



An Early Description of Pennsylvania

Letter of Christopher Sower, Written in 1724, Describing Conditions in Philadelphia and Vicinity, and the Sea Voyage from Europe.¹

Johann Christoph Sauer (Christopher Sower), the writer of the following letter, was born 1693 in Laasphe, a village not far from Marburg, Germany. He came to America in 1724 with his wife and their infant son Christopher (born 1721). In the spring of 1725 the family removed to Ephrata, Pa., where they remained about six years. In 1731 they returned to Germantown and settled there permanently. Christopher Sower, the elder, died in 1758.

*He was a pharmacist by trade, but is best known for his publishing activities. In 1738 he received a printing outfit from Germany and began at once to print in German for his fellow countrymen in America. Altogether he published over two hundred works in German and English, most of them of a religious nature. His son Christopher became the well-known Bishop of the Church of the Brethren, in Germantown. The name of the first Christopher Sower, printer and publisher, is still retained by the Christopher Sower Publishing Company, of Philadelphia.—For further details of the life of the first immigrant see Charles G. Sower, *Genealogical Chart of Descendants of Christopher Sower. Philadelphia, 1887.**

The German original of the following letter is in the library of the University of Göttingen, Germany. In the labor of transcribing and translating it, the chief credit should go to my former teacher, Dr. Adolph Gerber. The letter, apart from its important historical data, is so full of human aspiration, religious sincerity, and wonder stories of the New World, as to deserve a permanent place in the romance of early Pennsylvania.

-- R. W. Kelsey

Germantown, Dec. 1, 1724.

Dear brothers and friends,

Since I left all of you, dear friends, and promised to write how we arrived here in America and how we lived, many have desired in addition that I should report somewhat more in detail on the quality of this country. Since it is not possible to make a special report to each one, many may make shift with one account.

The sea voyage has been reported upon. I, there fore, pass it over and will say in short that we sailed in 16 hours from Holland to England and arrived there, at Dover, where our ship was cleared. We were, however, obliged to wait there about 3 weeks for a favorable wind. We were out 6 weeks and 3 days from land to land and

¹ A transcription of the German original of this letter may be examined in the Library of Haverford College.

had neither hot nor cold weather, also little storm, but as pleasant weather as in the month of May. During the greatest storm we were all, my wife and children, on deck by the fire, and baking cookies. Nor did we hear of any man that was afraid of the sea and the storm. The Palatines had their fun with it. When our ship would sometimes roll or pitch, they said: "The lion has fetched another mouthful of water." My wife said: "I thought people would be afraid if they saw nothing but sky and water." Our troubles were only: 1. That we had not taken an extra ration of water along, instead of believing the captain so fully that he would give us as much as we wanted. There were 3 liters of water per 5 persons per day, which to be sure would have sufficed for extra cooking, but the beer was used up too soon. 2. The meat was over-salted. 3. The cod-fish was soaked in fresh water, to be sure, but cooked in the same water in which it was soaked. 4. All people on shipboard got lice. 5. The greatest trouble was that there were too many people, so that quarters were restricted, and with many there was not a little stench. Yet we did not suffer from it because we three families had larger accommodations than the others.

During this voyage, of 6 weeks and 3 days, we lacked only the necessary east wind, and were obliged to sail with nothing but tack and head-winds, and it was wonderful that the sailors knew so exactly in what part of the sea they were. It is 1100 leagues from England to this coast, and yet the head-helmsman, though he is a young man and had never made this voyage before, hit it within three hours when we should see land. Because we had a strong wind, we got, however, a distance of 23 leagues to the left side of the river called Delaware. God, however, sent us a south wind which carried us in one day into the river. When evening came all were full of joy because we saw the river. When almost everybody had gone to bed the helmsman beg the captain, since they were close to a sandbank which barred the river, to cast anchor until day break; otherwise they would be in danger, as there were only 12 feet of water at that place. The captain, however, was not willing, but thought of still getting into the river. While the captain was still consulting with the sailors, the prow of the ship struck the sandbank although they had scarcely advanced a stone's throw after they had cast the plummet and still found 7 fathoms. And because the bank was hilly, the ship struck ground as many as 18 times, so that we thought it would go to pieces. Then the people came running out in their night-shirts. Simultaneously there were heard cries of distress from young and old, but I and 2 other men were without fear. My wife lay quite still and our child slept and did not wake up. In the meantime I remained firm in the hope that none of us would come into danger. The captain cried aloud and grew quite pale. Because, however, all sails were still set, the wind lifted the ship from one hill to the other. Then they wished to cut the mast. The head helmsman wished to have the three boats lowered and the people taken ashore, for we were scarcely half a league away from it. The captain forbade it because he was afraid everybody might desire to be first and therefore they might get drowned sooner than in the ship. When this distress had lasted a quarter of an hour, we were in deep water again. There we rode at anchor until daybreak and got a favorable wind.

Now we were still 100 miles from the boundary of Pennsylvania and instead of taking 8 to 10 days, as many do in getting up the river, we, with an extraordinarily good wind, arrived at Philadelphia Sunday noon, October first, and while they were casting anchor in the river they fired 22 guns. Then a great crowd of people came running to see the new corners. Then people came and brought apples to divide among the people [passengers], others brought fresh bread and the like, and when I went ashore a man came up to me and asked whether I was free and did not owe anything. I said I did not owe the captain anything, but I had to pay something to a

Palatine for brandy. The man went to get 20 Florins with which I was to pay and make my start. N. N. are now free. They are living together and have their place free from debt this winter and they have been offered, if they desired an allotment for pastures and fields, to get as much as they wanted; they might also cut wood free of charge. There have also been made considerable contributions for them. N. is also free and his friends in Holland have raised 288 Florins for him. I myself, however, who had not been suffering any want, was given 10 Florins by some one without my desire. Then I bought some tin because earthenware was said to be very high here. Thus the Lord has taken us safely to this country. His name be praised.

Scarcely had I arrived here when I was offered a vocation, as a foundry was to be constructed. I was to superintend it and, in order to be all the more faithful, I was to have an interest in the foundry and its returns. But because I said that I felt no special inclination and besides had no money for the construction, they wanted to advance me up to 1000 Thaler and compensate me for losses. I said however that I felt no inclination and did not aspire to great things in this world and went away, rented a house and moved in. Then there came one good friend after another and they brought me very many apples, whole baskets full, also nuts, wine, spelt, wheat, bread, eggs, turnips, cabbage, dried pears, buckwheat, chickens, pork and beef, of which I have salted 120 pounds, and presents are coming from a distance of 20 leagues [i.e. 60 miles] for the newly arrived Schwartzenau people.

For the rest we have nearly all been ill and those who had been well on shipboard have become ill here, also people with the strongest constitutions. Those however who come here weakly and sickly generally grow strong again and live to old age, the doctors say. Because they make a change of sky and earth, water and air, food and drink, they generally grow strong and their whole constitution changes.

Because one may hold here as much property as one wishes, also pay for it when one desires, everybody hurries to take up some property. One may choose where one pleases. The farther one goes, the better it is. This continent, as may be seen on the map, is almost as large as the other three continents together and has south of New England, say Spain, Virginia, Ne-gro-land, Pennsylvania; north of New England, New Holland, the borders of York, New France, unto the region lying beyond us, which cannot be inhabited on account of the cold. The farther the Germans and English cultivate this country, the farther the Indians retreat. They are our nearest neighbors and quite agreeable and peaceable. They would rather harm their own king than a German; they have very simple clothing. They do not gather more than they expect to eat. If a man's wife dies between seed-time and harvest, he gathers only for himself; the remainder is left standing. The traders take a few pounds of powder and lead and fetch for them whole wagon loads of ox-hides, deer-skins and bear-skins. There is also an excellent method of leather dressing known here, such that a tawer with his own hand may completely dress 20 deer-skins in about 2 or 3 days so that they may be wrought by the tailor. Hence leather is very cheap and is worn much, and an honest old friend told me that in summer on warm days one may shoot a deer, dress the skin, and wear a pair of pants from it on the body within 24 hours.

As for the savages, they are dark yellow, believe that there is a God who has created everything and are very much afraid to commit a sin. They believe God does not like it and is looking on. If one has committed a fornication, they stone him to death by the roadside right away and anyone who within 20 years passes by where the malefactor lies, seeks a rock and increases the pile to show the All-seeing that he

has a horror of such uncleanness. They also believe that, when they are dead, and have lived such a life that the Pure One was not pleased with it, they will go to the North where it is very cold; in that land there is a bad ruler who torments them and lets them suffer from the cold. On the other hand the good go to the South where it is nice and warm, and a good ruler receives them kindly. They think more of a hen that is laying eggs than of some ducats. They make baskets and brooms and bring them here or to Philadelphia and accept blue blankets and red stockings, knives, etc., in exchange. The wise know full well the meaning of the godhead and call God in their language "Acs." and speak of him with fear, saying that the Acs sees it. Other simple minded ones say that the Acs at first made only one man and woman. At that time the garden in which he placed them was only small. But now that men had become many, the garden also has grown larger; and similar simple minded talk. They are putting most Europeans to shame by their behavior.