



Episode 5, Muhlenberg Robe, Philadelphia and Colonial Williamsburg, VA

Elyse: Our last story investigates a preacher's robe that may have led an American church to war. By 1776, the Revolutionary War has been raging for nearly a year. Yet many Americans remain uncertain about the rebel cause. On January 21st of that year, a young minister named Peter Muhlenberg takes to the pulpit in Virginia. He has an incendiary message. The colonists have religious justification for fighting the British. He preaches on Ecclesiastes: "There is a time for war and a time for peace, and now is the time for war". As his fiery sermon ends, he throws off his clerical robe revealing a Continental Army uniform. According to the story, Muhlenberg then marches out of his church, taking 300 men with him. For the next two centuries, the story of this patriotic act inspires statues, poems and plays. Yet surprisingly little evidence of this event survives. Now, a woman in Philadelphia may have found the missing piece of the story. I'm Elyse Luray and I've come to meet Mary Redline at the Lutheran Theological Seminary to find out more about the robe and its claim to history. Hi, Mary.

Mary Redline: Hi, Elyse. It's such a pleasure to meet you.

Elyse: Thank you.

Mary: Come on, let's go. Well, this is the robe that John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg is supposed to have worn when he gave his farewell sermon at his congregation in Woodstock.

Elyse: And what's the provenance of the piece? I mean, how'd you get it?

Mary: Well, the Henkel family donated the robe to the seminary in 1910.

Elyse: Mary says that like the Muhlenberg family, the Henkels were German immigrants and preachers in Virginia. And did the Henkel family claim that this was Peter Muhlenberg's robe?

Mary: Well, that's what they say.

Elyse: And what specifically can I find out for you?

Mary: Would this robe be sufficiently old that it could have played a role in the story of 1776?

Elyse: Okay. I'll take the robe with me. But I'll also need some pictures so I don't have to carry it around too much. The very first thing that comes to mind when I look at the robe, my first instinct, is that there's condition problems. And I guess that would be normal for something that's 200 years old. If we were dating this piece from the 1700's, one of the things that we would look for is the stitching. If it was from the 1700's, it would have



to be hand stitched. And I can tell just by looking at the piece that this garment was definitely hand stitched. So that's a good thing. I want to show the robe to Linda Baumgarten, one of the world's experts in 18th Century American clothing.

Linda Baumgarten: Hi. Nice to meet you. And welcome to Williamsburg.

Elyse: She's curator of costumes and textiles here at Colonial Williamsburg.

Linda: My first impression is that it looks the right shape and size to be a man's religious robe in the 18th Century. The black material is appropriate. The fact that it opens down the front is appropriate.

Elyse: Now what?

Linda: We probably would need to go to the micro level to do fiber identification and to make sure there's no polyester or an inappropriate fiber. It will be quite easy to take a couple of millimeters from one of the hanging threads to get our fibers. And now...

Elyse: Oh, it's tiny.

Linda: ...put a cover slip on it. And that's ready for the microscope. Ah! That's interesting. Do you want to see it on the monitor?

Elyse: Yeah, sure!

Linda: See the fiber that has scales on the surface? That is indicative of wool under the microscope.

Elyse: And what does that tell us?

Linda: We have references that ministers' robes of the 18th Century were often silk with wool. And, this is a good indication, now that we have wool, even though the textile itself to the naked eye looked like all silk. We could very well have an 18th Century textile.

Elyse: Do we really have the clerical robe that once sent a church to war? I'm meeting Muhlenberg expert Gregg Roeber from Penn State University at the former Muhlenberg family home. He's familiar with the story of Peter Muhlenberg throwing off his robe, and a lot of it makes sense, he says. By 1776, the war was dividing the country, tearing entire families apart. Peter's father Henry was a German-born Lutheran minister who supported the British. But Peter, like many American born children of immigrants, backed the rebellion.



Gregg Roeber: It was a huge issue within his family. His father simply could not endorse what his son was doing; namely, that you would take out arms against a legitimately anointed Christian monarch, which is what George III was. And it affects his relationship with his father in a profoundly negative way.

Elyse: Gregg tells me that a great deal of the story is true. The younger Muhlenberg had been a preacher and did join the Colonial Army.

Gregg: He does, in fact, raise a regiment in Virginia that becomes known as the German Regiment. That's absolutely clear. That it sees service in various places, honorably, we know. That he was successful as a military officer, that's beyond dispute.

Elyse: But what about the story of the disrobing? Gregg says the first mention of Muhlenberg stripping to reveal a rebel uniform comes in 1849, in a biography written by Muhlenberg's great nephew.

Gregg: "Deliberately putting off the gown, which had thus far covered his martial figure, he stood before them a girded warrior." That's what, at least, makes it into print in 1849.

Elyse: But this was nearly 75 years after the event. And Gregg has been unable to find contemporary accounts of Peter Muhlenberg's flamboyant farewell sermon. And just to make sure that I'm perfectly clear, there is absolutely nothing in any written text at this point, that you've been able to find, that talks about the robe before this book?

Greg: There are no letters, there are no books. There are no journal entries. There are no memoirs from his sons, for example, that we might expect. Nothing.

Elyse: That's so disappointing. But thank you.

Greg: You're welcome.

Elyse: I'm not sure what to make of our story. Is this even Peter Muhlenberg's robe? Mary Redline said it had been given to the seminary by a family of German American Lutheran preachers, the Henkels. I'm heading back to the seminary to check out the archives. This is a collection of the Lutheran Newspaper. Here's something, in the October 7th, 1909 Lutheran, it says that Paul Henkel was working in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia around the same time that Muhlenberg was. Well, that's something. Both men were German American Lutheran preachers. But is there any evidence that they knew each other? This is a 1927 history of the region. It says Paul Henkel was preaching in the town of New Market and Peter Muhlenberg in Woodstock. And if we look at the map of the Shenandoah Valley, here's New Market and....ah, Woodstock. So they are close. Further down, I make a key discovery. Listen to this. "The silk robe which he wore during his ministerial



services, a gift from Reverend Peter Muhlenberg, a Brigadier-General in the Revolutionary War, is still in the possession of his great-grandsons." So, this clearly puts the provenances with the Henkel family. It's a baffling story. Our robe is a period clerical garment, which does appear to have been Peter Muhlenberg's and he was a revolutionary. But there's no period account of the famous story. Friederike Baer, of the German Society of Pennsylvania is an expert on the life and customs of German Americans in the early years of the republic.

Elyse: So this is where Peter's father preached.

Friederike Baer: Absolutely. This is his first....

Elyse: Friederike explains how the Lutheran Church and its preachers were at the heart of the community for generations of German American immigrants.

Friederike: This is his first church in the British colonies and this is where Peter grew up. So his first exposure, experience with Lutheranism would have been here in this church.

Elyse: And this is the oldest Lutheran Church in America?

Friederike: Yes. Absolutely.

Elyse: And it's unchanged.

Friederike: Yes.

Elyse: Okay. So let's go inside and check it out.

Friederike: Okay.

Elyse: I show her the photographs of our robe. Can you imagine Peter up there at a pulpit similar to this one unrobing with his uniform? I mean, what do you think about the story? Friederike said that some Lutherans were opposed to the Crown. But she's not surprised there are no period accounts of Muhlenberg stripping off a robe.

Friederike: I don't think he wore the uniform under his robe. He gave a farewell sermon – we know this – and it was probably a very stirring and patriotic sermon. But, I don't think a minister would have actually worn the uniform in his church.

Elyse: So why 75 years later would this symbolic image come to play?



Friederike: Well, beginning in the 1830's, and especially in 1840's, the rate of immigration increased drastically to the United States. In the 30s, we have possibly about 700,000 immigrants. In the 40s, the number increases to 1.6 million.

Elyse: What Friederike tells me next gives me my answer for Mary. Well, I have good news and I have bad news. I tell her the robe is period and did appear to have once belonged to Peter Muhlenberg. And I'm happy to tell you that it is made of silk and a wool blend that was very consistent to the 1700's. You definitely have an authentic robe.

Mary: This is going to be really exciting news at our seminary. [Laughs]

Elyse: But the story of Pastor Muhlenberg dramatically stripping the garment in the pulpit, almost certainly had nothing to do with the Revolutionary War. So would you say that the story is a lie?

Friederike: In a way, yes. It's an invention.

Elyse: Friederike explains how a surge of German immigration in the middle of the 19th Century, 75 years after the Revolution, may explain why dressed up accounts of Peter Muhlenberg's patriotism first appear at around that time.

Friederike: Americans are growing increasingly ambivalent about immigrants in their society. So, it is quite possible that immigrant groups like the Germans felt the need to explain their contributions to American society, their contribution to the building of the nation and the Revolutionary War. And Peter Muhlenberg would have been a perfect candidate as a German American general in the Revolution and ardent patriot.

Elyse: As a war hero, Muhlenberg's robe was perfectly tailored for myth making.

Friederike: So the basic storyline in a way is true. It just didn't happen that way. It's a very dramatic theatrical telling of this development in his life. And he becomes like a symbolic hero for the German Americans in the mid-19th Century.

Mary: Whether he actually gave the sermon or not doesn't discount all the service that he gave to his country. Uh, he actually ended up as a...as a United States Senator. It's inspired a lot of kids and people over the years. And, even if it's not exactly true, the fact that we do have the robe is something that's really special in our collection. And thank you so much.



Elyse: The story of Peter Muhlenberg's robe may well be a myth, rooted in the political needs of German American immigrants. What's undeniable, however, is that the clergyman traded his religious garment for a military uniform and risked his life for the Revolution, setting an example that inspired people for over 200 years.