Philadelphia’s Original Social Justice Warriors
The Little Big Story of Germantown and the Germantown Mennonites
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Germantown Past and Present

On July 8, 2017, on a hot and sunny day in the Germantown section of Philadelphia, the neighborhood’s multicultural spirit and history were on full display. The Universal African Dance & Drum Ensemble was dancing and drumming to West African rhythms and beats on a stage that was located directly in front of the Deshler-Morris House, otherwise known as the “Germantown White House,” a National Register of Historic Places–designated site built in 1752 where George Washington lived during extended stays in 1793 and 1794. The occasion for the celebration on this particular summer day was the Germantown Festival, a relatively new collaborative event organized by the Germantown United Community Development Corporation (GUCDC) and Historic Germantown with the aim of attracting community members and other visitors to celebrate the neighborhood’s historic sites and support an array of local businesses located along Germantown Avenue. The GUCDC declared in its 2011 mission statement its intention to “promote and facilitate the revitalization of Germantown’s business corridors through a sustainable, creative, and community-driven approach to economic development.” Its partner on this afternoon, Historic Germantown, is a nonprofit, community-based umbrella organization, whose aim is to oversee and assist, both directly and indirectly (through programming, grants, and/or best practices), a loose confederation of sixteen National Register of Historic Places sites, all located within a National Historic District along Germantown Avenue.
As a spectator during this vibrant event, I was painfully aware of the irony as I watched the Universal African Drum & Dance ensemble perform in front of George Washington’s former home. Here we were—men, women, and children of all ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations—celebrating peace, love, and diversity on a street abounding with numerous African American–centered economic and historic enterprises. Yet the revelries took place in front of George Washington’s Germantown White House; The very same George Washington who was the “owner” of hundreds of enslaved men, women, and children and who was an advocate for a strong federal fugitive slave bill. Most of us who were there that afternoon also knew something else about the neighborhood’s history. We knew that this was a special place where Black and White Philadelphians had challenged this kind of morally corrupt ideology for over three hundred years. We knew that it was home to centuries of antislavery and abolitionist protests. We knew that it had been
part of an active corridor that housed many stops on the Underground Railroad during the nineteenth century. We knew that this was a place where the oldest petition against slavery ever brought forth by a religious institution in the British colonies was signed: the 1688 Mennonite and Quaker petition against slavery. All these stories have been continually memorialized and celebrated for hundreds of years within Philadelphia’s Germantown. Past and present. Present and past.

Among the various musical, dance, and poetry performances that had taken place on the central stage that afternoon, and amid the numerous food trucks and the thousands of revelers, were the tables and booths set up and manned by people who represented an assortment of Germantown’s community organizations, agencies, businesses, and historic sites. I was stationed at one of these tables. It was a stall set up for the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust (GMHT), an organization that was founded in the early 1950s by congregation members who desired to oversee and maintain their historic church, built in 1770, as well as its grounds, archives, and cemetery. As a board member for GMHT, I was at the Germantown Festival that afternoon serving as a volunteer. My job for the day was not only to give a brief history of our site to those who visited our booth but also to assist the many parents who came over to us with their children on an arts and crafts endeavor that we had set out on our table. Replicating what is a fairly common children’s art activity, we had laid out strips of construction paper (different colors) as well as latticed, square-cut paper templates (also different colors) so that children or adults who wanted to participate could “weave” together the thin strips of paper into the paper-lattice templates, thus creating “miniquilts” that became their takeaway gift.

A few blocks away from the central plaza where the Germantown Festival was held sits the 1770-built, 1973 National Register of Historic Places–designated, and 1935 Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS)–surveyed Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse. Specifically located at 6133 Germantown Avenue, the church rests along a corridor that for a few hundred years was referred to as “Main Street” and before that was an active Lenape Indian trail. The 1770 church was not the first church built on the property; that honor is given to a rustic log cabin that is no longer in existence and which dates back to 1708. William Rittenhouse, the founder of the first paper mill in North America, preached his first sermons in that original church to the earliest German and Dutch Mennonite immigrants. The congregation's
size ebbed and flowed for approximately three hundred years until the mid-
1980s, when the Germantown Mennonites relocated their worship services
to a site around the corner on Washington Lane (formerly known as “Key-
srer’s Lane,” the name of a prominent Germantown Mennonite family). Consequently, the current structure that the trust oversees today is no longer
an active church but instead serves as a historic site that is administered
by an executive director, a few staff members, and a board.7

Throughout Germantown, radical approaches to public history have taken
shape over the past few decades. This can be seen in the growth of a num-
ber of innovative and/or reimagined historic sites, freshly interpreting the
335-year history of the community from the colonial era to the present.8
Included in this group are Vashti DuBois’s Colored Girls Museum, whose
founder describes its confines as “a memoir museum, which honors the sto-
ries, experiences, and history of Colored Girls”; the Aces Museum, a former
Black USO establishment and ballroom that operated during World War II
and is now designated as “a museum that pays tribute to Minority Vet-
erans”; and the Black Writers Museum, which, located in Germantown’s Vernon
Park, is headquartered at the historic colonial Vernon House and was founded
by Supreme D. Dow, who organizes events such as the People’s Poetry &
Jazz Festival.9 These projects and others like them are “radical” because they
have disrupted unexamined ideas about which stories are central and which
are marginal in both local and national history. History on the avenue had, in
the past, been based on a top-down, static, colonial-architectural-historical
narrative. Today, it is re-created and reimagined by African-centered, inter-
racial, class-informed, gender-informed, and LGBTQ storytellers.10

These trends are not simply recent. A tradition of grassroots history-
making that rests on the community’s independence of thought runs deep in
local history. The legacy of slavery, slaveholding, and abolitionism are critical
themes that tie together the community’s Mennonite history and its contem-
porary public history landscape. These subjects have saturated Germantown’s
history from the founding years of the colony through to the present day.
Cliveden, a National Historic Trust site, has been commemorated for over
240 years as the locale for the Battle of Germantown during the American
Revolutionary War. Recently, Cliveden has begun to interpret the story of
Quaker lawyer Benjamin Chew’s connections to slavery, both directly as a
slaveholder at his Germantown estate and as an absentee plantation owner
in Delaware as well.11 But Germantown residents find more meaning in the
1770 Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse just a few blocks away. The site emphasizes the signing of the 1688 Mennonite petition against slavery. As forerunners of the American antislavery movement, these early German (and perhaps Dutch) residents of Pennsylvania wrote a petition that was delivered to several local and regional Quaker meetings condemning slaveholding as an immoral, abhorrent institution that went directly against the Bible’s golden rule. Essentially falling on deaf ears, this measure was not endorsed by the Quaker Church as a whole until 1756, which only then would censure slaveholders. It also foreshadowed the state of Pennsylvania’s gradual abolition of the institution in 1780.

This essay traces the evolution of both the historical interpretation and the memory of this antislavery protest, from 1688 to the present, observing how the petition has been commemorated over time and how we tell the story today. Although incongruities abound as we follow this timeline forward, there is also significant consistency in the emphasis that has been placed on this event. Protest against slaveholding was embraced not only in the Germantown community for hundreds of years but also by German Americans in general, whose immigrant communities in the late nineteenth century happily connected their origin story to both the founding of Germantown and the signing of the petition against slavery. Although the significance of the petition changed over time—sometimes it was highlighted and sometimes it was de-emphasized—the preservation of this document and its memory allowed a powerful possibility to remain part of Germantown public history. A belief in the importance of protest and social justice has shaped local identity and public history. Through storytelling, pageantry, festivals, anniversaries, memorials, historic markers, and sculpture, Germantown is united by the common threads of both honoring and celebrating diversity, elevating stories of social justice, and remembering and learning from the unexpected stories of our country’s immigrant past.

**Historic Context: Germantown’s Mennonite Past and the Writing of the 1688 Petition**

In October of 1683, only two years after William Penn had established the proprietary colony of Pennsylvania, a group of thirteen German Anabaptist families arrived at the port of Philadelphia. They disembarked from their ship, the Concord, and made their way up to the northwestern outskirts of the colony’s capital, where they established homes and businesses. Hailing from the
town of Krefeld (which was situated in the western portion of modern-day Germany close to the Rhine River to its east and the Netherlands’s border to its west), they had made the months-long trek across continental Europe and over the Atlantic Ocean because of a promise made to them by one of William Penn’s most trusted land agents and confidants, Francis Daniel Pastorius. Pastorius, a lawyer, educator, and Lutheran Pietist, who would later become memorialized as the “Founder of Germantown,” roamed the Palatinate region of the Rhineland at William Penn’s urging, looking for religious dissidents and refugees who would benefit from Pennsylvania’s “Holy Experiment.” Pastorius assured the thirteen Krefeld Anabaptist families that Pennsylvania was a haven for religious tolerance, a place where they would be safe to worship as they pleased.¹³
The Krefelders had suffered significant religious persecution while searching for a home in Europe. Disciples of Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel, and perhaps most notably, Menno Simons (hence the name Mennonites), the Krefeld Anabaptists had belonged to a sect that formed in the 1530s in Switzerland, only a few years after the Protestant Reformation. They rejected what they saw as too much formality within the Catholic Church and within Martin Luther’s new Protestant church. They rejected several of the Lutheran Church’s policies, angering leadership. In addition, their antiwar stance and their rejection of infant baptism and an adherence instead to an adult “believer’s baptism” led the dissidents to become anathema among both European Catholics and Protestants alike, a dilemma that forced them to wander the continent looking for a place free from persecution. The Anabaptists had recorded and graphically illustrated the persecution they had suffered. Known as the *Martyr’s Mirror*, these books were first published in Europe in 1660 and arrived among the possessions of many Anabaptists in The New World. Eventually, they were printed in the American colonies. The early effort to print the *Martyr’s Mirror* was accomplished under the direction of Jacob Gottschalk, the third pastor of the Germantown Mennonite Church (from 1702 to 1725), after he left the settlement and moved to the Ephrata Cloister in the 1740s. Several copies of the Gottschalk volumes are on display in the back room of the Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse.

Perhaps because they had been victims of persecution and violence, the Germantown Mennonite’s actively opposed acts of oppression against other groups of people. The community adopted an antislavery position, and in 1688, the members of the community authored the first formal protest against slavery in British North America. This protest was significant not only because it predated by more than a century the rise of the organized abolitionist movement but also because its authors insisted that there be consequences for members of Anabaptist sects and other Christians who held slaves. The Quakers rejected the measure, which was presented in succession to the monthly, quarterly, and annual meetings of the Friends, but the issue split congregations down the middle. Neither the New Jersey nor the Pennsylvania annual meetings adopted the policy of censuring slaveholders and condemning the transatlantic slave trade until the 1750s. The protest occupies a central place in the local identity of Germantown today, and it is vigorously shared and interpreted throughout the community as a solidarity-building story of social justice. The Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust displays a 1901 memorial to the signing of the petition, which is on loan.
from the Germantown Historical Society. The GMHT also displays a facsimile of the actual petition (the original sits in the Swarthmore College Archives).

Visitors to the Meetinghouse hear selections from the original 1688 protest text. Scholars argue that the text is significant because it was the first to emphasize the incompatibility of slavery with Christian values. For example, both the members of the Anabaptist community and the broader community of Christian believers would have recognized references to the golden rule, such as this one: “There is a saying that we shall doe to all men
like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent or colour they are.” But the document goes further, arguing that enslaved people had a moral right to revolt and that Christians could not oppose the fight for freedom while still claiming to uphold the tenets of their religious faith.

Scholars’ focus on the protestors’ use of literal and figurative symbolism as literary devices in the attempt to make their argument persuasive, which is important, but the authors of the protest also do this with other powerful deployments of language and reasoning. They drew attention to the hypocrisies of Christians who might claim to uphold the Ten Commandments while also committing the atrocities of the slave trade. For example, some claim to uphold the commandment against adultery, yet they “do committ adultery, in separating wives from their husbands and giving them to others; and some sell the children of these poor creatures to other men.” The petitioners also accused Anabaptist slaveholders of bringing shame to their community, committing persecution that far surpassed any perpetrated against them by European governments, some of which did not practice human bondage. They wrote, “You surpass Holland and Germany in this thing. This makes an ill report in all those countries of Europe, where they hear of, that ye Quakers doe here handel men as they handel there ye cattle.” While some Germans, including Lutherans, were guilty of enslaving people, “Germans made up the first, and probably the most vehement group opposing slavery,” and “their opposition appears to have been based on both religious and moral grounds, as well as a predisposition toward self-reliance and independence.” In fact, few Germans had held slaves and they began protesting the institution of slavery soon after their arrival in Pennsylvania. The stridency of German American antislavery activism is therefore central to the history of the German community more broadly and to Germantown specifically.

**Historical Memory and the Germantown Mennonite Experience**

The Mennonite community has been central to Germantown’s grassroots expressions of heritage since the nineteenth century, but that community’s history also became significant in the construction of a larger German American identity over the course of the twentieth century. By observing the evolution of commemorative activities, we can recognize subtle shifts in this identity at the local, state, and national levels over time. At first, commemorations portrayed the Germantown community as “pioneers,” highlighting
stories of migration and survival. On September 29, 1883, a syndicated column appeared in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* describing the upcoming celebration of the Germantown settlement’s bicentennial that was to occur in Philadelphia the following week. The article connected the city’s burgeoning German immigrant population (many of whom had populated that region and arrived throughout the Midwest in the millions after the failed revolution of 1848) to “the pioneers who settled Germantown . . . in Philadelphia on October 6th of 1683” and reminded them, “It is this day which the Germans of the United States propose to celebrate.” The author described these first German immigrants, drawing attention to their Mennonite theology and antiwar principles, and citing the community’s first minister and printmaker, William Rittenhouse, for building “the first American Paper Mill in 1690, on a branch of the Wissahickon.” Perhaps most significant, the article highlighted the 1688 Mennonite protest against slavery. The author emphasized the significance of celebrating such an event, asserting that “the two hundredth anniversary of the Germantown settlement will be celebrated by millions of American Germans.”

Local newspapers also covered the celebration. An article in the *Philadelphia Times* covered the preparations that were underway for a “large-scale and well-funded event” to celebrate the founding of Germantown. The plans finalized by the German American Pioneer Jubilee committee included an opening day concert at the Philadelphia Academy of Music. Speeches would be made “in both English and German.” Invited guests would listen to a Mozart-composed, German librettist (Emanuel Schikaneder) version of “The Magic Flute,” as well as hear selections from Felix Mendelssohn. The speaker of honor at the next afternoon’s events was to be Carl Schurz. Schurz had been a major general for the Union during the Civil War, a United States senator supporting Reconstruction after the war, and secretary of the interior under President Rutherford B. Hayes. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a series of stories about the bicentennial. One article speculated, “If Pastorius, the founder of Germantown, were living now, his simple and loyal heart would be gladened by ocular proof of the fact that ‘young generations’ look more than kindly upon the little Mennonite Colony of which he was the guiding spirit.” The *Inquirer* also noted that one of the keynote speeches would be given by Samuel Pennypacker, the soon-to-be governor of Pennsylvania, “whose publications on the early history of Germantown have made him well known in literary circles.”
Bicentennial celebrations of the founding of Germantown and its Mennonites also took place in Europe. Correspondence from Germany appeared in the November 12, 1883, edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer, under the heading “Germantown: Its Bi-centennial Celebrated in Germany.” Written by “a correspondent in Berlin,” the piece excitedly announced that “besides the splendid festivals which have been celebrated in Germany within the last two months . . . there was a modest anniversary held at Crefeld in commemoration of the two hundredth return of the day on which the first association of German emigrants departed for the present United States.” The author suggested that had it not been for William Penn, the “thirteen Quaker and Mennonite families” would never have been able to settle peaceably in the New World “for conscience sake.” The celebration in Krefeld included an “exhaustive sketch of the political and religious causes which drove these Crefeld linen weavers” across the sea. But what most struck the foreign correspondent and the German revelers was their former countrymen and women’s role in the 1688 protest against American slavery: “As an immortal memorial of them be praised that glorious protest which, as early as April 1688, was made by those against human slavery, and which places them on the same platform with the noblest abolitionists of our day.”

If German people were proud to claim the migrants as part of their own history, American attention to the celebration signifies the crucial place that Germantown’s history began to occupy in German American identity. Carl Schurz’s presence at the Philadelphia celebration is a significant indicator of this. As a German immigrant who had arrived after the 1848 revolution, Schurz believed not only in overthrowing monarchy but also, more broadly, in protecting civil liberties and promoting personal and religious freedoms. Because he was on the losing side of the revolution, he was also among the millions of refugees who made their way to the United States, and the Midwest in particular, to start a new life. Schurz served the Union during the American Civil War and as a Radical Republican during Reconstruction, passionately advocating for the civil and political rights of African American people. Many of Schurz’s fellow refugees had strongly supported the antislavery movement before the war and civil rights (at least based on race) after its conclusion. These values, virtues, and ideals matched their fellow countrymen’s quest for freedom and human rights. Celebration of the connection between antislavery activism and German American history would last well into the next century.
By the early twentieth century, festivals commemorating “German American Day” became ubiquitous in a number of American cities. An October 1910 celebration in Lincoln, Nebraska, was typical: it included parades, pageants, and tableaux depicting German emigration, history, and accomplishments. The Lincoln Star ran a large banner entitled “Spectacular Pageant in honor of German Day.” In a front-page article, the author claimed that “the realization of a mighty influence which has helped to make America great among the nations was brought home to thousands of people who thronged the streets of Lincoln today and witnessed the passage of the German Day parade.” Among the floats to make the several-mile journey during the pageant was a representation of the Concord, the ship that had brought Germantown’s Mennonite families to colonial North America.27

The popular festivals and parades represent a process by which German American communities adopted the history of Germantown as part of their own identity. But festivals are temporary, so their messages and meaning are mutable. The establishment of Germantown as historically and culturally significant entered a new phase in the first decades of the twentieth century, one with more permanent implications for German American public history: monument building. The Lincoln Star article reported that German American benevolent societies in Lincoln had made an appeal for donations to support the construction of a monument dedicated to Daniel Pastorius and the thirteen Krefeld Mennonite families who had founded Germantown. Further, not only had the committee recommended that the German American Alliance of Nebraska help fund “the erection of a suitable monument in honor of Daniel Pastorius,” but a congressmen in DC had already “made an appropriation of $30,000 for this purpose upon condition that the national German-American Alliance appropriate a like amount.”28 This proposal began a process in which commemorations of Germantown moved toward enshrining particular aspects of the story as meaningful not only to the community but to the nation. The German American Alliance of Nebraska was likely aware that a project to construct a monument to Francis Daniel Pastorius had been in the works for several years. The idea had been originated with Charles J. Hexamer, president of the National German American Alliance.29 Hexamer recruited sculptor Jacob Otto Schweizer, a member of the German Society of Pennsylvania, to design a cornerstone to be laid in Germantown’s Vernon Park on October 6, 1908, at the 225th anniversary of Germantown’s founding. In a letter dated July 17, 1908, Richard J. Austin, the
treasurer of the German Society of Pennsylvania and Chairman of the finance committee for the founder’s day celebration in Germantown, confirmed there would be installed “in Vernon Park the cornerstone of a monument which they will erect to commemorate the landing of Francis Daniel Pastorius and the band of German emigrants who settled in Germantown in 1683.”

It was not until 1910, however, that the drive for the construction of a monument really began to take off, as Philadelphia congressman J. Hampton Moore got explicit support from Washington for a monument to be installed in Vernon Park. Moore’s Bill (HR 9137) provided for a $25,000 federal grant and required the National German Alliance to provide matching funds for the design, construction, and installation of the monument. In a speech to Congress advocating for this cause, Moore proclaimed that the funds were to be used to help build “a monument in historic Germantown, Philadelphia, to memorialize the first settlement of Germans in what is now the United States.” Moore had to address the clamor that such a memorial might fail because it “propose[d] to memorialize a certain class of citizens.” Moore argued, “That noble band of scholars and industrialists made so deep an impress upon the American character that is questionable whether we owe less to it than to the martial heroes whom we so cheerfully celebrate upon battlefields and in city squares.” Moore placed particular emphasis on the community’s role in antislavery activism, arguing, “German Americans have always shown good common sense and a just appreciation of the personal rights of others,” and “the first successful German Colony, at Germantown (now the twenty-second ward of Philadelphia), in 1688 drew up a remonstrance against slavery—the first of all such protests.”

The start of World War I in Europe impacted the construction of the monument and shifted its messages in subtle but important ways. Although the appropriation bill eventually received the necessary support from Congress the timing for creating a monument to German immigration to America was unfortunate. Germany’s role as aggressor during the war spawned widespread suspicion and hostility toward Germans, German Americans, and German history and culture. This was the case despite the fact that the political and communal beliefs of the earliest German Mennonite settlers and those of the later German Lutherans and Catholics placed many German Americans in opposition to the German government, especially German policies of imperialism. The monument’s unveiling, originally scheduled May 28, 1917, was canceled or postponed a number of times because “relations between the
country and Germany” were “strained.” The sculpture, created by Albert Jaeger, was stored away for two and a half years before its eventual unveiling. The local press covered the controversy, and in 1919, there was still a hesitancy to fully support the unveiling of the monument. For instance, in June of 1919, the Philadelphia Public Ledger asserted that “despite its designer’s plea
that Germania is not represented in his handiwork, the Pastorius monument in Vernon Park, Germantown, which is scheduled to be unveiled, is still the target for attack.” The Twenty-Second Ward’s Council of the Stonemasons Fellowship objected to the fact that the monument would be “unveiled in spite of objections by Germantown residents.” They argued that the monument “spread German propaganda . . . to retard the progress of the United States,” and were angered that it was “not a memorial to Pastorius but . . . a memorial to German arrogance.”34 Similarly, a September 1919 Philadelphia Public Ledger article reported that “a committee representing various secret societies of Germantown has undertaken to bring about the removal and destruction of the founders’ monument, in Vernon Park, which has been the cause of controversy because it is supposed to be tainted with Germanism and which is now enclosed in a box and under the control of the war department.” Among the committee’s “resolutions” was that “the secretary of war [should] be authorized and directed to remove and destroy this evidence of German propaganda, and place on the base or platform two or more captured German cannon.”35

Virulent anti-German sentiment led German American communities across the nation to more carefully define and defend their commitment to American ideals. In spite of vocal opposition to the project, the monument was finally unveiled in November 1920, bearing both the name and image of Pastorius as well as the names of the thirteen Mennonite families who settled Germantown in 1683. The images on the monument seemed to establish the Germantown community as quintessentially American by depicting the settlers as hardworking farmers and weavers. The prominent attention to the community’s antislavery stance simultaneously honored Germantown’s local pride and integrated German immigrants into the center of American history. One panel included an inscription commemorating “the protest of the Germans of Germantown against slavery” but its iconography reflected popular depictions of White Americans as the saviors of weak and powerless African Americans; it included an image of an enslaved individual being liberated by a female emancipator. Such imagery established the Germantown community not necessarily as Germans with a unique culture, but as Americans, committed to the nation’s economic and political ideals.

The unveiling ceremony further emphasized connections between the Germantown community and American identity. J. Hampton Moore featured prominently on the program. By then, he was mayor of Philadelphia
and had ushered the monument legislation through Congress and proved himself a steadfast ally to the National German American Alliance. The opening prayer was given by Bishop N. B. Grubb, the current pastor of the Germantown Mennonite Church. His presence ensured that the original congregation remained central to the commemoration of German American
history. Finally, a direct descendent of Francis Daniel Pastorius, Mr. Samuel N. Pastorius, was present to introduce the mayor. According to reports from the event, “Col. Laude (from the War Department) formally turned over the memorial to the city. Mayor Moore in his acceptance promised that the city would care and protect it. The young daughter of the president of the Crefeld
Society, which is composed of descendants of the original settler families, then pulled the cord releasing the drapes concealing the statue. The combined participation of federal and local government officials, descendants of Pennsylvania’s founder, and leaders of the Germantown community located the original community members and their antislavery protest as significant by placing them within a complicated matrix of national, state, and local identities.

The creation and dedication of the monument during World War I pushed German Americans to claim their patriotism even as they celebrated their German identity. The years leading up to World War II made their efforts to balance German and American cultural influences even more difficult. In 1933, Germantown was set to celebrate the 250th anniversary of its founding. The festivities were scheduled to take place between October 20 and 22. However, a disturbing incident clouded anticipation for the event. On Friday, October 6, German American Day, the German ambassador to the United
States, Hans Luther, refused to make his scheduled speech because there was no swastika adhered to the podium. Instead, Luther stood up and saluted Hitler in front of the stunned organizers.37 There is no record of the stance Germantown’s German population took regarding the Third Reich and its treatment of Jews.38 But the Germantown Mennonites of the 1930s, like the German, Dutch, or English Quakers before them, were pacifists by tradition. The antiwar tenants of their faith were as significant a part of their theological principles as was the prohibition against child baptism. Many American Mennonites, including several from Germantown, had been conscientious objectors during World War I. But World War II was different. Photographs from the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust archives indicate that the church displayed American flags both inside and outside and hosted USO dances as well.39

The German community’s perceived ambivalence about the rise of Hitler combined with general distrust of conscientious objectors made German Americans in general and pacifist religious communities in particular vulnerable during the war. As a result, it is not surprising that planners of the 250th anniversary of Germantown shifted focus away from Germantown’s founding, the Germantown Mennonite community, and the significance of the antislavery protest. Instead, the event focused heavily on the Revolutionary War–era Battle of Germantown. The 250th anniversary of Germantown is significant because it is the moment during which the battle, which had taken place on October 4, 1777, began to take center stage in Germantown’s history. Today, the battle and its reenactment remain a popular draw both for local people and for heritage tourism.

The guidebook prepared by the 250th anniversary planning committee for an open house walking tour of Germantown emphasized sites associated with the Battle of Germantown. Cliveden occupied a prominent position in the story because “in the battle of Germantown, October 4, 1777, a small force of the British occupied the house, converting it into a fortress, and all efforts of the Americans to dislodge them were futile.” The Revolutionary War’s significance at most other sites in Germantown is less well documented and more anecdotal, but the guidebook emphasized them nonetheless. For instance, St. Michael’s Lutheran Church is appropriately identified as the oldest Lutheran establishment in Philadelphia, but instead of exploring that connection fully, the guidebook focuses on Revolutionary War connections: “In the churchyard are the graves of Christopher Ludwick, ‘Baker General’ in
the American Army of the Revolution, and Major James Witherspoon, who was killed in the battle of Germantown.” Similarly, the Johnson House listing provided no context regarding its Quaker occupants’ lives or the site’s role on the Underground Railroad. Rather, the text indicates that “the house bears marks of the battle of Germantown, severe fighting having occurred hereabouts.” This wartime shift overshadowed the radical potential of Germantown’s history, replacing stories about protest and social justice with stories about American patriotism, and allowing national interests and concerns to overshadow locals’ sense of identity.

1983, 1988, and Beyond
What impact did late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century celebrations, commemorations, and monuments have on shaping radical public history practices in Germantown? How has the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust worked to promote social justice, and how have its efforts connected to the changing demographics of the community in the late twentieth century and beyond?

It is crucial to acknowledge that the Germantown Mennonite community’s celebration of its abolitionist tradition coexisted with its acceptance of segregation through most of the twentieth century. Black people neither worshipped alongside White in the church building nor were they buried in the church cemetery. African American people across the country recognized the Germantown Mennonites’ significant role in antislavery activism, however. During the early twentieth century, they organized commemorative events to celebrate the 1688 protest. In 1914, for example, an African American newspaper in Iowa, the Des Moines Bystander, picked up a report from the Pittsburgh Dispatch that congregants from Germantown’s African American churches had organized a celebration in the Mennonite Church: “The old church was selected for the reason that the communion table in that church is said to be the table upon which the Germantown pioneers of 1688 wrote the first public protest in America against human slavery.” Such commemorative moments may have been overlooked by the White press, but they are crucial in the history of the community. Eventually, separate acts of remembrance by Black and White people became a bridge for establishing radical public history practices in Germantown and for building a tradition of interracial cooperation, multicultural collaboration, and civic engagement. But that tradition would not begin to take root until the midcentury American civil rights movement,
and it would not become a celebrated part of local heritage until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Over time, the 1688 protest had become a pillar of Germantown’s identity. Beginning in the 1980s, the centrality of that story would help drive a significant commitment to social justice by the city’s public history leaders.

In 1983, preparations for the 300th anniversary celebration took a marked turn away from the troubled and ultimately conservative one of 1933. The Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust board members focused less on parades or monument building, and more on the collection, preservation, and interpretation of abolition and African American history in Germantown. Their efforts marked a return to the community’s original sense of heritage and functioned to untangle the nationalistic and white supremacist narrative that had taken over local history during World War II. The program of commemorative actions included plans to restore the Johnson House, a site that the trust had purchased from the city several years earlier. Between 1983 and 2003, the GMHT oversaw the rehabilitation of the structure, successfully lobbied for a State History Marker that emphasized the original owner’s role in the Underground Railroad, and won National Historic Landmark Status. Most importantly, these efforts were guided by an insistence by the trust that “the interpretation of the house will emphasize the contributions of blacks and immigrant groups to Germantown history, as well as testifying to the faith of the Mennonites and Quakers who have owned the land.”

Commemoration of Germantown’s 300th anniversary also included the creation of an archive. The members of the board invited broad participation by the local religious community, explaining, “Mennonites could become involved in Germantown by helping to create a Germantown Archives, where such valuable family papers as exist might be housed, where black history materials, church records, etc. might be kept, and where historical research can be undertaken in the context of the town which produced the materials.” While this was an ambitious plan, the GMHT successfully gathered and organized these materials, and the organization was awarded a 2015 Hidden Archives Initiative grant to improve the archives’ accessibility. Today, the trust has two partners in their effort to preserve Mennonite history: the Germantown Historical Society Archives and Library, and the Mennonite Heritage Center Library and Archives in Harleysville, Pennsylvania. The anniversary plans also called for the trust to create or partner with projects that might help animate Mennonite values. To this end, the board proposed to organize a
“Peace Church” interpretive slide show to serve as a counternarrative during celebrations of the Battle of Germantown.45

The Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust also envisioned the anniversary as a way to provide meaningful service to the members of the broader Germantown community. They imagined establishing a preservation corps that would “provide a pool of trained persons in building repair and maintenance to give low cost repair services . . . which could be combined with an apprenticeship program for Germantown youth.” They also unsuccessfully proposed establishing a local Ten Thousand Villages craft store in Germantown to connect local craftspeople with international artisans, empowering both through fair-trade arrangements. Ten Thousand Villages was created by Edna Ruth Byler, a Mennonite from Kansas, who had imported goods from Puerto Rican artisans after traveling with the Mennonite Central Committee in the 1940s. The Mennonite Central Committee did indeed open a Ten Thousand Villages store within the region in the 1990s, but it was in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia. Nonetheless, the GMHT recognized the potential of businesses like Ten Thousand Villages to create meaningful local opportunities. The trust was notably cognizant that economic revitalization can sometimes have unintended consequences, such as inflating prices and property taxes. Even as the board looked for ways to revitalize the community or design any project, they insisted that “any implementation should be done in consultation” with local residents. They insisted that any economic enterprise must not “displace present merchants—small enterprises of the Mom and Pop variety—but rather that our resultant business community contain a mix of proprietors, goods and services, and types of businesses.”46

Once the 300th anniversary of Germantown approached, however, the board planned several events that combined the very principles that they hoped to advance, especially in terms of social justice education and activism. For example, the trust, working with Quaker congregations across the Northwest, organized an antiwar event called “October 6 Witness: Friendship without Missiles.” As part of this event, the Germantown Mennonites released a lengthy and powerful political statement, connecting the founding of Germantown to the principles of pacifism, racial equality, and poverty relief. The statement began, “On October 6, 1683, the boat Concord landed at Philadelphia, carrying with it the first German immigrants who planned a German settlement. . . . They were a mixture of Mennonite and Quaker peoples who were . . . firm believers in the way of peace.” And it concluded
with a reaffirmation of their commitment to these values: “We are witnessing on October 6th because this is the day which belongs to us, the day of the landing of the Concord. We are witnessing to the values and faith of those original settlers and residents of Germantown: friendship without weapons, equality of all people, and concern for the poor and homeless.”

Speakers at the witnessing included General Gert Bastian, a Green Party member of the West German Parliament; Sister Falaka Fattah of the House of Umoja, an organization from West Philadelphia dedicated to ending gun violence; renowned Mennonite scholar, pastor, and college president Myron Augsburger; and United States representative and civil rights activist Ron Dellums from California. Envisioned as an act of public art as well as one of public protest, the event was advertised at various venues. The Philadelphia Museum of Art distributed a flyer explaining the event’s goal to “oppose deployment of the Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe; to celebrate German-American friendship and the powerful heritage of Germantown; and to highlight the social, economic and racial injustices caused by the arms race. A note on the bottom of the flyer read, ‘Let’s tell Bush and Reagan: Employment not Deployment!’”

At the rally, Myron Augsburger appealed for “a network of people around the globe . . . a community of people committed to the way of love and non-violence.” West German president Karl Carstens was a surprise attendee. The Philadelphia Daily News reported that he had been visiting with President Ronald Reagan, and “flew in from Washington to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the arrival of the first Germans to settle in the United States.” According to Susan Reed of the Germantown Courier, President Carstens also visited the Germantown Historical Society, though “Germantown residents, cordoned behind a police barricade set up across the street from the Historical Society, had to settle for a fleeting glimpse of Carstens’ arrival and departure amid a swarm of police and Secret Service escorts.” The Courier also reported that “seven members of the Philadelphia Women’s Peace Encampment, two of them from Germantown,” were arrested protesting outside of the state dinner and German-American Tricentennial Banquet at the Franklin Plaza Hotel that was attended by both Carstens and Vice President George Bush.

Highlights of the 1983 celebration undoubtedly included the unveiling of a Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission State Marker commemorating the “First Protest against Slavery,” and the opening of an exhibit tracing the history of Germantown, the Germantown Mennonites, and Germantown’s
African American history. The exhibit was prepared by GMHT member and historian Bob Ulle. Local students from Germantown Friends, Wister Elementary, Pickett Middle School, and Germantown High School unveiled the marker, and the Talented Black Souls Drill Team led a procession to Wister Street where students then read aloud from the original proclamation. Among the speakers was Charles Blockson, an archivist, activist, and the founder of Temple University’s Blockson Library. Blockson had led a movement to place Black history markers in Philadelphia during the 1980s and 1990 and beyond. At the unveiling, he echoed the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “We are coming to the mountaintop,” but we “still have slavery in this country . . . the slavery of ignorance.”

The historical exhibit was a massive time line affixed to a wall in the basement of a nineteenth-century Victorian house, adjacent to the 1770 Meetinghouse, that the trust had purchased in the 1950s. During the 1970s, the basement had been transformed into the Mennonite Information Center and operated as a small museum of Germantown Mennonite History. The exhibit covered four themes: the history of the Germantown Mennonites, the history of Mennonites in America, the history of African Americans in Germantown, and the history of African Americans in the United States. It was an incredibly ambitious, albeit straightforward and inexpensive, venture, but it connected the Mennonite role in the antislavery protest to the rise of Richard Allen’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Philadelphia and beyond.

Bob Ulle, the board member and historian responsible for the exhibit, also organized a Black history panel, held at the closing of the tricentennial celebration. Shirley Parham alongside Ulle. Parham was a historian and the education director for the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum of Philadelphia that had opened in 1976 (now known as the African American Museum of Philadelphia). The panel’s aim was to change how Germantown history was taught. Parham suggested that change had to begin with challenging the belief that Germans were the only ones responsible for the development of Germantown. Parham also sought to temper the praise that White Germantown residents heaped on themselves related to the 1688 protest that she said had been “staged on the basis of economic rather than strictly moral concerns.”

An opportunity to begin to transform the memory of the protest arrived five years later, during the 1988 tricentennial commemoration of the protest. Preparations for the occasion began in 1987. Shirley Parham and Charles
Blockson were members of the planning committee, which also included members of the GMHT and a number of other local and city historians. The first meeting was held at Trinity Lutheran Church in Germantown. Blockson’s voice emerged as the most authoritative. Blockson argued that the commemoration of the protest was nationally significant, in part because of Germantown’s well-established national significance. He was also cautious, however, about overstating Germantown’s history of interracial cooperation. He reminded the committee that “it wasn’t until the 1950s that all kinds of blacks moved into Germantown, many coming from the south, that Germantown took on a multiracial character—although blacks were certainly here along with Native Americans from the very first days.”  

In addition, Blockson argued, “We are taught that William Penn was a great man. That he established a colony and called it a ‘Holy Experiment’ with liberty and freedom [for] all, but not for blacks. Many Quakers owned slaves, including Penn. But those who hold the pen of history have left out women, Native Americans, and blacks.” For these passionately argued reasons, Blockson suggested, celebrating such an occasion was vital. He said, “Throughout our history, there are many incidents recorded of people of other races and creeds who stood up for us. Our liberty and so-called freedom came about through centuries of agitation by blacks and whites. . . . Therefore, we too must have an integrated history.”  

Blockson’s position was influential. Correspondence between William Grassie and Markus Miller leading up to this event indicate that both men identified four themes for the event: to “Protest Injustice—Then and Now; Build Community; Take Responsibility; and Revitalize Our Neighborhoods.”  

Events held to commemorate the protest during March and April of 1988, included a lecture series entitled “Mid-nineteenth Century Slavery and the German Americans,” moderated by Villanova University professor James Berquist; a talk on “Quakers and Anti-slavery in the Eighteenth Century,” by Patricia Reifsnyder; and the opening of an exhibit located at both the Johnson House and the Germantown Mennonite Church entitled The Johnsons and the Underground Railroad in Germantown. In addition, a panel discussion was held at the Germantown Friends Meeting entitled “Afro-American Perspectives on the 1688 Protest,” with Shirley Parham, Charles Blockson, and Leroy Hopkins all as panelists.
Conclusion

On June 16, 2018, several hours before Executive Director Cornelia Swinson and her associates at the Johnson House were to begin their annual Juneteenth Parade and Celebration, I participated in a meeting at the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust with Board Chair Dave Hersch, Krefeld textile engineer Eduard Loers, Krefeld resident Werner Daniels, and German Society of Pennsylvania president Tony Michels. The German Society of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia City councilman Al Taubenberger had invited these individuals to march in the parade. They had carried with them a banner that read “1688 For Emancipation of Slaves,” which had, according to Michaels, recently been found in the archives and had been apparently used in nineteenth-century abolitionist parades by Germans in Philadelphia sympathetic to the cause of antislavery. The five of us met around a table in the back room of the GMHT. Several members of the Germantown Mennonite Church congregation joined us, as did a docent from the Johnson House. A lively conversation took place, in which Eduard Loers expressed his excitement over being at the site where his former countrymen had made the journey to America over three hundred years before. His family research connected him to the Jan Luckens family, who were among the first thirteen families to migrate to Germantown in 1683.

Another conversation centered around a question from Toni Michels. He asked how the Quakers had claimed authority for the antislavery heritage of the Anabaptists when most of the men who had signed the petition, with the

Members of the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust pose with historic banner while preparing for Juneteenth celebration, 2018. Photograph by Craig Stutman.
This photograph from the 2017 Juneteenth celebration shows the connection that the Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust has built with the broader movement for racial justice. Photograph by Craig Stutman.
exception of Pastorius, were Mennonites when they disembarked from the *Concord*. We talked about the fluidity of the religious traditions of those who migrated to Germantown. Many worshipped together until they had built churches. Once established, congregations changed over time. We spoke of the fact that the Lutherans and Mennonites, enemies in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, had formed friendly relationships in Germantown around their common German culture. We discussed the fluidity of the Rhineland area as well; Dutch and German, Mennonites and Quakers all emigrated to American and to Germantown, contributing to the complexity of the story. And we of course talked about the protest against slavery. Michels agreed that the German abolitionist spirit, especially among those in the Palatinate region, seemed to be strong among immigrants arriving in North America from the colonial era through to the mid-nineteenth century.

Throughout the meeting, I couldn’t stop thinking about how our guests were absorbing the aesthetics of our 1909 Sunday school room annex. Folding tables and chairs set up for community and board meetings sat in the center of the room, and its rectangular perimeter was lined with display cases holding *Martyr’s Mirror*, German Bibles, Frakturs, and silk samples from Krefeld. One large windowsill held a facsimile of the 1688 protest. On the center wall hung a 1901 Site and Relic Society Wooden Marker commemorating the signing of the 1688 protest as well. I also wondered what they thought about our Historic Germantown exhibit, *Petitions for Social Justice and Change*, a large monolithic structure outfitted with the language of the protest draped around its body. Historic Germantown commissioned the artist Ben Volta as part of Historic Germantown’s Elephants on the Avenue: Race, Class and Community in Historic Germantown series. Volta used the petition as a platform rather than a relic, and he designed a project in which local people could participate and “draw from the powerful words found throughout the 1688 petition to create our own historic artifacts that document the times.” He explained, “These collaborative and individual artworks will serve as contemporary petitions for equity and justice that speak to our current climate of social change.”

56

After the meeting ended, we all went over to the Johnson House and waited for the parade to begin. Eduard, Tony, and Michel then went onstage with Cornelia Swinson and Al Taubenberger, where they joined Philadelphia mayor Jim Kenney, who had come to the festival to speak about the importance of the event and the significance of the 1688 petition: past and present, present and past.
Notes

1 Washington, and many others who could afford it, came to Germantown during those two years in particular to either escape the yellow fever epidemic (1793) in Philadelphia or flee the city’s heat wave (1794). The 1752-built house was donated to the National Park Service in 1948 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. See also “Germantown White House,” National Park Service, last modified May 16, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/inde/learn/historyculture/places-germantownwhitehouse.htm.

2 Germantown United Community Development Corp, accessed March 4, 2021, http://germantownunitedcdc.org/; Historic Germantown: Freedom’s Backyard, accessed March 4, 2021, http://www.freedomsbackyard.com/. The event also took place in a central plaza in front of the Colonial Revival–built headquarters of Historic Germantown, in which the Germantown Historical Society also operates its museum, library, and archives. The story of the 1960s and early 1970s colonial Germantown group’s intention to build a central plaza as an anchor for Germantown’s historic sites was controversial and did not work, although the plaza has been reincorporated into Historic Germantown’s and GUCDC’s (among other groups) current plans for Germantown.

3 The city has, although not without controversy, addressed the “Washington and his slaves” story with the Washington’s house memorial in front of the Liberty Bell. This at least begins to tell the story about the paradox of having men who relied on enslaved labor build a new nation on the premise of liberty, equality, and freedom.

4 One might wonder what a weaving project has to do with the Germantown Mennonites. Well, contrary to the age-old mythology of Mennonite émigrés to colonial America being predominantly farmers, the Germantown Mennonites, who arrived in colonial Pennsylvania in 1683, were mostly weavers and paper-makers by trade, not farmers. Although many of these Germantown Mennonites certainly possessed either farming or husbandry skills, later generations of German and Dutch Mennonite immigrants actually comprised the communities of farmers that dotted the landscape of rural America, spreading out from points north and west of Germantown.


6 This occurred during the same period that saw the GMHT’s purchase of several additional historic properties. These included the Johnson House, a Quaker Underground Railroad site that was next door to a Mennonite homestead known as the Peter Keyser house, and Historic Rittenhouse Town, named for the William Rittenhouse. Both sites’ relationship with GMHT will be discussed at length later in this essay.
7 As of the fall of 2018, there is no longer an executive director, as the board of the trust is now weighing the economic feasibility of the position against the consequences of not having a centralized figure to direct or delegate responsibilities.

8 At first glance, the story of Germantown, Philadelphia, appears to have followed a familiar American trajectory. A group of seventeenth-century religious dissidents—in this case German and Dutch Mennonites and Quakers from the Palatinate region of Germany—accepted an offer to settle on a plot of land on the outskirts of the capital of William Penn’s “Holy Experiment.” They gradually displaced the Lenape Indian population. During the late eighteenth century through to the mid-nineteenth century, wealthy city dwellers began to appear in the area, venturing out of the city to build their country homes and estates. And by the turn of the twentieth century, Catholic and Jewish migrants from southern and eastern Europe—many of whom were looking for work in the industrial mills of southeastern Pennsylvania—joined the fray. By the late nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, African Americans, many of whom had been living in small enclaves nearby, began to set up larger, more intentional communities within the town’s confines (which had been incorporated into the city of Philadelphia in 1854). During the Great Migration, many African Americans from the southern states relocated to Germantown, increasing the size of Black educational, religious, and cultural institutions. By the middle of the twentieth century, Germantown could be described, in the words of Frank X. Delany, as “a physically, socially and economically diverse community.” Delany has argued that the neighborhood’s development was shaped by its dual identity; it evolved as both “a mill town on the one hand and . . . a garden suburb on the other.” Unfortunately, racially-based economic and cultural segregation grew alongside the town’s increasing class and ethnic diversity. Segregation in churches, recreational facilities, and other social and economic institutions became the norm.


10 This is a bit of a paradox, however, because telling these colonial peoples’ cultural, social, economic, religious, and architectural histories is also vitally important to preserving both the neighborhood’s ethos and its built environment as well, a point that will be noted throughout this essay. But what is not up for debate is the centuries-old practice in the humanities and in the social sciences of neglecting, denigrating, or flat-out erasing histories.
“The Truth about Cliveden: The Chew Family Had Slaves and It’s Time to Talk about It,” WHYY, June 6, 2012, https://whyy.org/articles/clivedens-new-campaign/. Cliveden’s programming has also been mentioned in Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry’s Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). See also Donna McDaniel and Vanessa Julye’s Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African Americans, and the Myth of Racial Justice (Philadelphia: Quaker Press, 2009), which has only quite recently looked at exploding the myth of Quakers, abolitionism, and slaveholding—a topic that will be examined in more detail later on in this essay.

An active debate exists within the historiography regarding who authored the protest—whether they were Mennonites, Mennonites and Quakers, or just Quakers.

E. Hocker, Germantown 1688–1933 (Germantown, PA: Author, 1933). The heads of these thirteen original families were Dirk, Herman and Abraham Isaacs Op den Graff; Tunes Kunders, Johannes Bleikers, Lenart Arets, Peter Keujrlis, Wilhelm Streipers, Reinert Tisen, Jan Lense, Jan Simens, Abraham Tunes, and Jan Luken.


Higganbotham Jr., In the Matter of Color, 377–79.

Higganbotham Jr., 293.

St. Louis Post Dispatch, September 29th, 1883, 11. Most likely, the anonymous author who composed the piece had gleaned his or her ideas from the writings of Daniel Cassel and Samuel Pennypacker, including their Mennonite histories, written during
the 1870s and 1880s and encompassing the Germantown part of the story. Such articles that would detail Germantown over the next few decades pretty much followed the same narrative.

23 “German Bi-centenary,” Times, October 6, 1883, 3.
25 Historical records include two spellings for the name of the town of Krefeld. Until 1925, it was common to see “Crefeld,” particularly in English-language sources. In Pennsylvania, some locations and businesses—including the Crefeld School—still use the older spelling.
27 “Spectacular Pageant in Honor of German Day,” Lincoln Star, October 6, 1910, 1.
28 “Spectacular Pageant.”
31 He became mayor of Philadelphia in 1920.
37 “Swastika Absent, Dr. Luther Balks at Address Here,” Philadelphia Inquirer, October 8, 1933, 25.
38 This subject would require further research.
40 “250th Anniversary of the Settlement of Germantown,” program, 1933, Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust Archives (hereafter cited as GMHT Archives). The Johnson House is next door to the Keyser house, which was not even on the list of sites to visit.
41 Unfortunately, this was an occurrence at many Quaker churches until the early twentieth century as well. See McDaniel and Julye’s Fit for Freedom; Devin C. Manzullo Thomas, “Mennonites,” in The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia, http://philadelphiacentralencyclopedia.org/archive/mennonites/.
A number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians and publications indeed refer to the protest as a “Mennonite protest against slavery,” including Samuel Pennypacker, Leon Higginbotham, and the Philadelphia Tribune (the longest continuously running Black newspaper in the United States—from 1884 to today—which for at least three decades beginning in the 1970s ran advertisements on what Black history sites could be visited in Philadelphia and had on their list both the Johnson House and the 1770 Germantown Meetinghouse, as well as an anecdote about the Germantown Mennonite protest against slavery). However, there has also been confusion or disagreement over the faith of the German Germantown residents who signed and put forth the petition.

In the 250th anniversary book that was previously discussed, there is a short essay entitled “The Religion of the Founders” that essentially encapsulates this entire debate. The anonymous author of that essay wrote that “some of the original settlers had been Mennonites in Europe, but all the thirteen ‘heads of families’ from Crefeld arriving on October 6, 1683, became members of the Society of Friends, except for Jan Lensen, who remained a Mennonite.” The problem that scholars have with this logic is that several of the signers, including Abraham Op De Graef, are buried in Mennonite cemeteries in Montgomery County, and it does not take into account the fact that most of the thirteen families’ ancestors remained Mennonites.

It appears that the story got co-opted—though most likely for benign reasons. Nathaniel Kite, self-described as a “Quaker antiquarian,” “discovered” the original document protesting slavery in 1844 and immediately wrote about it in the Friends Journal and deposited the document in a Swarthmore library. But Kite’s ideas (and those of the dozens of others who followed him) on why the Mennonites became
Quakers might be due to a simple stumbling block: because there was no formal Mennonite meetinghouse until 1708, Mennonites worshipped in the homes of early settlers, and both the Quakers and Mennonites often worshipped together. Additionally, because of this and because of the fluidity of Germantown’s early residents to change denominations (such as Anabaptists to Anabaptist, Mennonite to Brethren, Mennonite to Quaker, Quaker to Mennonite, Mennonite to Lutheran, etc.), the story gets a bit muddled.

But it may have also been wrongly attributed to Quakers because of how and why the protest was signed in the first place. Because a number of prominent Quakers owned slaves, including William Penn, the petitioners brought forth their protest to Quaker meetings, pleading with the supposedly social-justice-conscious churchgoers to end the practice of slaveholding among Quakers first and foremost. As such, appearing then in front of the Quaker monthly meeting in Dublin, Pennsylvania, and then to the quarterly and annual meetings in Philadelphia, to object to this practice does not show membership but instead a belief that as allies, both communities should work together to end slaveholding.

To be most accurate, therefore, it is perhaps best to call the protest a Mennonite and Quaker protest at the least, and a Mennonite protest at best, but not a Quaker protest. This subject deserves an article or a book of its own.

53 “Minutes from the Planning Meeting for the 300th Anniversary of the First Protest against Slavery in North America,” April 21, 1987, GMHT Archives, folder “1988 Protest Anniversary.”
54 “Minutes from the Planning Meeting,” 4.