

# Passing it On: William Henry and Henry Albrecht

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In 1817 William Henry III (1794-1878) married Barbara Albright (1799-1842). The wedding not only tied bride and groom together but also cemented a relationship between the families that had begun nearly fifty years earlier in Lititz when Barbara's grandfather, Andreas Albrecht (1718-1802), began to train the fourteen year old William Henry II (1757-1821) as a gunsmith. William met Barbara because her father (and Andreas Albrecht's son), Henry Albrecht (1772-1845), himself an accomplished gunsmith, moved to Nazareth in 1816 and rented half of William Henry's home on south Main Street.<sup>1</sup> Searching through documents, one cannot help bumping into the Henrys and, nearby, the Albrechts.

One piece of this intertwined story, however, has been misunderstood. It is often claimed that Henry Albrecht studied the trade of gunsmith or completed his training as a gunsmith under William Henry in Nazareth from 1789 to 1792.<sup>2</sup> The story has a lovely shape to it: Albrecht trains Henry who in turn trains Albrecht's son. And another link only makes this claim seem even more irresistible: William Henry's eldest son, J. Joseph Henry (1786-1836), perfected his skills as a gunsmith by working with Henry Albrecht in Shippensburg from November 1805 to January 1806.<sup>3</sup> So, even more lovely: an Albrecht trains a Henry who trains an Albrecht who trains a Henry.

The problem is that William Henry was not working as a gunsmith from the late 1780s to the late 1790s. During this decade—including the years that Henry Albrecht supposedly was studying to be a gunsmith with William Henry—Nazareth authorities required William Henry, contrary to his own wishes, to serve as the settlement's *joiner*. A joiner was a specialized carpenter: eighteenth-century carpenters might cut timber, frame walls, and lay floors, while joiners would “finish interiors by joining together pieces of wood and might work on door and window frames and staircases and other wood pieces within a house or building.”<sup>4</sup> The tools of the joiner and the tools of the gunstocker—who carved the stock and fits the lock and barrel into it—are similar, which is why William Henry could shift from one trade to the other. Henry kept telling Moravian authorities that he wanted to “give up his joiner-work” and to instead “begin again his trade, making stocks for the guns,” but Nazareth authorities rejected his requests for most of the 1790s.<sup>5</sup> During these years Henry also designed the new church at Schoeneck (1793), the second store in Nazareth (1794), and the first bridge over the Lehigh in Bethlehem (1794).

Confirmation of William Henry's occupation in these years comes, in part, from discussions among Moravian authorities about apprentices or other men who worked for Henry. When Bethlehem's single brothers' diarist, for instance, heard that William Henry planned to resume his gun business, he worried that there would no longer be opportunities for boys to learn the joiner's trade (*Tischler-Handwerk*) from him. In 1795, Nazareth authorities prevented Henry from hiring a recent immigrant who wanted to “learn the joiner's trade in his establishment.” All the men or boys who worked for or trained with Henry in these years did so as *joiners*. Henry Albrecht himself, the Lititz single brothers' diary reported, left for Nazareth on March 25, 1789, to learn the “profession of joiner” from William Henry. And the Nazareth single brothers' diary recorded his arrival two days later: “the boy Henry Albrecht came from Lititz to learn the joiner's trade with Brother William Henry.”<sup>6</sup> The evidence, then, seems clear.

Still, though, it seems hard to believe. Could the diarists have got it wrong? Perhaps they were imprecise in their use of terms? Can it be true that this boy who had been training in Lititz as a gunsmith—and who worked as a gunsmith throughout his adult life—went to Nazareth at age 16 to become a joiner, a trade he never again practiced? Surely William Henry *really* was training Henry Albrecht as a gunsmith? It is hard to picture these two well-known gunsmiths without picturing them working together making rifles. Perhaps, covertly, William Henry of Nazareth yielded to his young apprentice's desire and trained him in the skills needed to be a gunsmith?

These sorts of questions are reasonable ones. But they are also questions designed to preserve a belief—that Henry Albrecht studied gunsmithing under William Henry—for which there has never been any evidence. That belief rested on nothing but unexamined assumptions. Instead of dismissing puzzling evidence (“the diarists must have not used their terms precisely...”), we might try to understand how it could be that Henry Albrecht came to apprentice *as a joiner* under William Henry. To do so, we must widen the context in which we explore our questions or ask different questions altogether. I hope the following discussion will not only make the situation more understandable but also reveal something about how apprenticeships and trades worked in the Moravian communities in early America.

Henry Albrecht does seem to have learned the trade of gunsmith from his father, although none of his siblings did (they studied to be tanners, nailsmiths, and milliners: see Sidebar 1, below). I write “seem” because little evidence has actually been found to reveal the trade in which Henry Albrecht worked as a teenager in Lititz. A 1786 Lititz membership catalog, for instance, lists no trade or “profession” next to his name. However, another catalog, begun in 1784 but later updated (likely mid-1788), identifies Henry Albrecht as a gunmaker (*Büchsenmacher*).<sup>7</sup> This single piece of evidence encourages us to conclude that Henry Albrecht *was* learning the gunmaking trade from his father in the late 1780s. (New evidence, however, that he was apprenticing at a different trade would not surprise me.) If so, this training was likely Andreas Albrecht’s last activity as a gunsmith. The 1798 direct tax list stated that an “Old Gunsmiths Shop” on Albrecht’s property, about 15 feet by 12 feet, made of logs, had been “*out of use these ten years or more*”—out of use, that is, since about 1788.<sup>8</sup> (Andreas Albrecht turned 70 years old in April 1788 and the following March Henry Albrecht left for Nazareth.)

This likelihood that Henry Albrecht was training as a boy as a gunsmith, however, only makes his move to Nazareth to learn to be a joiner even more difficult to understand. But perhaps by focusing on Henry Albrecht and by trying to establish a consistent arc to his career we are asking the wrong questions and, as such, are likely only to arrive at mistaken answers. Perhaps we should ask instead: what did Moravian authorities need? what did they envision for Henry Albrecht? We know the answer to that question: they sent him to Nazareth to train as a joiner.

### **Sidebar 1: The Other Albrecht Children**

*Andreas Albrecht did not train his other sons as gunsmiths. His eldest son, Andreas Jr. (1770-1822), went to Bethlehem in 1783 to apprentice as a tanner. He seems to have finished his apprenticeship there, returning to Lititz in 1790. A 1791 Lititz membership catalog lists him as a tanner (Gerber), but he soon began to work as a schoolteacher. In 1794, Andreas Jr. thought about becoming a nailsmith. His brother Jacob (b. 1775) was identified as a nailsmith as early as 1788. He later served as a blue dyer in Ephrata. Gottfried (1782-1835), too young to have been trained by his father, worked as a milliner. None of these children seems ever to have engaged in any activity related to the gunmaking trade. [See May 9, 1783, Bethlehem Single Brothers Diary, MAB; Lititz Membership Catalogs, MAB; November 16, 1800, Baptism of Rebecca Albrecht, Lititz Church Register, MAB]*

This assignment, as we saw, had been communicated to both settlements, Lititz and Nazareth, whose diarists reported it identically. The Nazareth community, in particular, counted on the work this young man would perform as a joiner.

These answers point us toward a crucial fact: decisions about Henry Albrecht’s trade were not made by him, or even by his parents, but rather by *Moravian authorities*. These authorities would consider what help was needed in what trades in a range of Moravian settlements. Men and boys moved from settlement to settlement, and from trade to trade, with bewildering frequency. Making sure every community had the “staffing” it needed for its various trades and activities was a stunningly complex problem to manage. Various committees spent enormous amount of time trying to orchestrate this vast system.

The occupation of joiner was a problem in Nazareth—and Henry Albrecht, it seems, was one way of solving it. William Henry himself was an earlier solution to this problem: authorities had shifted him from one trade to another, from gunsmith to joiner. But, as we saw, William Henry made it clear that he hoped this assignment would be temporary. A new crisis arose because Henry’s apprentice, Henry Albrecht, was about to depart. On February 15, 1792, the Nazareth Overseers Committee noted:

Br. Henry is not hopeful his assistant Albrecht will remain with him much longer. He himself won’t be in his workshop much more, especially this summer. And because of his own children, he won’t be able to retain young Brunner. Nonetheless, he should have someone take his place during his absence. Such a person could then stay on in the community in the joiner profession (since Br. Henry himself will be doing much less in this capacity in the future). He has suggested Br. Till from Christiansbrunn for this. Till has shown great interest in the joiner trade, is certainly talented enough, and could be employed.<sup>9</sup>

This passage contains a lot of information. Its central concern is: who will do the work in the joiner’s shop when Henry is away from it? Henry Albrecht’s pending departure produced the new crisis, since he would no longer be present to help with the joiner work that the community needed. The concern indicates that *he had been available* for such tasks, which confirms, if any confirmation were necessary, that Henry Albrecht was training as a joiner in Nazareth. The passage also makes it clear that the community was seeking somebody who would “stay on” to serve as the village’s master joiner. Authorities needed to seek such a person because Henry Albrecht would not, as had been expected, fill that role.

Henry Albrecht was sent to Nazareth to apprentice as a joiner under William Henry, that is, in the hope that he would *replace* Henry as joiner. This arrangement would release the

older man to return to his profession of gunsmith. It would have been in William Henry's interest to keep Henry Albrecht on track as a joiner, since only this plan promised William Henry what *he* wanted: a replacement joiner that would allow him to resume his work as a gunsmith.

This plan was not realized, of course: Henry Albrecht left Nazareth (and William Henry) in March 1792. He was not yet 20. He did not travel directly back to Lititz but instead to Lancaster, where he worked with Jacob Dickert (1740-1822), a fellow Moravian and an established gunsmith with a large manufactory. Although Albrecht returned to Lititz on October 14, 1792, after six months with Dickert, he moved to Lancaster soon after and married there, outside the Moravian church, in March 1794.<sup>10</sup> Henry Albrecht worked as a gunsmith for the rest of his career. It is significant, though, that to work as a gunsmith he had to leave the Moravian communities in which he had grown up, Lititz and Nazareth. He practiced his trade in Lancaster, Chambersburg, and Shippensburg in Pennsylvania and in Gnadenhutten in Ohio between 1794 and 1809.<sup>11</sup>

One conclusion seems obvious: Moravian authorities needed joiners more than they needed gunsmiths. Andreas Albrecht himself had a difficult time making a living as a gunsmith in Lititz. In 1772, Lititz authorities struggled to devise ways to get him more work—and during the American Revolution, Albrecht devoted enough of his time to making pipe heads that in one Lititz membership catalog (late 1770s) his occupation is listed as pipe head maker.<sup>12</sup> So it should not surprise us that most of Andreas Albrecht's children—Andreas Jr., Jacob, and Gottfried—were assigned to trades other than gunsmith, trades more urgently needed by the communities, trades that promised steady employment for a young man. Nor should it surprise us that his one son who had been training as a gunsmith, Henry Albrecht, was placed in a different trade when a need arose. After all, Moravian authorities had done the same thing to a very prominent member of their community who was an established gunsmith: William Henry.

Most people who have investigated Henry Albrecht have been rifle collectors and rifle researchers—who begin with assumptions about the importance of the figure they are studying (who became a master carver) and, even more fundamentally, about the importance of gunsmithing itself. These assumptions have only misled researchers in this case. Putting either Albrecht or gunsmithing at the center of the story distorts the actual circumstances of the 1780s or 1790s: Henry Albrecht was a pawn, his will subordinate to the plans of Moravian authorities, and gunsmithing was a dispensable trade. It is understandably difficult for rifle researchers to imagine that a craftsman as talented as Henry Albrecht would switch trades to joiner—but this of course assumes (wrongly, in this case) that the individual's own

desires or ambitions determined what happened to him. To understand why Henry Albrecht took up the trade of joiner in 1789, one needs to look instead to the needs of the Moravian communities in which he lived and the plans of Moravian authorities who managed these communities.

## NOTES

1. Scott Paul Gordon, "A Considerable Building on the Bushkill Creek": William Henry of Nazareth at Jacobsburg," *The Jacobsburg Record* 37, 3 (2010): 4 n 13. What little was known about Henry Albrecht was summarized in Henry Kauffman, *The Pennsylvania Kentucky Rifle* (Stackpole, 1960), 169-72.

2. John E. Byrne, "The Guns and Their Makers of the Great Western Emporium," *American Society of Arms Collectors Bulletin* 7 (1963): 5; Robert Lienemann, "Moravian Gunmaking: Bethlehem to Christian's Spring," in *Moravian Gun Makers of the American Revolution* (KRA, 2010), 43; Eric Kettenburg, "Conclusion" ([http://www.erickettenburg.com/Site\\_2/Conclusion,\\_etc..html](http://www.erickettenburg.com/Site_2/Conclusion,_etc..html)).

3. November 7, 1805 and February 6, 1806, Minutes of the Nazareth Elders' Collegium, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem (hereafter MAB).

4. "Carpenter and Joiner" (<http://www.history.org/almanack/life/trades/tradecar.cfm>).

5. "A Considerable Building on the Bushkill," 2.

6. January 25, 1794, Bethlehem Single Brothers' Diary, MAB; December 12, 1795, Minutes of the Nazareth Elders' Collegium [trans. E. T. Kluge], MAB; March 25, 1789, Lititz Single Brothers' Diary [my translation], MAB; March 27, 1789, Nazareth Single Brothers' Diary [my translation], MAB.

7. Both of these membership catalogs are at MAB.

8. Scott Paul Gordon, "Johann Andreas Albrecht," In *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present* (<http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=263>).

9. February 15, 1792, Minutes of the Nazareth Aufsehers' Collegium [trans. Edward Quinter], MAB. Till ended up going to Lititz to work with David Tannenberg rather than to Nazareth to work with William Henry.

10. Comparing rifles by Henry Albrecht and Jacob Dickert, Joe Kindig proposed over a half-century ago that "it is possible that Henry Albright learned his trade from Jacob Dickert" (*Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in its Golden Age* [York, 1960], 98).

11. See Gordon, "Johann Andreas Albrecht."

12. July 19, 1772, Minutes of the Lititz Aufsehers' Collegium, MAB; Membership Catalog, Lititz Congregation, July 1779, Box: Old Catalogs, Lititz Moravian Church Archives.

### **Sidebar 2: Arguments and Evidence**

*This article fits all the evidence (known to me) into a responsible account of Henry Albrecht's apprenticeship under William Henry. If more evidence is uncovered, we may need to rethink aspects of this account. No researcher has combed through Lititz's diaries to look for traces of Henry Albrecht or of the trade he studied in Lititz before 1789. No researcher has searched among the minutes of Nazareth's committees for the discussions that led to William Henry's reassignment from gunsmith to joiner, the arrangements agreed upon then, or the arrangements that permitted Henry Albrecht to leave Nazareth in 1792. Additional research may require us to revisit the questions and answers offered here.*