

Peter Bazaillion

Excerpts on his life from "OLD ST. JOHN'S CHURCH YARD, PEQUEA"

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Perhaps no grave in the old churchyard attracts more attention than does that of Peter Bezaillion, the Indian Trader. He was born in Canada, of French parentage, and came to this region with Letort, the Indian Trader and other French Protestants in 1686. Bezaillion traded with the Indians in what are now Delaware, Chester and Lancaster counties prior to 1696; and was particularly active in the trade at Conestoga Indian town. About this time he owned a plantation on the west side of the Schuylkill (2) referred to in the minutes of the Board of Property in February, 1717, as: "The old plantation where Peter Bezaillion formerly dwelt." He did not remain there long, as he began to roam about the Province. He penetrated the distant wilderness; bartered with the Indians for peltries; and established trading posts at various points.

About the year 1729 he settled down on a farm in Cain township (3) Chester county. From papers now in the possession of Mr. Joseph Beale, of Coatesville, it is evident that Bezaillion was only a tenant when he located there, for, in 1729, he paid the owner of the tract, John Bezor, eighty-three dollars quit rent. In 1737, Bezaillion and his wife Martha took title from John Warden, of Philadelphia, successor of John Bezor, for five hundred acres of land located now partly in Coatesville and partly in East Cain township. This tract extended from the Smith's of the North and South Valley Hills; and embraced the full width of the Chester Valley. From the Bezaillions the land descended to the Harts, and from them to the Gardners. One hundred and ninety acres of the original tract are in possession of the Beale family to-day. The house in which Peter Bezaillion lived was located within the limits of the present city of Coatesville, and stood near the southwest corner of Olive and 12th streets. A part of this house was standing twenty years ago.

Peter Bazaillion did not have his trading post (4) at his permanent residence, as his headquarters were among the Paxtang Indians, where, in 1721, it has been recorded that he had a trading post. His brother Richard was associated with him.

Peter Bezaillion was a cunning, crafty trader . . . one who was treacherous in his business deals not only with the aborigines but the Colonists as well. His dishonest methods aroused the ire and suspicion of the Provincial authorities. On December 19, 1693, the Bezaillion brothers, and the Letort's (husband and wife) were accused before the Provincial Council by Thomas Jenner and Polycarpus Rose of having carried on a secret correspondence in the year before with "the strange Indians called the Shall-Narooners (Shawanees) and the French of Canada." That his treachery was known to many is evident from a letter which William Markham (5) wrote to the Governor of Maryland under date of June 26, 1696, the Governor of Pennsylvania says: "Upon the copy of what Col. Herman gave unto your Excellency and Council, I shall require security for Bezaillion tho' I know that will not satisfy the Coll. He (Bezaillion) will still be uneasy until he get all the Indian trade to himself."

In 1701, the case of Peter Bezaillion was brought to the attention of William Penn and the Council. He was suspected of being "a very dangerous person in his traffic with the Indians in this troublesome conjuncture of affairs." The Provincial Council resolved that: "It was absolutely necessary that the Frenchman should be restrained from trading or inhabiting amongst the Indians." Two years later Peter Bezaillion was required by Council to give bonds in the amount of 500 pounds and was admonished "to behave himself as a good and loyal subject of Queen Anne." In 1710 he was referred to by the Governor of the Province "as a Frenchman, a Roman Catholic, and a suspicious person generally who trades with the Conestoga Indians." In 1711 his fidelity (6) was again suspected, and this time he was thrown into prison.

Despite his unscrupulous business methods, Peter Bezaillion was a man of some importance (7) in the Province, as the following record in the Minutes of the Provincial Council dated May 18, 1704, would seem to indicate: "Peter Bezaillion, ye French trader, coming to town

(Phila.) and being sent for informed ye board that he had heard that those of ye Five Nations who intended shortly down this way, had a design of carrying off the Shawanah Indians, both those settled near Conestoga and those near Lechay, they being colonies of a nation that were their enemies."

His services as interpreter (8) were employed on numerous occasions. When Governor John Evans visited the Shawanese Indians of Pequehan or Pequea on June 30, 1707, the Indian King Opessah received him and delivered a speech in behalf of the youth of the town. Peter Bezaillion, who accompanied the Governor on this trip, acted as interpreter.

In November, 1708, Bezaillion was given permission by the Property Commissioners to erect a home and plant fields for his own use on the lands above Conestoga. In May, 1712, he was licensed by the Governor to trade with the Indians. In July of the same year the Governor told the Indians that Peter Bezaillion was the only trader who had ever been allowed by the Governor to settle amongst them. In 1714 he again received a warrant from the Commissioners of Property allowing him to "seat himself at Paxtang, or at any other Indian town or place on the Susquehanna, in this Province, and to erect such buildings as are necessary for his trade."

On July 18, 1717, he acted as interpreter for the Delawares at a conference held at Conestoga.

His name appears on the first tax list of Conestoga township after its erection in 1718.

In 1728 he acted with Nicholas and John Schull as interpreters at an Indian conference held in Philadelphia.

He died on July 18, 1742, at the advanced age of eighty (9). His personal property was appraised at 573 pounds; and he names eight slaves in his will. One of these slaves Ceasar Gloss by name, Bezaillion brought with him when he settled in Cain township. Tradition says that Gloss was the handy man about his place . . . he built the house and had supervision over the workmen. He lived to an advanced age; and the house in which this slave dwelt was located on the site of the present Drumpelier Hospital at Coatesville. Some of his descendants are living in Coatesville to-day.

One of the earliest Indian paths (10) that led from Philadelphia westward and the one which Peter Bezaillion followed in his trading trips between Philadelphia and his trading posts at Conoy Town and Paxtang, crossed Delaware county diagonally and branched at Tom Moore's mill in the Chester valley, now Downingtown. This path followed the "Old Road" to a point in Lancaster county just beyond the village of White Horse, where it branched to the right and led on through Springville, past Roland's Church to the present power house on the New Holland pike. From this point it followed the dividing line between Earl and Leacock and Penn and Hempfield townships, past the old Donegal Church to Conoy creek and from thence to Conoy Town.

A few miles of the eastern part of "Old Peters Road" in Salisburg (11) township, remains and is known by that name to-day; that part extending from Mount Joy Borough to Conoy creek via Donegal Meeting House has lost its name, but it remains as it was laid out nearly two hundred years ago.

In 1740 the inhabitants of Warwick township petitioned the Court that "the old road or trail commonly called "Peters Road" which was made and used in early times would answer the inhabitants better "than a new road recently laid out. The Court ordered the road to be reviewed as to course and distance and that the proceedings of the same be reported to the Court. After several petitions and revisions it was finally confirmed in the November sessions; and so this part of "Old Peters Road" became absorbed in one of the highways of our county.

Peter Bezaillion married Martha Combe, a sister of Moses and John Combe, Indian traders, and a woman whom tradition has associated with St. John's in high praise. In 1732 a report was sent from St. John's to the Venerable S. P. G. in which Martha Bezaillion is mentioned as "a principal benefactrix." About this time she had contributed one hundred pounds towards the purchase of a glebe of one hundred acres "for the use and behoof of a clergyman rightly ordained and regularly licensed and authorized to officiate in said church under the Jurisdiction of the Bishop of London." In 1753 she contributed 5 pounds 8 shillings toward the erection of a stone church.

In 1764, the Rev. Thomas Barton wrote to the Secretary of the S. P. G. that Martha Bezaillion's character deserved to be recorded. "She contributed so generously to the Church at Pequea, and it pleased Providence, weak as I am to bring that woman into the Church. I baptized her when above forty years old, and she is a sober pious Christian and zealous for our Church." Barton was mistaken about her age. She was at least seventy. Barton was ordained in 1755; and came to St. John's in 1759. It is highly improbable that he should have baptized her before this year certainly not before his ordination in 1755. She died on June 18, 1764, aged 71 years. The statement (12) of Reverend Wilson Walters that both Peter Bezaillion and his wife were members of the Church of England is erroneous. As far as could be learned Peter neither contributed to the support nor became a member of the parish. In all probability he was of Huguenot extraction, and not a Roman Catholic as the Governor of Penna. claimed him.

In 1719 a patent (13) was granted to Martha Bezaillion for 700 acres of land on the east bank of the Susquehanna between Chickasalonga and Conewago creeks, adjoining the Conoy Indian town. She gave 158 acres of this land to John Hart by deed of Dec. 22, 1762.

Moses Combe, (14) a brother of Martha Bezaillion, was successfully engaged in the Indian trade in Donegal township where he had a post of Conoy creek before 1716. He died about 1736 and was buried beside his sister Martha.

The John Hart to whom Martha deeded 158 acres of land in 1762 is said to be her nephew. He was licensed as an Indian trader in 1744, and was a son of John Hart, the "Shamokin trader," who was accidentally killed while hunting with the Indians on the Ohio 1729-1730.

John Hart (15) had a brother Thomas who was a merchant in Philadelphia. Peter Bezaillion purchased from him such goods and trinkets as were needed for his trade; and in return sold to Thomas Hart the peltries, etc., which he procured from the Indians. Thomas Hart died May 18, 1774, and was buried by the side of Peter Bezaillion.

The Clemsons (16) became connected with the parish of St. John's early in its history. The progenitor of this family was Jacob Clemson, who was one of the early Swedish settlers in Delaware before 1650. His son James married Jean Coates who came from England with her parents in 1682. The Coates' family were strict Friends; and are said to have a common ancestry with William Penn. It was through this marriage that the Clemsons became identified with the Friends. The first James Clemson and his wife are buried in the old Friends Burying Ground, 4th and Arch streets, Philadelphia. His son, the 2nd James Clemson, and Thomas are buried at old Sadsbury Burying Ground.

The 3rd James Clemson was the first of his family to leave the Quakers. In 1750 he married Margaret Herd - a daughter of Stephen Herd and a strict Presbyterian. She was a member of the Octoraro Church. He refused to go with her to the Presbyterian Church, and she refused to go to Quaker meeting. They compromised and joined St. John's Protestant Episcopal Church, Pequea. In 1753 James Clemson the third was one of the fifty-two subscribers towards the erection of the first stone church. He later served in the Vestry. He died on July 13, 1792, aged 63 years, and was buried in the church yard.

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