

## **Elias Church History**

**by**

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Welcome to the Elias Church! You have just stepped back in time to 1806 when The Elias Church was built. Thomas Jefferson is president. The Louisiana Purchase was negotiated with the French just three years earlier for three cents an acre, more than doubling the size of the United States. There are only 16 states, none west of Ohio. The Elias Church, located in Youngman's Town, rests in West Buffalo Township and within Northumberland County. Youngman's Town, founded in 1792, will not be carved from Northumberland until 1813 when Union County is formed. Surprisingly it is called Mifflinburg as early as 1805, even though the town was not incorporated by that name until 1827; there is no "Turnpike" road between Mifflinburg and Lewisburg until 1828, 24 years later. Records indicate that monetary transactions are in pounds, shillings, and pence. No wonder the Elias Church was only the third church built in the Union County.

**1773:** The Presbyterians organized and built the first church in the area at Buffalo Cross Roads (about 5 miles northeast of the future site of Mifflinburg). The original building and an 1816 stone replacement no longer stand. It was rebuilt for a third time in 1846 on the original site and that structure is still standing today. It was purchased several years ago by a private owner and is no longer used as a congregational church. This original congregation represents an era when Indian hostility was present and, in 1780, settlers left the valley for their own safety. This time in history is referred to as "The Great Runaway"; however, shortly after 1780, settlers began to return to the valley.

**1788:** Enough settlers dotted the valley that the need for other churches became evident. As was customary during this era, the German Reformed and Lutherans combined and erected a new church called the “Dreisbach Church” on the New Berlin Mountain Road. Martin Dreisbach donated seven acres of land for the erection of this “Union Church”. The original church was of log construction and included land set aside for one of the earliest grammar schools. A second brick church replaced the original structure in 1845 and while being remodeled in 1970, its foundation collapsed, causing damage beyond repair. Immediately, a new brick church was built on the site and its beautiful structure can be observed today.

**1805:** Youngman’s Town continued to grow and sentiment developed that a new German Reformed-Lutheran “Union Church” was needed since the travel distance to the Dreisbach Church was inconvenient and time consuming. A building committee was formed which included Sebastian Whittmer, John Dreisbach, George Roush, and Michael Schock; a subscription list was created to finance the new church (list of church members and amount pledged for construction). Elias Youngman, founder of Mifflinburg, provided a plot to be used for this purpose. Reverend Ludwig Albrecht, Wilhelm Ilgen, Frederick Adam Gutelius, and others were also influential in the construction and creation of the building and its congregation. By 1806, the new church, named “St Elias Church”, was up and running.

The following is a brief sketch of four influential people of the church:

1. Elias Youngman: founder of Youngman’s Town, later named Mifflinburg. He provided land for the Elias Church and cemetery, which is also called the “Elias Church Cemetery” and located adjacent to south and west of the church.
2. Frederick Adam Gutelius: along with his wife Anna Catherine, became the parental ancestor of all the Guteliuses in the United States. They had 15 children with most growing up to be congregational members. Frederick was the first Union County Commissioner. His children grew up to be the most influential family in the development of the Mifflinburg buggy industry from the late 1840s through the early 1920s. In 1900, Gutelius was the most common local name in

Mifflinburg. The original home is located at the corner of Fifth and Green Street and has been restored by Preservation Mifflinburg, its owner.

3. Reverend Ludwig Albrecht Wilhelm Ilgen- The first Lutheran minister of the Church. Some of his descendants are present members of Mifflinburg's Lutheran Church.

4. Reverend Fries- The first permanent German Reformed pastor, beginning in 1812, and who remained pastor until his death in 1839. He was a fire-and-brimstone minister who was very outspoken on church issues.

**1806-1857:** The German Reformed and Lutheran congregation worshiped in the Elias Church until 1857. As the town and church membership grew, a decision was made that new and bigger buildings were needed. Both congregations built their own new churches at their present sites; the German Reformed (St. Johns UCC Church) at 417 Market St. and the Lutheran (First Evangelical Lutheran Church) at 404 Market St. Services were conducted in the Elias Church until 1857 when the newly built churches were completed.



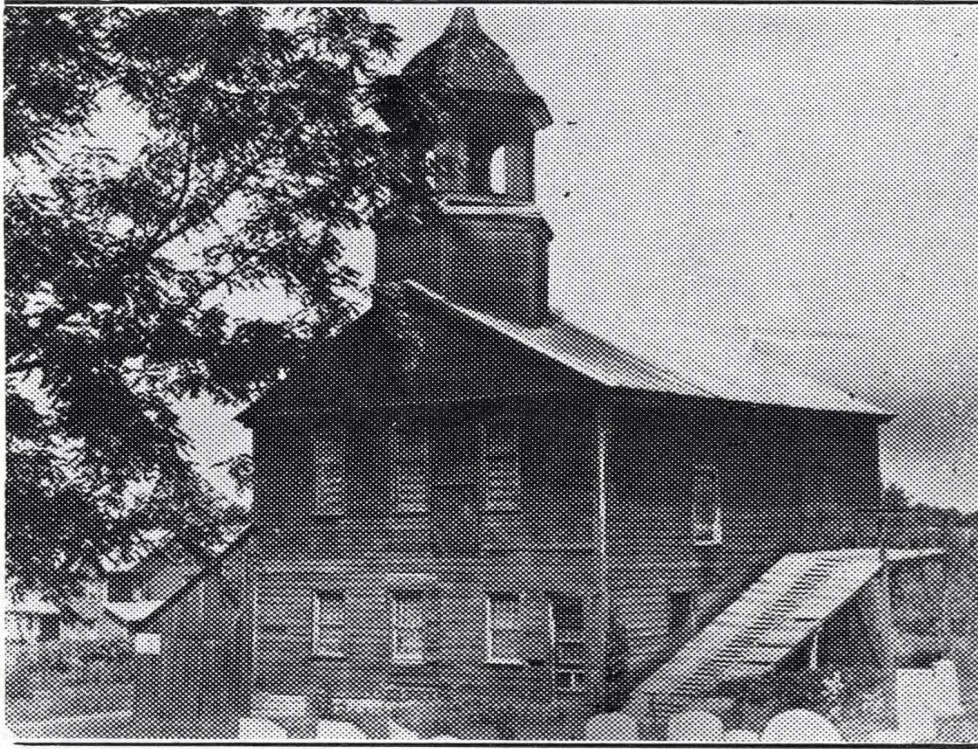
Painting of Elias Church during school period 1857-1876<sup>i</sup>

**1857-1876:** On May 4, 1858, the Elias Church was conveyed to the Mifflinburg School Board for the sum of \$1,000 and remodeled into the Mifflinburg Primary and Grammar School. Extensive renovations were made to the building with partitions for four class rooms created on the first floor, two sets of steps relocated for ingress and egress to the second floor auditorium, including other necessary changes. The Mifflinburg Primary and Grammar School operated in this building for the next 19 years. By 1876 a new elementary/high school was built at the foot of the Mifflinburg Cemetery Hill. On March 6, 1878, the Mifflinburg School Directors sold the Elias Church building to Robert Weirick.

**1878-1904:** Robert Weirick, a buggy trimmer and farmer, used the Elias Church as a barn and storage for grain over the next twenty six years. During the latest restoration (2006 to the present) plenty of oats and wheat were found within the walls of the building. Much of the structure was altered with the addition of barn doors on the east side and a hay door to the second floor on the west. On the north wall, a second floor grain chute was added to accommodate lowering grain to the first level. On May 2, 1904, Robert Weirick sold the structure to buggy maker John Gutelius and Son.

**1904-1919:** John Gutelius and Son used the building as a repository for his buggy manufacturing business located on Market Street. While owning the building, he added a buggy ramp on the south side of the building and cut through the framing on the south wall to install doors for access to the second floor. Signs of the ramp still existed during the restoration of the building. Mr. Gutelius and Son sold the building to Thurston Diehl on August 16, 1919 and by 1921 it was remodeled and used as a double house rental property.

**1919-1936:** Both sides of the remodeled double house were equal in size with identical layouts. They consisted of a living room to the west, a dining room in the center, and a kitchen on the east. Porches and doors were added on the east and west sides of the building. Each rental consisted of three bedrooms and a bath on the second floor. On January 3, 1936, during the Depression, the Mifflinburg Bank and Trust Company took possession by deed of the property from Thurston Diehl.



The Elias Church during its use as the Gutelius buggy repository 1904 - 1919<sup>ii</sup>

**1936-1939:** After ownership for a little more than three years, the Mifflinburg Bank and Trust Company sold the property to Reno M. Hoffman on October 10, 1939. The assumption is that the bank operated it as a rental during this period.

**1939-1983:** Reno M. Hoffman was the sole owner until October 27, 1983, when he changed the deed to include his daughter, Edith Irene Hoffman.

**1983-2004:** Edith Hoffman continued to rent the double house to provide her with an income until her demise. The estate of Edith Irene Hoffman sold the property to Preservation Mifflinburg Inc. on December 30, 2004, for \$35,000. Preservation Mifflinburg consists of Mifflinburg area residents who are interested in preserving historical buildings and its history, particularly the legacy of the Gutelius family and its historical impact on Mifflinburg. They are a 501C nonprofit corporation that works in cooperation with other like-minded organizations in the Mifflinburg area.



**2004-present:** The Mifflinburg Bank and Trust Company very graciously granted Preservation Mifflinburg Inc. \$35,000 for its purchase plus \$2,000 dollars for start-up expenses. The transaction was completed on December 30, 2004. It had been the hope of the estate that the building would be preserved because of its historic value and “one of a kind” significance. The community is indebted to the Mifflinburg Bank and Trust Company for making this happen.

**2004-2006:** Preservation Mifflinburg Inc. is to be commended for having the foresight to save such a singularly important historical building. On March 2, 2006, Preservation Mifflinburg turned over the project by deed to the Mifflinburg Heritage and Revitalization, Inc. that operates within the scope of being an agent of the Mifflinburg Borough.



View of Church during time of double house 1919-2004

(Author's photo)

**2006-Present:** Since March, 2006, the Mifflinburg Heritage and Revitalization Inc. has continued to restore the historic Elias Church, officially renaming it “The Elias Center for the Performing Arts.” Numerous grants

totaling \$600,000 plus was applied to the project. Three methods were used to guide the historical restoration. They are:

1. Written description- The interior of the Elias Church is described in detail in Chapter II of the “History Of The First Lutheran Church, Mifflinburg” located in the Lutheran Church office. It describes in detail the location of doors, pulpit, isles, etc.
2. Present churches built circa 1806- German-Reformed Churches of that era were basically identical in size and appearance, with minor exceptions, such as made from stone, brick, or timber framing. Some of these churches still remain with very few alterations. Two churches are the “Bindnagle Church”, located one mile north of Palmyra, PA, and the “Peace Church”, located in Mechanicsburg, PA. The Elias Church was the third church built in the area and is the oldest church building surviving in the immediate area. It is unknown where an older timber-frame church exists, certainly none in the area.



Exposed Timber Frame Walls after removal of Interior Apartments

(Author's photo)

3. Forensic evidence-this is physical evidence discovered while dismantling and restoring the building. The original stair location during the church period was identified by the mortice and tenon joints located in the northwest and northeast corner of the building. This evidence comported perfectly with the Bindnagle Church's staircases, built in 1803, which remain in excellent shape. It also fit the written description as outlined in "The History of the Lutheran Church". During the school period the staircases were relocated to the southwest and southeast corners of the building. Evidence was clear with an outline of each step imprinted on the wall leading to the second floor. When the building was remodeled into



View of Church interior after Restoration 2012 – 2013 (Author's photo)

a double house, the stairs were moved for a third time, with a staircase provided for each side of the dwelling. During the recent renovation, the staircases have been again moved and restored to their original 1806-1857 location. Windows, doors, petitions, framing and opening of the balcony have been returned to their original locations by combining knowledge of the three above methods. We are



confident the building reflects its original construction. The building is now in its final stages of becoming a reality. The restoration is nearly complete, including electricity, heating and air conditioning, restroom facilities, ticket office, storage areas, and other small projects. An open house is planned for May and by the time you read this article, a full schedule of program events will be in progress in the “Elias Center for the Performing Arts” for your enjoyment.



Exterior view of “Elias Center for Performing Arts” 2012-2013 (Author’s photo)

## References

Snyder, Charles McCool

1992 *Mifflinburg, a Bicentennial History, 1772-1792*. Mifflinburg, PA: The Mifflinburg Telegraph.

2000 *Union County Pennsylvania, A Celebration of History*. Montoursville, PA: Paulhamus Litho.

*Mifflinburg Telegraph*, Articles beginning in 1862.

Information from the Elias Church Committee who worked at restoring the building.

Original Elias Church documents in possession of the UCC Church.

History of the Lutheran Church, located in the First Lutheran Church.

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<sup>i</sup> The artist of the painting is Christina Pontius Larabee (1785-1877), a descendant of the Pontius family. The plate painting was in the possession of Ruth Wehr Zimmerman, also a descendant of Christina Pontius Larabee. You probably remember Ruth as our Union Co. Commissioner several years ago. Ruth personally donated the plate painting to me on behalf of the Elias Church. Identifying the date of the painting was done by the three methods of restoration indicated in the article. Observe the door on the south side; it had to have been installed after the church was abandoned since the pulpit was located in the exact location of the new door after being turned into the Mifflinburg Grammar School in 1857. This identifies the earliest date of the painting. The pulpit would have been removed for the door and hallway that was added at that time. Evidence of a hall, the door and two sets of steps leading to the second floor on the south wall was very clear during restoration. The Presbyterian Church and Mifflinburg Academy Steeples appear in Christina's painting. However, neither are the original steeples identified in the painting. The Academy was torn down and rebuilt in 1864, therefore changing the steeple that is identified in the picture. This establishes 1864 as the latest date it could have been painted. The Presbyterian church collapsed due to a snow storm in 1881, changing the steeple as well. This is how the date of 1857-1864 was established. The photograph was taken with my camera from the painting and transferred to the computer. This is the only known picture of this period.

<sup>ii</sup> The photographer is unknown. About 25 years ago a friend of mine and professional photographer, John Dersham, bought a group of glass plates from Bill Mattern, a local historian and antique dealer. John reproduced these plates originally taken by photographer Groover Bierly about 1913-1918. Many now appear in local history books written by Charles McCool Snyder and others. Lois Huffines used many of these John Dersham prints in her latest book. There is a good possibility this Elias Church buggy print was taken by Groover Bierly, although there is no proof. Groover Bierly lived in Mifflinburg.

## ✧ ACCOUNTS ✧