

## A Gun Wad Martyrs' Mirror

By Adam Hershberger<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to believe that pages from the *Martyrs' Mirror*, found in many Amish and Mennonite homes since its first printing, were once used to wrap powder and ball into rifle cartridges and shot at other humans. This is in direct opposition to what the stories of faith under pressure and trial were originally collected for. The books are often passed down from generation to generation and soon turn into precious family heirlooms. Each unique copy share history with larger stories of faith, suffering, and life, as the families that owned them engaged their world. In one such incident, pages from this large book were used by the American Revolutionary soldiers in their fight for independence from the British Empire. This unlikely story is the focus of this article.

The *Martyrs' Mirror* was compiled by a Dutch Mennonite, Thieleman J. van Braght in 1660, in Dordrecht, Netherlands. He used several martyr books that had been published earlier, and various other sources to collect the stories in the *Martyrs' Mirror*. The first edition of this book was published in 1660 and the second edition was printed in Amsterdam in 1685. The second edition included 104 woodcut etchings by the artist Jan Luyken. Both editions were in the Dutch language and were funded by the Dutch Mennonite Church.

The first American edition of the *Martyrs' Mirror* was printed by the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania in 1748/49 in German. Mennonites from Pennsylvania wrote to the Dutch Mennonites in October of 1745 asking for assistance in translating and printing the *Martyrs' Mirror*. They were concerned that the war between England and France would test their nonresistant faith, and a German translation of the *Martyrs' Mirror* could help to strengthen their Anabaptist heritage. They did not get a reply until three years later. By that time, the Mennonites in Pennsylvania had found a printer that was willing to translate and print the

massive volume. One of the men at the cloister, Peter Miller, was given the assignment of translating it from Dutch into German. In all it took three years of constant work to translate and print the *Martyrs' Mirror*. The first part was completed in 1748, and the second in 1749. The Cloister printed between 1,200 and 1,300 copies. It was about 1,500 pages long, and weighed about thirteen pounds after it was bound. It was the largest book printed in Colonial America prior to the Revolutionary War.<sup>2</sup>



A picture of the cover on this book. Note the metal plates and corners that indicate the work of the binder.

When the Revolutionary War began in 1775, there were several hundred unbound copies of the *Martyrs' Mirror* still at the Ephrata Cloister. At this time, books were not bound until they were sold. The purchaser would either pay the printer to bind them, or they would find someone else to bind their manuscript. Sometime in 1776, the Continental Congress became aware of the amount of printed paper at the Ephrata Cloister. There was a significant shortage of paper during these years since armies used paper to make cartridges, and wadding for their guns. They sent two wagons and

four soldiers to retrieve the paper. The soldiers took about 375 copies of the *Martyrs' Mirror*; while they were confiscated, Congress did pay for the unbound copies.

Only two primary sources of this event exist. Peter Miller included it in a footnote in the 1786 history of the Ephrata Cloister:

*This book eventually had an extraordinary fate during the Revolutionary War in America. Because there was a serious shortage of all war materials and also paper and it was betrayed that there was a large quantity of printed paper at Ephrata, an arrest was immediately made upon it. Many protests were raised against this in the settlement, and it was alleged among others that this might result in harmful consequences because the English army was so nearby. They were resolved not to give up anything voluntarily but that all would have to be taken by force. Thus, two wagons and six soldiers arrived, seizing the martyr books but correctly paying for them. This caused great offense in the land, and many people felt that the war would not end favorably for the country because the testimonies of the holy martyrs had been quite maltreated. At last, however, some judicious persons bought back what yet remained of them.*

For years this was the only information of the event until 1985, when the 1748/49 *Martyrs' Mirror* owned by Joseph von Gundy was discovered. In the front flyleaf was written in the German script of the time:

*This book was printed in Ephrata in Lancaster County, Earl Township-I should have said Cocalico Township. It was seized by Congress in 1776 and taken unbound to Philadelphia. Approximately 150 or a few more were made into cartridges and shot against their elder British brothers, making a murder book out of it until their own conscience told them it had not been printed for such a purpose. Then the Government made a pronouncement to the lovers of this volume that if they would repay them their*

*money and the cartage, they could have back the remaining books. This we did, sending them payment in 1786 when Congress money was worth so little that this book unbound did not cost me over four shillings and six pence or half a dollar and ten pence. Thus, 175 books were returned, many of which were no longer complete and also damaged which I myself saw. But I was lucky that this copy is not lacking a single page. As it is here, it cost me \$1.60. So much for this report. By me Joseph von Gundy, born in the last week of June, 1751. My father's name was Peter von Gundy. My mother was Verona, her maiden name was Farny.<sup>3</sup>*

Earlier this summer a 1748/49 edition of the *Martyrs' Mirror* was brought to the Ohio Amish Library by a local man, Nelson Schlabach. In evaluating the book, it was soon discovered that it was not complete and contained only the second part of the original *Martyr's Mirror*. It had a flowery, wallpaper-like material inside the front cover that was adhered to the leather cover as an



The title page and the unique interior binding of the "Gun Wad" *Martyrs' Mirror*

interior binding. This wallpaper-like binding is a significant marker, and gives some indication of its history. This is the same binding as in the Daniel Martin *Martyrs' Mirror*, which David Luthy has discovered is the same as is in the

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<sup>2</sup> David Luthy, *A History of the Printings of The Martyrs' Mirror*, Pathway Publishers, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> David Luthy, *The Ephrata Martyrs' Mirror: Shot from Patriots' Muskets*, Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage, January 1986

school booklet that was printed in Ephrata by Ludwig Hocker in 1786. It had never been used before this point. The binding in Martin's *Martyrs' Mirror* exactly matches that of the Schlabach *Martyrs' Mirror* dating the binding to, or after 1786. One could argue that perhaps it was rebound in the 1780s. The problem with this argument, is that most bindings lasted for well over a hundred years, and this is only 37 years after print.

In addition, some of the pages in the Schlabach *Martyrs' Mirror* were missing, out of order, or included twice. The first 400 pages are included, and in correct order; except that pages 365-366 were torn out. Pages 401-496 are missing, as are pages 801-864. But pages 801-816 are included after page 872. After page 816 is 841. There are no more missing pages after that, but pages 865-872 are included twice. In all there are 121 missing pages, and 8 duplicate pages. The argument that perhaps the pages were torn out is not conceivable upon close examination of the binding, and the fact that the volume also includes duplicate pages.

Six out of the thirteen copies that Lloyd Weiler of Muddy Creek Farm Library suspected were "Gun Wad" *Martyrs' Mirrors* (bought back by the Mennonites), include only the second portion of the volume.<sup>4</sup> One of the thirteen had the first and second half switched around. In 2010 at a *Martyrs' Mirror* research seminar that many of the 25 leading *Martyrs' Mirror* collectors and scholars attended, no one had seen a two-volume set of the 1748/49 edition. Weiler concludes, "...that partial volumes and other incomplete bindings are *Martyrs' Mirrors* returned from the American Patriots rather than a two-volume set." He further added that many of the suspected reclaimed *Martyrs' Mirrors* were bound in simple leather binding with little, if any of the metalwork common in large books at this time. This is the only clue that is not found in the Schlabach *Martyrs' Mirror*. It has metal plates in each of the four corners, and a diamond-shaped metal plate in the middle. There are two leather hinge straps on

each end of the spine, but the leather clasps have broken off. Some of the leather has also started to chip off. Except for these few blemishes of time, it is in excellent condition.

On the title page is written in the handwriting of that era, "S. C. Miller 1900". On another of the blank pages in the back is "Albert Miller Benton, Ohio, January 27, 1909." Also, very faintly, "Jacob Troyer." All of these were written in pencil. There are several words written in German that are not decipherable to this time. Nelson Schlabach said that the book was owned by his grandparents, Jeremiah Schlabach (1873-1936) and Lydia (Raber) Schlabach (1878-1952). What then is the connection between Albert Miller, who signed it 1909, and the Schlabachs? How did the *Martyrs' Mirror* get from Albert Miller to Jeremiah Schlabach? After searching through the genealogical databases, there is an S. C. Miller.<sup>5</sup> Samuel C. Miller was born in 1866 and died in 1926. He married to Sarah Raber, a sister to Lydia, the wife of Jeremiah Schlabach. He also had a son Albert. If this was the same Albert who signed his name, "Albert Miller, Benton, Ohio, January 27, 1909" he would have been 18 years old. Census records reveal that in 1910, the family, including, a son named Albert, were living in Salt Creek Township, Holmes County, Ohio; the township that Benton is located in.



The page is where Albert Miller's signature is found

In *Samuel C. Miller Family History*, it states that Albert was "an expert at playing ball and some big

teams were interested in him." But his father, Samuel C. Miller, did not allow it. Albert later moved to Iowa and married. He later became a Minister in the Mennonite Church. Perhaps Samuel C. Miller thought that in giving the *Martyrs' Mirror* to his son Albert, who wanted to play for a "big" ball team, it would help persuade him to keep his Anabaptist heritage. It is also significant that Samuel C. Miller's father, and both of his wife's parents died in 1900. Since he signed the *Martyrs' Mirror* in 1900, it would make sense that he got it at one of their estate sales or as an inheritance. Perhaps Albert took the *Martyrs' Mirror* with him to Iowa, sometime around 1913. If so, how did it get from Albert in Iowa to Jeremiah Schlabach in Holmes Co, Ohio? There are several different ways that it could have gotten to Jeremiah Schlabach. Albert could have returned the *Martyrs' Mirror* to his father, and Jeremiah could have simply bought it at Samuel's estate sale in 1926. He likely was present, since his wife was a sister to Samuel's wife. Samuel or Albert could also have simply gifted it, or sold it to Jeremiah, their brother-in-law and uncle, for any number of reasons. This seems to be the only scenario that fits the signatures in the book.

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This *Martyrs' Mirror* has had a unique journey. It was printed in 1749 in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, where it sat unbound for nearly thirty years. It was then seized by the Continental Congress sometime in 1776, and taken to Philadelphia. Here pages were removed and used in the manufacture of cartridges, or as wadding in cannons and guns. In 1786 it was bought back by the Mennonites, and bound in leather with the unique wallpaper-like binding and sold. We know little about the next

124 years until 1900 and the above-mentioned names. Sometime in that period it traveled from Pennsylvania to the Ohio frontier. A Jacob Troyer may have owned it during this time. S.C. Miller had it in 1900. Albert Miller signed it on January 27, 1909. If Jeremiah Schlabach owned it, as is thought by his grandson Nelson Schlabach, then he acquired it sometime between 1909 and his death in 1936. It was then given to his son Jeremiah Wyman Schlabach, who in turn gave it to his son, Nelson Schlabach who brought it to the Library.

On the inside, it contains many accounts and testimonies of Anabaptist martyrs standing firm, and being faithful during times of trial and persecution. Many lessons and examples of living and dying for Christ can be read inside its covers. The slightly worn covers and missing pages attest to a story and history as much as the stories inside the covers. What stories could it relate? Of Ephrata, and its journey to Philadelphia, and then its return to the Mennonites. Of traveling through the Pennsylvania wilderness, and on to the Ohio frontier. Of the many times it was read by different Amish and Mennonite families as they recounted their faith heritage, before finally being brought to the Ohio Amish Library, where it is now on display for this generation, and the world, to hear its story. It is truly a jewel of the past which we can appreciate in the present and future.

Editor's Note: The "Gun Wad" *Martyrs' Mirror* is on display at the Ohio Amish Library. Photographs are property of OAL and may not be used without permission.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Weiler, *Redeemed: The Martyrs' Mirror of 1786*, Muddy Creek Review, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.saga-omii.org>

## The “Gun Wad” Cartridge

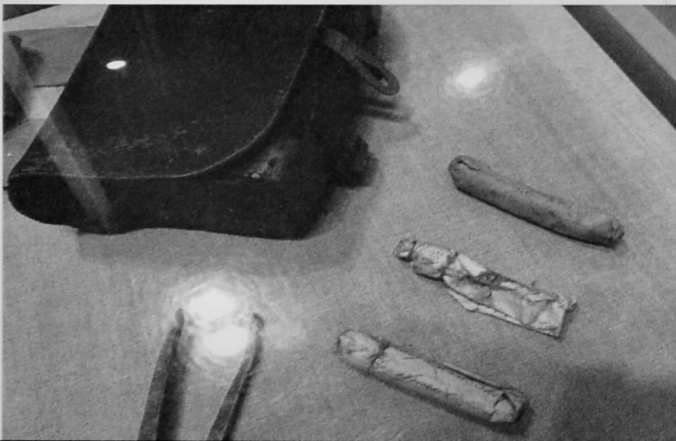
When a new recruit enlisted in the Continental Army, his health was carefully checked out to determine whether he was best suited for the artillery or the musket units. They looked at his overall size and built, but most important was the health of his teeth. It was the teeth that qualified or disqualified him for the musketry infantry units.

For a recruit to quickly load his flintlock musket he needed good teeth. He had to hold the paper cartridge between his teeth. The paper cartridge (gun wad) contained the powder and the musket ball (bullet) to load the gun. With the cartridge firmly held between the teeth, the recruit would tear off the top of the multiple folded paper. He would pour a small amount of that powder onto the pan of the gun (primer powder) and pour the rest of the powder into the front end of the musket barrel. Next, he would push the paper cartridge with the musket ball still inside (gun wad) into the front end of the barrel and ram it down the barrel with a ramrod. The gun was now ready to fire.

The gun wad cartridge served the same purpose as a rifle or shotgun shell does today. It contained the primer, powder and the bullet. The difference was that the top of the cartridge had to be ripped open (hence the good teeth) in order to pour a little primer powder into the pan which would be struck by a piece of flint to create a spark when the trigger was pulled. That spark traveling through a small hole into the barrel ignited the larger amount of powder in the barrel propelling the bullet out towards its target. The gun barrels were smoothbore thus the effective range was only 75-100 yards.

The guns couldn't be fired without this paper to make the cartridges. It is thus easy to understand why our Amish and Mennonite ancestors were so upset that the Martyrs Mirror paper was confiscated to be used to create more pain and suffering of which the cartridge paper already speaks so much about.

-Wayne R. Miller



Cartridge box with paper cartridges, Valley Forge Nat'l Park, Photo by Wayne R Miller



Musket with pan open for primer powder, Valley Forge Nat'l Park, Photo by Wayne R Miller