

Church dates to 1767

Jodie Whitekettle
Capital Times Contributor

As the sun set on Sept. 12, the bells rang out in the steeple of Saint Peter's Kierch in Middletown. The Reverend David C. Newhart stepped from a maroon, horse-drawn carriage followed by a man wearing a black, pilgrim suit with a white tie and large cuffs.

Two men dressed in colonial clothing, each holding a flintlock and a musket, stood at each side of the church door as members of the congregation filled the ground-floor and balcony on three sides of the church.

They were celebrating the 220th anniversary of the Kierch, a historical landmark whose cornerstone was laid on July 13, 1767.

The 278-year-old pilgrim was Dr. Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg, played by Dr. Henry Diers, Dean of the School of Arts and Communication of Susquehanna University.

"I came here from Philadelphia to celebrate the dedication of this church," Diers said.

The church has not changed much since Muhlenberg's last visit. Muhlenberg was the pastor of a church in Trappe, Pennsylvania and a patriarch of the Lutheran Church during the 1700s. He assumed the role of a bishop because he was the overseer of many of the churches in central and eastern Pennsylvania. Muhlenberg arrived on a horse to dedicate the church and gave the first sermon on Sept. 12, 1769.

Muhlenberg's journal for Monday, Sept. 11, 1769, read, "Prepared for my journey....The Elders and Deacons of the Evangelical Lutheran congregation were there.....quickly assembled and welcomed us with tears of joy."

The church was silent as the impersonator of Dr. Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg, wearing a white wig, walked up to the blue and white, wooden pulpit to present his sermon.

Diers gave a sermon on Jacob: "We think of Christians needing an example of some kind and we all know the story

of Jacob."

If Diers really had been Muhlenberg, he preached on the correct topic because Muhlenberg's journal on Tuesday, Sept. 12, 1769 said, "We sang hymns of praise, and I preached on Genesis 28:20, 'And Jacob made a vow.'"

Diers' German accent reflected the research that he put into preparing for the role of Muhlenberg.

"He could impersonate Henry," said Assistant Pastor, Reverend K. Robert Schmitt, "and we chose him for that reason."

In his welcome, Pastor Newhart said, "The building is a symbol of our faith, but it is not our faith."

A few minutes passed between the time the people entered the church and the when the service began. The congregation, hot though the clear glass windows were raised, fanned themselves.

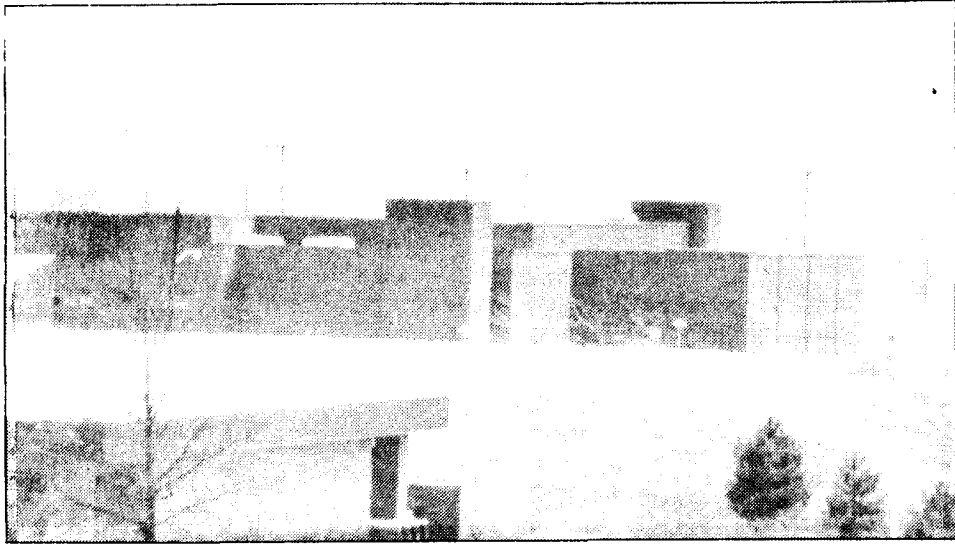
Their restlessness was halted by the harmonious sound of the choir singing from a hymn book copyrighted in 1817, accompanied by an organ that dated from an 1850 remodeling project.

Two Dauphin stoves, sitting on each side of the room were used until electricity replaced them in the 1930s. They were built in Middletown by Raymond & Campbell.

The celebration touched past and present. Among the congregation, one woman was dressed in an old-fashioned long, floral dress down to her ankles and a bonnet while the lady beside her wore modern polyester dress pants with a frilly blouse.

The congregation voted to build a new church in 1876 because membership was increasing. In 1879, the kierch held a short service and then the members marched to the new St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Middletown. Now only three services are held in the kierch annually.

When asked why he chose the special appearance of Muhlenberg to celebrate the anniversary, Pastor Newhart said, "It's a way for the congregation to celebrate and recall the history."



file photo

Even on a dreary day, the cooling towers of the Three Mile Island nuclear power can be seen from Olmsted.

TMI to evaporate radioactive water

Jon Fleck
Capital Times Staff

Three Mile Island plans to start evaporating the 2.3 million gallons of water left over from the March 1979 accident and cleanup, and that has many people concerned.

The process, which will cost \$4 million and take 15 to 24 months to complete, will evaporate water "slightly tainted" with radioactive tritium, said Bill Gross, TMI public relations manager.

Gross said there should be no concern over the radioactive exposure and said that it is much lower than the exposure from watching for a year. "The total radioactive dose has very little consequence when put into perspective," Gross said. "People don't understand how harmless the process really is."

Three Mile Island Alert, an anti-nuclear group established in 1977, is attempting to stop the procedure. The state Department of Environmental Resources is holding hearings today and tomorrow, to determine if the evaporation process should be shut down temporarily until a full-fledged hearing can be held.

"We don't agree with Three Mile Island," said Kay Pickering, office coordinator for TMI. "We are concerned not only about exposure to the general

public, but also about the workers on-site at the evaporator."

Pickering pointed out that it appears that TMI is having problems with the evaporator when it is tested using water with chemicals.

Scott Huebner, a Penn State Harrisburg environmental instructor, attributes the concern to the closeness of the plant.

"Most of the opposition to the plan of on-site evaporation is part of the 'not in my back yard' syndrome," Huebner said. "I have mixed emotions because I don't have all of the details yet."

Huebner added that if the weather conditions and radioactive releases are closely monitored that the evaporation can be done safely.

The process is the same one used by other industries which use a lot of water. Gross compared it to the process that makes evaporated milk. The system will also automatically shut down if excessive radiation levels are detected.

When asked about the ten-year time span between the accident and the evaporation process, Huebner said that the gap is not as long as it sounds.

"Most of what they're doing in respect to the accident is the first time through," Huebner said. "Nobody's dealt with a nuclear accident of this size in the U.S. before."

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