

EPHRATA CLOISTER

Founded in 1732 by a German immigrant, Conrad Beissel, Ephrata Cloister was the birthplace of the Borough of Ephrata. Here along the banks of the Cocalico Creek, Beissel and his followers awaited the Second Coming of Christ. At its height in the 1740s/1750s, the community of the Solitary at Ephrata numbered about 80 celibate members and about 200 Householder or married members with families. The celibate Brothers and Sisters lived a life of religious devotion and self-denial to prepare themselves for Christ's Second Coming.

This quiet German Anabaptist community accomplished much for such a small community. They erected four and five story Germanic-style buildings. These buildings, two of which still exist, were some of the largest buildings west of Philadelphia in the 1740s. They also practiced the art of Frakturschriften (a type of calligraphy). Following the founder's musical composition methods, they composed over 1,000 hymns, creating magnificent hymnal manuscripts. The first documented North American women composers were Ephrata Sisters! The Ephrata Cloister Chorus sings some of these very hymns in one of the buildings where they were originally sung.

By 1745, the brotherhood established a printing office to produce works of their own authorship and for outside customers. Fifteen Brothers worked for three years to produce the first German edition of the "Martyr's Mirror" for their Mennonite neighbors. This was the largest printing in the American colonies prior to the American Revolution.

Following Beissel's death in 1768, the celibate population declined and by 1813, the last celibate member died, leaving the property and faith to the remaining married members. The following year, they formed the German Seventh Day Baptist Church. Congregation members continued to live and worship at the site as the Borough of Ephrata grew around them.

In 1941, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania purchased the remaining 28 acres and nine original buildings. The Ephrata Cloister Associates were formed in

1958 to support the Commonwealth's preservation and educational mission. The property is managed by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission with the support of the Ephrata Cloister Associates, a registered non-profit organization.

Ephrata Cloister offers self-guided and guided tours, school tour programs, musical performances and special events throughout the year. And no visit is complete without a trip to the Museum Store. Ephrata Cloister volunteers assist the site's staff and contribute to the success of these programs.

Today the restored Ephrata Cloister preserves the legacy of the community, as well as that of Pennsylvania's founder William Penn and his Holy Experiment that offered religious freedom to early colonists. When you walk through the gates, it feels like you're transported back in time.

The Ephrata Cloister is located at 632 West Main Street, Ephrata. Hours vary seasonally. Please refer to their website, www.ephratacloister.org or call 717-733-6600 for more information.

