Early White Settlers

The date of the earliest settlement of Lehigh County is decidedly indefinite. We are told that white traders came into the Lehigh Valley as early as 1701 to barter with the Indians, but it was considerably later that any permanent settlers arrived. German immigrants are believed to have located in Lower Milford Township about 1715. Some records indicate that as early as 1719 Peter Trexler settled along Spring Creek, where Trexlerstown is now. Certainly many families settled in the region before 1730. Practically all the early arrivals were Germans who had landed in Philadelphia and, seeking homes, pushed northward beyond the already occupied portions of Pennsylvania. Some were persons who had bound themselves to work out their passage costs after landing and were known as Redemptioners. The shipping companies sold the services of these people to farmers mainly for periods up to three years. At the expiration of their terms they were free to locate farms for themselves. These redemptioners came mainly between 1728 and 1751.

Most of the immigrants came from the Palatinate. A variety of reasons caused them to emigrate, but principally religious persecution and economic distress. They came to Pennsylvania rather than elsewhere because agents of William Penn circulating through their homelands of the Rhine region had spread the reports of “peace, liberty and fertile soil” that they could secure and enjoy in Penn’s colony.

The first settlers entered the region from the south, now Bucks, Montgomery, and Berks counties, and occupied Lower and Upper Milford and Upper Saucon townships. But soon they crossed South Mountain and located in the wide limestone valley, which was more to their liking. One historian has expressed the idea that the German farmer was especially desirous of obtaining limestone land. However, he found few streams in the limestone sections, so many a compromise had to be made. Later arrivals pushed northward into the slate regions, doubtless attracted by the numerous springs in the valleys.

There seem to have been few organized groups of colonists among the first settlers in Lehigh County. In the main they came as single families and settled themselves where they could. With few exceptions they were poor and of limited educational and cultural background, characteristics common to first settlers in every new country. In general they possessed unusual initiative and courage and were deeply religious, industrious, and of hardy stock. Many of the present residents have reason to be proud of such an ancestry. They suffered unanticipated privations, but with fortitude of spirit overcame obstacles and discouragement as they came along, and laid the foundation for the prosperity and happiness enjoyed by their descendants.

The settlers in the northwest section of the county and adjoining portions of Berks County had crop failures at times so that that region received the name of Alle-Mängel (lacking everything). They traveled eastward for food and other supplies and the region of succor was named Egypt, a name which still survives but with Alle-Mängel not entirely obsolete.