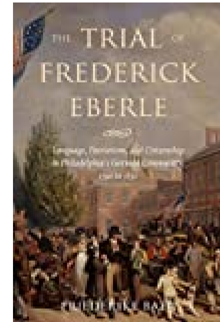

Friederike Baer. *The Trial of Frederick Eberle: Language, Patriotism and Citizenship in Philadelphia's German Community, 1790 to 1830.* New York: New York University Press, 2008. 272 pp. $48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9980-2.

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Published on H-SHEAR (November, 2009)

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Ethnicity and Language in the Early Republic

This small book tackles a very large subject, nothing less than what it meant to be an American in the early Republic. It does so through a minute examination of a language dispute in Philadelphiaâs German Lutheran Church that spilled over into the courtroom. If initially one has doubts whether such an obscure congregational matter could lend itself to an exploration of the crucial question of national identity, Friederike Baerâs incisive analysis of the episode and its larger significance sets them to rest. Thoroughly in command of the details of the escalating conflict that embroiled the local German community for several decades, she marshals a surprisingly rich cache of evidence to elucidate the social composition and political leanings of the competing parties; differentiate the positions of clergy, lay leaders, and rank-and-file church members; and craft illuminating biographies of key figures in the drama.

The dispute that split St. Michaelâs and Zion Church, Philadelphiaâs largest Lutheran church, hinged on the efforts of an acculturated elite to introduce English preaching in the congregation. Their continuing attempts to break the pattern of all-German worship were steadfastly resisted by a large group of church members of more modest social standing. When this so-called German party allegedly used violent means at an 1816 corporation election to ensure that control over church affairs remained in the hands of those who prized the German language, their opponents moved to have them charged with conspiracy. Baker Frederick Eberle was the first name on the bill of indictment, hence the title of the book. Though the legal fulcrum around which the trial revolved was whether violent means had been employed to advance the goals of the German party, the testimony presented in court, the arguments laid out by the Anglo-American lawyers, and the opinions of the Anglo-American judge all spoke to the larger issue of language usage in America.

In essence, Baerâs study problematizes the assumption already crystallizing in the young Republic that communicating in English was a prerequisite to full participation in the American nation. Those in Philadelphiaâs Lutheran congregation who agreed with this notion,

for the most part well-to-do descendants of early German settlers, were convinced that the future prosperity of their church depended on adapting to the dominant Anglo-American culture. To supplement German-language worship with services in English was to take a necessary first step in the right direction. Congregants of limited means, some relative newcomers to the area, opposed this idea with a ferocity that indicated nothing less than a primordial attachment to German culture.

What divided Philadelphiaâs Lutheran congregation in this conflict, then, was not merely a question of alternate vocabularies but rather differing perspectives on the world. The German language became a surrogate for German culture, the constellation of values that anchored transplanted men and women to their ancestral heritage and underpinned group identity. To challenge the supremacy of their native tongue by incorporating English into the time-honored way of worship was to drive a wedge into the ideal of a unitary German Lutheran community.

Yet there was another level to this clash between Germans in Philadelphia. As Baer astutely points out, the conflict in St. Michaelâs and Zion Church had a prominent class dimension. The animus members of the German party felt toward the promoters of English preaching may have been triggered by the question of language, but it rested on a more generalized distrust of acculturated Germans who had risen to respectability in Anglo-American society. The artisans and their wives who formed the nucleus of the German party mobilized against the affluent and educated Germans whose mastery of the English language was a sign of their divorce from the interests of their less privileged countrymen. Far from the levers of power in the public domain, members of the German party struggled to maintain cultural authority in the church.

Because we already know the outcome of language disputes such as this one, we are inclined to characterize the party that held tenaciously to the traditional tongue as retrograde. What is remarkable about the standpoint of the German party in this instance is the coupling of a profound conservatism in matters of culture with a forward-looking outlook in the civic arena. Adherents of the German party did not believe that their stance in favor of exclusively German-language preaching in Philadelphiaâs Lutheran church detracted from their loyalty to America. Speaking German was not a mark of foreignness, as their adversaries contended, but just another way of being American. Declaring that they were as patriotic as their brethren of the English faction, they embraced Revolutionary ideals and chose as their symbol the eagle, a creature that had resonance in both German and American cultures.

Although they did not theorize the issue, those attached to the German party were making the case that linguistic preferences had nothing to do with allegiance to the nation. Their commitment to the founding principles of the American Republic, they believed, was in no way undermined by their affinity for the German language. As if to demonstrate how well they had absorbed the lessons of American democracy, they adeptly transferred the partisan tactics of early nineteenth-century democratic politics to the church setting.

The fact that German party members definitively rejected an âold worldâ identity and assertively claimed a place at the American table is of great significance because it underlines the importance of context in assessing the meaning of their behavior. If Baer had considered a similar conflict over the language of preaching in New York Cityâs Dutch Reformed Church in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, she might have accentuated the central importance of timing in interpreting the Philadelphia dispute.[1] Beginning in the 1740s and persisting even beyond the installation of the congregationâs first English-language minister in 1764, defenders of the Dutch language from the middle and lower ranks of New York society ardently opposed the initiatives of the congregationâs elite concerning English-language preaching and English-language psalmbooks. Unrelenting in their efforts to preserve Dutch as the exclusive language of worship in the cityâs Dutch Reformed Church, these ordinary men and women constructed religiously based arguments and employed multiple tactics, not excluding force, to achieve their goal. But their prolonged and ultimately unsuccessful struggle was conducted without reference to American nationality. Subject to British rule, eighteenth-century Dutch New Yorkers could only turn to a distant fatherland for sources to replenish their Dutch identity as they worked to set themselves apart from their Anglicizing brethren. By contrast, advocates of the German language in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia had no difficulty articulating the reasons why they aimed to be progressive American citizens. They were well on their way to reconciling their German ethnicity and their Americanness.

What lifts this microscopic analysis of the extended quarrel among Philadelphiaâs Lutherans from the realm of local history is the light it sheds on the connection be-

tween intra-group conflicts and the evolution of ethnic identity in urban America at a time of relatively low immigration in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Accustomed as we are to framing the history of ethnicity in the new American nation around transactions between immigrants and American hosts, it is refreshing to encounter a study that conceptualizes negotiations over Americanization within the confines of an ethnic community.

Note

[1]. Joyce D. Goodfriend, âArchibald Laidlie and the Transformation of the Dutch Reformed Church in Eighteenth-Century New York City,â *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 81 (2003): 149-162; and Joyce D. Goodfriend, âThe Cultural Metamorphosis of Domine Lambertus De Ronde,â *The Hudson River Valley Review*, 25 (Spring 2009): 63-73.

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Citation: Joyce Goodfriend. Review of Baer, Friederike, *The Trial of Frederick Eberle: Language, Patriotism and Citizenship in Philadelphia's German Community, 1790 to 1830.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

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