



Benjamin G. Groff (1847-1905)

Benjamin G. Groff was born on February 17, 1847, in Lancaster County Pennsylvania. Groff, along with his family, were members of the Church of the Brethren, also called the German Baptist Brethren or Dunkers. Groff belonged to the White Oak congregation, dating back to the early eighteenth century.¹ Groff was also on the board of directors for the first National Bank of Elizabethtown.²

A new college was trying to be established by the Church of the Brethren who were seeking to create an institution of higher education for their members in Eastern Pennsylvania. The Committee on Location for the new College was in charge of visiting potential towns for the school to be located. The committee visited Norristown, Mountville, Columbia, Ephrata, Pottstown, and finally, Elizabethtown. On April 4, 1899, the committee convened at the home of S.H Hertzler in Elizabethtown and spent the morning discussing proposals from all of the towns that were bidding for the college location. In the afternoon, the Committee on Location drove around Elizabethtown to view the various potential sites – one was near the Pennsylvania Railroad station and the other was east of the town on farmland owned by Benjamin G. Groff.³ There was the question of which of the two sites in Elizabethtown was better for the college's location. The citizens' committee met, and they each expressed their opinions, which led to the Committee on Location finally deciding on the tract of land southeast of town on the farmland belonging to Benjamin G. Groff.⁴ Not only did Benjamin Groff sell the college the land on which it was built, he was also the

¹ Richard Kerwin MacMaster, *Elizabethtown: The First Three Centuries* (Morgantown, PA: Mastof Press, 1999), 124.

² Ibid., 139.

³ Ralph Schlosser, *History of Elizabethtown College 1899 - 1970*. (Lebanon, PA: Sowers Printing Company, 1971), 12; Chet Williamson, *Uniting Work and Spirit: A Centennial History of Elizabethtown College* (Elizabethtown, PA, Elizabethtown College Press, 2001), 10.; Jean-Paul Benowitz, and Peter J DePuydt, *Elizabethtown College*. (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 12.; The Committee, *History of the Church of the Brethren of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania*. (Lancaster, PA: Press of the New Era Printing Company, 1915) 629.

⁴ Williamson., 17.

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contractor who built the first building on campus, known as Alpha Hall, along with many others. The committee had received bids from various contractors based on the architect's plans but all of them exceeded the \$10,000 target. The trustees consulted Benjamin G. Groff who had submitted a \$15,000 bid. They asked him if he could reduce the amount and he agreed to donate \$750 which brought down his final bid to \$14,250.⁵ The board accepted this offer, making him the contractor of Alpha Hall and ground was broken on July 10, 1900.⁶



Pictured left: "Ground breaking takes place at the Groff farm for Alpha Hall in 1899. George Falkenstein (sixth from left with shovel) designed Alpha Hall with plans drafted by architect A.A. Ritcher of Lebanon. Benjamin Groff was the contractor. Alpha Hall was dedicated on March 4, 1901."⁷

"This is a view of Elizabethtown College from the railroad station. The campus was established on 10 acres owned by Brethren Benjamin G. Groff of Groff

Mills. The brothers Royer S. and

J. Harvey Buch of the Brethren firm Buch Manufacturing paid one third; their father, Adison Buch, trustee of the Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren, paid one third; and Groff donated the remaining third of the tract to the college.⁸"

Groff was particular about the way things were built and had an eye for detail. For example, in the building of Alpha Hall he wanted white keystones placed above each window. This would be an additional expense to the college, but Groff was set on the keystones so he offered to pay twenty-five percent of the cost, the board agreed as long as the additional expense did not exceed sixty dollars. The front of Alpha Hall alone required thirty-four stones, as well as the additional work of laying the irregular brickwork around them.⁹

Later in the building process of Alpha Hall, the board would decide to enter a protest against Benjamin G. Groff for how long he was taking on the college building. The board's disapproval may have motivated Groff and his workers because Alpha Hall was ready for occupancy seven weeks later.¹⁰ Brothers Hertzler and Falkenstein were fearful of future delays in the construction of the college building. They spoke to the contractor,



⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶ Schlosser, 34.

⁷ Jean-Paul Benowitz. *Images of America: Elizabethtown* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 80.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Williamson, 33.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

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Brother Groff about the potential of adding additional plasterers to the two already on the job. Groff disagreed saying that plasterers were currently hard to get, but Falkenstein suspected that the small size of the crew was because Groff had to supply the heat for his workmen and he wanted to wait until the building's heating plant was installed. But Hertzler and Falkenstein ended up prevailing in their argument because soon enough an additional ten plasterers were on the project. "For one time at least, urgency trumped Pennsylvania German Thrift".¹¹ Though Groff would often try to save money where he could, he was extremely generous to the college, donating nearly a thousand dollars of contract work to Alpha Hall.¹² During the board of trustee meeting on March 28th the building was accepted from Benjamin G. Groff to the College at a cost of \$14,318.71. "At last Elizabethtown College had a home."¹³ Groff served as superintendent of the grounds and buildings and erected all college buildings until his death in 1907.¹⁴

There was a need for a bank in Elizabethtown that met the strict guidelines imposed by the National Bank Act of 1864. Through the autumn and winter of 1884, a committee met to decide on the principals this new bank would uphold and ensure that it met the standards to qualify it as a National Bank. On February 25, 1885, stockholders gathered for an organizational meeting.¹⁵ "They chose John H. Coble, Aaron Dissinger, Jacob Dyer, Christian Gingrich, Benjamin G. Groff, Martin G. Keller, Frederick Olweiler, Winfield S. Smith, Abraham G. Stauffer, and Samuel R. Zug as a board of directors. At their first meeting the board members elected Aaron Dissinger, president; Jacob Dyer, vice president; Isaac S. Longenecker, cashier; and Jacob Hertzler, teller. John S. Risser and Jacob G. Stauffer joined the board in 1886. Nathan S. Zug came on the board in 1889; John H. Myers was elected a member in 1891 and Ephraim C. Ginder in 1895.¹⁶" "Under the National



¹¹ Ibid., 42.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 44.; Schlosser, 42.

¹⁴ Williamson, 42.

¹⁵ MacMaster, 139.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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Bank Act of 1864, the Elizabethtown National Bank shown in the photographs was organized in 1885.”¹⁷

Benjamin G. Groff died on June 21, 1907, at age 60, in Elizabethtown, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Groff is buried at the Mount Tunnel Cemetery in Elizabethtown. His gravestone is pictured below.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Benowitz, 69.

¹⁸“Benjamin G Groff (1847-1907),” Find a Grave, accessed May 22, 2024.
https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/103917614/benjamin_g-groff.

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