a box in my garage that I had obtained from my father (Rev. Henry P. Heisey), who had inherited it from his sister (Fannie P. Heisey) and their father (Rev. Jacob L. Heisey), the grandson of the recipients of the letter. In going through the contents of the box one day, I noticed an old ledger book containing scores of handwritten papers. My great-grandfather had saved his many school writing

exercises, including sentences from classical history and from the practicing of letters of the alphabet; and his extensive arithmetic exercises with many pages of both word problems and numerical problems. He had also saved a letter dated September 7, 1862, written by his aunt and uncle on his mother's side (John and Catherine Light) to inform his parents about a love feast to be held at their home on October 2 and 3, about a month hence, many years before they would have a meetinghouse built in their community. And he had saved one his own letters written to his cousin in which he reflected on his struggle with faith issues (Heisey, 2009). Finally, then, this letter written by his aunt and uncle on his mother's side that is the subject of this article. Even though the letter was badly torn and unfortunately soiled with what looks like blotches of ink possibly caused by water smearing the ink of the words, several generations of descendants kept it and thought it had value.

The letter provides us with insight into not only what personal letters looked like in physical form and how the penmanship appeared, but how ordinary people wrote letters. This letter discloses the content, revealing the formula used—a greeting, a hope that it finds them well, the substance of the message, the weather, a request for a response, and a closing goodbye. It appears to be consistent with other letters and diaries from the region and from that era found in the collection called *The Valley of the Shadow*. The most important finding, however, is that the writer confirms in detail the fact that the Confederate Army in coming into Franklin County, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1863, did follow General Lee's order not to destroy everything in its path and to take only what the soldiers needed for their supplies. Though items taken and destroyed are mentioned, the emphasis in the letter seems to be on the side of assuring the reader that the soldiers were not as bad as they had been expected to be—they did not destroy Chambersburg, they did not find a colt, they did not destroy the farmers' houses, they did not take all the grain, they did not take anything "good" from their house, they did not "visit" "ous" as "hard" as some others, and they did forget some places. In General Lee's advance into southern Pennsylvania, he had sent Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell to get supplies at Chambersburg. He had twenty thousand men in his 2nd Corps (Mohr, 1982, p. 332), so he would need plenty of supplies. In fact, Burdge and Horst claim that one of "Lee's major purposes in launching the invasion was to re-provision his army" (p. 244).

Photograph of General Richard S. Ewell from the National Archives and retrieved from <http://military.history.about.com/military-history>

The situation of the Confederate soldiers in Pennsylvania was in stark contrast to that of the Confederates in Mississippi. Henry A. Kircher, a Union soldier writing to his mother from his camp in Walnut Hills, Mississippi, on June 17, 1863—the very time of the Franklin County invasion, wrote that the Confederate soldiers there were in great distress for food. He wrote, "[Confederate] Deserters keep coming still. Last night 4 came and said they have only bread made from rice flour, the pea bread is all gone." He continued, "In Vicksburg there must really be little food, for this evening I already heard many soldiers speculating about rats that ran over their faces, etc." (Hess, 1983, p. 109). General Ewell's army saw to it that there was no shortage of food, thanks to the plentiful supplies taken from the prosperous Franklin County farmers. On the other hand, the Oberholser letter does support the conclusion that the Southern soldiers did not follow the order from General Lee that the farmers were to be compensated for what was taken. The Oberholser did not report any compensation being received for what they lost. Given the soft tone of the letter, one must conclude that if the

soldiers had given compensation, the writer certainly would have mentioned it. The local newspaper does report that when Confederate General Richard S. Ewell came to Chambersburg issuing an order of requisitions on June 24, 1863, he itemized the goods and materials that were to be collected and brought to the soldiers. If the shops did not open their doors and make their materials available, the goods would be confiscated by force. They were to be given Confederate money for the goods brought in, but it was worthless. The local newspaper, *Valley Spirit* (1863), reports on July 8, 1863, that in Chambersburg:

There was not a store of any prominence that did not suffer heavily. Those who did not open at the first demand were compelled to see their doors broken in. The officer who seemed to have particular charge of this delightful piece of work was a Major Tod[illegible] a brother of Mrs. Lincoln. The doughty Major come [sic] very near getting his skull split, however, by one of our brave and patriotic young ladies. She had taken her position in the cellar of her father's private house, which they insisted on searching, and as they came to the cellar stairs, she stood there with an axe in her hands, and calmly informed the major if he came one step further she would knock his brains out. Thinking discretion the better part of valor the major withdrew.

Apart from the destruction that did take place and the loss of cattle and grain taken, one of the consequences of the invasion that was highlighted in the letter was the terror and fear that the Southern soldiers had inflicted on the people. The writer says that those four weeks were a “fearful time” for them, not knowing what would happen. The implication is that they feared for their very lives. Though the soldiers went through their homes, taking what they needed, they did not injure anyone or take what might have been called “valuables.” As noted earlier, the writer appears to be somewhat dispassionate in her emotions directed against the soldiers, but does note the state of fear that was created. The impact of this fear caused them to call upon their religious faith and to ask for each other’s prayers that they would be sustained through it all. The Oberholers were a devoutly religious family, as Christian Oberholser, Jr. was a minister and bishop in the River Brethren Church (Zook, 1985, p. 205; Cassel, p. 3). His wife, Frances, or Frany, as she was called and as the signature in the letter indicates, was from the family of a deacon in the River Brethren Church in Lebanon County (Heisey, 2007, p. 429).

Further evidence of the religious nature of the Oberholser family is that their son, Martin H. Oberholser (1845-1938), who was converted and joined the church at the early age of 14, elected deacon at age 24 and minister at age 30 (*The Evangelical Visitor*, 1938, Obituary, p. 8), became a very well-known leader in the Brethren in Christ Church during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He served as bishop for forty-three years and was elected nine times as assistant moderator and eleven times as moderator of the church’s General Conference (Zook, 1985, p. 211), the highest office to which a church leader could be elected. Like his father, Christian, who was not a writer and thus had his daughter, Barbara, write this letter for him and his wife, Martin Oberholser, also did not write much. This is corroborated by his great-grandson, Avery Zook, who concludes in his biographical account that Martin Oberholser, though a prominent church leader, “did very little [writing]” (Zook, 1985, p. 114). This is in contrast to one of his older contemporary church associates, Dr. W. O. Baker from Ohio, who published scores of sermons and articles in the *Evangelical Visitor* and a book on church doctrine (see Heisey, 2004).

One piece of writing by Bishop Oberholser does survive that was published in the *Evangelical Visitor*. He published a three-column testimonial of his faith, describing two different occasions in which he was ill, once with typhoid fever and once with “a severe pain,” but both times, he wrote, “the Lord raised me up.” In this testimony he also told of

the time he was elected bishop at age 34. When 125 members of his congregation migrated to Kansas in 1890, including their bishop, Samuel Zook, Martin was elected bishop to replace Zook (Oberholser, M. H., 1921, 1-2).

A final observation is that the fact that they were devout River Brethren may have contributed to their perception of the invasion as being less horrible and despicable than others perceived it. We have already commented on the tone of the letter and on their emphasis of what the Southern soldiers had not done and that they were called “Southern soldiers,” not “Rebels.” Also, the words chosen to describe the invasion are of interest because they appear to be more historically descriptive in nature than words filled with personal anger. They used words like “evil,” “disturbance,” “uproar,” and “war.” This is in stark contrast to the passionate language used by the Oberholser neighbor in town, Rachel Cormany, whose diary entries, quoted above, mention that she also was a Christian and that she called on God to preserve her life. She was, in fact, “steeped in the traditions of evangelical Protestantism,” had “spiritually intense” “religious roots,” was brought up among the Mennonites and was a college graduate (Mohr, 1982, p. xiii). Nevertheless, in spite of her deeply religious and educated class, Rachel allows more of her intense feelings against the soldiers to come out in her diaries as she paints a different picture. She writes: “O! How it grated on our hearts to have to sit quietly and look at such brutal deeds” (June 16); when the “rebels” came into town, the Union soldiers were “too badly frightened to speak” (June 23); the “Rebs are plundering the stores” (June 24); the “Rebs” talking as they went by our house “made my blood boil” (June 25); “I did wish I dared spit at their old flag” as the “Rebs” went by, and “While I am writing thousands are passing—such a rough dirty ragged rowdyish set one doesn’t often see” (June 27) (Cormany, 1863).

The Oberholser letter does not have in it any such language. Nor is there any hint in the letter that the Oberholsers had any such feelings as the woman in the newspaper story who was ready to split the skull open of the Confederate soldier at the top of the stairs. Instead, the final section of page two almost suggests a different response, though consistent with their River Brethren pietistic faith. If we filled in the missing words like the following in brackets, the letter might read, “god hath [known] which [things] we hav observed...we couldnt [blame them for what they did] if we would [know everything, we would] have to say [we can’t be angry but] some what we [feel sorry for them, for God] knows all [things and if possible] this could [help them to see their ways] god help [them].” The Oberholser letter thus offers another, more objective and perhaps compassionate perspective on how some of the local residents of the pietistic faith in Franklin County viewed the Confederate invasion.

The four pages of the Oberholser letter could be represented by the following four sentences taken directly from the wording of the letter: page one—“the invader [is] in our neighborhood,” page two—some thay viset harder then what thay dit ous,” page three—let ous be in prayer for each outhar,” and page four—if I hav written any thing that is not true it was unknown to me.” The letter is remarkable for its soft and nonjudgmental tone, its concern for the condition of others, its prayerful spirit, and its honest attitude. In this sense, it can be said of the Oberholser letter what was written of other Civil War letters by a Union soldier, Henry A. Kircher. Hess, the editor of the letters, wrote: “the personal spirit evident in the letters is impressive” (Hess, 1983, p. ix).

Why did the Oberholsers write this letter? My reading of the letter brings to mind three reasons. First, they were responding to their younger brother’s letter to them inquiring how they were getting along in the face of what had happened in their community. The letter on page three says, “We received your letter and are well at this present time.” The news of the invasion had no doubt prompted her brother to write asking how it had

impacted them personally. Second, they had experienced something momentous in their lives that they needed to share with someone important—their family. Jacob Heisey was the only other of her six siblings that Frances had who was yet living, other than Martin Heisey who was nine years older and who had moved to Ohio. Third, they wanted to acknowledge that God had preserved them from any serious harm or damage. The key words are that the Southern soldiers “had visited some others harder than what they did us.” They were thankful.

Why was the letter preserved? Because the eighteen-year-old son of the recipients was interested in preserving a document that highlighted a piece of important history. Perhaps he was intrigued by the writers’ spiritual character disclosed in the way they had responded to the Civil War calamity in their time and place. His aunt and uncle’s empathy for others—both their less fortunate neighbors and the unfortunate Confederates—signaled the words that President Lincoln would speak a few weeks later in November at Gettysburg when he identified and called “for us the living, rather, to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us.”

In summary, four conclusions emerge from the Oberholser letter. First, the letter confirms the story in a personal way of the historical accounts that the Southern soldiers did not destroy everything in their invasion as the Pennsylvanians had feared. Second, the letter discloses the location of the Confederate camp as the soldiers made their way from Chambersburg to Shippensburg as being in close proximity to the Oberholser farm near Green Village, something not recounted before in the history of this part of the campaign. Third, the letter reveals that the invasion had a serious spiritual/psychological impact on the common residents as much as a physical and financial one in the great fear that it brought to the people as to what was going to happen. Fourth, in spite of this, the letter uncovers a non-belligerent, if not an almost sympathetic attitude toward the Southern soldiers themselves, quite untypical of the letters and diaries of the Oberholser peers. John Updike (2009), another Pennsylvanian, and the two-time Pulitzer Prize winning Christian author, has been described as “showing ordinary life as being worth writing about.” (www.achievement). The Confederate invasion was no ordinary life, so even more so, the Oberholser believed it was worth writing about. To quote from words directly by John Updike, when commenting on his own writing, the words written by the Oberholser in their letter are “attempts to bottle some small portion of the truth” (Updike, 2009) as to what happened in this important Confederate invasion into Franklin County, Pennsylvania, during the Civil War.

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