Discovering Fort Zeller

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One of my favorite parts of a family history trip is the experience of "walking in the footsteps" of my ancestors. I love to stand where they might have stood and take in the view of a piece of our country that they helped to settle; or, walk along the river that brought them to their new home; or, tour the camp where they trained for battle.

Don't get me wrong. I spend plenty of time in the cemeteries and churchyards puzzling over gravestones. And, of course, lots of hours go into libraries, museums and archives. But the places where ancestors lived and breathed, where they made their mark in this world – those offer something special.

If you are going to find these special places, good preparation and research is necessary before you head out on your adventure. There may well be unexpected finds, or lucky misdirection that happens without planning, but good investigation with Google and the Internet in general, can help you uncover sites you had no clue existed or were relevant to you.

Before a family history trip to Pennsylvania, where my sister Julie and I intended to retrace the steps of our Palatine forbearers, I spent time on Google with each of the relevant family names. Among other discoveries, I came across a website for "Fort Zeller" in Tulpehocken, one of the towns we intended to visit. A little bit of research showed me that this structure was built by my 7th great grandfather, Johann Heinrich Zeller. The Zellers were French Huguenots that had to flee France and wound up joining in the Palatine Migration of 1710. I learned I could arrange a tour, and, of course, I did.
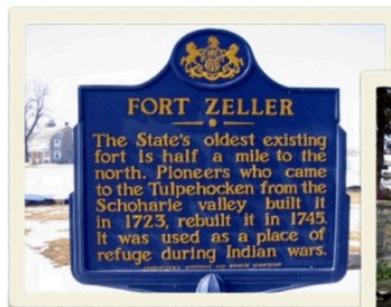
On the day of our tour, with the help of GPS we found the site – up a nondescript drive we never would have noticed on our own. We parked in front of an old farmhouse, and just as we were wondering what to do next, a fellow came out of the

nearby horse barn and introduced himself. His mother had been a Zeller and his parents had worked hard to preserve the small fort. He said a little reluctantly that the responsibility was his now.

Maybe 50 yards down from the farmhouse sat a stone house. The windows were small and few, the walls thick. Our guide explained that this "fort," the oldest existing fortified building of its kind in Pennsylvania, was a house of refuge. First built by the Zellers in 1723 when they arrived in Tulpehocken from Schoharie Valley in upstate New York, they improved and rebuilt it in 1745 using heavy timber construction with stone exterior and plaster over wattles (i.e., woven lattice of wooden strips) on the interior. Securable window shutters were made for the small windows, and a multi-step handle for the door so only those familiar with it could open it. The building straddled a running spring; water could be accessed without going outside.

The Zellers were pushing out into unsettled territory and the threat of Indian attack was very real. This safe house could accommodate the Zeller family and immediate neighbors. Downstairs we toured two rooms, separated by a large stone fireplace and hearth for cooking and heating. The windowsills were wide and concave, and acted as washbasins that could be emptied out the connecting windows. Upstairs, we found a large attic room for sleeping, with porthole like windows.

Over the years, the safe house has seen other uses. It is currently filled with an intriguing assortment of antiques and artifacts that have collected there over the years – farm and kitchen tools, quilts, chairs, dry sinks, spinning wheels, and the like. Our distant cousin that generously gave us a tour of the house and the grounds, said that he wasn't sure that he would be able to continue showing the property on request as his parents had done. My sister and I felt especially fortunate to have had the opportunity to stand where our ancestors had taken their stand and explore the refuge that they had created.

FORT ZELLER AND ITS SPRING

DEEP WINDOWSILL THAT DOUBLES AS WASHBASIN

ASSORTMENT OF COOKING UTENSILS AT THE HEARTH IN THE MAIN ROOM