

## Unknown Fraktur from Central PA Artist: Are There More?

by  
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A “new” Fraktur\* by artist Johann Valentin Schuller has surfaced recently. Although this Fraktur was made in 1813 for Union County residents, it appeared in Ohio and now resides in Florida. This Fraktur has never been documented in any prior publications dealing with this specialty.

Fraktur art was prolific in central Pennsylvania during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An American Fraktur is the carry-over of the tradition of illuminated manuscripts from Western European countries. There has been a surge in surfacing of Fraktur and their documentation in the past 50 years as attics



Example of a Geburts- und Taufschein (birth and baptismal document) announcing in German the 1828 birth of Johann Jacob Miller in Perry Township. Pre-printed form from J. Baab, Printer, Harrisburg.

From the collection of the Union County Historical Society

get cleaned out, junk boxes emptied and blanket chest emptied or old Bibles reviewed. It is a fertile field for investigation and research.

These hand painted and decorated documents were created mainly as birth announcements, baptism or (seldom) marriage certificates, Vorschrift (a school exercise demonstrating penmanship), house blessings or presentation pieces (generally a small reward of merit for a student, member of the church, favorite neighbor, notation of ownership of a Bible, etc.).

One of the best-known Fraktur artist in our area was Henry Young (1792-1858). This multi-tasking German immigrant is considered the most prolific Fraktur artist to be catalogued from central Pennsylvania. He was unusual as he worked in the German as well as the English language.



Example of a Geburts- and Taufschein (birth and baptismal document) declaring in English the 1816 birth and baptism of Anna Pollock in Derry Township, Northumberland County. Hand drawn and colored by Henry Young.

From private collection

Johann Valentin Schuller (1759-?) is thought to have spent most of his Fraktur career in the Mahantongo Valley region of Northumberland County. Schuller's penmanship is so neat it resembles the block print on his printed

certificates. He frequently signed his works, either by hand or in print. He is most well-known for tidy, half-size certificates in which the text is neatly flanked by urns and tulips. He used patterns for tulip and urn decoration and other floral decoration that he colored in lovely shades of red and yellow. Schuller may have made Fraktur to sell to others, for a handful of certificates listed as his were not filled in by him.



Gerburts- and Taufschein (birth and baptismal document) declaring in German the 1813 birth of Johann Peter K(H)ern in Center Township, Union County. (Penns Creek is in Center Township today. Union County was created in the same year, 1813. Snyder County was divided from Union County in 1855.) Made by Johann Schuller.

From private collection

The printed portion of this Fraktur was probably produced in Reading where he is documented to have bought many pre-printed forms. Part of the frame and the black writing was printed. Schuller would fill the personal information in the spaces allotted, and embellish the frame and sides of the document. Although the very earliest American Fraktur were completely hand lettered and painted, it was very common to have pre-printed forms as printing facilities became available.

As seen in the end bibliography, much research has been done since the 1950's in Fraktur art. Known Fraktur certificates and Fraktur artists have been

tediously researched and catalogued. But there are surely many more examples of this early Pennsylvania folk art waiting to be re-discovered.



Example of a Geburts- und Taufschein (birth and baptismal document) announcing in German the 1824 birth of Daniel Kraemer in Penn's Township (now Snyder County). Hand-applied color on pre-printed form from G. Miller, New Berlin.

From the collection of the Union County Historical Society

Pricing of this folk art has not traveled the rollercoaster of the economy as a whole. The prices have remained subject to condition of the piece, personal preference, availability or rareness of the piece and popularity of the artist. For example a Fraktur by Rev. Henry Young (Centre County, Pennsylvania 1792-1861) was estimated between \$2,000-\$4,000 at Garth's Auctioneers & Appraisers in their January 6-7, 2012 auction, and the final purchase price was \$7,500. In 1974 a pair of Fraktur sold for \$2,300 at an estate sale of Edgar and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. Twenty years ago, a Henry Young Fraktur sold for \$5000.

One of the highest prices known to be paid was for a Centre County Fraktur by artist, Rev. Geistweite (1761-1831). This very rare, highly embellished “verse hymn” of ink on paper was estimated to bring \$15,000-\$30,000. The winning bidder paid \$330,000 in 2004. Certainly many of these Pennsylvania German creations are still waiting to resurface. Who will be the fortunate discoverer?

## Notes

This article was compiled by Joannah Skucek according to information from Jim Bohn.

\* The word Fraktur in German is the same in singular and plural---no “s” is added in the plural when using the German term. As a German noun it is customarily capitalized.

## Bibliography

A readily accessible introduction to the nature and history of Pennsylvania Fraktur can be found on the website of the Historical Society of Berks County: [www.berkshistory.org/fraktur/](http://www.berkshistory.org/fraktur/)

Earnest, Russel D. and Corinne P.  
1997 Papers for Birth Dates, Guide to the Fraktur Artist and Schiveners Volume II, Second Edition. Published by Russel D. Earnest Associates, P. O. Box 1007, East Berlin, PA 17316. ISBN # 1-879311-12-7

Shelley, Donald A., Executive Director Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village  
1961 The Fraktur-Writings or Illuminated Manuscripts of the Pennsylvania Germans. The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, Volume 23, 1958-59.

Garth's Auctioneers & Appraisers,  
2012 Firearms and Early American Antiques and Decorative Arts January 6-7, 2012 page 713, Lot 710.

Fraktur Birth Certificate.  
1813 Printed by Johann Balentin Schuller, inscribed for Johann Peter Kern, born April 1, 1813, in Center Township, Union County, Pennsylvania. Printed text flanked by watercolor urns and tulips, 7 1/2” h. 13”w., in a painted frame, 10 3/4 “h. 16”w. \$250-\$500.

Stopp, Klaus  
1998 The Printed Birth and Baptismal Certificate of the German Americans Vol. IV Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh-Reading, Mainz/Germany and East Berlin PA/USA. Published by author, Klaus Stopp. Numbered edition limited to 500 copies. This copy bears the number 66, pg. 72-73. ISBN 3-00-001358-X,

Adams, E. Bryding  
1977 The Fraktur Artist Henry Young. Der Reggeboge. Quarterly of the Pennsylvania German Society Vol. 11, No. 3-4, Fall 1977.

Examples of Websites that deal in Fraktur sales:

[www.garths.com](http://www.garths.com)

[www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)

[www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)

[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)



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