

John George Obermeyer  
1727-1805  
Early German settler in Union County, PA

By Walter Watkins

At a time when Union County laid on the westernmost edge of colonial settlement, there existed a need for persons with enough fortitude to settle this unconquered land. The dangers facing these early settlers of Buffalo Valley included crossing the mighty and unforgiving Susquehanna River, the untamed first growth forests that gave rise to the name Pennsylvania, and Native Americans, who were not pleased with the settler's encroachment upon the lands which these people had long called home. One man with enough pluck to endeavor against such odds to settle this land was John George Obermeyer. Not only did Mr. Obermeyer forge a life for himself out of the Pennsylvania wilds, he also greatly aided his compatriots in their attempts to settle and create a new country.

Born in Blankenloch (now Stutensee), Germany on October 27, 1727, Mr. Obermeyer would immigrate to America during the summer of 1751. After enduring a one hundred and twenty-five day journey across the Atlantic, Mr. Obermeyer's vessel, "Brothers", anchored in Philadelphia on September 16, 1751. After declaring his loyalty to the English King and English Laws in Philadelphia, Mr. Obermeyer moved to Paxton Township, in what is now Dauphin County. In 1769, Mr. Obermeyer's father-in-law surveyed land in Buffalo Township and less than two years later, Mr. Obermeyer and his family reached Union County.

After crossing the Susquehanna River, Mr. Obermeyer along with his wife and children proceeded along Penn's Creek to Sweitzer's Run, near present day New Berlin. Surely, Mr. Obermeyer was familiar with the LeRoy Massacre that occurred a short distance from his new property as he constructed a well fortified log cabin, measuring 30' by 30'. In the coming years, the protective construction of the Obermeyer residence would come to be highly revered and beneficial to the residents of Buffalo Valley.

After constructing his residence, Mr. Obermeyer quickly undertook the transforming of wilderness into farmland. By 1775, the Obermeyer's were tending to 40 acres of land that had been cleared. Despite his agricultural successes, Mr. Obermeyer, along with his fellow settlers of the valley, had to survive the all too frequent Native American raids. During such attacks, residents of the valley would seek shelter in the Obermeyer household, which would come to be affectionately called "Fort Obermeyer."

By the latter part of 1775, with the threat of Native American raids ever present and the specter of war with Great Britain, the settlers of Buffalo Valley created a committee of safety for the purpose of organizing the defenses of the valley. Mr. Obermeyer was unanimously elected by his peers to serve on this first committee of safety for the valley.

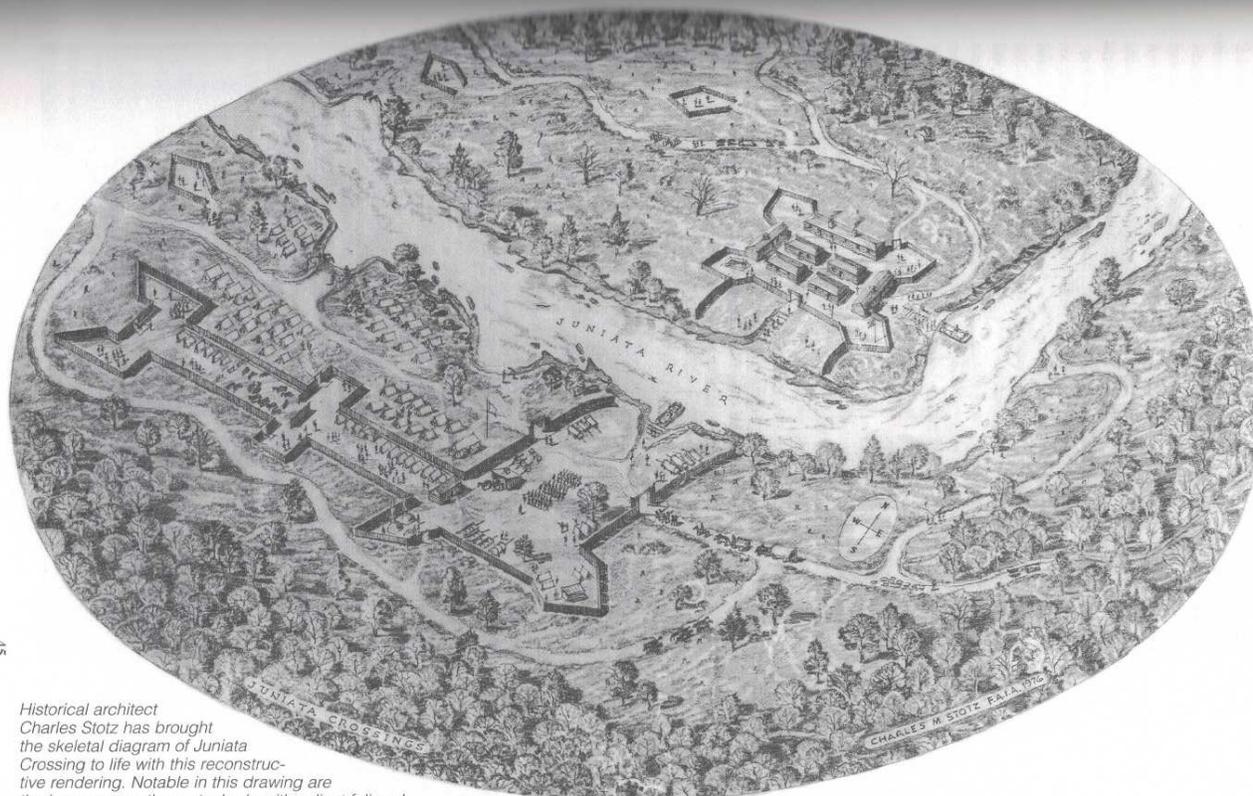
With the outbreak of War with Britain in 1776, Mr. Obermeyer answered the Continental Congress' call for troop formation and left Buffalo Valley. He was elected to a Captain's position in the Sixth Company of riflemen from Pennsylvania. In 1777, the Sixth Company assisted General Washington in the pacifying of British hostilities in New Jersey. However great the successes of the Sixth Company were in New Jersey, Mr. Obermeyer's deployment would soon be altered by events occurring in the Buffalo Valley.

A sharp rise in the number of raids on the frontier settlements of the Susquehanna and Wyoming Valleys in the spring and summer of 1778 led to the "Great Runaway." Nearly all of the early settlers were forced to leave their homesteads and take refuge in forts east of the Susquehanna. Mr. Obermeyer, still being on the Buffalo Township Committee of Safety, organized a group of militia to combat the Native American threat.

The militia that was organized by Mr. Obermeyer would become affectionately known as the "Frontier Rangers." This group of expert marksmen, along with the campaign led by General John Sullivan, worked tirelessly to reestablish control of the frontier of central Pennsylvania. Despite the war with the British ending at Yorktown in 1781, the Frontier Rangers continued to battle the Native American raiders until the Treaty of Paris ended hostilities in 1783.

Following the end of the War for Independence, Mr. Obermeyer returned to his home in New Berlin. Staying actively involved in the community, Mr. Obermeyer was elected to the position of Overseer of Northumberland County. He served in this capacity until retiring to his farm in 1796. However this retirement did not end Mr. Obermeyer's public involvement, he became the trustee of the Lutheran Society for New Berlin. Under his leadership, the society acquired a lot on the corner of Vine and Church Alley from George Long on August 21, 1793. The congregation erected a log church to practice in until a new church could be built in 1821.

Captain John George Obermeyer passed away on September 22, 1805 at his home. Although the location of his grave has been lost to the annals of time, Mr. Obermeyer's accomplishments during his lifetime have established his legacy as the embodiment of an idea American.



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*Historical architect Charles Stotz has brought the skeletal diagram of Juniata Crossing to life with this reconstructive rendering. Notable in this drawing are the immense southern stockade with salient full and half bastions erected to protect the camp, the three diamond-shaped stockade redoubts, and the considerable work that was expended in clearing the area for the fort site and vicinity. Clearing the area around the fort was essential to remove cover that could be used by attackers.*

Courtesy of Virginia Stotz, by permission of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania

Typical colonial fort built by the British near Breezewood, PA in 1758.