

History is His Story

Woodstock may be one of the most historic places in American History--not Woodstock, NY, but the one in Virginia. Because one Sunday morning, Jan. 21, 1776, at the Lutheran Church there, **Rev. John Peter Muhlenberg** gave what seemed like a normal sermon. The Text was Eccl. 3, "To everything there is a season..." He preached, "In the language of the holy writ, there was a time for all things, a time to preach and a time to pray, but those times have passed away." He continued, "There is a time to fight, and that time has now come!" At which point he pulled open his clerical robe to reveal a fresh continental army uniform. The congregation gasped. He gave the benediction and walked down the aisle. At the narthex he turned and shook the doorway and said, "Who is with me?" That day 300 parishioners from the relatively small church in the Virginia countryside, volunteered to become the 8th VA Regiment.

John Peter was born to middle class Pennsylvania German parents. He worked as a store clerk and then enlisted in the British colonial army. Bilingual, he served next to the German dragoons, who nicknamed him "Teufel Piet" (devil Pete), because he was a fierce fighter. In 1767 he attended Philadelphia Academy and was ordained a Lutheran pastor. His first parish was in Bedminster, NJ. After a visit to England, it was impressed upon him that the Church of England badly needed pastors in VA. Since his theology was the same, he was dual-ordained as an Anglican. Thereupon, he found a small Lutheran church in Woodstock, Virginia to serve.

Frederick, his brother and also a pastor, questioned whether it was right for Pete to fight, indeed to mix politics and faith. "I am a Clergyman it is true," Peter wrote back, "but I am a member of the Society as well as the poorest Layman. Liberty [freedom to practice faith] is dear... Shall I then sit still and enjoy myself at Home when the best Blood of the Continent is spilling?...[S]o far am I from thinking that I act wrong, I am convinced it is my duty to do so and duty I owe to God and my country." They agreed to disagree until a year later, Frederick watched the British burn down his own church before his very eyes. (Original British theory was that colonial dissatisfaction was due to non-Anglican pastors) Fred enlisted too.

General Pete's regiment was first assigned to the South but then moved to Valley Forge under Washington. General Nathaniel Green was Muhlenberg's commander and he fought in Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth after 1777. In October 1783, when Washington moved in on Yorktown to entrap Cornwallis, Muhlenberg's by now well-trained fighters helped General Alexander Hamilton's bayonet charge and takeover of Redoubt #10. That capture allowed artillery to be moved close-in and defeat the British army. He and the Woodstock Lutherans returned as war heroes to Virginia. Pastor Muhlenberg was given the rank of Major General and assigned to his native Pennsylvania.

Evidently Fred rethought his 'no politics' stance. He ran for Congress and became the first Speaker of the House in 1789. He often wrote about the duty we all owe to fight for Liberty. Peter was also elected as an at-large Congressman from Pennsylvania. His statue stands with Washington and Jefferson amid the Hall of Heroes in front of the Senate Chamber in the US Capitol building. (If you haven't been there, it is often used for television interviews of Congressmen by the media.) The early colonists like the Muhlenberg brothers came together and looked to God, not government, to guide public affairs. God gave inalienable rights and no government should try to take them away. Today we face unprecedented threats to Liberty in our political debate. Abortion is sought without restriction, free speech of faith is in jeopardy, religious symbols are found offensive. Alternative lifestyles without regard for Jesus Christ are advocated ahead of family. Racial hatred and insensitivity is promoted. Will Christians pull off their clerical robes and fight for their faith, or will the church just go through successive decline?