

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR ANCESTORS ...

DEVOUT “FOUNDING FATHER” OF THE UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST

**John B. Hershey
(1741 – 1811)**

— *Bradley Rymph*

VISITS TO JOHN HERSHEY-RELATED SITES:

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania:

June 28–30, 1996 (*with José Baquiran,
Albert and Edna Mae Rymph*)

May 28–30, 2011 (*with José Baquiran*)

Frederick and Washington Counties, Maryland:

October 30, 2010 (*with José Baquiran*)

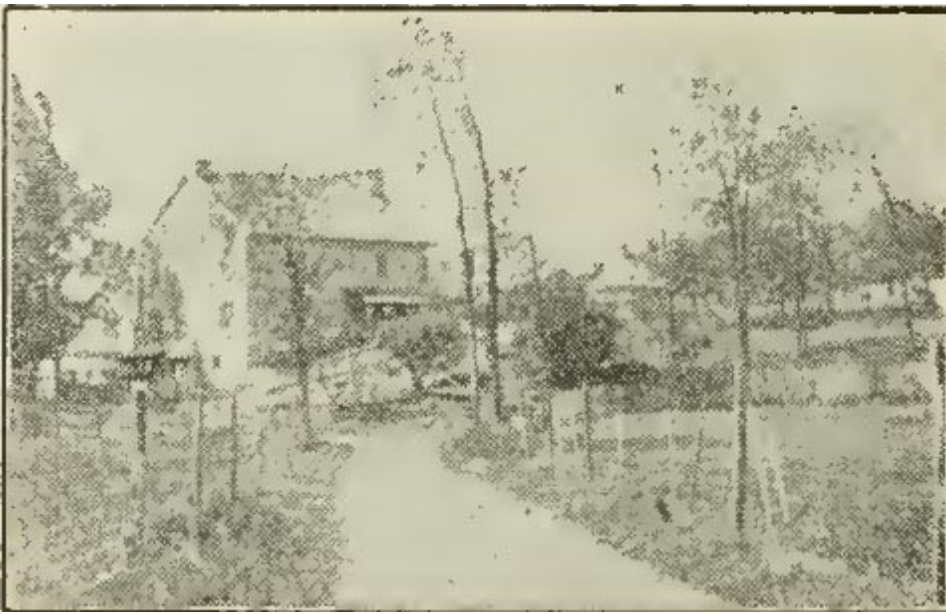
October 10, 2011 (*with Albert and Edna
Mae Rymph*)

*Text and photos © 2010, 2011, by Bradley B.
Rymph.*

It is commonly understood that the immigrant-generation Hershey ancestors of the Rymph family were devout Mennonites, who came to colonial America as part of the large migration of Mennonites who were escaping religious persecution in Switzerland and Germany and seeking freedom to practice their particular version of Christianity without compromise. With their fellow believers, the Hershey immigrants settled in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding Pennsylvania and Maryland area, which quickly became identified as the Mennonite section of the American colonies.

What came as a surprise to me is that several members of the second and third generations of the Hershey family in America left their Mennonite roots in the late 1700s and early 1800s and became some of the early spiritual leaders of the United Brethren in Christ in the United States. The United Brethren in Christ eventually merged with the Evangelical Association in 1946 to become the Evangelical United Brethren denomination, which then merged with the Methodist Church in 1968 to become the United Methodist Church.

In fact, John B. Hershey, one of the two second-generation Hersheys from



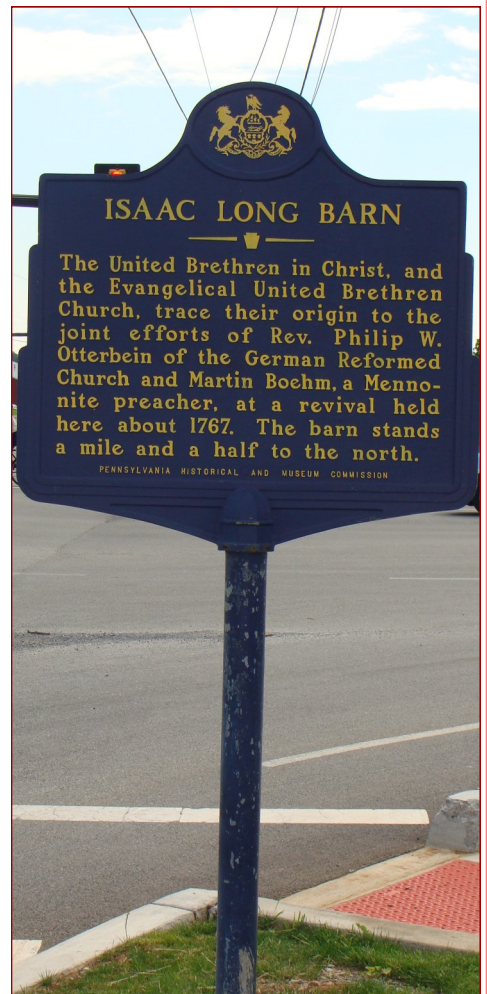
*John B. Hershey's home, outside of Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland. (Photo from Eberly, Daniel; Albright, Isaiah H.; and Brane, C.I.B, *Landmark History of the United Brethren Church*. 1911.)*

which our lineage descends, can be considered one of the co-founders of the United Brethren in Christ. The unofficial birth of the United Brethren is commonly traced to a meeting of two

German-heritage clergy, Martin Boehm (a Mennonite preacher) and Philip William Otterbein (a German Reformed minister), at a revival (or “great meeting”) that was held circa 1767 in a

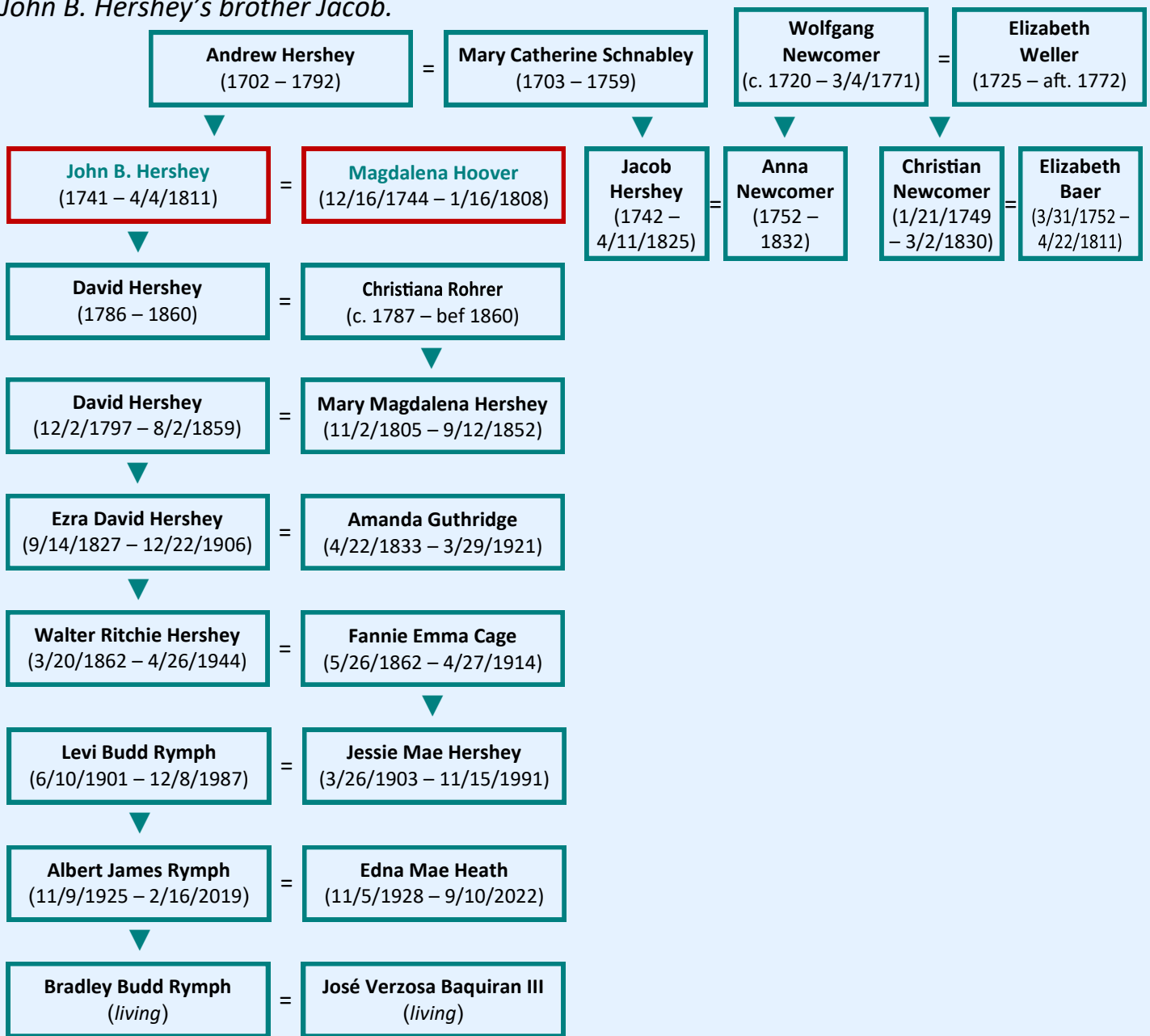
bottom left: *Isaac Long's Barn, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania / site of the “Great Meeting,” circa 1767, at which Philip Otterbein and Martin Boehm met, eventually leading to the establishment of the United Brethren in Christ, one of the predecessor denominations of the United Methodist Church. (Photo of barn from United Methodist Church, General Commission on Archives and History, <http://www.gcah.org/site/c.ghKJIOPHloE/b.4196373/>)*

bottom right: *Historical marker south of site of barn, which is still standing as a working barn on private property.*



HOW WE'RE RELATED

John B. Hershey was my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather through my father, Albert James Rymph. Anna Newcomer, sister of Christian Newcomer, was married to John B. Hershey's brother Jacob.



large barn on a farm owned by Isaac Long in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. When Otterbein arrived at the meeting, Boehm was preaching on the barn's threshing floor.

Otterbein was so moved by Boehm's message that at its end he famously

went forward and embraced Boehm, exclaiming "Wir sind brüder!" (We are brethren!). From this point, the two ministers from two different theological branches of Protestantism began a lifetime of "united" cooperation in jointly proclaiming their faith, especially

Peter Kemp's Home, west of Frederick, Maryland / site of the historic "Conference of 1800," at which John B. Hershey was one of the ministers present at the founding of the United Brethren in Christ. (Photo from Huntingdon University, United Brethren Historical Center, <http://www.huntington.edu/ubhc/publications/ebooks/berger/p1ch09.htm>)



to the German-speaking people of Pennsylvania and Maryland.

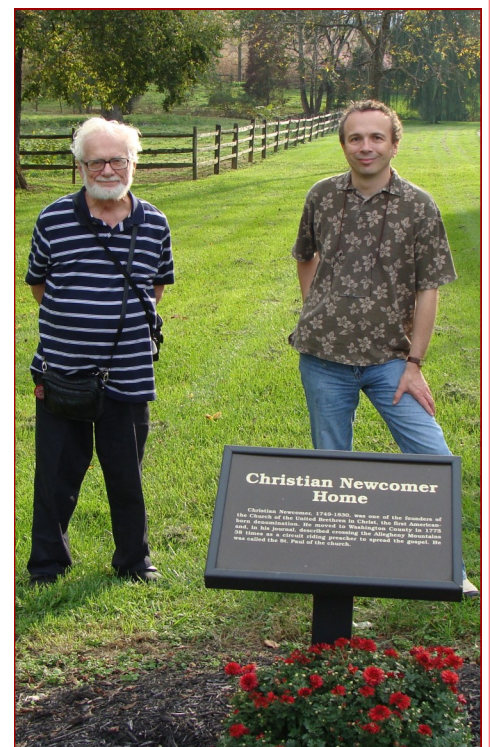
Whether John B. Hershey (or any other Hersheys) were in attendance at this gathering is not known. But they may well have been. Boehm was a prominent Mennonite preacher, and the Hersheys were devout Mennonites.

John B. Hershey's father, the immigrant Andrew Hershey, was himself a Mennonite minister, and his son John would have been around 26 years old at the time.

What is certain is that, by 1791, John B. Hershey had become actively identified with the United Brethren movement



Christian Newcomer home, east of Hagerstown, Maryland / Bishop Newcomer and his family lived within one mile of John B. Hershey and his family, in Washington County's Beaver Creek area.





Shopp Farm, near Shiremanstown, Pennsylvania / The first preaching place for the United Brethren in the lower end of Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley. The owner, Johannes Shopp, was married to John B. Hershey's daughter, Anna (Hershey) Shopp. (Photo from Shiremanstown United Methodist Church, http://www.sumc.info/brief_history.htm)

being led by Otterbein and Boehm. The minutes of the movement's "Second Formal Conference" of ministers in 1791 listed him among 13 "absent" ministers.

Hershey, however, was one of 15 United Brethren ministers (including Boehm and Otterbein) who *were* present at the historic "Conference of 1800" held west of Frederick,

Maryland, on September 25– 26 of that year at the home of Peter Kemp. At that conference, the gathering clergy decided to organize their movement as a denomination. Translated from German into English, the official minutes from that conference read:

Every preacher spoke first in regard to his own experience, and then declared his intention to continue to

Geeting Farm, south of Keedysville, Maryland / Originally a German Reformed preacher, George Adam Geeting joined Otterbein, Boehm, Newcomer, and Hershey as one of the most vibrant, inspiring preachers in the early United Brethren movement. (Photo from Maryland Historical Trust, <http://www.mht.maryland.gov/nr/NRDetail.aspx?HDID=449&COUNTY=Washington&FROM=NRCountyList.aspx?COUNTY=Washington>)



preach, by the assisting grace of God, in full earnest, to the honor of God and the blessing of mankind.

Resolved, That two preachers shall be appointed to investigate the case of D. Aurandt, as to his authority to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Resolved, That annually a day shall be appointed on which the unsectarian preachers shall assemble together and counsel how they can become more useful in their office, so that the church of God may be built up, sinners converted unto God, and God glorified.

The conference was opened with prayer, the reading of a chapter, and a short exhortation by Brother Otterbein, and closed with prayer."

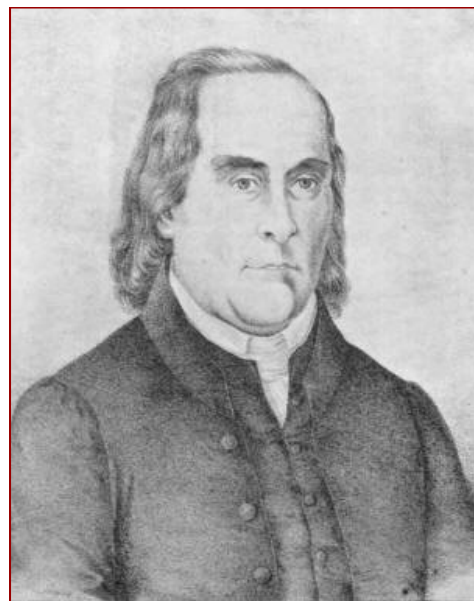
Christian Newcomer was another of the participating ministers at the United

Brethren founding conference. He became one of the first bishops of the United Brethren in Christ. In addition, his sister Anna was married to John Hershey's brother Jacob, and John Hershey himself lived within a mile of the Newcomers in the Beaver Creek area east of Hagerstown, Maryland.

In his personal journal, Newcomer recorded his own experience at the conference:

"25th. This morning we set out early; came to Brother Peter Kemp's, where the conference is to be held; found Father Otterbein, Boehm, and twelve other preachers there. The conference was opened with singing and prayer by Otterbein and Boehm. The former gave a powerful exhortation. Then were all the brethren present separately examined respecting their

*Martin Boehm (left) and
Philip Otterbein (right),
primary founding
ministers of the
United Brethren in Christ.*



*John B. Hershey's barn,
outside of Hagerstown,
Washington County, Maryland.
Site of multiple church meetings
during John B. Hershey's ministry.*

*(Photo from Eberly, Daniel;
Albright, Isaiah H.; and Brane,
C.I.B, Landmark History of the
United Brethren Church. 1911.)*



progress in divine life, their success and industry in the ministry. 26th. This forenoon Father Otterbein preached from Amos 4:12. Boehm spoke after him. After transacting some other business the conference closed with prayer.”

The historical documents of the United Brethren in Christ record that John B. Hershey was present at 8 of the initial 10 annual conferences of that denomination, missing only those conferences held in 1804 and 1807.

John B. Hershey was clearly a close friend and colleague of Newcomer's. Hershey is mentioned several times in Newcomer's personal journal. (Some, but not all, years of this journal are available online at www.huntington.edu/ubhc/publications/ebooks/newcomer/title.htm.) For example, Newcomer wrote:

1803 / January:

“Sunday 2d—This day we held meeting at J. Hershey's.”

1803 / February:

“15th—In Hagers-town, and lodged with marteny. 16th—A sacramental meeting commenced at Leymeister's; Geeting, Hershey, Thomas, and Jacob Bowlus were present.”

1808 / May:

“5th—This morning I rode with Br. Hershey to Peter Kemp's, where we met Br. Geeting; rode together to Remsberg's, and tarried for the night. 6th—We rode 28 miles and preached at Bishop's in Little's-town. 7th—This morning we rode 17 miles to a Quarterly meeting; Geeting spoke first, Hershey followed him. In the evening I spoke from Psalm 144, v. 3.”

1808 / August:

“11th—This morning I left home

*Cemetery outside
Hagerstown
(on grounds of
current Mount Zion
Mennonite Church)
in which John and
Magdalene
(Hoover) Hershey
are said to be
buried. Any
remaining
gravestones in
cemetery from
early 1800s are
now illegible.*



in company with Br. Hershey;
preached at the old church and
rode to Peter Kemp's.

1809 / January:

"21st—I made preparations for a
journey; at night I preached at J.
Hershey's, from Psalm 146, v. 8, 9.

1809 / March:

"18th—This day we had meeting
in Hagers-town, lodged with J.
Hershey.

1809 / August:

"Sunday 20th—A great
congregation was this day
assembled; Br. Hershey spoke
first, David Sneider and myself
followed him.

1809 / October:

"5th—Came to a Camp-meeting at
Samuel Bauman's; Brs. Birch,
Swartwelder, Hunter, Gill Watt,
and Enoch George were present;

they all spoke with uncommon
power and unction from above;
Br. Hershey and myself spoke in
the German language. We had a
most precious meeting; a great
many souls were converted to
God: glory be to the name of the
Lord, for what he is doing in our
day and generation for the
children of men."

John B. Hershey clearly played a critical
role in the early establishment and
ministry of the United Brethren in
Christ. In one denominational history,
*Trials and Triumphs: History of the
Church of the United Brethren in Christ*
(Paul R. Fetters, ed.), the author of the
chapter on "Loss of Early Leadership"
lists Hershey as one of the
denomination's "founding fathers" and
writes:

“On March 4, 1811, John Hershey departed this life at his home, near Hagerstown, Maryland. He was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1741 and was of Mennonite descent. He married Magdalena Hoover. He was a member of the Original Conference and attended most of its sessions before his death. ‘Like Brother Kemp, Brother Hershey was a long, a loving, and a tried friend in the cause of the religion which he honored and adorned by his pious and upright manner of living in this world....’ Brother Hershey was a coworker with Newcomer, Geeting, and Otterbein.”

TO LEARN MORE

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Newcomer, Christian. *The Life and Journal of the Rev'd. Christian Newcomer, Late Bishop of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*.

Hagers-Town, Maryland: F.G.W. Kapp. United Methodist Church. General Commission on Archives and History. “United Brethren Founding Sites Cluster / Frederick and Washington Counties, MD.” © 2008. (gcah.org/research/united-brethren-founding-sites-cluster).