

PETER KEYSER November 9, 1766-May 21, 1849

Miller, D. L. and Royer, Gallen B., Some Who Led, "Peter Keyser.", Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1912, 27-30.

Elder Peter Keyser was a direct descendant of a notable Mennonite family of Europe. They suffered persecution, as did our own brethren, and one of the family, Leonard Keyser, was publicly burned at the stake in August, 1527, because he strenuously refused to renounce his religious convictions. They were driven from place to place by the cruelty of their persecutors, until finally the family found refuge in the principal city of Holland, Amsterdam. Here they found rest for a time, but in 1668 Peter Dirck Keyser, the great grandfather of our Bishop Keyser, came to America and settled at Germantown, PA. Here with others he found liberty to serve God, as he believed, according to his Word, and here the subject of this memoir was born November 9, 1766. His father was the first of the Keyser family to unite with the Church of the Brethren. He was baptized by Alexander Mack October 5, 1769.

When the boy, Peter Keyser, Jr., was in his eighteenth year he was brought under conviction and had his second birth. He was received into church fellowship by Christian baptism, administered by Bishop Martin Urner, September 28, 1784. He was possessed of a remarkable aptitude for learning, was quick of perception and had a wonderful memory. His natural powers made it easy for him to commit entire chapters of the Scriptures to memory and this gave him unusual prominence among his associates and friends, and doubtless stimulated him to greater efforts in committing the Bible to memory. The remark was once made by the Rev. Dr. Philip F. Mayer that, "if by some accident, every copy of the Scriptures should be destroyed, it could be restored so long as Peter Keyser lived." The author of "Eminent Philadelphians", says of Brother Keyser: "He had the most intimate knowledge of the sacred Scriptures, both in English and German, and it is doubtful whether any other man could repeat them more accurately than he. It appeared as though he remembered the very words, verses and chapters of the entire Bible."

The following incident will reveal how he obtained his knowledge of God's Word. His father was a tanner and it was young Peter's task to attend the bark mill and keep the horse attached it moving. Above the hopper of the mill he attached a shelf where he placed his Bible, and while the grinding was going on he committed to memory chapter after chapter of the Scriptures. Thus by using every moment of time he committed the entire New Testament and the greater part of the Old to memory. He not only read the Bible through, but got the Bible through him, which is, after all, the only way to salvation. His example is worthy of all imitation and is heartily commended to the young of the present generation. Soon after he united with the church he was called to the ministry. This occurred in 1785, and in 1802 he was ordained to the bishopric, in which office he faithfully served forty-seven years. He was called home May 21, 1849, in the same house in which, as he took pleasure in relating, he was twice born; first into this world, and second into the kingdom of God. He was in his eighty-third year and had walked with God for many years, and the Lord took him and he was not.

He was bishop of the Germantown and Philadelphia churches forty-seven years, succeeding Alexander Mack in charge of the Germantown church, and was the third elder of that church after its organization in 1723. When the Philadelphia church was organized, in 1813, it was placed under Bishop Keyser's charge and care, and he faithfully and ably discharged his duties to the churches. It is believed that the Church of the Brethren has never produced a greater orator, a minister with a deeper or more profound knowledge of the Scriptures, or a preacher of greater eloquence and efficiency in the pulpit. He drew large audiences and was considered by all churches as one of the great preachers of his time.

In his later years he lost his eyesight, but this did not interfere with his work as a minister, for he continued to preach with unabated zeal and vigor to the end. When he became blind he would take his place on the stand, open his Bible and repeat an entire chapter without missing a single word, and would then preach an able sermon. The stranger, if present, would never have suspected that he was blind and was reading by the inner light of his marvelous memory. If the deacons in reading a chapter, as was the custom in those days, omitted a word in his presence he would at once correct them.

Brother Keyser was a man of great physical strength and endurance. Like King Saul, he was "higher than all the people". He was six feet and three inches tall, rather spare in form, without an ounce of extra flesh on his body, muscles of steel-like quality, a natural athlete, and was capable of doing an

immense amount of labor and study. For many years it was his custom to rise at four o'clock in the morning and devote the early hours of the day to reading and study until the time came for him to go to his place of business. In this way he kept his mental powers keen and active, and himself abreast of the times in which he lived. He also, by using his memory, kept it unimpaired even to old age.

He continued with his father in the tanning business until 1794, when he moved to the city of Philadelphia and engaged largely in the lumber business. He was scrupulously honest in all his business relations and had a high reputation for integrity as a business man. The fact that he was held in high esteem is attested by the fact that for many years he served the city as secretary of the Board of Health, secretary and treasurer of the Society for the Alleviation of the suffering in the Public Prisons, and when the public school system was adopted by the State he was director and controller of the city schools. He served in these various offices for the good of his fellow-men until he retired from active business life. In 1828 he moved to his estate and old home at Germantown, where he lived and labored for the church until the Lord called him to his reward. Such was his fidelity to the principles he espoused that in all his extensive business career he never brought suit against any one, nor was he ever sued.

It was truthfully said of him as of one of old: "He was eyes to the blind, feet to the lame, a father to the poor, and the cause he knew not he searched out."