

The Confer Families of Advent Cemetery by Justin K. Houser

With pleasure I am happy to provide the histories of some of the families of the Advent Cemetery and tell their stories. It seems that I am related in some way or another to most of the early families of the Yarnell and Marsh Creek areas. This article will explore the Confer family who are quite numerous in the region. There are in fact numerous branches of the Confer family who now repose in the Advent Cemetery. All are distantly related but each has its own story.

Philip Confer, the ancestor of the Confers discussed in this article, was born circa 1766 or 1767 in Bern Township, Berks County, Pa., the son of Johann Michael Conver (1734-1813) and Maria Catharina _____ (c1740-1824). The Conver lineage traces back through Neustadt-an-der-Weinstrasse, Germany, to the Val du Ruz in Canton Neuchatel, Switzerland. The earliest known ancestor, Jehan du Ruz, was born about the year 1220 and was the first of many generations of vintners in the region. His descendant, Guillaume du Ruz, took the surname Convert during the late 14th century.

When Philip Confer was about four years old his parents moved “over the Blue Mountain” to the frontier region that is now known as Manheim Township, Schuylkill County, where his father ran a grist mill and saw mill. Philip married Catharine Wenrich, a neighbor, about 1787, and they became the parents of eight known children. Around 1800 Philip and Catharine and their family moved to Centre County, settling first in Brush Valley, and then in Penns Valley for a couple of years. (Philip’s parents and siblings also came here around that time and are the ancestors of the other Confers of Centre County.) In 1804 Philip and Catharine moved to the area known as the “ridges,” in the vicinity of Lower Polecat Road in Liberty Township. Catharine died about 1806 and Philip remarried, probably to Susanna, dying himself about 1825 or 1826.

Two of Philip and Catharine’s sons are the ancestors of the main branches of Confers buried in the Advent Cemetery: Jonas and Philip. (Another son, John Confer, is the ancestor of my own ancestor, Mary Chestina (McKean) Sliker Watson, buried in the Advent Cemetery, but her branch will be discussed in a future article about the Sliker family.)

The Jonas Confer Branch

Jonas Confer (Aug. 3, 1792 – 1838 or 1839) came to Liberty Township with his family around 1800. He married first to Agnes Gunsallus (ca. 1792 – ca. 1827), daughter of Richard and Eustacia Ann (Lucas) Gunsallus, early settlers just to the east of Curtin and among the pioneers of the Curtin Methodist Church. They had five children – Richard, Eustacia Hannah, Elizabeth, James, and Austin. Jonas remarried to Anna Reed, who moved to the Pottersdale area after his death with their children, Isabella, William, John, and Elmira. Of these children, Richard Confer is the ancestor of those in the Advent Cemetery. Born in 1814, he married Margaret Packer (22 May 1821 – 14 Jan 1914) on November 16, 1837. She was the daughter of Eli and Ann F. Packer, and a descendant of the well-known Packer family from Howard which included Governor William F. Packer of Pennsylvania.

Jerome Armour Confer was born in what is now Liberty Township, Centre County, Pennsylvania, on August 31, 1840, the son of Richard and Margaret (Packer) Confer. The second of four brothers, he was only six years old when his father, a miller by trade, passed away in 1846 at the age of 32. In 1851 his widowed mother married Jonathan Haugh, himself a widower, and the blended family moved to Jefferson County, Pa., in 1856. Four years later, on Feb. 20, 1860, Jerome married **Margaret Elizabeth Walker**, daughter of James and Rachel (Heaton) Walker, who was born on May 5, 1844, in Beech Creek, and whose family may later become a subject of one of these articles.

Jerome and Margaret Confer became the parents of thirteen children: *Rachael Margaret (Confer) Butler Strickland (1861-1932), *Susan Melissa Confer (1863-1865), *Mary Elizabeth (Confer) Heaton (1865-1930), *Ann Confer (1867-1867), *Richard Seymour Confer (1868-1935), James Edward Confer (1870-1942), *Alma Confer (1873-1873), *Lida May Confer (1874-1878), *Clara Minerva Confer (1876-1878), Nelson Askey Confer (1878-1940), *Ethel Edith (Confer) Burd (1880-1945), *Gertrude Edna (Confer) Walker (1885-1922), and Frances Myrtle (Confer) Haagen (1888-1977). (Those marked with an *asterisk are buried in the Advent Cemetery.)

At his marriage Jerome Confer returned to Centre County and for the first part of his married life, he engaged in lumbering. During part of this time the young family lived in Snow Shoe Township. Lumber workers would not only log the old-growth forest for shipment downstream to the hubs of Williamsport and beyond, but perhaps more significantly would also supply the wood needed to create charcoal, the essential fuel of the local iron-making industry.

In 1875 Jerome Confer gave up the woodsman's life and began renting a 184-acre farm in the Marsh Creek area near Yarnell from Adam Walker, and the next year he purchased this farm. The rest of Jerome and Margaret's lives were devoted to agricultural pursuits. According to an 1898 biographical sketch, "Mr. Confer is a man of great energy, of strong determination and resolute purpose, and carries forward to successful completion whatever he undertakes. All that he possesses he has secured through his own efforts, and his prosperity is certainly well merited." Ray Burd Sr. would later remember his grandfather Confer's prize-winning corn from this farm.

Jerome and Margaret were not members of the Advent Church but instead were members of the Church of Christ, also known as the Disciple Church, and most likely attended the Fairview Union Church which included a Church of Christ congregation.

Margaret Elizabeth (Walker) Confer passed away on February 15, 1917, on the family farm at Yarnell, from complications of a stroke sustained 13 years prior. She was 72. Her funeral services were nevertheless held in the Advent Church. Jerome survived until September 10, 1929, passing away at the age of 89 from chronic nephritis at the home of his daughter, Frances Haagen, at Yarnell. He had been blind the last four years of his life.

William Packer Confer was a younger brother of Jerome Armour Confer, and was born in Liberty Township on December 21, 1844. At the age of 16 he enlisted in the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War. William served as a Private in Company L, 11th Pennsylvania

Cavalry, from September 30, 1861 through August 13, 1865, practically the duration of the war. He witnessed the destruction of the ironclad Merrimac and was later captured by the Confederate Army during the war and spent eleven months and five days in the horrific Andersonville Prison. He survived this ordeal and returned to Centre County after the war.

Soon thereafter William married **Jane Walker**, daughter of Jacob C. and Margaret (Lucas) Walker. Jane was born August 13, 1847, in the vicinity of Runville, but died soon after her marriage, on December 16, 1869, at the age of 22 years. She was laid to rest in the Advent Cemetery. So far as is known they had no children.

William then moved to Snow Shoe Township and lived with his brother Jerome for a while, working as a lumberman. He also spent some time in Jefferson County near his mother's family. During this time he became involved in a relationship with Lydia Reynolds and he became a father. His son, Samuel Packer Confer (1871-1965), lived with his mother and her family in Jefferson County for the rest of his life.

William returned to Centre County and on October 30, 1875, in Bellefonte, he married **Eva Margaret Williams**, born on October 11, 1848, in Milesburg, the daughter of James and Mary Elizabeth (Heaton) Williams. The first years of their married life were spent in Morris Township, Clearfield County, later moving to Gibson Township, Cameron County, then to the town of Bradford in McKean County, and even for a time living in Pittsburgh with one of their daughters. William worked variously as a laborer and liveryman. By 1920, however, they had returned to the Yarnell area for their retirement years. Later they lived in Altoona but then moved back to Yarnell.

William Packer Confer passed away on October 5, 1936, at his home in Yarnell, following a stroke, at the age of 91. He was laid to rest in the Advent Cemetery. Eva Margaret returned to the home of her daughter in Altoona where she died on September 30, 1937, of bronchial pneumonia, at the age of 88. A Baptist by faith, her funeral services were held in the Advent Church and she was laid to rest beside her husband.

All of their children moved to places throughout the country. But daughters Emma (Confer) Jones Covert (1877-1947) and Louise A. (Confer) Reichard (1877-194?) are buried in Advent Cemetery. The other children buried elsewhere were Mary Melissa (Confer) Bottom (1880-1907), Josie B. (Confer) Tonkinson (1882-1964), and John M. Confer (1883-1905), who died while serving in the Ninth Battery of the Field Artillery of the U.S. Army in San Ardo, California.

The Philip Confer Branch

Jonas's brother, Philip Confer, was born in Centre County, probably in Miles Township, on February 26, 1801. He married Margaret Wants on October 2, 1823. She was born May 7, 1804, in Howard Township, the daughter of John and Margaret Wants. They became the parents of fourteen children. Margaret passed away on December 27, 1887, at her home in Howard Township; Philip followed her to the grave on December 16, 1889. They were originally buried

in the Sand Hill Cemetery, but when the Foster Joseph Sayers Dam was constructed in the mid-1960s, their graves were among those removed to the new Schencks Cemetery.

Ezekiel Confer was one of their fourteen children. Born in Howard Township on June 30, 1839, he married Charity A. Packer on December 8, 1859. She had been born in Howard Township on August 18, 1840, a daughter of Jesse Phipps Packer and Sarah Linnes (Swisher) Packer. The young couple lived in Howard Township for a while but later moved to Boggs Township, purchasing a 158 acre farm on the "Canada Road." They became the parents of thirteen children. Ezekiel worked as a farmer and as a dealer in farm machinery. Charity passed away on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1914, and Ezekiel followed her to the grave on August 15, 1915. They were practically lifelong members of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and were pillars of that congregation in the Fairview Union Church, where both are buried. Of their children, two are buried in the Advent Cemetery.

Ira Packer Confer was born on January 1, 1865, in Howard Township. On August 29, 1895, at the home of the bride in Yarnell, he married **Florence Elizabeth Yarnell**, daughter of Jacob and Maria (Poorman) Yarnell, who had been born February 16, 1873. They were wed by Rev. W. R. Dillen, United Brethren pastor of the Runville charge. The young couple lived in Yarnell for the rest of their life; they had no children. Ira ran a general store at Yarnell for many years and was appointed Postmaster of the Yarnell Post Office on August 17, 1901, and served until May of 1920. He also engaged in farming.

Florence passed away on August 28, 1937, at her home in Yarnell, following an illness with stomach cancer. Ira passed away on November 11, 1945, at the age of 80, following an accidental fall, and was laid to rest in the Advent Cemetery.

Ira's younger sister, **Emma Laura (Confer) Watson**, features prominently in the history of the Advent Church and Cemetery. She was born June 4, 1876, in Boggs Township, and on December 18, 1894, at Snow Shoe Intersection (now Wingate), she married **John Thomas Watson**, son of Stanley Kay and Mary E. (Poorman) Watson, born March 3, 1869 in Boggs Township. The Watsons were a long-standing family in the Advent Church.

John Thomas and Emma Laura (Confer) Watson lived on the farm adjacent to the Advent Church. John passed away at home on August 6, 1943. Emma followed him to the grave on January 12, 1945, following a heart attack suffered while visiting her daughter in Warren, Ohio. Both were noted in their obituaries as members of the Advent Church, and were laid to rest in the Advent Cemetery. [Emma's columns about Holts Hollow, published in the *Centre Democrat* from 1924 to 1945, recounted the social life of the community, including picnics, camp meetings and worship services at the Advent Church.]

John Thomas and Emma Laura (Confer) Watson became the parents of fourteen children. Those buried in the Advent Cemetery are marked with an *asterisk. Clyde Marlin Watson (1895-1959), *Albina Alice (Watson) Johnson (1897-1968), *Alta Mae (Watson) Reese (1898-1980), *Cameron Watson (1899-1899), *Burton Ray Watson (1901-1918), *Armetta Irene (Watson) Sweitzer (1903-1964), *Ruth Elva Watson (1904-1905), *Olive Madalene (Watson) Rhoads Scholl (1906-1985), *Mildred Helene (Watson) Magargel (1909-1968), *Hilda Kathryn

(Watson) Roberts Fyfe (1910-2005), *Orvis Edward Watson (1913-1985), Mary Ida (Watson) Sheesley (1915-2001), *Eva Ethel (Watson) Stauffer (1916-2009), and *Rev. Fred Harold Watson (1918-2011).