

# THE PALIMPSEST

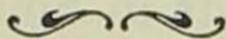
EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXIX

ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1948

No. 11

COPYRIGHT 1948 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



## American Backgrounds

Lutherans were among the first to explore and settle America. One authority states that the Bronx was named for Jonas Bronck, a noted Lutheran peacemaker among the Indians. Another Lutheran (Johann Conrad Weiser), warm friend of the Iroquois, negotiated numerous Indian treaties in Pennsylvania and gained the support of many tribes for the English colonists against the French. Although he died in 1760, Weiser is said to have left such an influence among his powerful Indian friends, that they swung from the English to the embattled colonists at the outbreak of the American Revolution.

This same authority claims that a Lutheran "bellman old and gray" rang the Liberty Bell in 1776! A Lutheran pastor (John Peter Gabriel Mühlenberg) flung aside his clerical garb to fight with Von Steuben and DeKalb. Another Lutheran preacher (Frederick Augustus Conrad Mühlenberg) was destined to become speaker of

the first House of Representatives. Obviously, Lutherans played an important rôle in the events leading up to the birth of the nation.

But Lutherans came to the New World long before the outbreak of the American Revolution. There were Lutherans in South America as early as 1532 when the Augsburgians in Welserland (Venezuela) accepted the Augsburg Confession of 1530. The first Lutheran pastor reached American soil a year before the arrival of the Pilgrims. Pastor Rasmus Jensen, who acted as chaplain to the Danish explorers, landed on the west shore of Hudson Bay and spent the winter of 1619 to 1620 in this bleak region. The Dutch in New York and the Swedes on the Delaware formed the first Lutheran congregations in North America. After 1700 Lutherans ranged from New York to Georgia, their churches being served by pastors from the mother countries.

It was not until 1748 that Lutherans effectually organized into a company of congregations, commonly called a Synod. This early endeavor toward joint action was carried out under the leadership of Henry Melchior Mühlberg (the father of John Peter and Frederick Augustus) and the founder of Lutheranism in America. During Mühlberg's active service in the ministry many Synods arose. Efforts were then made to combine

these Synods into one united Lutheran Church.

In 1820 these attempts culminated in the founding of the General Synod, the first union of Lutheran Synods in America. Not all Synods joined the body, but it was hoped eventually to unite them all. This desire was not to be realized because of disagreement as to doctrine and practice in the new organization.

With the influx of many Lutheran immigrants, beginning around 1820, new groups of Lutherans appeared on the scene, especially in the West. In 1838 a large body of Saxon Lutherans arrived and settled mainly in Perry County, Missouri. Under the leadership of their most noted theologian — the Rev. C. F. W. Walther — these Saxons joined with scattered Lutherans of the Midwest in 1847 to form the church-body, which today is known as the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.

Sessions at the organizational meeting of the Missouri Synod were held in Chicago, Illinois, and lasted from April 26 to May 6, 1847. Twelve pastors with their congregations accepted the constitution which had been drafted and adopted the year before in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Ten other pastors affixed their signatures to the document. They were called advisory members, because their congregations had not yet voted to

enter the Synod. Of the twenty-one ministers in attendance, four lived in Missouri, six in Ohio, five in Indiana, three in Illinois, two in Michigan, and one in New York. The twelve congregations which joined at Chicago had 3,000 members.

The constitution of 1847 (still in force today) provided that the Missouri Synod in its conventions had no right to make any laws for the congregations, but that the latter are to administer their own affairs. On the other hand, the congregations recognized that those who have the same faith ought to meet and work together. The declared reasons for the organization of the Missouri Synod were: to secure unity in doctrine, to extend the Kingdom of God, to train ministers and teachers, and to publish sound Lutheran books and papers.

As early as 1855 the Missouri Synod was divided into districts or geographical territories. These grew in number as the Synod increased in size. In 1879, for example, the Iowa District was established and grew so rapidly that by 1936 it was divided into Iowa District East and Iowa District West. The story of the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod in Iowa reveals in miniature the development of that Synod throughout the United States.

L. C. WUERFFEL