



Rev. Levi Zerr, founder of Cornwall Manor.

Cornwall Manor: How It All Started

Rev. Dr. J. Dennis Williams (2011)

Editor's Note: Cornwall Manor a retirement community in Lebanon County founded by Methodists, celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2009. This article was written for a larger history of the Manor prepared by Rev. J. Dennis Williams, who is a retired clergy member, and former District Superintendent, of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference.

They were relaxed. Perhaps because they all knew each other, but the setting had something to do with it, too. On a summer day, August 4, 1948, ten men gathered on a Mt. Gretna cottage porch in comfortable wicker chairs. The host was Claude R. Stauffer. The group consisted of John T. Carson, Walter J. Leppert, G. Stanley Lynch, Henry E. Walhey, Robert H. Stauffer, Frank Campbell, John B. Leshner, E. U. Sowers, Levi H. Zerr, and the host. The conversation was about the Buckingham estate. It was for sale. On that porch, the decision was made by this group of ten to acquire the Buckingham property, and five thousand dollars, writes Levi Zerr, “was subscribed as initial gifts to get the... project underway.”

The wicker chair porch decision to purchase the Buckingham estate grew from earlier events. According to *The Cornwall Story*, the Levi Zerr memoir, it all started at a quarterly conference of the then Cornwall Methodist Church. As with all such conferences, the District Superintendent presided over the meeting. The superintendent was the Rev. Dr. Levi Zerr. At one point the church's pastor, Rev. Washington Sands Fox,

was asked to make his report. In that report, almost as an afterthought, Pastor Fox mentioned the death of a generous benefactor of the church, Mrs. Margaret Buckingham. Sometimes life-changing events can creep up on you when you least expect them, as in a perfectly ordinary church meeting. For Levi Zerr, Fox's casual comment about Mrs. Buckingham's death was life-changing. It triggered a dream from the past that Zerr had tucked away in some forgotten, cob-webbed corner of his mind. It was a dream, he wrote, "of a home for God's Senior Citizens," a place where members of Methodist Churches, together with the ministers of the conference, their wives and widows, and other deserving people, could live comfortably. Zerr shared with Bishop Fred Pierce Corson the thought that the Buckingham estate could be just the place for such a community. The Bishop was supportive. He knew that entrance into the Home for the Aged in Philadelphia required a seven-to-eight year wait. Another Methodist retirement community was needed, but there were no funds to make such a purchase.

While this was being pondered, Reuben F. King, a Lebanon realtor, inquired of Dr. Zerr about the church's interest in the Buckingham property. A day later, a letter was received from a former pastor of the Cornwall Methodist Church. The letter spoke of the pastor's association with Mrs. Buckingham and the adaptability of the property for church purposes. Zerr became convinced that God was moving him to see if the Buckingham estate could give shape to his dream of a new retirement community.

With kindly friendliness, and a passion for the project, Zerr began to interest key laity of the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Church in the idea of a church home in Cornwall. On July 10, 1948, those interested in the project visited the seventy-four acre Buckingham property for the first time. Guided by Mr. Frank Campbell, the manager of the estate, they toured the Victorian mansion and acres of graded lawns, gardens, and carefully selected shade trees. They were shown a sizable greenhouse, a large stone bank barn, a U-shaped stable and carriage shed with a four room apartment on the second floor, a four car brick garage, and a rustic shed. For Zerr, entering the estate and following the winding drive upward toward the mansion was a moment of epiphany. He found himself saying, "Oh God, could all this be for our Church?" And from somewhere deep within arose the thought, "If you have faith to believe, it shall come to pass."

Armed with such faith, on August 4, 1948, twenty-five days after the tour, the group of ten was convened on the Stauffer family's Mt.



The Buckingham Mansion, which became the core of Cornwall Manor.

////////////////////////////////////

Gretna porch. There the critical decision was made to purchase the Buckingham property.

There were others who were interested in purchasing the estate, which was being offered for \$100,000. At least one potential buyer was prepared to purchase the property at that price. Zerr and his interested Methodists made an offer of \$20,000. The offer – eighty per cent below the asking price – seemed destined to sink into oblivion. But then a remarkable thing happened. William C. Freeman, Margaret Buckingham’s heir, accepted the \$20,000 offer. After further discussion, Freeman also agreed to give to the group the valuable furnishings within the mansion, Zerr noted, “even though he knew full well that most of [the furnishings] would not be practical for our use.” Why did Freeman accept the \$20,000 bid that was but a fragment of the property’s worth? In his book, *The Cornwall Story*, Dr. Zerr speculates that it was because Mrs. Buckingham had informed her nephew before her death that she hoped the estate would be sold to someone who would preserve the dignity of the place. Evidently, Freeman felt that this would occur under Methodist ownership.

On October 12, 1948, more than one hundred people from all the districts of the Philadelphia Conference gathered at the mansion to witness an agreement for the purchase of the historic Buckingham estate. The agreement was signed by John T. Carson, on behalf of the Methodist Church Home in Cornwall, and Frank Campbell, who was representing William C. Freeman. No money was transferred.

There were some ministers and lay people of the conference who felt uneasy with the Cornwall enterprise. It was thought to be too big an undertaking. They asked, "From where will the \$20,000 come?" Some of the \$20,000 came from those initial donations pledged on the Mt. Gretna porch of Claude Stauffer, and from other donors. The remainder of the money came, astonishingly, by holding a sale. The mansion furnishings, which had been included in the agreement of purchase, included a wealth of valuable antiques. Zerr auctioned off a small portion of them, realizing more than \$12,000 from the sale. This amount, added to the gifts of the first contributors, provided the needed \$20,000. Therefore, a case can be made that the cost to the Methodists was considerably less than \$20,000, in that the money that came from the auction was in actuality a gift from William C. Freeman. He had been willing to include the furnishings in the agreement, with full knowledge that they were valuable. Subtracting the auction money, as a gift from the seller, from the \$20,000, Freeman sold the property to the Methodist Church Home in Cornwall at a cost to the buyer of less than \$8,000.

THE HOME IS FOUNDED

On January 24, 1949, the Methodist Church Home in Cornwall was incorporated in the Lebanon County Court of Common Pleas. The incorporation papers were prepared by Mr. James Atkins, a Lebanon attorney, who became the solicitor for the incorporators. The incorporators were John T. Carson, a prominent figure in Methodist circles and the lay leader of the Philadelphia Conference, John B. Leshner, an industrialist of Williamstown, E. U. Sowers of the Sowers Printing Company in Lebanon, Claude R. Stauffer, a businessman and district lay leader, and Robert H. Stauffer, a businessman from Leola. All five incorporators were present at the Mt. Gretna porch meeting.

Three weeks after incorporation, on February 15, 1949, the title to the Buckingham estate was transferred from William C. Freeman and his wife Margaret to the newly incorporated Methodist Church Home in Cornwall. At 1:00 PM that same day, a meeting of the incorporators was



Signing the agreement of sale, in February 1949, for the Buckingham Mansion and property. Standing, left to right, is Rev. W. Sands Fox (the former Cornwall pastor who first mentioned the estate to Dr. Zerr), John B. Leshner, Dr. Levi Zerr, and Rev. Johnson N. Armistead. Seated, left to right, are Frank W. Campbell and John T. Corson.

convened. According to the minutes of the afternoon, a board of trustees with officers was constituted, a resolution was adopted to take out a \$35,000 mortgage payable to the Methodist Home in Philadelphia, and a letter from Bishop Corson was read by John H. Herr, representing the Bishop and the Superintendents. The letter spoke of the need for the Cornwall project to “be properly [staffed] and managed.” It suggested that Levi Zerr lead the project, and that “Rollin M. Lawrence be appointed Assistant Director.” The rationale that the Bishop gave for these appointments was that they would indicate “that the project will have enough promise to merit favorable consideration from the Trustees of the Bradley Fund.” Thus, even on the day that the title was being transferred, funding issues were being considered so that existing buildings could be renovated and new buildings constructed. The newly constituted board instructed Dr. Herr to inform the Bishop of its “request for the appointment of Levi H. Zerr as Executive Administrator of the Home and of Rollin Lawrence as Assistant Administrator.”

During the annual meeting of the Philadelphia Conference, on May 13, 1949, the following resolution was presented.

WHEREAS- The historic Buckingham Mansion and estate... has come into the possession of certain laymen and ministers of the Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Church as Incorporators and Trustees of the Methodist Church Home in Cornwall, Pa....

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED- That this property and project be, and is hereby accepted by the Philadelphia Annual Conference as one of its projects....

The resolution was adopted, and a dream that had been awakened at a Methodist quarterly conference became a reality.

Sources:

John E. Hower, *A Community of Caring: 50th Anniversary Cornwall Manor* (Cornwall Manor, 1999), 1-7.

Constitution and By Laws, Application for Charter, Decree of Incorporation, Articles of Incorporation, recorded January 24, 1949.

Minutes of the Incorporators of the Methodist Church Home in Cornwall, February 15, 1949.

Levi Hoffman Zerr, *The Cornwall Story* (Printed privately, 1968).