The Planting of the Evangelical Association in Western Pennsylvania, 1800-1833

by William C. Beal, Jr.

The planting of the Evangelical Association in Western Pennsylvania occurred primarily in the first, second and fourth decades of the nineteenth century. The first wave, directed by Jacob Albright and John Walter, simply organized one class and established regular preaching appointments. The second wave applied the systematic supervision of a circuit ministry to the area under the labors of John Klinefelter, David Yerlitz, John Dreisbach and Adam Hennig. The third wave, which opened the northwest region of the state, was accomplished by John Seybert. I am including biographical information about all of these men, except Yerlitz, later in this paper.

Jacob Albright organized the first three classes of what became the Evangelical Association in 1800 in eastern Pennsylvania. Under his direct supervision the first Evangelical work was planted in western Pennsylvania sometime prior to 1804.

Albright and his associates traversed the narrow valley called "Little Cove" through the Blue Mountains, seeking the German settlements of Bedford County. Ammon Stapleton describes this first planting:

> In Morrisen Cove . . . was a large settlement of Germans from the eastern part of the state. In this region Albright and his associates gained entrance prior to 1804. The appointments were near the present town of New Enterprise at the homes of George and Jacob Stull, Henry Schnebly, George Kring, J. Lyons and Philip Muhleisen (now Milliron). South of this on Wills Creek, near Hyndman, they preached at the house of John Wilhelm. . . .
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> About 1806 George Kring and Jacob Stull moved westward across the mountains into Cambria County. Kring located at Elton, about ten miles east of Johnstown and Stull located about three miles away. They were visited this same year by the Evangelical preachers. . . . In 1807 John Walter took up an appointment at the house of Nicholas Varner, on the Frankstown Road, four miles east of Johnstown. In 1807 Albright spent some time in this region preaching at Krings, Stulls and Varners. During this tour he also visited Peter Levergood, the founder of Johnstown.[2]

During this first formative period of planting these appointments were placed under the supervision of the preachers assigned to the New (Northumberland) Circuit in 1806, the time when the first class was organized. However, George Miller, appointed to this circuit in 1806, left the work unsupplied. It was probably not indifference but distance and the circuit preacher's decision to use his time to preach rather than to travel that made him turn in other directions once he reached the west end of the Northumberland Circuit at the home of John Steffy, a popular stopping place for frontier preachers. Christian Newcomer, the United Brethren Asbury, and other evangelists preached here as early as 1800. From this appointment it was 100 miles or more to the western Pennsylvania appointments and this one class.

As noted, John Walter assisted Albright in this area. One of the most concise descriptions of his influence among early Evangelicals is the following from the *News* of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, and written in 1930 when his remains were re-interred at Ono, Pennsylvania.

> Rev. John Walter was not educated when he started to preach, and was compelled at first to spell out the words of his texts and hymns before he could announce them, but so rapidly did he advance that when the Rev. J. G. Schumucker, D.D., of the Lutheran Church, heard him preach, he said, "Walters is a deeply learned man, and an orator who has scarcely been excelled. Oh, he speaks with supernatural power! God in his providence has done a great deal for him."
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> Not only was his preaching ability of a marked character, but he was a poet as well, and rendered the church of his early day a distinct service when he wrote several hymns and edited a church hymnal for the use of the various classes. It was he who also urged the compilation of the discipline.
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> Because of his strenuous labors he was able to serve his church but twelve years in the itineracy, and then was compelled to locate because of ill health. He died in 1818. It was John Walters who preached the funeral sermon of Jacob Albright.[2]

Walter composed the two most popular camp-meeting songs of the day. The one titled (in English), "Come, Brother come, we'll journey on," was composed while riding the mountains between Bedford County and Johnstown. When they stopped to rest the horses, he reported to his traveling companions the progress he was making. When he finished the trip he penned the song. One other interesting sidelight before moving on, Dr. Daniel

Poling, at one time editor of the *Christian Herald*, was a blood descendent of the Kring family, who opened their home to Albright.

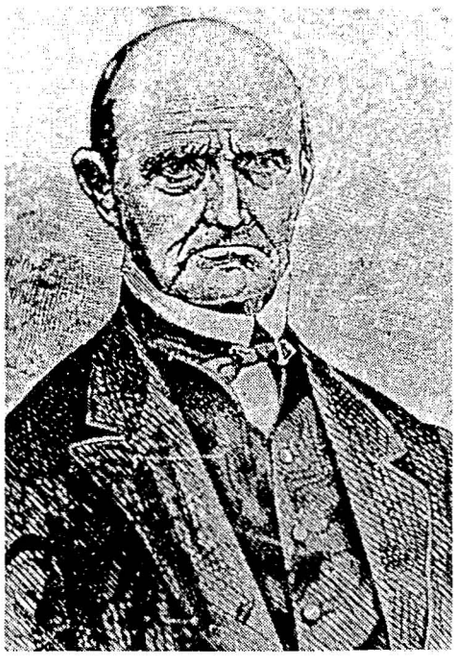
From 1800, when the first classes were organized, until 1807, the work of the budding Evangelical Association was directly supervised by Jacob Albright, its founder. But, as Bishop Reuben Yeakel states in his denominational history,

> The year 1807 was in many respects a very important year for the Association. The Original Conference was held, and thereby, the *history and era of conferences* [Bishop's italics] commenced. . . . Up to this time the affairs of the preachers and the membership was directed by Albright, though mostly after consulting the preachers and leading men at "big meetings." But the work was spreading, and the concerns of the church increasing, and hence it was felt that the time for holding annual conferences had come. In the month of November, 1807, the first conference of the Evangelical Association was held and represented the entire work at that time. Being the only conference in the church, and legislating for the whole church, this conference embodied in itself the Quarterly, Annual and General Conference for the time being.[3]

Questions of the proper church structure to conserve the spiritual life of the Association were discussed at this conference. Albright was authorized to draw up Articles of Faith and a Discipline in conformity with the teachings of the Bible and the conference required the ministers to have personal interviews with their hearers "to examine them on the subject of experimental religion after every sermon, if practical, especially in those places where classes had been formed." [4] Albright died but six months after the conference and it fell to George Miller to complete the unfinished task of drawing up the Articles of Faith and Discipline.

Following the death of Albright in 1808, the pace of expanding the work slackened for awhile and was not accelerated until 1813, at least for the western Pennsylvania region, when the actions of this annual conference precipitated the second wave of the expansion of the Evangelical Association into western Pennsylvania. Four preachers—John Dreisbach, an elder in full connection; Adam Hennig and John Kleinfelter, newly received on trial into the itinerancy; and David Yerlitz, newly ordained deacon—were appointed to break new ground and create new circuits.

We know more about John Dreisbach than of the other three, primarily because he began a diary just five days after this conference closed. It is doubly revealing since it records both the appointments kept and results of day to day labors as well as his inner Christian pilgrimage. He was born June 5, 1789, in the Buffalo Valley, Union County, Pennsylvania. Martin Dreisbach was his father, and his home was a preaching place open to men of various denominations until the year 1806. At this time George Miller held a general meeting and the entire Dreisbach family, except the youngest who was small, professed conversion and became members of the class. John's capabilities were first manifest within this class and he became its leader. His talents were recognized by the church and he eventually became the first Presiding Elder for the denomination. The entire denomination was in his care.



John Dreisbach

Dreisbach was licensed at the first conference in 1807. His license bears Albright's signature and the name "The Newly Formed Methodist Conference." At this conference Albright was six months away from his death and his health declined from day to day, yet he continued to press on with the work. This included tutoring a newly licensed 18-year old preacher on his first circuit. Orwig describes the situation:

> During the winter he [Albright] occasionally accompanied Mr. John Dreisbach who was yet young and inexperienced, on the old circuit. Yet notwithstanding his youth and inexperience, it would seem that Mr. Albright loved and esteemed him in a high degree; and it is probable that he accompanied him for the purpose of preparing him the better by his example and instructions, for future usefulness.[5]

Dreisbach served as conference secretary, 1809-1813, and was elected first presiding elder in 1814. He then became virtual head of the Albright followers and presided over most of the conference sessions. The year 1816 was a landmark year for him. He headed both the annual and first General Conference sessions,

dedicated the first church building, and established the first printing concern. In fact, on his second trip to Philadelphia to pick up additional needed supplies, they cost so much that he had no traveling money to return home and had to secure a loan from his inn-keeper. He paid for the press and supplies out of his own funds. His health broke in 1821, and he located. He died in 1871.

Adam Hennig (Henney), the second missionary sent to western Pennsylvania at this time, was born March 9, 1794, in Center County, Pennsylvania. His conversion at the age of sixteen led him into membership in the Evangelical Association. He was licensed at the age of nineteen and immediately sent to western Pennsylvania to work with Dreisbach. This was his training ground to be a missionary preacher for he was sent in 1816 to the state of Ohio to break new ground and expand the work. Here he spent the rest of his life serving first as an active itinerant and later as a local preacher. Shortly after his arrival he and his wife, the former Catherine Richel, became the first settlers in the region where they eventually built their house. His biographer, the Reverend C. Hammer, writes:

> He distinguished himself as a local preacher, as he was very conscientious in observing the duties that are made obligatory . . . in our Discipline. He assisted the itinerants in branching out and in extending their borders, and was always ready to help.[6]

His ministry extended over forty-seven years and he died February 7, 1860.

John Klinefelter, the third missionary to come to western Pennsylvania in 1813, was born May 5, 1791, in York County, Pennsylvania. His father was one of the first families in the county to receive a follower of Albright. Two years after his conversion in 1811, Klinefelter was licensed to preach and immediately was on his way to seek out new appointments with David Yerlitz in Bedford and Huntingdon Counties.

John Klinefelter served the denomination in a variety of ways until his location in 1821. At various times he was a presiding elder, secretary of the conference, member of the stationing committee (even before his election to the office of presiding elder), delegate to the first General Conference in 1816, and one of the delegates to the Social Conference that same year in conjunction with the United Brethren to explore and effect a merger. After his location his home was a favorite stopping place for the traveling preachers.

The labors of these four men *for one year* led to the creation of the Somerset Circuit in 1814 and to additional appointments which were added to the Northumberland Circuit. In 1816 the latter circuit was divided to form the Bedford Circuit. There was a more positive response to the labors of Dreisbach and Hennig as far as the geographical expansion of the Evangelical Association was concerned.

This phase of the planting began five days after the close of the conference session in 1813 when Dreisbach started west. The responsibility of being a missionary to virgin territory weighed so heavily on him that he began to write a daily journal of his experiences. This is his first entry:

> On the 28th of April, I, John Dreisbach, set out from home to find a Circuit. I came with brother David Yerlitz to Penn's Valley to Dati (Daddy) Hennig, and he stayed here, while I went to brother George Menk and remained there overnight. I could commit unto the protection of the Almighty wife, child, home, farm, parents and brothers and sisters, and entered upon my journey with consolation. This night I rested well. . . .[7]

On May 1st, Yerlitz and Klinefelter took their leave of Hennig and Dreisbach to seek preaching places in Canoe Valley. Directly south at the other end of this farewell point was the Morrison Cove and New Enterprise families that received Albright. From May 2nd to July 4th Dreisbach and Hennig began the task of seeking out German settlements from as far west as Pittsburgh and Butler to Mt. Pleasant, the villages along Indian Creek and homesteads in the Ligioner Valley, as well as further to the east in Somerset, Casselman, Brothers Valley, Berlin and Stoyestown.

The task of finding locations to preach demanded the use of every means available—the word of inn-keepers, relatives, and United Brethren preachers. Dreisbach reveals his hopes, encouragements and discouragements in the following entries:

> *May 2, 1813*
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> This day we travelled about thirty miles and just before sunset came into a small town named Armach. I at once ask the inn-keeper Elliott if there were German people in the region; for, said I, if there were, we would hold an evening meeting if we would be accepted. He said only one German lives in the region. I met a person with whom I

was acquainted named Hezlut, who asked me to preach in English; I allowed him to make the appointment. There was a small gathering and I preached on "For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace," and hope it will not have been in vain. There was much weeping and emotion. Brother Hennig prayed in German in closing. I felt troubled today because we had to travel and, as I believed, would not get to preach. . . .

May 3, 1813

Today we came within 32 miles of Fort Pitt or Pittsburg; came through Dennisontown, and then journeyed left from Pittsburgh Road, toward Greensburg, in order to seek preaching places. We saw no opportunity from Mt. Allegheny to Dennisonstown; the people here are mostly all English. For the night we remained with Hans Heuschi (probably Hershey); here, their son was in the house, insane, fastened to a chair in a wretched condition. The father wasn't right either. My heart was touched very much as I saw this misery. I can say I still possess courage for God's work, and believe that the Lord is leading us upon the right path. I prayed with the people of the place we stayed at and they seemed greatly moved.

May 4, 1813

Today we rode almost the entire day in the rain. At noon we fed our horses and had dinner at Beital; we found them friendly, prayed with them and took our leave. At night we came to Preacher Traxel and stayed there. I can say that I experience blessings, but the desire to find a circuit lies so close to me, that it is becoming a burden. . . .

May 6, 1813

This day we came within 4 miles of Pittsburg and stayed for the night at Kaufman's who received us in a friendly manner. Today I was melancholy and experienced a scattering of thought, but in the evening I felt new courage, and the blessing of God mightily in family prayers. I believe that God will now show me the bounds for my work. O dear Father, give us faith and the equipment from on high for Thy word.[8]

While Hennig remained, Dreisbach left the circuit on July 4th to keep preaching engagements previously arranged. His next round on the circuit began on September 24th and concluded on November 9th. He then travelled east to his father's farm to meet jointly with the duly appointed committee members of the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren in Christ to draft plans for the merging of the two German denominations. By December 4th he was back on his new circuit and had a reunion with Hennig at Paul's near Stoyestown. Once more he left the circuit on February 21st for a week's visit with his cousin at

Slippery Rock. March 1st he began his farewell round with Hennig and concluded on March 30. He and his co-worker then joined Yerlitz and Kleinfelter. They travelled east to participate in camp meetings and the annual conference session of 1814, where Dreisbach was elected the first Presiding Elder of the denomination. His entry in his journal for Friday, April 15, records the extent of his larger responsibilities:

> Today we came to the close of our conference. George Miller preached from I Peter 5:1, in the evening. J. Erb and H. Niebel exhorted. Then, I held the ordination service, in which four brethren were ordained. After this we observed the memorial of the Lord's sufferings and death together, and had a wonderful time. . . . At this conference, I was elected Presiding Elder, to travel over all the circuits as follows: 1. Union, 2. Bedford, 3. Somerset, 4. Franklin, 5. York, 6. Lancaster, 7. Schuylkill; which will require a 1000 miles of travel in making one round.[9]

John Dreisbach's journals contain a wealth of information. Most of his entries are rather full summaries of where he was, what he did and how he felt. Also, his intimate style offers one a devotional experience as well as historical insights. His record of circuit expansion for the four years he rode as Presiding Elder are equally significant, but are not a part of this study except to state in summary, there were 1,016 members in 1816 when Dreisbach became the first Presiding Elder. The stationing committee report stated simply, "Conference District." In twelve years the membership nearly tripled as the denomination moved into the state of Ohio and further west, and this expansion made it necessary to divide the original conference in 1827. W. W. Orwig reports:

> In this year, for the first time two annual conferences were held in the connection, the *"Eastern"* and the *"Western"* [Orwig's italics] and this was annually continued until a third conference was formed.[10]

In terms of legislative authority and autonomy, this was not an equal division. Roy Leedy, Ohio Conference historian, explains why:

> The Western Conference was in reality what in the modern period . . . [is] called a missionary conference. . . . It was carried forward twenty-four years in advance of the missionary movement in the

denomination. Only with a missionary spirit could the ministers of Pennsylvania have shared their own too meager salaries with the men in the far distant field of the West. . . .

[For the Western Conference] the minutes of each annual session had to be laid before the Eastern Conference for inspection. After examination and approval they were then copied in the record book of the mother body. . . . At first a committee was appointed each year to convey the minutes from Ohio to the conference in Pennsylvania. The General Conference in 1830 assigned this duty to a presiding elder. To give ample time for the long journey the sessions in Ohio were held three weeks earlier.[11]

The Evangelical Association was now divided into three districts. It is interesting to note that the Western Conference was considered a district and that the appointment of preachers was made by the stationing committee of the Eastern Conference. Under the supervision of Presiding Elders the work had grown to three districts and twelve circuits. Usually two and sometimes four men were assigned to a circuit. One-fourth of the circuits were in the Western Conference.

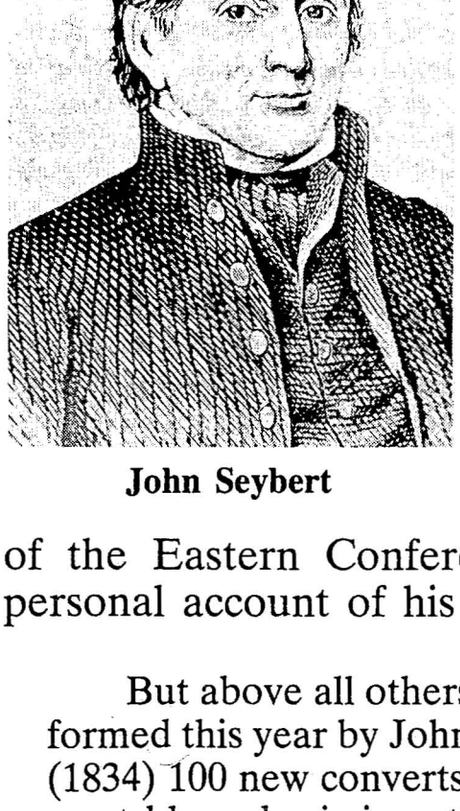
By 1827 an interesting situation had developed in Western Pennsylvania. Aside from one preaching place next to the Ohio-Pennsylvania line and supplied by the preachers of the Canton Circuit, most of the region of Pennsylvania north from the Ohio River to the New York State line and between the Ohio State line and one due north of Pittsburgh to the New York State line was untouched by the Evangelical Association missionaries. However, the denomination had a bachelor like Francis Asbury, and he firmly planted the Evangelical Association in this region in 1833. His name was John Seybert.

Many words have been penned about John Seybert from memorial addresses to the 439-page biography by Bishop S. P. Spreng in 1888. This study could have been written solely about this man. Perhaps the most concise summary of his work and influence was written by Roy Leedy for the *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*:

John Seybert was born near Manheim, Pa., July 7, 1791. In 1804 his parents joined the followers of Jacob Albright. . . . After a remarkable conversion on June 21, 1810, ... [he] united with the Albright people. . . . He entered the ministry in 1820 and became an ardent builder and first bishop of the church Albright founded.

Seybert's diaries (eighteen volumes) yield these amazing figures: 175,000 miles (horseback, 1820-1842; one-horse wagon, 1843-1860);

and 46,000 pastoral visits. . . . [Upon his election as bishop in 1839,] forthwith he directed the attention of his workers to the German settlements of the Northwest Territory. With the dearth of reading material in the west, Bishop Seybert in 1842 loaded his wagon at the publishing house in New Berlin, Pa., with an order of 23,725 volumes, charged to his account, and delivered these books to ministers in Ohio and westward. . . . His journey ended at a revival meeting appointment at a church near Flat Rock, Ohio, January 4, 1860, and he was buried in the church cemetery.[12]



John Seybert

John Seybert's 1833 appointment was to open the remaining territory in northwestern Pennsylvania to the work of the Association. His efforts resulted in the organization of the Erie Circuit. W. W. Orwig summarized the events in his report to the next session of the Eastern Conference, often drawing on Seybert's own personal account of his labors.

> But above all others, did the new Erie circuit prosper, which was formed this year by John Seybert. He reported at the next conference (1834) 100 new converts and 121 members in all. This was one of the most blessed missions that was ever undertaken by the Society. Its principal places were: . . . Erie . . . and Warren. In these two places glorious revivals took place, and each of them had three flourishing classes at the end of the year; there was also a small class of three members . . . at the Cannaeut lake . . . In Mercer County too [Greenville], there was during this year, the foundation of a good work laid . . . ; likewise in Butler county at Zelienopel [and] Harmony. . . . In different places he found doors open among the Methodists, Mennonites, Baptists, Lutherans, and Reformed, preaching in churches, school-houses, private dwellings, barns, and in the woods, with great success. In some places, especially at Warren, public morality was at a very low ebb, and sins and vices of many kinds were predominant. Some parts of the country had no preachers at all; while others had such bad ones, that they would have fared much better without any. These rose with their followers against the strange itinerant, and did their best to drive him out of the country by slanders [and] lies, calling him a good-for nothing fellow, who had left his wife and children in the East. . . . But several of the curates fell into the pits

themselves, which they had dug for Brother Seybert—they lost their places and were compelled to leave those parts of the country. . . . The following extracts [are] from a report of this mission by Seybert himself. He says,

"I reached my mission Friday, July 12, 1833, and lodged with Mr. Gingrich, [three-fourths of a] mile south of Erie. The following day I looked about for preaching places, and the Lord opened hearts and doors to me. Sunday, 14th, I preached three times, the Lord owning and blessing my humble efforts. . . . The German settlers of Erie county were partly Romanists, . . . Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists, and Mennonites; some of whom may have been in a state of grace, while others perhaps were convinced of the necessity of a change of heart—but the great majority lived in impenitency and indifference." . . . Speaking of Warren, [Brother] Seybert says:

"The German . . . population were in a state of gross darkness, and addicted to such vices as cursing, swearing, . . . etc. As to their religion, they were for the most part Catholics and Lutherans. Their preacher was a drunkard. A German, who had served in Napoleon's army, was their player; but instead of playing the fiddle, he used to whistle: afterwards he became a subject of converting grace.

"October 10th I paid the second visit to Warren, remained four days, preached three sermons, and held prayer meetings. The beginning of the work of grace was now made: a respectable man, named Gross, fell to the ground during the sermon, as if struck by lightening, and continued to wrestle and pray, till he had obtained the pardon of his sins and the new life in God.—I visited the healthy and the sick, the wealthy and the poor; who then came to my meetings, and may of them were convinced of the necessity of conversion, and some were really converted. My family visiting and praying with the people in their houses, it appears to me, contributed more to bring about this glorious work of grace, than my preaching. —January 17th I visited Warren for the fourth time, remained six days, preached nine sermons, and held four prayer meetings. This time a powerful work of grace took place. Scoffers, persecutors, and blasphemers broke down, like trees uprooted by a mighty hurricane, and were happily converted to the Lord; and many of a more respectable class, also became the blessed recipients of divine grace . . . —Now, as the tippling minister could do nothing to hinder the work of grace, the above mentioned whistler commenced to assemble his fellow tipplers and dancers at the same time when the converts and anxious inquirers met for prayer, in order to keep them away from the religious meetings, and thus prevent their conversion. But at a later period, this whistler also came to my preaching once, and was so powerfully affected and aroused from his lethargy, that he cried in great anguish of soul—*'Seybert, pray for me!'*

[Italics Seybert's] . . . the dancing and playing at this place had now come to an end, as the whistler had embraced religion. . . .

Speaking of the impact of Seybert's one-year effort, Orwig concludes:

Through this mission, the foundations of the operations of the Society in the north-western part of Pennsylvania were laid, where subsequently several good circuits and promising stations were formed, and many souls enlisted in the service of God. Some time after, several of the members of the Warren society removed to the state of Illinois, and were there among the first who received the preachers of the Evangelical Association.

Thus was completed the final wave of missionary expansion which ultimately demanded the formation of the Pittsburgh Conference of the Evangelical Association in 1852.

Footnotes

[1] Ammon Stapleton, "A Wonderful Story of Old Time Evangelism," manuscript in the Archives Division of the Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, p. 74. Ammon Stapleton (1850-1916) was born in Oley, Pa., January 15, 1850. He received his formal education at Central Pennsylvania College and was awarded the D.D. degree by Ursinus College in 1895. During his forty-five years of ministry he was a pastor, presiding elder and prolific writer with at least six major printed works. He was a life member of the Pennsylvania Historical Society and a member of the Pennsylvania German Society.

[2] *The Evangelical Messenger*, Sept. 27, 1930, p. 13.

[3] Reuben Yeakel, *History of the Evangelical Association. Volume I. 1750-1850* (Cleveland: Evangelical Publishing House, 1894), p. 83.

[4] W. W. Orwig, *History of the Evangelical Association. Volume I. From the origin of the Association to the end of the year 1845*, translated from the German, First Edition (Cleveland: Charles Hammer, 1858), pp. 36-37.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[6] *The living Epistle*, Raidabaugh, editor, Vol. XXI, No. 9 (Cleveland: Laver and Yost, 1886), p. 259.

[7] Dreisbach, first Daybook, p. 1.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

[9] *Ibid.*, second Daybook, p. 43.

[10] Orwig, p. 134.

[11] Roy B. Leedy, *The Evangelical Church in Ohio. Being a history of the Ohio Conference and Merged Conferences of the Evangelical Church in Ohio, now the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1816-1951* (Evangelical Press: The Ohio Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1959), pp. 34-35.

[12] Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism.* Volume II (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), pp. 2127-2128.

[13] Orwig, pp. 164-167.