Trappe native Frederick Muhlenberg was first man to sign Bill of Rights; served 4 terms in House

By Michael T. Snyder
Journal Register News Service

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t the president and the vice president die while in office, the Speaker of the House of Representatives takes over the reins of America's government. In other words, the Speaker is only two heartbeats away from being the commander of the world's most powerful country.

Strangely enough, a person close to this threshold of power is not usually well known. It is a safe bet that, outside of his home state, most of the people who vote in the presidential election on Tuesday could not name the man who currently holds the post.

Given the problem with current name recognition, it is a lead-pipe cinch that only very serious students of American history and folks studying for an appearance on "Jeopardy!" could name the first person to hold this position.

Residents of the Lower Schuylkill Valley, especially those living in the Trappe-Collegville area, can take pride in the fact that the first Speaker, Frederick Muhlenberg, was a Trappe native who also spent most of his life living there.

The second son of a famous Lutheran clergyman, the Rev. Henry Muhlenberg and his wife, Anna Maria Weiser, Frederick Augustus Conrad Muhlenberg was born on Jan. 1, 1750, in his parents' home in Trappe.

Born in Germany in 1718, the Rev. Muhlenberg came to America in 1742 when there was an acute shortage of Lutheran clergy. He lived in Trappe for most of the time he resided in this country, but in the course of his pastoral duties he traveled widely. His long and successful career led to his being recognized as the father of the Lutheran Church in America.

His wife, Anna Maria, was a daughter of Conrad Weiser, who was a Mohawk in skills with the powerful Iroquois and other Native American tribes were invaluable in helping to preserve peace between them and the colonies.

The Muhlenbergs had 11 children, including the Rev. Peter Muhlenberg, a Lutheran minister and a general in the American army during the Revolutionary War; Gottlieb Henry Ernst Muhlenberg, also a Lutheran minister, who became one of America's best known botanists; Maria Salome, wife of U.S. Congressman Matthias Richards; and Eve, wife of Emmanuel Schultz, whose son, Andrew, became a governor of Pennsylvania.

Because Frederick Muhlenberg and two of his brothers were destined to follow in their father's career footsteps, they traveled to Germany to receive proper training. Crossing the North Atlantic, a small sailing ship was always risky, but on Wednesday, April 27, 1763, 13-year-old Frederick set sail for the Old World.

His father noted in his journal, "At twelve o'clock I said farewell to my three children (and) commended them to the Lord God in prayer..." It would be seven years before Frederick returned to Pennsylvania and saw his parents again.

In 1770, after his return, Muhlenberg was ordained a Lutheran minister and took a position as pastor to five small rural congregations around the area of Schaefferstown in eastern Lebanon County. These country people had some rough edges, as the young minister noted in his journal after a farmer blew his nose in his hand and then wanted to shake hands with him before wiping it on his breeches. Or, when sitting down to a chicken dinner with a family in his congregation, he was berated by his host for not bringing his own knife.

Not pleased with his single status, in 1771 the young minister mustered the courage to propose, as he noted in his journal for Sept. 18, "Stopped with Miss Catherine Schaeffer to get her consent to marry me. This I secured several days later."

Catherine was the daughter of David Schaeffer of Philadelphia, a wealthy sugar refiner and prominent member of St. Michael's Lutheran Church. It is very likely the couple knew each other from the time Frederick's father was pastor of St. Michael's.

In 1774, Muhlenberg left the rustic Schaefferstown area to become the pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in New York.

N.Y. The outbreak of the Revolutionary War ended his tenure there. With the occupation of New York City by British troops imminent, the Muhlenbergs left and went to live with his parents in Trappe, and Henry Muhlenberg noted in his journal on Aug. 16, "my son Frederick and his family arrived in a rented stage."

Muhlenberg, now a pastor without a congregation, had no regular source of income. It is certain that his father-in-law gave the family financial support, but the position in which Frederick found himself prompted his entry into the mercantile business. With his connections in Philadelphia, especially through his father-in-law, this was a natural move, and it led to his opening a store in Trappe.

However, it was politics that radically changed Muhlenberg's life. Like his brother Peter, the minister and American general, Frederick supported the Revolution and in 1779 became a member of the Continental Congress. A year later he became the first Speaker of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, and when Montgomery County was established in 1784, he was appointed its first Recorder of Deeds and Register of Wills.

By the middle of the decade, Frederick Muhlenberg had gone from an out-of-work cleric to a successful merchant and politician. These were achievements a man could take pride in and be content with, but for Muhlenberg greater things were ahead.

As the 1780's drew to a close, the American colonies had won their independence from Great Britain, but they still faced the knotty problem of creating a government that would unite them into a true nation.

Frederick Muhlenberg played an important role in this process. In 1787, he presided at the Pennsylvania state convention to ratify the U.S. Constitution.
Frederick Muhlenberg was first Speaker

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stitution. Two years later he made the move from state to national politics when he was elected as a representative to the first U.S. Congress and chosen as the first Speaker of the House — thus becoming a charter member of that powerful but anonymous group — and was the first man to sign the Bill of Rights.

Muhlenberg served in the House of Representatives for four terms, from 1789 to 1797, and was elected again as Speaker during his third term.

A treaty between the U.S. and Great Britain ended Muhlenberg's congressional career. In November of 1794, American diplomat John Jay signed a treaty with Great Britain that became unpopular in America. Its ratification by the Senate set off a wave of protests with mobs threatening violence to those who voted for it.

On April 29, 1796, when the House had to vote on the treaty's appropriations, the debate was so heated that the congressmen dissolved into a committee of the whole with Muhlenberg as chairman.

The vote on the resolution was a tie, leaving Muhlenberg holding the bag. Realizing he was committing political suicide, but feeling that the treaty was essential to avoid another war with the English, he voted in favor of the resolution. Two days later, May 2, 1796, the House approved the necessary money to enact the treaty.

Muhlenberg was right. His vote ended his national political career and it almost ended his life. On May 4, his brother-in-law, Bernard Schaeffer, enraged over Muhlenberg's vote, assaulted him and stabbed him. Schaeffer, who was a little unbalanced, also stabbed the sheriff of Philadelphia when the officer tried to arrest him two days later.

Muhlenberg's last term in Congress ended in 1797 and less than two years later he was appointed Receiver General of the Pennsylvania Land Office, roughly analogous to the modern-day state treasurer, and moved to Lancaster, which then the state capital.

He died there of a stroke on June 4, 1801, and is buried in that city.

Frederick Muhlenberg was an illustrious member of an illustrious family. His passing was noted by Pennsylvania politician William Duane in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, "There is no other character among the Germans of the talents and standing of the deceased."
Speaker’s House saved from wrecking ball

By Michael T. Snyder
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When Frederick Muhlenberg moved his family from New York City to Trappe, he was for a time essentially a homeless person with no job. He and his wife and children lived with his parents and, except for the small amounts he earned preaching occasionally at the Lutheran church in New Hanover and a few other area churches, he wasn’t earning any money.

His father lamented in a journal entry, Aug. 9, 1776, “It is hard for young beginners when they suddenly lose their scanty support and are forced to flee with wife and little children...“ and then on Sept. 29 noted that “Friedrich (had) no charge, no income, and (was) in exile with wife and children.

Despite this rocky beginning, in 1781 Frederick bought a house and 50 acres on the north side of the main road leading from Reading to Philadelphia (now Ridge Pike). The home was built in 1763-64 — about the same time Muhlenberg left home to study in Germany — for John Schrack, the eldest son of Christian Schrack, who founded Trappe, and his wife, Silence.

John and Silence lived there until he died in 1772. For the next 11 years, the home belonged to a series of owners and then became the property of Frederick Muhlenberg.

Then a merchant, Muhlenberg added a stone building, used as a general store, to the east side of the main house, and he was also probably responsible for a stone addition to main house’s west side.

Ten years later, Muhlenberg sold the property to his sister, Mary, and her husband, Francis Swaine, who expanded the house with an addition to the rear. The Swaines moved to Norristown in 1801 and two years later sold the property to Charles Albrecht, a musical instrument maker from Philadelphia.

During the 19th century, the house went through a series of owners and major alterations. In 1924, Ursinus College bought the house for use as a men’s dormitory and athletic training center. In 1944, the college sold the property.

In 1990, the second and third floors were converted to apartments after which the building suffered mightily from neglect.

In 1999, CVS Pharmacy’s plans to demolish it and replace it with a store was the catalyst that gave life to a grassroots effort to rescue what was an important piece of local and national history.

Organized as Save the Speaker’s House Inc., the group was able to purchase the building and an acre of ground with the intent of restoring it to it to the period in which Muhlenberg lived there.

With a 2006 grant from Montgomery County, the property was purchased and placed under conservation easements that ensure that the wrecking ball and the bulldozer will never bring about its demise.

For people interested in learning more, see the Speaker’s House website, www.speakershouse.org. The Speaker’s House annual meeting will be held on Sunday, Dec. 9, from 2 to 4 p.m., at Augustus Lutheran Church, 717 W. Main St., Trappe. All community residents may attend.