

**RECORDS OF THE
AMERICAN CATHOLIC
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF
PHILADELPHIA, VOL. XXIII**

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BY
THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF PHILADELPHIA

THE REV. PETER HELBRON, SECOND PASTOR
OF HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA.

USURPATION OF PASTORAL RIGHTS BY REV. JOHN
N. GOETZ AND REV. WILLIAM ELLING.

OPPOSITION OF THE TRUSTEES TO BISHOP CARROLL.

BY THE LATE MARTIN I. J. GRIFFIN.

The Rev. Peter Helbron, the second pastor of Holy Trinity Church, Philadelphia, arrived, with his brother, the Rev. John Charles Baptist Helbron, at Philadelphia from Amsterdam on October 14, 1787. He was on November 12 [or 22], 1787, appointed pastor at Goshenhoppen (now Bally), Berks County, Pennsylvania. There he served until August, 1791, when he came to Philadelphia to assist his brother, the pastor of Holy Trinity, who was about to visit Spain to collect for the church. On his departure on November 13, 1791, Father Peter took his place as pastor of the church.

Father John Baptist Helbron may have sailed on the brig *Boon*, under Captain Teer, or on the *Cadet*, with Andrew Oswald as master and George Meade, owner. Father Helbron was never afterwards heard from and was believed to have been lost at sea. His last record on the sacramental registers was on October 18, 1791, but on September 19, 1791, he stood sponsor for Anthony Charles

Selin, who was born June 19, 1789, son of Anthony and Catharine Schneider Selin. The father of this child was Captain Anton Selin, a Swiss Catholic, who served in the American Revolutionary Army. His record may be read in the *American Catholic Historical Researches*, October, 1908. He was the founder of Selin's Grove, Northumberland Co., Pa. The mother of the child was the sister of John and Simon Snyder, the latter becoming Governor of Pennsylvania. As no record is made in the Holy Trinity Register that she was not a Catholic it is probable that she was a convert to the faith.

A record in the sacramental register of the church sets forth that on 13 November 1791 Father John Baptiste Charles Helbron, German, missionary in North America, associate and actual pastor of Holy Trinity Church, sailed for Spain in order to collect funds for the said church and that the administration of the church had on September 3, 1791, been taken over by Peter Helbron, formerly pastor and missionary at Goshenhoppen, with the consent of Bishop Carroll of Baltimore and the entire congregation of Holy Trinity. Father Peter Helbron's name first appears on Holy Trinity baptismal register on July 30, 1791, as sponsor for Joanna Monnier van Mannierck, born July 12. Father Peter's name again appears as baptizing George Libee, born November 10. Father Peter's last record was on November 6, 1796. Between the periods of these sacramental acts he had an eventful career, which we will endeavor to present.

On Whit Monday, 1792, an election for Trustees was held with the following as the successful candidates: George Ernest Lechler, Adam Primmer, Anthony Hookey, Michael Shindler, Jacob Trien, Francis Young, James Oellers, and Adam Upperman. At the organization of the Board, June 11, 1792, James Oellers was chosen as Secretary and Mr. Lechler as Treasurer. The President was Father Peter Helbron. On August 21, 1792, it was or-

dered that the room under the altar be furnished as a school until a special building for a school would be erected. Anthony Heim, the schoolmaster, resigned and John Maison of Goshenhoppen, was elected in his place. On his coming he was elected organist and sacristan. The charge for schooling from those able to pay was one dollar each quarterly term. The school is described in the City Directory for 1795 as follows:

"It is one hundred feet long and sixty feet broad with cellars under the whole. The church deserves the attention of the builders of places of public worship more than any other in this city, because part of the cellar is converted into a seminary of learning. The floor of the church is raised about three feet from the ground and the cellar is sunk about seven feet under it, a part of which is floored, partitioned off, lathed, plastered and glazed, and makes a comfortable school room."

In 1790 the Trustees of Holy Trinity made application to the Assembly for a grant of public lands for the support of free schools. A like application was made on behalf of the Public School of Germantown and by the College and Academy of Philadelphia. A report was made against these grants. The committee was opposed to the policy of such grants and of small quantities of land. [*Dispatch Hist., Phila.*, Chap. 306.]

At the election of May 20, 1793 Trustees Hookey and Shindler were replaced by Charles Shorti and Henry Norbert. At this time there were many French Catholics in Philadelphia in consequence of the Revolution in France and the Negro Insurrection in San Domingo. This made it necessary, on account of the numbers attending Holy Trinity, to have a priest who could preach in the language of these people. Rev. Laurence Peter¹ Phelan was appointed

¹ It is given as "Sylvester" in *RECORDS*, XVI, 202.

assistant to Father Peter Helbron, in November, 1793. His name first appears as sponsor on November 8 at a baptism by Father Helbron.

At the election in 1794 Lechler and Shorti retired and Charles Baumann and Daniel Norbert took their places. At the election of 1795 Anthony Hookey and George Ginter became members.

Everything appears to have gone well during Father Peter Helbron's administration, until July, 1796, when there arrived in Philadelphia the Rev. John Nepomucene Goetz, formerly professor and preacher at the Royal Imperial Academy at Wienerich, New Stadt. He arrived here in the ship *Harmony*, Captain James Moore, from Hamburg, July 25, 1796.¹ His name is recorded in the ship list as Johan Nyromeen Geetze. Three days later, July 28, he applied to Bishop Carroll for admission into the diocese. While awaiting approval and appointment the newly-arrived priest seems to have won favor among the people with the determined purpose of obtaining the pastorship of Holy Trinity from the Trustees of Holy Trinity if it came not from Bishop Carroll. Within less than a month after his arrival in the city he had evidently succeeded in winning the good will of the Trustees, as the meeting of the Board on August 18, 1796, made evident, when it was resolved to elect "by the members of the congregation a chaplain or vicar", on the plea that Father Peter Helbron, though appointed by Bishop Carroll, accepted, and for several years paid salary by the Board of Trustees, had never been "elected" as pastor by the people of the congregation, notwithstanding the fact that the register of the church expressly recorded that he had taken charge "with the consent of Bishop Carroll and the entire congregation of Holy Trinity." At this time the Trustees were Oellers, Bauman,

¹ 2 S. Pa. Ar. XVII, 556.

G. Lechler, Jr., Premir, Ginther, Shindle, C. Bastian, and Anthony Hookey. Notice was given the congregation to meet on September 4 to elect a "chaplain or vicair of our church." The election was held, whereupon the Trustees met and formulated a notification to Bishop Carroll.

At a meeting of the Trustees held September 4, 1796, Father Goetz was elected "to assist the pastor". Secretary Oellers so informed Bishop Carroll, as follows:

PHILADELPHIA, SEPT. 4, 1796.

Right Reverend Father in God,

We have the honour to inform you that we the Trustees of the German Religious Society of Roman Catholics of the Holy Trinity Church in the city of Philadelphia have this day had an election for a Chaplain, or Vicair of our Church, which said election was twice publish'd, & the congregation met on this day, & concluded it being hihely necessary for the better service of the church, & instruction of the youth thereof to have another gentleman to assist our pastor; the votes of the congregation were taken, & after examining the same, they were all in favour of the Reverend John Nepomucenus Goetz.—We, therefore, as in duty bound have the honour to represent to your Right Reverend the said Revd. John Nepomucenus Goetz for your respected approbation, we are glad to be inform'd that this gentleman has brought all necessary papers of recommendations with him to be employ'd in the church of our holy religion, we hope it will promote the holy religion, & have the honour to wish your Right Reverend a long life, & happiness, & will ever pray.

JAMES OELLERS, *Secretarius.*

Signed by order of the Trustees of the German Religious Society of Roman Catholics of the Holy Trinity Church in the city of Philadelphia. [Minutes.]