

# Lancaster Farming *Antiques Center*

## German Religious Settlement Fails, But History Preserved



Guides bring history to life in Zoar, Ohio.

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ZOAR, Ohio — In a previous antiques article we learned of the German settled Harmony Society just north of Cranberry. Like the Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, and Harmony, still another German Separatists group settled in Zoar, Ohio.

Having been persecuted because of their belief in separation of church and state, the Zoars fled Wurtemberg, Germany, to have freedom to worship as they chose.

Guided by a vision from their mystic spiritual leader, they set sail for America in April 1817, arriving at Philadelphia in August.

Aided by the Quakers, arrangements were made for purchasing 5,500 acres in the Tuscarawas River valley in Ohio to be paid back in 15 years.

A small band of men arrived at their new land on October 16, 1817. By spring they had built enough shelter to house their families who had been left in Philadelphia for the winter. They named their settlement Zoar after the Biblical town to which Lot fled seeking refuge from Sodom. A seven point star of Bethlehem was chosen as their emblem and the acorn from which the mighty oak grows was their symbol of strength.

Failure appeared imminent in this harsh new land. A plan was devised to assure that either all or none would succeed or perish. A community of goods and efforts was devised whereby all individual property and future earnings became common stock.

On April 19, 1819, the articles of association were signed by 53 men and 104 women establishing "The Society of Separatists of Zoar."

Joseph Baumeler was named agent-general as well as the Society's spiritual and temporal leader. Men and women possessed equal political rights.

In 1827, the Society was contracted to dig seven miles of the Ohio-Erie Canal which passed through their land. Their work was completed for \$21,000 and allowed the Society to pay off its land debt.

During the time period of building the canal, about five years, the Zoars remained celibate. Children, aged 3 and over, were taken to a central location to be raised by appointed nannies. The idea was that women were needed to help in building the canal. If they were pregnant, it became impossible to do this difficult work.

People 60 and over were housed in yet another building. Those who wished to remain active could do so, others did lighter tasks for the community.

The canal essentially opened the area for commerce, and at one time, the Society operated as many as four canal boats. Zoar was almost totally self sufficient with excesses being sold to outsiders. By the mid 1800s, the Society had accumulated assets of more than one million dollars.

The Society began to decline after Baumeler's death in 1853. By the late 1800s, the Zoars were no longer commercially competitive. This and other outside influences caused the Society to disband in 1898 with a division of assets. Each Society member received land, house, and possessions.

However, the Society did achieve its original purpose of survival in a new land.

Today, Zoar has a 12-block historic district, which is unique in that it remains a living part of the community. Peaceful side streets invite one to browse. Many of the buildings contain home occupations much like those did in the Zoarites' era.

There are a variety of shops offering gift items, restaurants, bed and breakfasts, and the visitor information buildings.

The United Church of Christ occupies the 1853-meeting house next to an up-to-date fire department.

For an admission fee, visitors can tour the dairy and cheese making buildings, the Magazine Complex where weekly supplies and staples were distributed, the community greenhouse and gardens, bakery, tin shop, wagon shop, blacksmith shop, and sewing house.

In the center of the town is a large flower garden where the hard working Zoarites would gather on summer evenings to chat, play games, and worship. The area is constructed with very tall trees in the center surrounded by a maze of flower gar-

dens. The paths of the maze all lead to the tall trees symbolizing the paths to heaven. It is also noted that if one strays off the main path, he can find his way back again.

The greenhouse, once used for growing the town's veggie and flower plants is now a nursery for area sick houseplants.

Special events throughout the year include canal hikes, dairying at Zoar, a Harvest Festival, and food preservation workshop.

Zoar is located 2.5 miles east of I-77 (exit 93) on State Route 212 in Ohio. For more information contact Zoar Village at Box 404, Zoar, Ohio 44697. E-mail questions to [HYPERLINK](mailto:HYPERLINK) mail-to: [kmfzoar@compuserve.com](mailto:kmfzoar@compuserve.com) [kmfzoar@compuserve.com](mailto:kmfzoar@compuserve.com)



Today visitors learn that failure appeared imminent in this harsh new land for the religious settlement. A plan was devised to assure that either all or none would succeed or perish. A community of goods and efforts was devised whereby all individual property and future earnings became common stock.



This is a typical Zoar kitchen with furniture made by the Zoars. Note the practical, sturdy lines.



A private dwelling built in the Zoar era is still in use.



A tin making shop shows the craftsmanship of the religious settlement.



A guide, who is a German war bride, displays shows some of the tin items made in the shop.