Johannes Keim

by CHRISTOPHER A. SPANG

In 1698, when he bought 300 acres of virgin land at the head waters of the Manatawny Creek in the Oley Valley, Johannes Keim began a family dynasty that contributed six generations of outstanding and gifted individuals important to the history of Berks County.

This is a far cry from his "financially ruined" status at his ancestral home in the war-ravaged Palatinate city of Speier, just across the Rhine river from France. Mr. Keim first arrived in America in 1698 at Philadelphia, the first port of entry for any immigrant to Pennsylvania.

After he purchased the land near Lobachsville, he returned to Europe where he remained for nine years after he married Katharine in 1706. It was by Katharine, his first wife, that Johannes started the first seven of "a total of 16 branchlets, taking root in the rich soil of Oley to perpetuate and spread this ancestral banyon."[1]

Contemporaries of Keim who immigrated to the Oley area were the Deturcks, Highs, Yoders, Stapletons, Hills, Fochts, Yeagers (Hunters), Griesemers, Guldins, LeVans, and Weisers.[2] Descendants of Johannes Keim intermarried with some of these prominent families and with those families which arrived later, such as the deBennevilles and Hiesters. The intermarriages occurred because these families belonged to a "democratic elite" or ruling class which developed in this country immediately after the first waves of immigrants from Europe. Families that knew each other in Europe naturally continued to have close contacts in America.

Brief statements about the progenitor's family in Europe will serve to illustrate this point. Johannes' great-grandfather was Ludwig Hericourt Keim. Ludwig's mother was a Hericourt, a member of that famous French Huguenot family of nobility.

Other relatives of Johannes were the Deturcks and Bertolets, who were also French Huguenots of the Rhine Valley. So, despite their original German last name, the Keims were of French Huguenot religious background and continued to have close dealings and marriages with these families in America.[3]

In addition to the fact that they intermarried with other prominent families, the Keims achieved their special place in early Berks society through their careers and business ventures, land holdings, religion, politics, social works, and especially in the military. The "democratic elite" quickly took the lead in all areas of public and private life.

Johannes had sixteen children by two wives, but only nine survived childhood and only two of these are important for our purposes.[4] Jacob Keim, (1724-1799), the youngest son of the first wife, inherited the original 300 acres which continued to be passed down to his heirs up to this century. He married Magdelena Hoch (High), a member of the famous High family about which more will be mentioned later.[5] Nicholas, (1719-1803), the fourth child and third son of Johannes' first wife, married Barbara, daughter of John Schneider, and moved to Reading in 1755.[6] He was a wheelwright by trade until he purchased, in 1769, the "Old White Store," formerly owned by Conrad Weiser of Indian treaty fame. The store was used by Weiser as a trading post but Nicholas turned it into a hardware store.[7]

Nicholas' only son John (1763-1831)[8] obtained the "Old White Store" from his father in 1785. He changed the name to "John Keim and Sons." It was among the first three-story buildings in Reading and the wealthiest hardware store in Berks County.[9]

The "Sons" in the name of the store referred to Daniel and George, the two oldest sons by Susanna, daughter of Dr. George deBenneville who was the progenitor of the deBenneville family in America.[10] George deB. Keim's other business interests included the Reading Furnace and other furnaces; a foodstuff exportation company in Philadelphia; wire manufacturing; livestock improvement; bridge building; managing the Perkiomen, Reading, and Sunbury turnpikes; establishing the "Reading Academy" and the "Reading Female Seminary;" president of the Branch Bank of Pennsylvania for 30 years; promoter and first president of the Reading Water Company;[11] and involvement in the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company.[12]

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George's younger brother, Benneville, also had extensive dealings in the business world of the early national period of American life. He had a hardware store at 5th and Washington Streets in Reading, in 1830.[13] He became president of the Farmer's Bank and succeeded his brother as president of the Reading Water Company. He was a member of Keim, Whitaker & Co., which was the first extensive iron works in Reading by 1836, and became a member of the Board of Trustees of the Charles Evans Cemetery until his death.[14] Benneville, with his brother George and others, invested $100,000, a very large sum in those days, in the establishment of the Reading Iron and Nail Works.[15]

George and Benneville both had siblings that succeeded in business. George's wife, Mary, daughter of James May, Esq., Burgess of Reading, had five children who survived childhood.

The two daughters married into the Orrich and Mays families. The three sons, from oldest to youngest, were John (1799-1844), George (1805-1861) and Daniel (1806-?).[16] Benneville's wife, Mary, daughter of General William High, had five children who survived long enough to marry. Three of their children married Randolphs of Virginia, probably through their father's contacts in the military. William High Keim (1813 - 1862), the eldest, married Lucy, and John High Keim (1817-?), the second oldest son, married Martha, both of them daughters of Col. Thomas Randolph.[17]

John M. Keim was Secretary for the Berks County Savings Association and had a hardware store called John M. Keim & Co., at 5th and Penn Streets, Reading.[18] John's brother, General George M. Keim, was introduced into the banking business as a cashier in the Farmer's Bank of Reading by his Uncle Benneville who was its president.[19]

Shortly before that, he was admitted to the bar of Pennsylvania to practice law. He was commissioner and manager of the Mill Creek and Mine Hill Navigation and Railroad Co. He again took advantage of his uncle Benneville's business interest, and became a partner in the Keim, Whitaker Iron Company.[20] Moreover, he was a benefactor of the Berks County Savings Association.[21] Lastly, he and his brother, Daniel M., were members of

the iron firm of Jones, Keim and Co., which used the Windsor Furnace at the base of Blue Mountain.

This company was famous for reproducing works of art, such as Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," in cast iron.[22] Benneville's son, William H.'s, contribution to the family in the business realm was the establishment of the "Pennsylvania Military Institute of Reading" in 1852,[23] and he ran a hardware business with brother John H. and his father[24], and was Treasurer and Charter Member, with brother John, of the Neversink Fire Co. in 1829.[25]

In the sixth generation of Keim businessmen were two sons of George M. Keim and Julia, daughter of the Hon. Christopher Mayer, who was a state representative;[26] and a son of John H. Keim and Martha Randolph. George Keim, Esq., son of George May Keim, was commissioner of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad.[27] He married Elizabeth Trezenent, daughter of a Virginia State Supreme Court Justice. Henry Mayer, Esq., (1842-1899), the other son of George M. Keim, was the president of the Valley Railroad of Ohio.[28] Last on this long list of Keims was DeBenneville R., (1841-1914), son of John H. He has the distinction of being the first author and newspaperman in the family.[29]

The Keims, as was shown, did not reach their peak in the business world until George deBenneville Keim succeeded in the third generation. He also marked the end of their prospecting in land.

After Johannes bought his 300 acres in the Oley valley in 1698, and son Jacob added 30 more, no farmland was added to the original Keim estate. George deB. Keim's farms were located in Exeter and near Limerick.[30] Most of the Keims who descended from Nicholas were urban dwellers.

City life changed the religion of the Keims. French Huguenot was their original religious background in Europe, but when Johannes moved to Berks County, he became a follower of Pastorius, the Quaker.[31] The switch was made because of the strong influence of the Boones and other families who were Friends in the area. Nicholas and son John had no major accomplishments in the religious community of Reading. It was not until George deB. that the Keims were active in forming a new church. He supported the construction and administration of Christ Episcopal Church in 1822.[32] He and his son George M. were also active in the Universalist Church, incorporated on May 29, 1832. (Of course they'd be active, as the Universalist doctrine was founded by Dr. George DeBenneville.) The church is located on Franklin Street above 4th Street.

Also involved with the Universalist Church were brothers John May Keim and Daniel May Keim.[33] An Episcopalian was well-understood to be among the upper crust of society and Universalism was an infant denomination of Protestantism, which grew up in this country starting in the late 1700's. Universalists believe that all people will be saved because God's goodness will conquer over evil.

The last of the Keims involved with Berks religion was George May Keim's son, George deB. He was an elected officer of the Bible Society of Berks County, organized in 1819. The Bible Society was an outgrowth of the beginning of the Second Great Awakening, which might have been the reason behind Gen. George M. Keim's presence on a committee to prohibit mail deliveries on Sundays in 1830.[34]

All of the Keims felt obligated to take the lead in the religion in the community; this was part of a larger responsibility called *noblesse oblige,* or noble obligation. The members of the democratic elite were expected to do their part in leading the community down the right paths and they were accepted by the rest of the community in taking the lead.

The social work of the Keims started when John Keim, grandson of the founder, became a commissioner of a lottery in May of 1796 to raise money for a bridge to cross the Schuylkill River at the foot of Penn Street. The lottery successfully raised $60,000 and the bridge was planned.[35]

John's eldest son, Daniel deB., was among the seventy who signed the constitution of The Society of the English Library of Reading.[36] Daniel's nephew, John May Keim, was Treasurer of the Benevolent Society from 1835-1844.[37] George M., brother of John, was the first president of The Berks County Agricultural Society, founded by him, his nephew William H., and others.[38] William H. was also secretary on a committee to improve Penn Square for Reading's Centennial in 1848.[39] He directed a pageant, celebrating the building of the Odd Fellows Hall by the Masons of the Grand Lodge. He belonged to the Masons, as well as the Reading Cabinet, a literary society of the time.

In the early 1800's, societies of this sort took the place of formal education for adults. John H.'s cousin, George deB., was Vice-President of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.[40] George's brother, Henry May Keim, was a promoter of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of Reading in 1898, and assisted in the establishment of the Reading Free Library. He also was a member of the Historical Society of Berks County. His cousin, DeBenneville R. Keim was a life member of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, a member of the Society of the War of 1812, and a member of the Pennsylvania German Society.[41]

Through these societies, clubs, and committees, the Keims fulfilled their *noblesse oblige* to the public. When one looks at the officers of these organizations, the same last name comes up repeatedly. In no other period of American life were there so many societies for the public good.

The community accepted these families as their benefactor. One good example of this is in politics. The Keims' political activities probably started with John Keim's term as a County Commissioner from 1787 to 1790. He also was Burgess of Reading before it was incorporated as a city.[42] George deB., like his father, was also a burgess of Reading. Moreover, he was Auditor of Reading from 1801 to 1802 and, again, in 1809.[43]

Benneville had the honor of being appointed, in 1812, to acquire a petition for a memorial to the Congress of the United States against the Embargo of 1807 against exports to Great Britain. This embargo badly affected the economy of Berks County.

The sons of George deB. and Benneville had their share of elective offices. George M. was Burgess of Reading for one year and attended the State Constitutional Convention at Harrisburg for the Amendment to the Constitution in 1837.

Moreover, he was elected to fill the unexpired term of Henry A. Muhlenberg, Sr. as a U.S. representative from 1838 to 1843. He was appointed and re-appointed to be the U.S. Marshal for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania by Presidents Tyler and Polk.[44] Like George M., William H. filled an unexpired term of a U.S. Congressman in 1858. Finally, he was elected Mayor of Reading in 1848, and State Surveyor General in 1860.[45]

In the sixth generation, Henry M. was Democratic Chairman of Berks County in the presidential election of 1876 and was appointed by President Cleveland as the U.S. Counsel at Charlottestown, Prince Edward Island in 1886. The counsel position was probably a reward for his service to the party ten years before.[46] DeBenneville R. was commissioned in 1870 to inspect all consulates of America.[47]

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Henry and DeBenneville finish a long list of Keims who gained the public's confidence and their votes. However, they excelled even more in the military service. John Keim served as a private in the American Revolution.[48]

Daniel deB. started the Keims' real interest in military matters when he organized the Reading Union Volunteers, later called the Reading Artillerists, to put down the Whiskey Insurrection of 1794. The insurrection started when dealers of distilled whiskey refused to pay the tax on their product that was instituted in 1791. He again was commander, with the rank of Captain, of the Reading Washington Guards, which fought in the War of 1812, near Philadelphia, and also was the personal bodyguard of President Washington when he was at Carlisle.[49]

Taking advantage of Daniel's inroads were brothers George deB., George M., and William H. Each one succeeded the other as Major General of the Sixth Division of the Pennsylvania Militia, after George deB. took over the position from his brother-in-law, the Hon. Samuel J. Franks.[50]

William High Keim, who was named after his mother's father, who was also a general, fought in the Mexican War of 1848[51] and started to prepare for the Civil War in 1861 before his untimely death.[52] Other Keims who reached the rank of Captain were Daniel M. of the Washington Greys, succeeding cousin William[53] and DeBenneville, who served in Harrisburg during the Civil War.[54] Cousin Henry M. also served in the Civil War as a Lieutenant in Co. A of the 53rd Pennsylvania Militia.

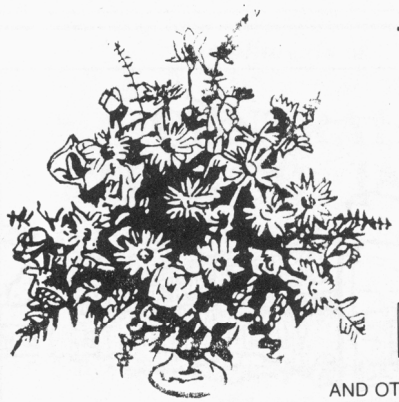
In summary, it has been shown that the Keim family members were leaders in the business, religious, and military aspects of Berks life before the end of the Civil War. They fulfilled their obligations to the public through their social work and the community responded by supporting them at the ballot box.

A question that cannot be ignored is why these ruling families, including the Keims, faded out of the public gaze after the Civil War. A major part of the answer is that the country as a whole changed into a business-oriented society with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Bossism was the major political philosophy of the cities. The major emphasis of this type of politics is to turn out the vote, not public service. The democratic elite would have nothing to do with this kind of politics.

Second, the federal government got increasingly involved in public service after 1865, which filled the services provided by the benevolent societies. Last, the military service was not as voluntary after the Civil War and officership demanded all of one's energies. As a result of these three changes, the Keims and others decided to devote their time mainly for personal economic gain. The rule of the democratic elite was waning.

FOOTNOTES

1. P. C. Croll, ***Annals of the Oley Valley in Berks County, Pa.*** (Reading, Pa.: Reading Eagle Press, 1926) p. 71.
2. DeB. R. Keim (ed.), ***The Keim and Allied Families in America and Europe*** (Harrisburg, Pa.: Harrisburg Publishing Co., 1899), p. 60.
3. Croll, ***op. cit.,*** p. 69.
4. Keim, ***op. cit.,*** p. 93.
5. John E. Eshelman, "The Keim Family of Lobachsville," ***Historical Review of Berks County*** (October 1955), p. 63.
6. Keim, ***op. cit.,*** p. 3.
7. Morton L. Montgomery, ***History of Berks County in Pennsylvania*** (Philadelphia: Everts, Peck, and Richards, 1886), p. 356.
8. Keim, ***op. cit.,*** p. 48.
9. Montgomery, ***op cit.,*** p. 681.
10. ***Ibid.,*** p. 680.
11. ***Ibid.,*** p. 356.
12. ***Ibid.,*** p. 456.
13. ***Ibid.,*** p. 675.
14. ***Ibid.,*** p. 682.
15. ***Ibid.,*** p. 693.
16. Keim, ***op. cit.,*** p. 84.
17. Croll, ***op. cit.,*** p. 74.
18. Montgomery, ***op. cit.,*** p. 625.
19. ***Ibid.,*** p. 505.
20. ***Ibid.,*** p. 508.
21. Eshelman, ***op. cit.,*** p. 540.
22. Montgomery, ***op. cit.,*** p. 1059.
23. ***Ibid.,*** p. 500.
24. ***Ibid.,*** p. 205.
25. ***Ibid.,*** p. 516.
26. ***Ibid.,*** p. 510.
27. ***Ibid.,*** p. 449.
28. Keim, ***op. cit.,*** p. 73.
29. ***Ibid.,*** p. 74.
30. Montgomery, ***op. cit.,*** pp. 356-57.
31. ***Ibid.,*** p. 664.
32. ***Ibid.,*** p. 519.
33. ***Ibid.,*** p. 780.
34. ***Ibid.,*** p. 372.
35. ***Ibid.,*** p. 433.
36. ***Ibid.,*** p. 819.
37. ***Ibid.,*** p. 823.
38. ***Ibid.,*** p. 86.
39. ***Ibid.,*** p. 747.
40. ***Ibid.,*** p. 456.
41. Croll, ***op. cit.,*** p. 74.
42. Montgomery, ***op. cit.,*** p. 681.
43. ***Ibid.,*** p. 356.
44. ***Ibid.,*** p. 509.
45. ***Ibid.,*** p. 490.
46. Croll, ***op. cit.,*** p. 73.
47. ***Ibid.,*** p. 74.
48. Montgomery, ***op. cit.,*** p. 150.
49. ***Ibid.,*** p. 355.
50. ***Ibid.,*** p. 356.
51. ***Ibid.,*** p. 184.
52. ***Ibid.,*** p. 197.
53. ***Ibid.,*** p. 205.
54. Croll, ***op. cit.,*** p. 74.



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