

York Farm Women Society 26 Visits Ephrata Cloister

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Lancaster Farming Staff
EPHRATA (Lancaster Co.) — If you are searching for a day trip, you might want to do what the Farm Women Society 26 of York County did. They celebrated their club's 25th anniversary with a visit to the Ephrata Cloister.

The trip provided a glimpse into the 18th century life of a religious commune.

While the members examined



A Farm Women member dons a vell worn by women at the Cloister settlement.

the 15-inch board that was used for a bed and its accompanying wooden pillow, one woman remarked, "I can see why the group died out."

The purpose of the austere lifestyle of the Cloisters was to teach its members self-denial in order to get closer to God.

Founded by Conrad Beissel in 1732, the commune consisted of three orders, a brotherhood and a sisterhood that practiced celibacy, and a married order of householders.

Strict rules, little sleep, and bland food permeated the commune.

The medieval-style buildings had low door openings that forced members to stoop whenever they walked through them. This was to remind them to be humble.

At its peak of popularity, the radical religious community had 300 members. The celibate orders lived on the grounds and worked at farming, basketmaking, papermaking, printing, bookmaking, carpentry, and milling.

Beissel believed that music was necessary for a pious lifestyle. Members wrote music and followed strict dietary rules to purify their voices. Music was sang in five parts that included an unusual falsetto.

Education was important to the religious commune. In 1740, the



York Farm Women Society 26 toured the Ephrata Cloister. From left, front row: Mary Lantz, Athena Beshore, Betty Bertolette, Ruth Willis, and Louise Pennay. Back row, from left: Naomi Cashner, Luna Kohler, Martha Yost, Mabel Miller, Doris Beshore, Mary Conley, and Clara Wilt.

Cloister community founded a school, which was later used as a public school. In 1743, the commune began printing numerous tracts, books and other literature. The Cloister printing press is best known for printing the largest book ever printed in colonial America. The book, *Martyrs Mirror*, has 1,200 pages and tells the stories of Anabaptists martyred for their faith.

Convinced that it was necessary to show charity to others, the Cloister provided free lodging and food to travelers. They also nursed

500 wounded soldiers during the Revolutionary war.

Beissel died in 1768. Few remained interested in a life of self denial and celibacy and by 1800 the few remaining members incorporated with the Seventh Day German Baptist Church that used the

buildings until 1934.

In 1941, The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission assumed administration and restored it as an important historic site.

For information on the Ephrata Cloister, call (717) 733-6600.



The Ephrata Cloister settlement was furnished only with items that were necessary for their daily chores.

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