Redeeming Susanna Cox: A Pennsylvania German Infanticide in Community Tradition

Dissertation

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Abstract

In 1809, Susanna Cox, a twenty-four year old servant living in Oley, Pennsylvania, was accused, convicted, and executed following the death of her newborn son. Throughout the next two hundred years, Susanna’s story would be transmitted through oral histories and printed and performed broadside ballads. Perhaps the most widely diffused version of the story began in the early 1960s at the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival (now called the Kutztown Folk Festival) when the festival organizers revived her story in the public imagination. Over 50 years later, Cox’s story is still retold at the Kutztown Folk Festival, three times a day for nine days, with the visual addition of a hanging reenactment.

This dissertation explores the interplay between history, social memory, and oral tradition as it occurs surrounding the ongoing use of Susanna Cox’s story. I explore the exposition of her story between the discovery of her son’s death and her execution, as well as the legal impact – real or perceived – of the case in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The broadside ballad also maintained currency as it was translated and reprinted in various North American locations throughout the nineteenth century. I go on to discuss the ways that the story has been transmitted and reinterpreted into the 21st century, examining the recorded, published, performed and electronically-disseminated versions and audience responses to them.
This project combines textual interpretation, archival research, oral history interviewing, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2013I explore why various communities – ethnic, gendered, religious, or geographic – chose to claim Cox and redeem her soul, reputation, or memory.

Susanna Cox was a woman whose actions went against the legal and moral standards of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In her own time, she provided a focus for public debate over the death penalty and the role of secular and religious education in equipping individuals for appropriate participation within the new Republic. Her story would continue to be raised both as a warning against inappropriate behavior and as an example of the misuses of the legal system.

Later generations would repurpose Cox’s story to meet their own needs, interpreting it through contemporary lenses or simply presenting her as an icon of a previous time. Coupled with her tie to the place, the dearth of evidence detailing her life, actions, and motivations renders Susanna Cox available as a cultural touchstone: a familiar case that inhabitants of the region can call upon as a touchstone in assessing shifting attitudes towards gender, crime, and responsibility.
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the input, support, and patience of many people. First, I would like to thank the individual community members who donated their time to helping me with my project. Everyone associated with the Kutztown Folk Festival, from my unnamed informants, to June DeTurk, Dave Fooks and Elaine Vardjan, did their best to help me experience all appropriate context.

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I also thank the Ohio State Folklore community for adopting me into the fold. I could not have asked for a better academic support system.

I have benefitted from a wide range of archival resources. Dr. Don Yoder met with me to discuss the project and shared many documentary resources unique to his collection. Corinne and Russell Earnest opened up their personal library of Pennsylvania German texts and have graciously answered any number of questions. The Historical
Society of Berks County Henry Janssen Archives has been a welcoming archival home, and the assistance of its staff, especially Kimberly Richards Brown and Lisa Adams, and volunteers, especially Irv Rathman, has been invaluable. The Library Company of Philadelphia; the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Society, and Ursinus College’s Pennsylvania Folklife Society Collection and its librarian, Diane Skorina, granted me access to their materials. Many members of the Berks County Association for Graveyard Preservation offered assistance. The library staff at both Ohio State and Penn State has answered questions both technical and procedural, as has the staff at Ohio State’s Historic Textiles and Costumes Collection.

I also would like to thank the Center for Folklore Studies Mullen Prize, the Council of Graduate Students’ Ray Travel Grant, the Coca-Cola Critical Difference for Women Grant, the Department of Comparative Studies, and the David and Helen Birdsall Memorial Scholarship for financial support. Accommodations to allow me to pursue my studies and research were also made by my supervisors, most notably Merijn van der Heijden and Mary Ellen Jenkins, who smiled as they signed off most of my requests.

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**Introduction: Why Susanna Cox?**

Before 1809, Susanna Cox lived as an indentured servant in a German-speaking household in Oley, Berks County, Pennsylvania.\(^1\) On February 14 of that year, Susanna gave birth to a son. There is some debate about what happened next: perhaps the baby was stillborn, perhaps not. Regardless of how it happened, the boy died and, because of the frozen ground outside, Susanna could not bury him. Instead, she wrapped his body in a coat and hid it in the trash pile that her employers kept in one of their cold cellars. A few days later, Susanna’s employer, Jacob Geehr, found the child’s body and contacted the authorities. Susanna was arrested, tried, convicted, and executed on the charge of First Degree Murder within four months. Infanticide, without proof of intent on the mother’s part, was no longer classified strictly as a capital crime in Pennsylvania, but cases that were deemed especially heinous could be redefined as murder instead.

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\(^1\) The basic story remains constant throughout several presentations. The most commonly cited historical retelling is Louis Richards, *Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation: a Paper Read before the Historical Society of Berks County, Pa., March 13, 1900. [S.l.]: B.F. Owen, 1901.* Other versions of the story can be found in Patricia Suter, Russell Earnest and Corinne Earnest, *The Hanging of Susanna Cox: The True Story of Pennsylvania’s Most Notorious Infanticide and the Legend that’s Kept It Alive* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2010) and George M. and Gloria Meiser, *The Passing Scene, Volume 15* (Reading, PA: Historical Society of Berks County, 2007). An additional discussion, focusing on the ballad presentation, can be found in Don Yoder, *The Pennsylvania German Broadside: A History and Guide* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005). Since 1900, all sources have relied primarily on Richards. As will be discussed, Richards drew on the resources available to him as the President of the Historical Society of Berks County, including a wide range of published oral histories from between 1870 and 1885.
Susanna’s execution should have been the end of her story: other women, convicted of similar crimes in Pennsylvania, entered and exited the public interest very quickly. But the details of Susanna’s story triggered a regional public reaction, especially among the German population, that would result not only in support for her during her lifetime, but in the positive presentation of her story in ballads, historical narratives and, for the last 50 years, as a public reenactment at the Kutztown Folk Festival. Susanna’s story has continued to maintain relevance for over 200 years, despite the public distaste—or, perhaps, because of the public’s morbid fascination—regarding the violent death of children.

This dissertation is an exploration of how and why Susanna’s story has engaged the community imagination. I am interested in how the story began, how it developed, and how it is being used today. Within that framework, the question of “why” persists: why has this story continued to strike a chord? This is an explication of the successive stories related to Susanna’s life, and how they have been presented since she first entered into the public imagination. The reformulations of her story has changed public perception and maintained her relevance long after her judicial execution in June of 1809. I will examine the continually redeveloping views related to Susanna, especially within her geographic and cultural origins, as her story has been used as a cultural ideograph around which community opinions have been formed, reformed, and reconsidered. 

redeem her – not forgive or pardon her – but provide her memory with a framework within which her actions could be understood in the context of her life story. But Susanna is more than just what she can represent as part of her individual identity: she, and her story, can be used as an ideograph within local history. She did not necessarily cause change through her own actions, but some, as will be discussed, continued to reinterpret her story as relevant. She became an example that is useful to think with, especially as her story was disseminated and her motivations interpreted depending on the cultural and legal needs of the time.

**Susanna’s Life in 1809**

The first incarnation of Susanna’s life story occurred during her lifetime. Because of the public dissemination of her story, the details quickly became available throughout the region, presumably through oral means, but also through the filters of the authors and publications that relayed her tale in print. My first chapter will examine and discuss this incarnation: how was her reputation transformed from that of an unfeeling mother to that of an uneducated innocent? Why were the people of Berks County so willing to explore her reasoning, even when they did not necessarily agree with her – and did her status as a condemned women help or hinder their decision to do so? How were her actions interpreted by those who could have the opportunity to meet her, and did their interpretations do anything to modulate public opinion?

Infanticide has been a topic of legal contention and commentary within the early United States, its colonies, and the two dominant cultures – Germanic and British – that most influenced the people and laws of Pennsylvania. While life was valued, in most
Map 1: Map of Berks County, circa 1813. Used with permission of Historical Society of Berks County, Henry Richards Collection.
cases, a woman’s life was held to be more productive than a child’s, especially in the more rural areas, where infant mortality was still high.\(^3\) Eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant considered the possibility that a woman who killed her illegitimate child entered into a “state of nature” that put her outside legal jurisdiction.\(^4\) But, as Jennifer Uleman concluded in her discussion of Kant’s position, his final interpretation was that, regardless of a change in the state of nature, the law as it was written needed to be applied equally. This argument parallels some of the debates affecting early American policy as infanticide – as well as other capital crimes – was reevaluated to determine whether or not the capital sentence was truly appropriate for the degree of the crime committed. The prevalence of infanticide in the Early Republic has been avidly discussed by many scholars.\(^5\) Most of their texts address a broad range of individuals and time periods; even Merril Smith, whose work contains a significant exploration of Elizabeth Wilson’s public treatment after her sons’ death in 1785, still uses Wilson as just one of a series of examples as part of her point regarding class bias and

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premarital pregnancy in the mid-Atlantic. While I provide background and contextualization as part of my greater discussion, my focus is truly on how this particular infanticide case affected the immediate and long-term cultural resonance within the region and within the Pennsylvania Dutch community.

I also explore how the printed texts affected the local dissemination of Susanna’s story: how contemporary newspapers directed the transmission of news but also became silent when details were considered more gossip than fact. Charles Briggs explored this in his own research into the treatment of individuals accused of infanticide in Venezuela as he “disrupted a narrative” in order to better interrogate the public, official, and private presentations of women accused of infanticide.6 When Elliott Oring described the tales told in newspapers versus those told in legend, he states that “[t]he difference between the two kinds of accounts is perhaps less a question of their truth than of their rhetoric of truth…. No matter how bizarre, an account of an event was likely to be “true” if it evidenced the accepted moral order.”7 Like those cases studied by Briggs, Susanna’s case becomes both news and legend. While the published newspaper accounts stories are the only available contemporary texts, they can be used to show how the press utilized its forum to shape public opinion both in favor of and against the accused. Marlin Shipman, in his examination of later nineteenth-century newspaper stories involving women and death penalty cases, noted that the perpetrator of a crime was often described as “a homicidal monomaniac” and a “demon” during the arrest and trial phase, but transformed


into someone “almost angelic” in the days leading up to her execution. Anne Cohen, specifically addressing the Pearl Bryan murder case from 1896, demonstrated both the significant change in public perception depicted in the newspaper presentations, and the interplay between the ballad versions and the newspaper accounts. While both forms of documentation exist for Susanna Cox, there is a distinct temporal divide between the stories labeled as “news” and those included in the published broadsheets which differs from that explored by Cohen. Because of this temporal divide and the resulting difference in interpretation between the two forms of source material, I have also chosen to separate my analysis.

**The Legal Applications**

Susanna’s second incarnation was as the accused in a legal case. The second chapter will examine the legal life of Susanna’s case, contextualizing her situation by also examining documentation related to other reproductive crimes within the Commonwealth. Susanna Cox was not, by far, alone as an accused mother. Yet it was her case, not that of any of the other six women convicted in Pennsylvania of infanticide nor the multitude of others accused but not convicted that received lasting attention.

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9 Anne B. Cohen, Poor Pearl, Poor Girl! The Murdered Girl Stereotype in Ballad and Newspaper (Austin: Published for the American Folklore Society by the University of Texas Press, 1973)

The realignment of the legal treatment of infanticide reflects the change in practice that Jennifer Manion observed within Pennsylvania jurisprudence: prosecutions related to “crimes of morality” – including fornication and bastardy – had declined in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{11} The change also reflects a rationalization of the legal code: murder was a moral crime as well as a legal one because of its action against religious and moral guidelines.\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, an individual who was convicted of murder had erred against not just the Commonwealth, but against the religious morality that was expected to guide individuals within the “Peaceable Kingdom” created within its geographic boundaries.\textsuperscript{13} This resulted in the individual holding responsibility not just for the break with religious doctrines, but also any legal consequences. The consequences of breaking human law would result in a more immediate judgment in this life, which gave these laws primacy to those who feared temporal punishment.\textsuperscript{14}

A case that resulted in a conviction for murder relied on evidence that went above and beyond that previously required for infanticide: no longer was the child’s death the only necessary piece of information. As Charles Evans, one of the lawyers defending

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Jennifer Manion, \textit{Women's Crime and Prison Reform in Early Pennsylvania, 1786-1829} (Diss., Rutgers University, 2008), 148
\item I use the term “Peaceable Kingdom” much like G.S. Rowe and Jack D. Marietta, “Personal Violence in a ‘Peaceable Kingdom’ : Pennsylvania, 1682-1801,” in \textit{Over the Threshold : Intimate Violence in Early America}, eds. Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, 1999, 22-44. Part of the issue is whether or not people were actually concerned about the frequency and occurrence of infanticide. In Philadelphia proper, according to Clare Lyons, \textit{Sex Among the Rabble}, 70, infanticide was rarely prosecuted. However, in the outlying regions, it was more of an issue.
\item For an example of a ballad in usage contemporary with “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” that described a woman in this situation, see Yoder, \textit{Pennsylvania Broadside}, 53, “Death of Polly: A young Lady who Lived a Wicked Live and Died Amiserable (sic) Death.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Susanna Cox, would say in his closing arguments, the prosecution had to prove that the child had been born alive, intentionally killed, and that the mother had perpetrated the act.\(^\text{15}\)

As a part of this examination, I will also explore bastardy and fornication charges from Berks County, as well as delve deeper into Governor Simon Snyder’s method of evaluating the relative appropriateness of capital punishment cases. These legal patterns demonstrate an interest in sexual crimes of morality, but also show the benchmark that an individual’s case must have met in order to be considered viable for a clemency ruling. Susanna’s case was part of a greater tradition: while she was unusual in that she was convicted, she was not unusual in being accused or questioned following the disappearance of the father responsible. This chapter will explore the precedents and antecedents, and discuss why later iterations of her story would credit her case as influencing change despite a lack of documentary evidence.

**Literary and Oral Remembrances**

Susanna’s third incarnation was as the heroine of a ballad circulated throughout the German-speaking community within North America. The text frequently referred to as “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” was published almost immediately after her execution, and it continued to be republished throughout the nineteenth century. It is believed to have been one of the most popular German-language ballads in North America, based

\(^{15}\) Charles Evans’ closing arguments from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.
both on the number of extant copies and the number of different printings catalogued.\textsuperscript{16}

It is, more importantly, the only infanticide ballad catalogued within the German American tradition.\textsuperscript{17} So Susanna’s third life developed as her story was transmitted, in both oral and published form, as a representative of a popular Anglo-American song topic that did not have a parallel among the German-American tradition.

This is perhaps the form in which the story of Susanna Cox has been best explored. Alfred Shoemaker intentionally revived public interest in “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” in the late 1940s, first with a feature on his Pennsylvanisch-Deitsch radio program, later with several featured articles published in \textit{The Pennsylvania Dutchman}, and then integrated into the Kutztown Folk Festival, of which he was a co-founder and early director.\textsuperscript{18}

Don Yoder, in his seminal text \textit{The Pennsylvania German Broadside: A History and Guide}, spent several pages explaining the context of “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” in the late 1940s, first with a feature on his Pennsylvanisch-Deitsch radio program, later with several featured articles published in \textit{The Pennsylvania Dutchman}, and then integrated into the Kutztown Folk Festival, of which he was a co-founder and early director.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Among others to state the availability of this text are Russell Earnest, et al, \textit{Flying Leaves and One-Sheets: Pennsylvania German Broadsides, Fraktur and Their Printers} (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Books, 2005); Don Yoder, \textit{The Pennsylvania German Broadside}; Walter E. Boyer, "The German Broadside Song of Pennsylvania," \textit{Pennsylvania Folklife} 10, no. 1 (Fall 1959): 47; Trudy E. Gilgenast, \textit{Pennsylvania German Broadsides: A Reflection of Daily Life 1741-1890} (Wilmington, DE: Cedar Tree Books, 2009), xviii, states that only \textit{Der Himmels Brief} can be found in more copies. See Appendix (number) for a list of the copies found by the author.

\textsuperscript{17} Don Yoder (Professor Emeritus, University of Pennsylvania Department of Folklore and Folklife) in discussion with the author, June 30, 2009; Corinne Earnest (Pennsylvania German Fraktur scholar) in discussion with the author, September 17, 2010. This is a case of argument from silence. No literature regarding Pennsylvania broadside ballads, songs, or stories presents another native infanticide ballad, and both Dr. Yoder and Mrs. Earnest, who have examined the vast majority of Pennsylvania German printed texts, verify that they have not seen another. Mark Tristram Coffin, \textit{American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry} (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1975) does not cite any other infanticide ballads in the German language, although “Susanna Cox” is one of the few German-language texts he explores.

\textsuperscript{18} Dr. Shoemaker donated his extensive collection of folklore and folklife materials to the Myrin Library at Ursinus College, Collegeville, Pennsylvania. Thanks to Diane Skorina for granting me access to this resource. Additional information regarding Dr. Shoemaker’s tenure as the director of the Festival can be found in multiple \textit{Pennsylvania Dutchman} and \textit{Pennsylvania Folklife} articles, especially Mark R. Eaby, Jr., “I Remember Well… Thirty-Five Years of the Kutztown Folk Festival.” \textit{Pennsylvania Folklife} 33, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 2-3.
Cox” as well as its historical significance. Along with both German and English versions of the broadside, he included the text from an 1875 oral history but with a few edits that removed some of the author’s commentary. Russell and Corinne Earnest, in their text *Flying Leaves and One Sheets*, also discuss the ballads retelling Susanna’s tale, although focusing more on the dissemination of the broadside rather than the content. While all of these sources provide descriptions of the ballad and insight into the historical situation, the limited space allotted to the text within these greater works still means that more work can be done. The Earnests, along with their daughter Patricia Suter, published a popular history account of Susanna’s life, titled *The Hanging of Susanna Cox: Pennsylvania’s Most Notorious Infanticide and the Legend that’s Kept it Alive*. This text offers more questions than answers, and provides another resource from which to see additional interpretations of Susanna’s story within her own lifetime as well as in the modern imagination.

**Modern Reinterpretations**

Susanna’s last two incarnations are interrelated, and I will discuss them both over the course of the last two chapters, first discussing the construction and intent of the performance and then interpreting its reception. The Kutztown Folk Festival has performed a version of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox”, resulting in the hanging of a

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19 Yoder, *Pennsylvania Broadside*, 46-49. This can be compared to the original, which appeared as "An Old Time Execution," *Elk County Advocate* (Ridgeway, Pennsylvania), September 23, 1875. The edits may have been due to the version he consulted; Jacob Pile’s text had been reprinted in several different papers, up into the February 14, 2013 edition of the Reading *Eagle*. These different editions frequently contained abridgements of the original publication.

20 Suter, Earnest and Earnest, *The Hanging of Susanna Cox*. 

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mannequin designed to look like Susanna, over the past 50 or more years. Susanna’s story first appeared in this setting because of the believed importance of the ballad, and continued because the performance itself became part of the heritage associated with the Festival. The origins of the Festival are well-examined, as three of the most widely respected Pennsylvania Dutch (or German, depending on your choice of terms) scholars, Don Yoder, Alfred L. Shoemaker, and J. William Frey, spearheaded its founding. But more recent scholarship is definitively lacking; other than in the work of Zach Langley, who has volunteered at the Festival as well as presented papers discussing it, no recent academic explorations into the Kutztown Festival have been attempted.\textsuperscript{21} While I do not claim to address every potential issue related to the Festival, I hope to build on the scholarship presented mostly in \textit{Pennsylvania Folklife} and \textit{The Pennsylvania Dutchman} to update some of the observations.

Susanna’s story was redeemed, once again, by the community who first presented her ballad as an example of traditional balladry, and then accepted this interpretation as a conduit to explore the past of both the region and the festival. For Susanna’s story has become both history and tradition as a part of the festival, even separate from the ongoing recurrences of the ballad in the public imagination.

\textbf{The Most Recent Interpretations, both Popular and Academic}

Recent years – perhaps even more so since the publication of Don Yoder’s \textit{The Pennsylvania German Broadside} in 2005 – have brought about a rise in what one local

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} At the time of this writing, Zach Langley’s dissertation in American Studies is still in progress at Pennsylvania State University – Harrisburg.}
researcher describes as “Coxology.” Outside the Kutztown Folk Festival, Susanna’s story has emerged in popular culture in a range of formats and with a range of applications. For the musical ensemble Those Galloping Hordes, Susanna’s story is important because it represents how they came together as a group. For both Linda Tadic, who worked to promote the unreleased and unrecoverable 1994 film about Susanna’s life, and those associated with the Reading Theatre Project’s 2013 staged production “May be Honest,” Susanna’s story provides an example of the mistreatment of women, especially of the working class, in the nineteenth century. A local radio personality recorded a spoken word interpretation of “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” on an album of local folktales; the Reading Eagle chose to reprint Jacob Pile’s 1875 oral history telling of Susanna’s execution on the 104th anniversary of the child’s death. These reinterpretations have gone by relatively unnoticed outside a small community: Tadic’s film was never released; Those Galloping Hordes have a small but loyal following; “May be Honest” played to a full house every night for two weekends but received mixed reviews.

I became interested in Susanna’s story because of the themes related to transgressive women and the community interpretation of them; my interactions with the specific community within eastern Pennsylvania developed from this topical interest. I am intrigued by the evidence that exists, and challenged by the gaps in the story.

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22 Irvin Rathman, e-mail message to the author, June 26, 2013. Mr. Rathman is a specialist on Pennsylvania German musical performers, but our interaction has been mainly related to his role as a long-time volunteer at the HSBC.

Examining how Susanna’s community interpreted her actions has proven to be a fascinating act of historical detective work. I have challenged myself to look at the silences as well as the content: the holes in the documentation have proven to be as fruitful to examine as the details.

**Notes Regarding Spelling and Name Usage**

A few notes regarding usage are appropriate here. The German language in use in early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania did not follow standardized spelling or printing conventions. Frequently, “V” and “B” were interchanged; versions of the ballad text would alternately use “ae” “ä”, “a”, or “å” to mean the same thing; different typefaces utilized other typographic variations that made transcription and translation a more creative endeavor. When reproducing the texts, I have done my best to follow the original, and the variations have proven an interesting way to examine regional variants, even when the publication location might not be known. I chose to keep the texts as they were, even when logical substitutions existed, because I wanted to maintain the integrity of the piece as published. All mistakes are my own, even in situations when I had access to other transcriptions and translations.24

Nineteenth century names, especially those translated and interpreted in two different languages, often featured alternate spellings. In some cases, I had to choose

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24 Thanks to Corinne and Russell Earnest for allowing me access to their translations and transcriptions; to Dorothy Noyes, who read and corrected my ballad translations, to Linda Tadic who allowed her transcriptions of the trial record to be maintained within the Historical Society of Berks County; to Jeremy B. Williams, who read microfilm and verified many of my transcriptions and translations, and to Christopher Maybury and Allison DeKorte, who helped me work through the nuances of a few word choices.
which version was most appropriate to use. Within my written text, I will use the same spelling – Geehr because it is what is found on Jacob and Esther’s tombstones; Susanna Cox because it is the most common choice. The Schneider family of Oley and Simon Snyder, governor of Pennsylvania, are not related, despite their last names occasionally appearing with a wide range of alternate spellings. For this reason, I will consistently utilize the more common – and distinct – spellings. When the names appear in documents, however, I will maintain the spelling used within the original text.

I have also frequently chosen to refer to the women discussed by their first names rather than following convention and using their last names. This is for two reasons. The first is that many of the women described have an associated male family member with the same last name and it is necessary to distinguish them. Even Susanna Cox’s father, George, makes a brief appearance. So, to eliminate confusion, I will be referring to her as “Susanna” rather than “Cox”. The other reason has to do with the development of the story. The people of Berks County, especially those associated with the Kutztown Folk Festival, don’t call her “Cox”. They call her by her first name, or by her full name. Those who have spent years at the Festival feel that she is one of their own, whether they are discussing her historical situation or her embodiment in use during the hanging performance. Rather than switch back and forth between the differing usages, I am choosing to maintain use of “Susanna” throughout.

_Pennsylvania German vs. Pennsylvania Dutch?_ 

The debate as to the proper use of these terms is ongoing, and I use both of them, but in different contexts. The correct usage of the terms “Pennsylvania German” and
“Pennsylvania Dutch” has been debated for over 100 years. In the 1890s, when a group of educated men banded together to form the Pennsylvania German Society, they intentionally chose the term “German” rather than “Dutch.” They saw this as an opportunity to preserve their own heritage as descendants of their homeland, as they self-identified with a language and a culture that they saw as more German than American, and understood the term “Dutch” as referring either to “Hollanders” or those whose lives had become more integrated with American traditions. Many of these German-Americans had been relatively recent immigrants who settled in the cities, while the more rural populations, who would continue to identify themselves as Dutch, traditionally descended from individuals who had come to the United States or the colonies before 1800.

The debate continues. The early editions of the Pennsylvania Dutchman newspaper are filled with references to why the editors chose “Dutch” over “German”;
Don Yoder, the only living member of that original triumvirate of editors and scholars, still insists on the use of the term “Dutch” to describe the people and culture of the Germans who settled Pennsylvania before 1800 and passed down their folkways even to the current generation. In 1996, Susan Isaacs provided a straightforward dichotomous separation between the “Dutch” and the “German”, observing that Dutch heritage celebrations focused on material culture, dialect, square dancing with fiddle music, and culinary specialties such as apple butter, chicken pot pie, funnel cake, shoofly pie … In contrast, the group representing descendants of the later wave of German speakers sponsors Bavarian and October fests which feature alpine costume, polka bands with accordions and horns, and German singing …. Their foodways include sausage, sauerkraut, potato filling, and beer, some of which overlap with Pennsylvania German foods.

While not perfect, this distinction does provide a framework within which the division of terms – if not necessarily people – can be achieved.

You will note that I use both terms in this text, and purposefully chose “Pennsylvania German” for the title. Every usage is intentional. I have taken to heart the comments of individuals who self-identify as Pennsylvania Dutch, as well as those who see themselves as Pennsylvania Germans. In this text, I will use the term “Pennsylvania German” when referring to the language, or to issues for which the connections between individuals are made linguistically, as in the circulation of the ballad texts in a German

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28 Don Yoder, quoted in Kyle R. Weaver, “Meet Don Yoder Dean of Folklife Scholars,” *Pennsylvania Heritage* 32, no. 2 (2006): 9-10. Also Don Yoder in discussion with the author, June 30, 2009. Yoder does acknowledge the import of utilizing the term “German” when discussing printed texts, as he uses it in his book *The Pennsylvania German Broadside*.

that was not yet significantly different from standard literary German. But I will use the term “Pennsylvania Dutch” when referring to those individuals who associate with that particular interpretation of American regional culture as it has been passed down over time—as in speaking of the Kutztown Folk Festival, which at one point was called the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival. A grey area exists at the intersection of the two terms, and I hope to navigate it with respect for the individuals and community under examination. When I spoke with Patrick Donmoyer, the director of the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center at Kutztown University, I asked him directly why he described himself and the culture as “Dutch” when the Center was called “German”. He said that the “German” was a historical remnant of a long-past administration and a reflection also of the language materials present, and they felt no need to change it. Tradition bore more relevance than a strict adherence to accuracy.

**Moving Forward**

Susanna Cox faced a difficult decision when she brought an illegitimate child into early nineteenth century Oley, Pennsylvania. Her story is specific – the details are only relevant in her life – and universal – the issues of childbirth and financial support of both the mother and the child. Because of all of the cultural issues that were relevant as related to Susanna’s story, she became an ideograph of the developing pluralistic society as well as an icon of a previous time. Across her lifetime and later generations her story was

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30 The local dialect, Pennsylvanisch-Deitsch, did not develop fully until the 1850s.

31 Patrick Donmoyer (Pennsylvania Dutch scholar and now director of Kutztown University’s Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center) in discussion with the author, February 2013.
available to actors with a range of concerns—justice, charity, legal reform, local history, cultural revival—and they interpreted it according to their needs. Her life began in obscurity and ended in infamy, but the discussions surrounding her story demonstrate the wide range of reactions to the female accused.  

32 Louis Storck’s translation (Johann Philip Gombert, A New Dirge, Containing the History of Susanna Cox, Who Was Executed at Reading, Berks Co., Pa., for the Murder of Her Own Infant Child, trans. Louis Storck (Pennsylvania, 1865)) ends with “Her exit – infamy!” which is then adopted as the end of the presentation at the Kutztown Folk Festival’s “Execution of Suzanna Cox”.

19
Chapter 1: Susanna’s Story as it Unfolded in the Public Eye, February – June, 1809

Susanna Cox’s story first appeared in public in mid-February 1809. Until that date, she had reportedly lived a quiet life in rural Berks County, dutifully fulfilling the requirements of her employment as a maidservant and caregiver to the young children of Jacob and Esther Geehr. Everything changed in her existence on February 17, when her employer found the body of a newborn boy in the cold cellar on his farm. Susanna did not make any effort to hide that the child was hers, acknowledging that she had given birth but insisting that she had not intentionally done the child harm. Once the story became public knowledge, she became the local cause célèbre, and, for a few weeks, her every movement was observed and commented upon within the local press.

In this chapter, I intend to discuss the community in which Susanna’s case arose, and explore the reasons why the local population deemed her story worthy of examination, comment, and revision. While Susanna’s story has continued to be invoked in a variety of formats, within the first four months of her notoriety the perception of her changed more substantively than it has in the 200 years since. Because of the rapidly

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33 Details of the case first appeared in Der Readinger Adler, February 21, 1809. The early newspaper stories and the ballad use the German “Das Kind” or the English “The Child.” However, in Peter Nagle’s testimony during the trial in April, he does specifically identify the child as a “male child.” Peter Nagle’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.
modifying presentation in those first few months, I would like to explore her story as the surrounding issues became available to the public. While it is difficult to ignore later interpretations, my intention is to reconstruct the case as it was disseminated in print during Susanna’s lifetime.

Still, it is difficult to remove the details of the story as relayed in the current best-known version. Attorney Louis Richards was the president of the Historical Society of Berks County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was very engaged in local historical research, especially gathering the details of local court cases. While Richards was not from the area, he applied his interests in history and legal studies to learning more about Berks County and its historical residents. Richards compiled a range of sources and considered details that are no longer available anywhere but through him.

As more and different details became available to the public, and as understanding of the legal and personal ramifications of her actions became clearer, Susanna’s public persona developed from that of a one-dimensional criminal into a complex embodiment of a wide range of issues. These changes give insight into not only how Susanna was interpreted by those in a position to help her shape her own public presentation, but also the way that the community viewed her case based on their own assumptions and belief structures. Susanna’s story changed in the retelling, not just because of how the details were disseminated, but also because of the ways in which some within her community reinterpreted it to justify their own actions and attitudes.

34 Louis Richards, A Memorial Tribute to the Late John Richards (Philadelphia: Collins, 1885), 10-12, describes his family’s travels. While John Richards had familial ties to Berks County, Louis had been born in New Jersey, moved to Pottstown, Pennsylvania, at approximately 10 years of age, and eventually served as an attorney in Reading.
Violence against children had been a popular topic among eastern Pennsylvania’s German-speaking population even before Susanna’s case became public. On February 14, 1809 – the day that Susanna’s son reportedly was born and died – *Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift*, published about 40 miles away from Oley, addressed a slow news day and its consequent lack of material by publishing a version of the popular ballad “*Der Kinder im Wald.*” The ballad details the fictional account of a young brother and sister who, after the death of their parents, are exploited and left to die by an uncle whose interest in them was more for their money than their persons. Whether the editors’ reasons for running the piece were motivated by the need for something exactly that length to fill a gap, or because of an interest in the issues underlying the text, the choice of that particular piece foreshadows the local drama about to unfold. Two weeks later, *Der Weltbothe* would reprint the news of Susanna’s arrest.

The rapidity of the dissemination of oral reports is difficult to determine. Regardless of how slow or fast the oral networks functioned, Susanna Cox’s story officially became accessible to the German-speaking public within Berks County on February 21, 1809, when *Der Readinger Adler* published the following story:

*Schauderhafte Begebenheit*

Als letzere Woche Hr. Jacob Geehr, in Oley Taunschip, in dieser County, auf seinem Waschhauße nach einigen Stücken Eifen suchte, fand er, unter einem Haufen alter Sachen, zu seinem unaussprechlichen Erstaunen und Schrecken, ein neu-gebohrnes Kind, welches daselbst in einem Rock gewickelt todt lag. Als hierüber Larm gemacht und eine Untersuchung

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35 *Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift*, February 14, 1809. Numerous English versions of “The Children in the Wood” can be found through the Baldwin Library of Historical Children’s Literature at the University of Florida. However, this collection does not include any copies of the document as published in German.

Horrible Event

Last week, Mr. Jacob Geehr, in Oley Township, in this County, looked in his wash house for a piece of iron. He found, under a heap of old things, to his inexpressible astonishment and horror, a new born child, which lay dead wrapped up in a coat. He then raised the alarm and started an investigation, during which it was shown that the servant in the house of Mr. Geehr, Susanna Cox, was the unfeeling mother of this child. When the coroner’s jury returned with a doctor to participate in the investigation, they discovered that the child had a graft of tow and his tongue pushed back in his throat and that the jaw was broken. The jury gave its verdict that murder was a strong possibility. The mother of this child was immediately taken to the prison in this city, where she will remain until the process goes forward in April, when the court meets.

36 The originals consulted are deteriorating. I have consulted the version held in Print at the HSBC, as well as that available online through Readex’s America’s Historical Newspapers. Both appear to use this spelling. I also have a transcription of the February 28, 1809 article that appeared in Der Weltbothe, based on the microfilm held at the Kemp Library of East Stroudsburg University in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, and I have looked at the digital version available through Readex. The Weltbothe article confirms the spelling that was used for the term. Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! states that the item found was in the shape of a “stopper.” The text of this pamphlet is repeated in HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, 409, almost in its entirety. While this text is reproduced without a date, those before and after it have “1886” written next to them.

37 This word is difficult to read in the original text, both in the originals found at the HSBC and in Readex’s scanned versions. Again, I consulted Der Weltbothe for clarification. Due to the placement of the word on this page, it was better maintained and could easily be determined to read “Kinnbacken”.

38 Der Readinger Adler, February 21, 1809, 2
In this presentation, the Adler article introduced the story in a moderated journalistic tone. The words chosen expressing the details of the case, outlining the course of events with only two subjective statements voiced. The first comes from Jacob Geehr, conveying his reaction to his discovery as one of “unaussprechlichen Erstaunen und Schrecken (inexpressible astonishment and horror).” The other indirectly indicts Susanna: while she is not blamed for the death of the child directly, she is identified as the mother and described as “gefühllose (unfeeling).” While the text does not make an explicit connection between Susanna and the child’s death through a blunt statement of culpability, she is held responsible because of her role as his mother. Before the end of the article, Susanna has lost her individuality and her name to become purely “[d]ie Mutter dieses kindes (the mother of this child).” Her own identity has been subsumed under the role she played, and the assumption of her guilt was made not based on her self, but on her identification with that role. Because she is the mother, she is unfeeling; because she was unfeeling and the case was deemed most likely to have been murder, it must have been her responsibility. So, despite the seeming lack of bias in all but those two phrases, the end result of the article still implicated Susanna. The immediate

39 Later articles, in both English and German, spread throughout the spring in newspapers in Reading, Lebanon, Carlisle, Lancaster, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as well as Massachusetts. Some of the details varied between presentations and over time and would, if consistent with the patterns of other stories of the period, move from the printed to the spoken tale quite quickly. Many of the German texts appear to come from the same source which was, at least early on, most likely the Reading Adler, both because the dates for these are the earliest, and because the Adler, with its geographic proximity to the events, would have been able to break the story more quickly and then be copied by outlying papers. Among these texts are Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift (Lebanon, Pennsylvania), February 28, 1809; The Carlisle, Pennsylvania Gazette, April 28 1809; Der Wahre Amerikaner (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), May 20 and 27, 1809; Daily Advertiser (Boston, Massachusetts), June 23, 1809; Essex Register (Salem, Massachusetts), September 2, 1809. With the later articles, especially in the Massachusetts newspapers, the details provided would be several weeks or even months out of date.
allegation was that she was responsible for her child’s death: without evidence, and without a trial, her guilt and, therefore, fate had been decided in the popular press. So, within a week, Susanna had gone from obscure indentured servant to a publicly-acknowledged suspect. The local discussion of her case in itself was unusual, as most newspapers – including Der Adler – focused on wider-ranging news, ignoring events which occurred closer to home. The February 21, 1809 edition of Der Adler was no different, dedicating its front page to a pro-war poem originally published in a Baltimore paper, an update from the National Congress, and a reprinted letter of George Washington from 1783 regarding the establishment of the Federal government. The article describing Susanna’s case appeared as the first story on the second page, followed by the details of recent state Governmental appointments. With later updates, Susanna’s

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40 Der Readinger Adler, February 21, 1809, the front page contains a poem. The article about Cox is at the top of the second page, above the details of recent state governmental appointments. The last two pages are filled with paid advertisements. “The Old Jail” newspaper series from Reading Eagle, circa 1880. Reproduced without citation in the HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, 212, states “No extended report of the proceedings of the trial, or of the evidence submitted to the Court and jury appears in the columns of the journal, already referred to, brevity being at such period a desideratum in order that the general class of readers might obtain an outline of actual occurrences.” In addition, the pamphlet Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! Her Life, Crime, Trial, and Death on the Scaffold (Reading?, Pennsylvania: 1881-1883 (?)), Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection, Ursinus College, Folder 735, Item 11, begins its version of Susanna’s story by stating that much of the detail of her life had to be compiled from a variety of sources, as the local newspapers had not made a practice of covering local events. Louis Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation: A Paper Read Before the Historical Society of Berks County, Pa., March 13, 1900. ([S.l.]: B.F. Owen, 1901), states that the case wouldn’t have been heavily covered in Reading, since everyone was familiar with the story. The Reading Eagle, November 15, 1938, in an article titled “Pioneered in Original News Fields,” comments on the focus of the Adler of the early nineteenth century, noting that issues that should have received priority of place (for which they specifically reference Susanna Cox’s case) were subsumed under issues of national or international importance. It is relevant to note that they reprinted the incorrect date for Cox’s case, which probably helped lead to their inability to find any reference to it in the Adler or other local papers of the time.
case would later meet the standard for relevant news not just in the local papers, but as far away as New York, New England, and West Virginia.\textsuperscript{41}

The fact that her indictment resulted in a murder trial indicates that the evidence and situation went above and beyond the acceptable threshold of allowable behavior. Only six cases involving a woman killing a young child had previously resulted in executions within Pennsylvania, and the number of documented pardoned women is almost as long at five.\textsuperscript{42} Still, something about the situation – whether the situation within the Geehr household, or the political climate of the area – made it so that Jacob Geehr felt that his most appropriate recourse was to report Susanna to the local

\textsuperscript{41} Stories, however brief, detailing the results of the case could be found in \textit{Daily Advertiser} (Boston, Massachusetts), June 23, 1809; \textit{Mercantile Advertiser} (New York, New York), April 21, 1809; and \textit{Farmer's Repository} (Charles Town, West Virginia), May 5, 1809. Details of her execution can be found in \textit{American Monitor} (Plattsburgh, New York), September 8, 1809; \textit{Independent American} (Ballston Spa, New York), September 12, 1809; \textit{Newburyport Herald} (Newburyport, Massachusetts), October 31, 1809; \textit{Salem Gazette} (Salem, Massachusetts), October 31, 1809; \textit{Essex Register} (Salem, Massachusetts), September 2, 1809; \textit{Hampshire Federalist} (Springfield, Massachusetts), November 2, 1809; \textit{Merrimack Intelligencer} (Haverhill, Massachusetts), November 4, 1809; \textit{Vermont Courier} (Rutland, Vermont), November 8, 1809; \textit{Concord Gazette} (Concord, New Hampshire), November 14, 1809; \textit{The Sun} (Pittsfield, Massachusetts), November 18, 1809. Most of the reports of her execution contain identical text; the variations occur with the correction of a punctuation error.

\textsuperscript{42} Negley K. Teeters, \textit{Scaffold and Chair: A Compilation of their Use in Pennsylvania, 1682-1962} (Philadelphia: Sponsored by the Pennsylvania Prison Society, 1963), 20-21 and 67-78. Teeters acknowledges that some of the cases listed as “murder” may have been related to either child murder or infanticide, but the specific details were not always available. Roger Lane, \textit{Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-century Philadelphia} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 90-96, estimates that, by 1840, 25% of all pregnancies ended artificially, and that infanticides were even more problematic. The documentation on these cases is scarce, though, because of the desire to shield public sensibilities. Randolph Roth, “Child Murder in New England,” \textit{Social Science History}, 25:1 (Spring 2001), esp. 103-106, provides estimates on the neonaticides in New England between approximately 1630 and 1797. Details on the number of women indicted for infanticide throughout the Commonwealth are not available. Within Berks County, I have documentation of four women between 1802 and 1855 who were indicted for murder where it was either specified or implied that the victim was a child. None of these were convicted on the murder charge, although at least two were convicted of concealment. See Appendix C for additional details, as well as Joanna B. Spanos, “‘Victim[s] of Seduction’: Options for Unmarried Mothers in the Early Republic” (unpublished conference presentation, Pennsylvania Historical Association Conference, 2012).
magistrates rather than address the situation within his own household. Perhaps he believed that the authorities would ignore the situation, or that he would receive some benefit from reporting her. Or, perhaps, he was concerned that to not report Susanna would result in a charge for concealment against him if the situation was discovered by those outside the household and he had not spoken first. The authorities did not ignore the child’s death and, for their own reasons, chose to prosecute Susanna’s case to its full extent rather than pursue alternative options.

Susanna’s story stayed out of the press throughout March. This might have been because of the tendency of the regional papers to ignore local stories in favor of issues less available through local oral networks— but a wider-reaching search also did not locate any additional references outside the immediate geographical vicinity until later. This did not mean that the story was not being disseminated. On the contrary, the lack of published accounts indicates that her story either was no longer interesting to the local population, or that other means of dissemination had taken precedence. The local papers rarely addressed local events, unless the individuals involved were paying for the space, so the written record is less thorough. A later discussion, published in the early 1880s, would agree, stating that “[l]ocal news and gossip passed from mouth to mouth at the store and tavern, the greatest news exchanges of that remote period.”

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43 Two examples of local information spread through paid advertisements could be found in Der Readinger Adler, May 23, 1809, and June 20, 1809. Both items, titled “Ein Ehefreuz!” detail the desertion of the wives in question and note that their husbands will no longer be honoring their bills.

44 Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! This pages in this pamphlet are unnumbered; this quote comes from the third page.
The Trial

Susanna’s trial before the Court of Oyer and Terminer took place on April 7, 1809, at the Reading Courthouse. The presiding judge was John Spayd, one of the first German judges in the area, and previously a candidate for governor of Pennsylvania. Representing the state was Attorney General Samuel D. Franks. The defendant was represented by three lawyers who were, according to later accounts, the best in the County. Marks John Biddle, Charles Evans, and Frederick Smith were all experienced attorneys, and would continue to be respected lawyers, judges, and legislators. They were not paid for defending Susanna – at least, no records of payment received have been discovered, and Frederick Smith does not log the case into his otherwise meticulous ledger detailing the cases he participated in throughout his career. Only four individuals provided testimony during the trial. The prosecution produced three witnesses, and the defense presented one whose role was to ameliorate the others’ testimonies.

The only remaining record of the trial proceedings related to Susanna Cox’s case can be found in the Historical Society of Berks County’s Archive. Louis Richards had transcribed the notes kept by one of the lawyers involved in the case and maintained them

45 The Twentieth Century Bench and Bar of Pennsylvania (Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr., Bro. &., 1903), 46.
46 It might be considered relevant that Snyder’s son, Henry, later married Smith’s daughter, Mary Catherine. Under some circumstances, this connection could be seen as creating a motivation for Snyder’s decision to rule in favor of Smith’s prosecution. However, at the time of the Susanna Cox trial, Henry Snyder was 12.
47 Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and Expiation, states that they worked for free; Frederick Smith’s ledger does not contain details regarding the case, substantiating the claim that he did not receive payment for his services (HSBC, Genealogical Archive 06, Box 1, Item 1).
48 HSBC, Archive Collection 13, No. 58.
as part of his own collection. This document covers both sides of one legal-sized sheet of unlined paper, covered in small, cramped handwriting. The identity of the original transcriber has been debated: Richards says they belong to Marks John Biddle, another researcher who transcribed Richards’ work, Linda Tadic, attributes them to Samuel Franks. The HSBC did have the trial transcripts as well as the original of this document, but they disappeared “mysteriously” in the 1980s according to George Meiser, the current President of the HSBC. 49

The first to testify for the prosecution was Jacob Geehr. Because he had found the child, and because he could also speak on behalf of the women in his household, his testimony would set the tone for the rest of the trial. Following the legal convention of *femes covert*, Geehr, as the head of household, shared not only his own impressions but those of the three adult women within his household, none of whom were given the opportunity to speak. 50 Geehr explained the way in which he and his mother-in-law had examined the baby’s body after he had found it. They handled it enough to make some (later determined to be incorrect) suppositions regarding the gestational age of the child. Perhaps they wanted to be able to provide doubt as to the child’s viability. Certainly

49 Based on textual clues, including the reference to Charles Evans as “Mr. E”, I do not believe the notes originated with him. The author thanks Corinne and Russell Earnest for permission to use their transcription of this document. Linda Tadic’s transcription of the same document can be found in HSBC LC32, Berks County Collection, Box 05, Folder 05. Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions used are based on Corinne Earnest’s work and verified by the author. George M. Meiser IX, introduction to Louis Richards, “Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation,” in George M. Meiser IX and Gloria Jean Meiser, eds., *The Passing Scene*, Vol. 15 (Reading, PA: Historical Society of Berks County, 2007), 90, reports the ”mysterious,” as they describe it, disappearance of the official notes from Susanna Cox’s trial sometime in the 1980s.

Geehr stated in court that the child appeared to be “only have [half] grown.” After their examination, according to Geehr, his mother-in-law had then thrust the baby’s body back into its original hiding place before the authorities, both of whom would also testify, arrived. Even this admission that others had handled the child – and roughly, based on Geehr’s testimony – would not be enough to create the required reasonable doubt as to who or what was responsible for the physical damage evident on the corpse. Despite the lack of strong evidence implicating Susanna in particular, she was by her own admission the only person who had witnessed the child’s delivery and, therefore, was the only person who could comment on whether or not he had been born alive.

Jacob Geehr voiced his interpretation of Susanna’s thought process as part of his own testimony. When asked about Susanna’s response to questioning, Geehr described the interaction that had taken place between Barbara Schneider, Geehr’s mother-in-law, Esther Schneider Geehr, his wife, and Susanna Cox. As Geehr expressed it,

[Mrs. Schneider] went in and asked Susanna Coxe if it were her Child & she said it was. … My wife asked her if she had done anything to the Child. She said no. My wife asked her if … the Child was alive. She said no. Then she asked her if she did not see any signs of life. She said no. … I heard Susanna Coxe asked that she had put the Child in the hole. I am not positive. I think Squire Nagle asked her the question, but I am not positive. The child was wrapped up in a piece of a mans Coat. My Wife asked her two or three times the [that] day before the Jury came & told her she would have to tell the Truth & my Mother-in-Law got with her … Tell the Truth but she constantly denied having done anything to the child. … It was dead.

51 Jacob Geehr’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58. On Richards’ transcription of the trial notes, he appears to have written “have”, but Corinne Earnest, in her transcription, amended it to “half”.

52 Ibid.
When under the immediate stress of being discovered, in addition to the physical and emotional stresses related to recently given birth, Susanna still had denied any culpability in her child’s death. There is no evidence that she acknowledged any wrongdoing, whether under pressure from her employers or subsequently under interrogation by the Jury, the legal team, several curious visitors to the jail, and anyone else who had the authority and/or audacity to question her. A confession would later be produced on her behalf, but even that proves suspect.53

The details of her life then became much more public: a large number of people witnessed her trial and been exposed to the testimony as it related to her crime and otherwise: according to Der Adler, “Die Anzahl der Anwesenden den dieser Gelegenheit was sehr groß und auf jeden schien die Feyerlichkeit des Augenblicke einen tiefen Eindruck zu machen. (The number of observers at this event was very large, and the solemnity of the situation seemed to make a strong impression).”54

**A Caretaker of Children**

Susanna’s main task within the Geehr household had been to care for the children, as Esther Schneider Geehr was chronically ill.55 The Geehr/Schneider family is often

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53 *The Letzen Wörte und das Eserbe- Bekenntniß die Susanna Cox, Welche am 10ten Juny, 1089, hingerichted worden, Auf denen Commons der Stadt Reading, in Berks Caunty, Für die Ermordung Ihres neugebohrnen unehlichen Kindes, An dem leztern 14ten Februar* (Pennsylvania: 1809?) will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

54 *Der Readinger Adler*, April 11, 1809.

55 Her actual illness was never made clear; it could have been related to childbirth, or postpartum depression following the deaths of several of her young children. Or it could have been completely unrelated. Esther was a relatively young woman; she would have been about 27 in 1809. She died 10 years later; Jacob outlived her by many years, dying in 1853 at approximately
portrayed in printed texts as having significant interest in Susanna’s behavior and well-being, which is somewhat in contrast to the tone of Jacob Geehr’s testimony during her trial. The highest praise that Geehr was willing to give Susanna was that she adequately performed her job duties and did not disgrace the family. As Geehr said, “[s]he behaved well enough or else we would not have kept her so long. A good, quiet, sober girl – were not smart for work & my wife asked if she was not so any good (sic) to her Children she would not keep her any longer. She was tender & affectionate to my Children.”56 So, according to what Jacob Geehr chose to share as part of his public statement regarding his personal relationship with a servant in his household, his family was invested in Susanna’s well-being purely because of her love for their children and the quality of care she provided for them – not because they felt any great tie to her as an individual. Still, nowhere does Geehr state that he would not have accepted her child into their household, as long as its presence did not interfere with Susanna’s ability to fulfill the requirements of her own position. Indeed, the child’s existence could have been interpreted in a positive light, as women who became pregnant and gave birth while under contract were often required to extend their contract as repayment to her employers for providing her time to recover and care for her child as well as complete her own duties.57 The religious implications of her actions were subsumed under the legal consequences: the courts did not regulate morality, and even illegitimate children and their mothers could remain as

54 years old (ages based on data provided on gravestones at the Schneider Graveyard, Oley, Pennsylvania).

56 Jacob Geehr’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.

viable members of their own society as long as they showed due penance. While the birth of her child did not necessarily cause a legal concern, the death of her child could have endangered not only her legal status, but also her ability to be trusted with children. The trust she had built with the Schneider and Geehr families was broken – but whether the break occurred because of her lack of forthrightness or because of the death of her child is unclear.

Jacob Geehr was unambiguous in his interpretation of Susanna’s role within his family: she was a servant who lived in his household. She might excel at the specific tasks associated with her job requirements, but was not well suited for other activities and definitely not someone he would associate with outside of this professional relationship. Susanna’s apparent affection and perceived role as a surrogate mother to the Geehr children contrasts with the portrayal of her as “gefährlose” when confronted with her own offspring. Even as purely a caregiver and not the Geehr children’s actual mother, she was held to the standard that expected women to provide appropriate role models for her charges, regardless of whether this model met the needs of Jacob and

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58 Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 18-9, 309; also Raphael Semmes, *Crime and Punishment in Early Maryland* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1938), 197; Linda A. Pollock, “Childbearing and Female Bonding in Early Modern England,” *Social History* 22, no. 3 (1997), 287. Rev. C.E. Keiser would note the existence of an illegitimate ancestor born in 1833 when documenting his family history in the 1940s. Among other things, she was able to purchase a large portion of family land; HSBC, Keiser Family Collection, Genealogical Collection, GA, K 01, Box 01H, Folder 6. Alfred L. Shoemaker would also document local twentieth century views toward illegitimacy, stating that it was at least better than infanticide; The Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection at The Pennsylvania Folklife Society Collection, Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA. Note card collection, “Illegitimate.” Note also says “PG vol 45 page 220.” The PG referenced does not seem to be the journal *Pennsylvania German.*
Esther Geehr’s family. The cultural expectation was that Susanna, as a woman, would excel at childcare and be emotionally attached to any young people, especially her own.

Louis Richards would later claim that Susanna was put in charge of the Sheriff’s children during her incarceration in the Reading jail. This suggests that her conviction for infanticide was dissociated from the assumption that Susanna could care for children. Perhaps placing a convicted child murderer in charge of other children was a sign that the accusations against her were not believed. Or, more likely, those who made the decision to give her that job did not support the possibility that Susanna’s actions against her newborn son would or could be repeated in the context of caring for the jailer’s children. It may have been an acknowledgement of a divide between the actions of a woman made temporarily unstable due to the trauma of childbirth and those taken by a woman whose livelihood relies on her ability to provide appropriate care for the children of others.

Jacob Geehr’s testimony presents a different view into his household’s relationship with Susanna Cox than do other contemporary accounts. Throughout his testimony, he attempted to perform objectivity, stating on several occasions that he is just

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60 The essays contained in Greenfield and Barash, *Inventing Maternity*, problematize the idea of “maternity” as a temporally-determined construct. Another discussion of women working outside their traditionally-approved roles can be seen in Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986)


62 Postpartum depression did not become frequently diagnosed until the late 20th century, and would not have been accepted as an argument at the time. For additional information, see Keira V. Williams, "Susan Smith, the "Mommy Myth," and Maternal Crimes at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century" (roundtable discussion, Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, Amherst, Massachusetts, June 12, 2011).
repeating what the women of the household told him and rarely claiming his own opinion. So, once again, Susanna was presented without her own name: an unfeeling mother who broke the trust of her employers and community and must, therefore, receive punishment not just within the community but through legal means.

**The Legal Responsibilities of the Child’s Father**

Peter Nagle, the justice of the peace who had arrived at the Schneider farm in the role of official representative, also testified. Other than serving as the legal representative, Nagle was the only individual with whom Susanna entrusted the name of her child’s father. When Nagle is asked about the father in court, he responded, “[s]he told me who was the father of the child who was a married man.”  

He did not specifically name the father, but there are two potential clues found within the trial transcript. The first results from the ability to interpret the transcription of the court records a few different ways. Linda Tadic, a filmmaker who had consulted the historical documents in preparation for a never-released 1994 film about Susanna, interpreted one portion of Nagle’s testimony as

I asked her the child was hers and she answered it was, that it was born dead. She said she got it early in the morning of the 14th from Mr. Gehr.

Q: (from the examining lawyer, but not recorded)
A: People were up.

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63 Peter Nagle’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.

64 Peter Nagle’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58. Transcription by Linda Tadic, HSBC LC32, Berks County Collection, Box 05, Folder 05
But Corrine Earnest, who has spent the majority of her life examining Pennsylvania German fraktur and documentation, transcribes the same line as:

I asked her whether the Child was hers & she answered [acknowledged] it was. That it was born dead. She said she got it early in the morning of the 14th before Mr. Gehr People were up.\(^65\)

That slight shift in transcription changes the meaning altogether: from “it was Mr. Geehr’s child” to “it happened before they were awake.” Since it is impossible to go back to the original, I consulted the closest thing: the source text for both Tadic’s and Earnest’s transcriptions in the form of Louis Richards’ transcription taken directly from the trial notes. Richards’ handwriting is challenging, but my reading of the line is

I asked her whether the child was hers + she said it was – that it was born dead – she said she got it early in the morning of the 14th before Mr. Gehr’ People were up.\(^66\)

The issue comes down to interpretation of Richards’ handwriting, and the placement of the lawyer’s questions.\(^67\) Because no charges were filed against Jacob Geehr after this testimony, the court itself did not interpret Nagle’s comment as an indictment of Susanna’s employer. His indictment at this point would not have provided Susanna with any financial benefit, as she had no child for him to support. But, as Nagle knew the name at the time of Susanna’s arrest, if it had been Geehr, he could have encouraged charges against him in order to recoup some of the money spent for Susanna’s

\(^{65}\) Richards transcript, Earnest transcription.

\(^{66}\) Court Records, transcription by author.

\(^{67}\) Richards did not use standardized marks within his transcriptions, and his well-documented quest for thrift led him to write in small text and on strange materials. Kimberly Richards Brown and Lisa Adams, archivists at the HSBC, in discussion with the author in 2009, 2010, and 2013, spoke about Richards’ tendency to produce and catalogue transcriptions and notes on napkins, envelopes, backs of papers, and other random sources. I witnessed this myself when reading through his archived collection in the HSBC.
incarceration and trial. Because of the tendency to charge the father with bastardy and fornication when the financial assistance would relieve the burden on the local government, the lack of indictment against Geehr implies his innocence – and the lack of indictment against anyone supports the idea that the father had removed himself from the region.68

**The Medical Professionals: For the Prosecution, and for the Defense**

The next to testify was Dr. John Otto, who had served as the medical professional examining the child’s body at the scene. According to his testimony, the baby had a broken neck, some large strands of tow fiber stuck in its mouth, and a torn tongue.69 The damage was easily identifiable, but the actual cause or perpetrator was not as definitively determined. Tow was a common substance and, among its other uses, it could have been applied as a pacifier for fussy infants.70 Its presence could have been interpreted as an indication of an attempt to comfort the child – or, at the very least, keep it quiet – but the

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68 W. Logan MacCoy, “The Law of Pennsylvania Relating to Illegitimacy,” *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 7, no.4 (1916): 512-515 highlights the lack of legal ability to bring a man convicted of bastardy and fornication back into Pennsylvania in order to be held financially accountable for his actions. While MacCoy writes based on the laws that were in place in 1916, Details on the handling of bastardy cases involving municipal borders can also be found in Pennsylvania. *Laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Volume 3* (Philadelphia: John Bioren, 1810), 41.

69 "Tow" is used to describe the leftover pieces of any plant-based fiber after the useable material has been processed. John Otto, Jr.’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58. This description was disseminated in several newspaper reports, including *Kline’s Carlisle Weekly Gazette*, April 28, 1809 and *The Daily Advertiser*, June 23, 1809. In 1828, a similar description of the child would be noted in an infanticide case in Scioto County, Ohio, according to "Infanticide," *Scioto Gazette* (Chillicothe, Ohio), March 13, 1828.

70 Thanks to Dr. Amy Shuman and her English 597.01 class from Spring quarter 2012 for the suggestion. This use of fiber can be verified Valerie A. Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), 315.
other damage to the child’s body resulted in the interpretation of the tow as a tool in the infant’s death. Dr. Otto noted that the baby was full-grown, and seemed to have been born alive. Peter Nagle would, as part of his testimony, note that Dr. Otto had cut open the child’s left cheek, further injuring the body. Otto’s last comment was to mention that while the child looked fully formed, it was extraordinarily bloody. Despite his feeling that this was out of place, he also indicated that he did not have enough evidence to declare a source of that blood.

Dr. John Baum’s testimony, for the defense, intentionally contradicted or brought into question much of the prosecution’s case. While Geehr had testified that Susanna was welcome to keep working for him as long as she did her job, Baum states that Susanna believed, “Mrs. Gehr and they would have turned her out.”71 Dr. Otto said that the evidence indicated a live birth; Dr. Baum disagreed, stating that babies born with blood filling the mouth were “generally dead.” He did not address Otto’s decision to cut the child’s cheek open, or make any kind of comment regarding the rough postmortem treatment received by the child. But he did provide details that could have been used to at least provide a reasonable doubt in Susanna’s favor.

Dr. Baum did, however, have to testify about his prior interaction with Susanna, explaining how he could have examined her at five or six months pregnant without noticing her condition. Susanna either truly was unaware of her pregnancy, or she did an outstanding job of hiding it from the general public, from the family in which she lived, and from Dr. Baum himself. Jacob Geehr had testified that “[h]er shape was larger than

71 John Baum’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.
[it] ever was” but with no indication that he felt this change was due to anything other than normal weight gain. Dr. Baum had provided medicine for Susanna the previous fall, after she complained that “she was swelled some what (sic) & had an obstruction of the bowels.”

He had examined her, but stated no reason that he might have questioned her insistence that she was not pregnant: especially since, in deference to her gender, Baum’s examination had been based more on the observations of Mrs. Geehr and Mrs. Schneider than it was on any substantive physical observation or contact. According to Baum, Mrs. Schneider responded by laughing at the question and stating that “she did not think any such thing as the girl kept on working.” The medicine Baum prescribed to help ease Cox’s complaint was intended for use as an emmenagogue, but not specifically as an abortifacient. However, Baum did note that the use of this medication “might have debilitated the Child” before providing additional testimony to describe some of the signs that the child had quite possibly been stillborn. Again, Susanna’s perceived ignorance toward her own physical condition was stressed, as was her insistence to Dr. Baum that “if I am a poor girl I may be honest.” Baum also testified that he had witnessed other situations in which the woman did not know she was pregnant, citing a case that he had

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72 Ibid.
73 George Meiser IX felt that it was appropriate to note in his introduction to Richards’ “Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation,” that most male doctors of the period would not have performed a physical examination on a female patient unless it was absolutely necessary.
74 John Baum’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.
76 John Baum’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.
attended to in which the woman thought she was dying, until her son was born. He had been especially struck by this case, because the woman’s mother had been a midwife, which, to him, reinforced how possible it was for even a woman with resources to be unaware of her own pregnancy.

After the four witnesses had provided their testimony, defense attorney Charles Evans presented closing arguments in which he asked for the court to acquit Susanna Cox. He instructed them to examine the evidence to decide whether or not “the presumption is so strong as to make the Jury to believe that the Mother murdered the Child. … It must be proved that the Child was born alive. … It must be proved that the mother murdered it.” Evans argued that the testimony provided was not enough to conclusively justify a guilty verdict. He encouraged the jurors to find the proof, not just make an assumption, of guilt. The jury deliberated for several hours before announcing their decision. Perhaps Evans and the rest of the defense team were able to put some doubt into the minds of the jury members by highlighting Susanna’s consistent answers and previous positive character assessment. The jury could not accept the defense’s explanation that the tow, broken jaw, and appearance of the child could be interpreted as anything other than direct proof of the child’s murder, and of its mother’s guilt. Despite all attempts to cast doubt on her actions, intent, and motive, Susanna was still convicted of murder in the first degree.

77 Charles Evans’ closing arguments from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58.

78 Local legend, documented by Louis Richards, indicates that Spayd was so upset by this verdict that he resigned his judgeship shortly thereafter. Suter, Earnest, and Earnest (116) question this, citing work by Negley K. Teeters (probably Scaffold and Chair, page 11, which doesn’t actually
Based on the reportedly high number of observers during the trial and the implication that gossip and word of mouth spread faster and with more detail than the printed word, it would be reasonable to assume that the content of Susanna’s case became fairly familiar to those within Reading and Berks County within a few weeks at the most. Notes from the trial, in conjunction with printed newspaper articles, provide a more nuanced interpretation of Cox than had previously been available in the press. Still, she had never been granted the opportunity to speak on her own behalf, nor was she believed to be able to understand most of the English-language trial proceedings.

**The Convicted Murderess as Wronged Woman**

Following the testimony of her trial, perceptions changed toward Susanna. She was no longer seen as a criminal who had acted out of spite or malice but, instead, her presentation was now transformed into that of a wronged woman who had been led astray by an unworthy man. The printed presentation of her had also shifted: she was not the “unfeeling” mother indicted by the Adler’s earliest article. Instead, her personality and the possible motivations behind her situation were described in greater detail. In mid April, 1809, The Reading *Weekly Advertiser*, published in English, jumped right to the point when it published the details of the court case a week after the trial. In an article titled “Horrid Murder!” the fundamental details of the case were presented. But, instead

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80 This text would be conveyed almost verbatim in Carlisle two weeks later. *Kline’s Carlisle Weekly Gazette*, April 28, 1809.
of providing just the factual evidence from the trial, the *Weekly Advertiser* chose to go into much greater detail as to the testimony given while also adding details and interpretations that did not have easily-identifiable origins. For the first time in print, the details of Susanna Cox’s life prior to her crime become relevant to the overall presentation of her actions and her child’s death. The text of the article includes both a description of her life before her child’s death, and the details as presented in the court case:

The facts as appeared in evidence are as follow: -- Susanna Cox, single woman, resided for five years past in the family of Jacob Gehr, a Farmer in Oley township, Berks county, & conducted herself apparently with great prudence & propriety. Some months since her change of person and indisposition excited the fears and apprehensions of the family, who were induced to request a Physician to enquire of her the cause of her disorder. Upon being questioned by the Physician she denied that she was pregnant, and ascribed it to a cessation of those periodical evacuations incident to woman – this was believed by the Physician and the family. On the 17th of February last, Mr. Gehr employed a Smith to perform some work for him on the farm, and to furnish some iron for the Smith, went to a room over the wash house, to look for some iron in a hole under a closet, which had been the receptacle of Lumber and Refuse for many years past; after he had taken out some pieces of old iron, he caught hold of something rather heavy, and pulling it out, he discovered it to be the dead body of an Infant, wrapped up in a piece of an old coat. – He immediately communicated it to some members of his family, and in due form a Coroner’s Inquest examined the dead body – Doctor Otto, junior, who attended the Inquest, examined the dead body, and observed some small fibres of tow on the lips of the Infant, and on further examination perceived that the under jaw was broken, and that a piece of twisted tow five inches long and an inch in thickness was stuffed in the throat of the Infant – there was a quantity of coagulated blood in the mouth of the Infant, and its tongue was torn from its mouth and pushed back – the Infant had nails and hair, and from every appearance had been born alive. After being questioned, said Susanna Cox confessed that on the 14th of

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81 *Kline’s Carlisle Weekly Gazette*, April 28, 1809. This article cites a Reading paper from April 15th – probably the English-language Reading *Weekly Advertiser*. *Poulson’s The Daily Advertiser*, published in Philadelphia, repeated the story almost word-for-word on June 23, 1809, citing a Reading paper dated May 10, 1809 (Again, probably the *Advertiser*).
February last she had been delivered of the Child – that it was put in the hole by her, but always declared that she had not killed it, and that it had been dead.\(^\text{82}\)

In this description, she is reframed as an individual whose behavior had been so predictable and understandable that, when she became ill, those around her had acknowledged it without forcing an explanation or discussion. They had requested medical attention, but believed their practitioner and not pushed Susanna herself for further explanation.

Through this and other newspaper presentations of Susanna Cox, the public perception allowed her to become less of a one-dimensional trope and more of a rounded, fallible human. Rather than presenting the details in an accusatory tone, the paper chose to highlight that the “apprehensions of the family” led to them requesting medical care on Susanna’s behalf. Her denial of pregnancy is not questioned, either by the Physician and the family or, seemingly, by the author of the text. The implication was that she believed herself to be sick, but not pregnant, and that her health was important to the Geehrs. The description of her actions as demonstrating “great prudence & propriety” also changed her presentation: these two terms both praised her for her actions and reflected positively on the Geehr family. It was also implied that the Geehr and Schneider families believed her version of the story at least enough to support this interpretation to outsiders. She had conducted herself with propriety – and so had those with whom she had the most contact. No one – including herself – had any reason to doubt that she was telling the truth. Her reputation was maintained; the Geehers were vindicated; Dr. Otto, who had been the

\(^{82}\) *Kline’s Carlisle Weekly*, April 28, 1809. The detail of her five years at the Geehers is not substantiated in the other discussions, which place her time at the Geehers closer to eleven years.
physician consulted, had also acted with due diligence and respect for his patients. The content of this retelling varies slightly from that recorded as part of Dr. Baum’s testimony, but the intent does not diverge so greatly that the differences could be attributed to anything other than the interpretation and record keeping of the individuals whose observations helped construct the written record.

Susanna Cox had been transformed, in her public presentation, into a woman for whom the end result of her actions was interpreted as criminal despite her insistence that it had all been a tragic, but innocent, mistake. Her humanity became a mitigating factor – not forgiving her actions, but contextualizing them. Public opinion, as conveyed through the local press, changed as more details regarding the case became available. These published pieces led to a nuanced view of Cox’s life that allowed her to be seen as more than just a one-dimensional criminal to be unilaterally disparaged. The details of her life gave more context to her actions: not asking for forgiveness, but perhaps allowing a better understanding of the motivations that led to her choices, however morally-questionable they were.

The discussion was not all positive, of course. Also in April, the Lancaster newspaper *Der Wahre Amerikaner* published what seemed to be a fairly innocuous text, conveying details regarding Susanna’s conviction and the pending status of the governor’s verification of the sentence. The complete text read

Wir hören dass den der lezten Court in Reading, Berks County, ein jungs Weibsbild zum Tod verurtheilt wurde ween der Ermordung ihres Kindes. Wir wissen nicht ob der Gouverneur von Pennsylvanien die Todten-Warrant unterschrieb hat. We have heard that the Court which met last week in Reading, Berks County, condemned a young woman to death for the murder of her child.
We do not know whether the Governor of Pennsylvania has yet signed the death warrant.\textsuperscript{83}

Within the factual representation of the verdict lies one word that provides a hint as to the continuing underlying bias – the choice of the word “Weibsbild” to stand for “young woman.” While this may be the standard definition, the word carries a pejorative secondary meaning of “hussy” or “wench”. It was not a commonly-used term, at least, not in newspapers, which indicates that it carried more meaning that it might otherwise appear.\textsuperscript{84} So, even in cases where the text indicates some emotional distance between the author and the subject, one word can be used to transform the text from an innocuous record of an event to a biased commentary addressing social mores.

Not every presentation of Susanna’s case was as even in its tone. Lancaster’s \textit{Der Wahre Amerikaner} provided both the official verdict and sentence alongside a mixed message regarding Susanna and the act for which she was accused. As this article phrase it, the accused is “der unglücklichen Susanna Cox, wegen Übertretung die göttlichen und menschlichen Gesetze, durch Ermordung auf eine barbarisch Weise ihre uneheliches Kind (the unfortunate Susanna Cox, who transgressed against divine and human law by barbarically killing her illegitimate child).”\textsuperscript{85} The actions that led to the death of the child

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Der Wahre Amerikaner}, April 15, 1809.

\textsuperscript{84} A search through the Historical Newspapers Database confirms only three other uses of the word “Weibsbild” in American Newspapers – at least, those that have been recorded and are searchable with this resource. Understanding that this is not the most accurate means of judging frequency, compared to what else is available in this database, it is still significantly less common than other terms. The three articles refer to a woman who sued the local government after an injury sustained in their jurisdiction (Northumberland \textit{Republicaner} (Sudbury, Pennsylvania), February 02, 1816); one discussing a drunk woman who was found with a married man (Reading \textit{Adler}, June 13, 1876); and one referring to a young wife of an older husband (\textit{Der Weltbothe} (Lebanon, Pennsylvania), August 29, 1809).

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Der Wahre Amerikaner}, May 20, 1809.
were condemned as a transgression against the laws of both God and Commonwealth – but Susanna herself is “unglücklichen.” The separation between her action and her self would be perpetuated throughout the rest of the journalistic and literary depictions of Susanna’s life. The action (which she continued to deny) was condemned, but the actor was granted assistance in order to establish an appropriate end to her life, even by those to whom her actions might be the most repugnant.

**Legal versus Spiritual Forgiveness**

After her trial, Susanna returned to the jail. While there, she received spiritual guidance from Rev. Phillip Reinhold Pauli, the 66-year old minister of the Reformed Congregation in Reading.⁸⁶ Rev. Pauli was well-respected, even beloved, within the community, and he served the church in Reading as well as “several country congregations.”⁸⁷ No evidence demonstrates that he had encountered Susanna prior to her incarceration, especially with her reputation for lax church attendance.⁸⁸ Still, he was

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⁸⁶ The 66 year-old Rev. Pauli had been the minister of the Reformed congregation in Reading since 1793, according to Kenneth D. Sell, “P. Pauli: Prisoner, Professor, Preacher,” in *The Journal of the Johannes Schwalm Historical Association, Inc.*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (1986), 16-21. According to Sell, Pauli had been a prisoner himself, captured during the American Revolution and held for 4 years by Americans. However, other biographies omit this detail. Additional details can be found in Daniel Miller and Benjamin Bausman, *History of the Reformed Church in Reading, Pa.* (Reading, Pennsylvania: Self-published, 1905); William John Hinke, *Ministers of the German Reformed Congregations in Pennsylvania and Other Colonies in the Eighteenth Century* (Lancaster, PA: Historical Commission of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1951), 234, does not mention Susanna Cox, several other references to him do explain that he was the minister to whom Susanna turned in her time of need.

⁸⁷ Hinke, *Ministers of the German Reformed Congregations*, 235

believed to have visited her on several occasions while she lived in the jail, and he accompanied her to her execution. While this extension of Christian charity from a pastor was expected toward a condemned woman, Rev. Pauli’s participation indicates a certain level of import to the case. He was one of the more well-respected pastors in the region, but pastoral care was not normally mentioned as one of his strengths. A few years later, his congregation would pass a resolution forcing him to make more of an effort to visit his congregants on a regular basis. The results of his interaction with Susanna would not go unnoticed, as Susanna – previously described as uneducated in religious matters – would be able to recite a hymn and ask for forgiveness at her execution.

Susanna lived for about a month with no new public commentary related to her case, beyond the reiteration and dissemination of her trial records. And then, on May 9th, the picture grew more complex, with two newspaper articles. The first to become available to the general population was a polemic related to Susanna’s case, published in Der Readinger Adler. The text sets up a Socratic discussion, presenting a conversation between two hypothetical local citizens named Christian and Friedrich. The dialogue focused on Susanna’s case in particular, but moved the argument away from Susanna as an individual who had sinned and toward a view of her as an example of someone whom Christian mercy should look to protect, not persecute.

89 According to Daniel Miller and Benjamin Bausman, History of the Reformed Church in Reading, Pa. (Reading, Pennsylvania: Self-published, 1905), 95, the Reading church passed a resolution requiring Pauli and another Church representative to visit each of the congregation’s families at least once a year.

90 Der Readinger Adler, May 9, 1809. Unless otherwise noted, all text is from this passage. Translation by the author with the assistance of Jeremy B. Williams.
The conversation started by addressing Susanna’s case, with the character of Christian asking Friedrich why he felt any kind of sympathy toward Susanna after Friedrich states that it is Susanna’s situation, not her action, that is “schrecklich (terrible).” Christian interprets both the event and Friedrich’s attitude by questioning Friedrich as related to his friend’s perceived compassion toward Susanna: “Warum schrecklich, war denn die Ermordung ihres Kindes nich auch schrecklich? (Why terrible, was the murder of her child also not terrible?)” He deemed the child to be an innocent victim whose situation deserved Friedrich’s sympathy, and automatically determined that Susanna’s judicial conviction confirmed both her guilt of action and wickedness of intent. Based on what he had heard, he insisted that she be whipped first, and then executed for the crime. Friedrich countered with an argument that would take root in ongoing discussions of Susanna’s life: the situations that propelled her toward the choices she had made. “Bielleicht waren eine schlechte Erziehung, böses Beyspiel, Berführung und hernach Schaam und Berzweiflung, die zusammentreffenden Ursachen, die sie dazu gebracht haben. (Perhaps it was a bad education, a wicked example, with resulting shame and despondency that together brought her to this particular end.)” Even with the possibility of context, Christian still believed that wickedness (“Boßheiten”) needed to lead to punishment in order for others to learn to avoid this path. He was unconvinced by Friedrich’s argument that hanging an individual would not allow the accused to achieve redemption. Instead, Christian stated that the hanging might not redeem her soul, but it would at least prevent her from killing again. The protection of the public outweighed the salvation of the individual.
But Friedrich disagreed with Christian’s logic, encouraging him first to consider the possibility that incarceration would grant the time necessary to pursue and achieve rehabilitation. This comment directed their dialogue away from the specifics associated with Susanna Cox. The discussion continued, however, as a commentary on how the death penalty fit into both the Old Testament approach of retribution and the New Testament support of mercy and redemption. The character of Christian becomes more willing to listen to Friedrich’s position, but he is unwilling to ignore the holiness of the Old Testament perspective. To make his counter argument, Friedrich invokes Paul of Tarsus, imploring Christian to consider everything – the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Constitution (which he also acknowledges that some hold holy) – when considering the most appropriate action to take. In this way, he not only supports mercy as a religious guideline, but as a legal one as well. When all perspectives were considered, he chose the teachings of Jesus over either those of Moses and the Prophets or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Friedrich’s closing statement returns Susanna’s specific situation to the discussion. Since he chose to apply Jesus’ teaching over other determinants of appropriate conduct, he invokes Jesus’ words with the following:

In the New Testament, one does not find our Savior commanding a sentence of death. He speaks to women taken in adultery: I condemn you not, but sin no more. The holy religion instructs us, that we should find peace through complete holiness in order to become nearer to Godliness; if, on the other hand, we are not merciful, than Jesus’ command to us is in vain, when he said: therein send mercy, as your Father in heaven is merciful. Moses commands revenge and death – Christ commands grace and life.

Neither Friedrich nor Christian argued that Susanna might actually have been innocent – her guilt was accepted because of the judicial sentence. But the issue of guilt or innocence was not at stake. Instead, the crux of the argument revolved around the Commonwealth’s responsibility to make, interpret, and enforce the laws under which Susanna was convicted. The discussion raised the question as to whether or not these laws were appropriate applications of precedents set not just by legal standards, but by religious ones as well. Before, the question related to her role as a mother and citizen, and how she had failed in both. With this text, the focus shifted to her spiritual role: despite her sins against both God and Country, mercy was still possible – if she was granted the necessary time to realize her sin and repent.

However, this perspective had not been shared by the jury that had convicted her, nor, apparently, but the governor who considered the possibility of pardon. For, on the same day that Christian and Friedrich’s dialogue was published in Reading, Governor Simon Snyder issued his final verdict related to Susanna’s case.

Despite what would later be described as the overwhelming popular belief that Snyder would pardon Susanna, the document released on May 9, 1809 instead upheld the jury’s verdict and set her execution date as June 10, 1809. The document was brief, and Sheriff George Marx responded soon after with a similarly brief acknowledgement and
verification that the execution would take place as dictated. With these documents, Susanna’s fate was sealed. Unless the governor had a significant change of heart and became willing to override his own decision, Susanna’s execution and its date were nonnegotiable.

Even with growing public sympathy and legal precedent for lenience, Susanna was not pardoned. Because of the timing, it is unlikely that Snyder read Christian and Friedrich’s polemic before crafting his response to Susanna’s clemency request. For a range of reasons that will be explored in the next chapter, the Governor decided that Susanna’s case was not an appropriate outlet for a demonstration of gubernatorial mercy. And, because of Snyder’s decision to uphold the jury’s application of Pennsylvania law to her case, Susanna (influenced, most likely, by the individuals surrounding her) decided that an appeal for spiritual redemption was now in order.

The Confession

Susanna had lost her case and been denied a pardon. Shortly thereafter, a document was published that acknowledged her culpability in the death of her son. The text, produced in both English and German and advertised as in the English-language newspapers as *The Last Words and DYING CONFESSION OF THE UNFORTUNATE SUSANNAH COX*, was hastily published in order to maximize sales at the execution.92

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91 *Der Readinger Adler*, May 16, 1809, reproduces Sheriff Marx’s statement to the Governor. The State Archives preserves only the official denial of pardon, Pennsylvania State Archives, RG 25, SC 10 May 1809.

92 The entire advertisement, found in *The Weekly Advertiser of Reading, In the County of Berks*, June 10, 1809, pages 2-3. *JUNE 10, 1809, “The Last Words and DYING CONFESSION OF THE UNFORTUNATE SUSANNAH COX, In the English and German Languages, are FOR*
No complete copies of either this text or the German *The Lezten Wörte und das Eserbe-Bekenntniß die Susanna Cox, Welche am 10ten Juny, 1089, hingerichtet worden, Auf denen Commons der Stadt Reading, in Berks County, Für die Ermordung Ihres neugebohrnen unehlichen Kindes, An dem leztern 14ten Februar* are extant, and the version that is accessible is incomplete and with questionable provenance.\(^{93}\) The reprinting of excerpts of the text in some of the newspapers help verify that at least part of the document was available in 1809, even if the version available is not that which was for sale on Susanna’s execution day.\(^{94}\) The *Confession* tells Susanna’s story from the beginning of her life, reconstructing her public persona, perhaps for the final time before her execution. - The document highlighted factors that mitigated Susanna's guilt: – her lack of education and her inability to completely identify that what she was doing was wrong – opening her case to more sympathetic treatments.

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\(^{93}\) Transposition of the date to “1089” is in the original document. Kimberly Richards Brown, the archivist at the Historical Society of Berks County, acknowledges that the HSBC owns a great number of documents that have not been cataloged or sorted. She says that she would not be at all surprised if, somewhere in their collection, they had at least one copy of the *Confession*, which was rare even when Louis Richards consulted it.

\(^{94}\) The best source is *Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift*, June 13, 1809.
One of the details raised in the published confession is new, and provides a different insight into Susanna and her experiences. According to the German-language version of Susanna’s *Confession*,


So, without having a care for the future, led by her natural lusts and desires after the way of the flesh, she made the acquaintance of a young man who was a fellow-servant in the same house and became pregnant by him. Six months later, [as her wedding was nearing,] she injured herself lifting a heavy piece of wood, and delivered a dead child, for which untimely childbirth some women of the neighborhood were present.  

If this statement is true, then Susanna may have previously been pregnant, and her arguments about not understanding the signs and causes are no longer valid. Even so, the details provided in the quote above still demonstrate an adherence to her community’s social norms. According to the account of her alleged first pregnancy, her condition had just become noticeable when she experienced a miscarriage. This timing probably coincided with Susanna’s baby’s quickening – which would have been the official signal that not only was she pregnant, but that the child had a good chance of survival. Traditionally, a couple who was waiting to get married until the woman’s fertility had been established would not have necessarily acted before the quickening, and a

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95 *The Lezten Wörte und das Eserbe- Bekenntniß die Susanna Cox, Welche am 10ten Juny, 1089, hingerichted worden, Auf denen Commons der Stadt Reading, in Berks Caunty, Für die Ermordung Ihres neugebohrnen unehlichen Kindes, An dem leztern 14ten Februar.* From the Russell D. Earnest Archives, Clayton, Delaware. Translated by Jeremy B. Williams, who used this version as well as the *Libioner* printed excerpt to compile the most complete interpretation.
miscarriage could have released the father from any verbal commitments without detrimental effects for either party.  

For these reasons, Susanna’s actions and that of the young man in question seem to have been acceptable to the community, even to the point that no one had commented on it in any of the discussions of her life prior to the publication of her own *Confession*. The implication in Susanna Cox’s situation is that, had she not miscarried, her actions would have continued toward the expected marriage and subsequent legitimate birth. The alleged first pregnancy did not receive any comment during her court case – or, at least, was not in the surviving transcript. It was not deemed worthy of discussion in court: a previous illegitimate pregnancy did not by itself cause further damage to Susanna’s reputation, as her behavior had been publicly accepted and deemed appropriate.

Even in this *Confession*, blame for the death of the child in February of 1809 is not placed on the father, although his name first appears in this document. Instead, the prior pregnancy is presented as a fact: “bis sie sich juletz wieder durch einen in der Nachbarschaft wohnenden Mann Nahmens P--- M--- verfuehren liessm das Folgen davon waren, dass sie wieder schwanger ward (at last she was led to lie with a man named P--- M---, who lived in the neighborhood. The consequence of this was that she again became pregnant)”. Susanna’s confession leaves no doubt that she is taking responsibility for the death of her child, stating that “mit ihren eigenen Händen das Leben raubte, um ihre

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96 Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 60.
97 *The Lezten Wörte und das Eserbe- Bekenntniß die Susanna Cox*, Williams translation. The *Confession* intentionally edited out the gory details.
Schaude vor der Welt zu verbergen (with her own hands she robbed the child of its life in order to prevent the world from seeing her shame).”

If, indeed, the Confession is truly written from Susanna’s perspective – based on her words, but probably embellished and organized in order to fit into the current confessional genre, and phrased in third person – then why had her story changed? Had Susanna been lying all along when she had insisted that the child had been born dead, or had she truly believed herself to be innocent and just confessed to preserve her immortal soul? Perhaps even she was influenced by the placement of her protestations of innocence and her arrest in the local press next to a discussion of the damage done to her small son’s body. Susanna’s motivations, and the truth of her actions, will remain a mystery. Suppositions can be made – and have been. Part of the confession was reprinted in Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift, granting some insight into her development and reasoning for those who did not choose to buy the pamphlet. This provided enough details to entice the readership to buy the pamphlet, but not enough to make the entire document redundant. Whether or not the Confession is truly her words, the voice of a repentant but realistic sinner resonates from the text. So, someone either helped her construct what would be seen as her official statement or took on her persona in order to sell pamphlets. Either way, Susanna’s Confession both humanized

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98 Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift, June 13, 1809, my translation.

99 For contemporary suppositions, see Suter, Earnest and Earnest, as well as Bathsheba Doran, Nest (New York: Samuel French, 2008); Wendel Allen, The Hanging of Susanna Cox: A Docudrama (Alexandria, VA: Legend Books, 1989), and the Reading Theatre Project’s current work entitled “May Be Honest,” which premiered on August 2, 2013.

100 Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift, June 13, 1809, my translation.
her and indicated that she acknowledged her guilt in the death – but still, perhaps not murder – of her child.

Susanna’s lack of education, deemed unacceptable even given her other circumstances, became a source of comment within the narrative of her life. According to several contemporary printed sources, as well as later reinterpretations, Susanna was uneducated, and she was believed to have had less than a year, total, of formal schooling. As one version of her published “Confession” stated,

Mangel an Unterricht, indem sie nur 8 Monat in die Schule gegangen, wo sie kaum reeckt buchstabiren gelernt, auch nie zum Gottesdienst angehalten worden, waren die Ursachen, dass sie ganz umwißend im Christentstum blieb, und Gott und ihren Erlöser kaum dem Namen nach kannte.

Insufficiency in instruction, insofar as she had only received about eight months of schooling, where she scarcely learned her alphabet properly. Nor was she ever encouraged to attend church services, which resulted in her remaining entirely ignorant regarding Christianity to the point that she barely knew the names of God and her Savior.101

This lack of education went against legal tradition within Pennsylvania: most contracts of indenture guaranteed a minimal amount of time in the school room. One local indenture named Susanna’s defense attorney, Frederick Smith, as the employer. He agreed to provide to his young servant “fifteen quarters half-day schooling, one half of which after she attains the age of fourteen years.”102 If Susanna’s reported level of education was accurate, she did not meet the local standard for indentured servants. This demonstrated

101 Lezten Wörte und das Eserbe- Bekenntniß die Susanna Cox, Williams translation. This phrasing is also used in an article from Der Wahre Amerikaner, June 17, 1809.

102 This was a standardized printed indenture document, with the relevant specifics filled in by hand. In this quotation, everything but the word “fifteen” is part of the original printed document. From Portraits of the Smith Family Collection, Volume II, page 34, in HSBC GA:06, Box 1, Folder 1, Item 1.
negligence on the part of both her employers who did not provide the educational
opportunity and the local governmental officials who did not enforce the rule.

The decision to cite Susanna’s lack of education in the published documents adds
to the argument in favor of her pardon: since the legal system had let her down by not
enforcing the law, her inability to understand and follow a different law became more
understandable. Perhaps the Schneiders and Geehrs ignored the stipulation for their own
reasons, or because they believed Susanna to be unsuitable for formal education. But, in
addition to a lack of practical schooling, Susanna also was presented as unfamiliar with
religious traditions and teachings despite living in an area with strong connections
between the German ethnic community and the Reformed/Lutheran tradition.\textsuperscript{103} She
was, apparently, unaware of the law of the Commonwealth as well – or, at least, she did
not view its strength to be as significant in her life as that of the wrath of Jacob Geehr.
For she was willing to risk breaking the laws of the Commonwealth related at least to
fornication, bastardy, and concealment of the death of her bastard child, even if she was
truly innocent related to the child’s death. She also broke both the Sixth and Seventh
Commandments, which she acknowledged, after learning more about these religious
guidelines from Rev. Pauli.

\textsuperscript{103} Raymond W. Ford, Germans and Other Foreign Stock; Steven M. Nolt, Foreigners in Their
Own Land: Pennsylvania Germans in the Early Republic (University Park: Pennsylvania State
University Press, 2002); Karen Guenther, "Rememb'ring Our Time and Work Is the Lords": The
Experiences of Quakers on the Eighteenth-century Pennsylvania Frontier (Selinsgrove, PA:
Susquehanna University Press, 2005)
Susanna would later be described as “simple,” a term that can be used to imply everything from “innocent and harmless” to “mentally deficient.” More recent interpretations have chosen to focus on the possibility that she was truly “mentally deficient,” implying that Susanna didn’t have the mental capacity to make appropriate decisions or to have been an appropriate recipient of education in the first place. However, the records from the end of her life indicate that she was indeed capable of learning: according to Richards, after meeting with Rev. Philip Reinhold Pauli over the course of her incarceration, she was able to both construct a plea for forgiveness and perform a hymn that met the standards expected by her local community. The ability to perform these communally-appropriate actions indicates an understanding of the society’s expectations of her, and her ability to learn the materials necessary to meet these expectations. So criticisms of her mental capacity are probably not as valid as they might appear: she did seem to understand the consequences of her actions. However, the fact that she could understand and learn did not mean that she had wanted to, nor does it indicate that her educational deficits resulted purely from her employers’ decision to ignore her religious and secular instruction.

How much impact could a published confession make on an audience who already believed Susanna to be guilty? Based on the available evidence, the change is not

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105 Bathsheba Doran, Nest, focuses on this perceived character trait. One of my informants at the Kutztown Folk Festival in July 2012, Jenny, reiterated this description.

106 Louis Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation.
in her perceived guilt or innocence, but in the tone with which her actions are discussed. After the articles published in May, the published interpretations of her life begin to position themselves more on the side of compassion than of retribution. The choice of words – “gefährlose (unfeeling)” in February, but “unglücklich (unlucky)” in May – demonstrates one level on which the conversation shifted. But, more subtly and more significantly, the content changed. The early retellings provided only the facts of the case in regards to Susanna; the later stories provide background and exposition. She was no longer the faceless perpetrator of a crime, but a rounded character defined by her entire history rather than just one decision.

The release of a confession does not necessarily mean that Susanna intentionally caused the death of her son. She did, most likely, authorize the release of the document. But even that approval indicates Susanna’s own focus on achieving redemption, not on attempting to satisfy the curiosity of the reading public. To be “purged of the stain of sin” in the eyes of both God and man, it was deemed necessary for the condemned to confess and ask for absolution.\(^\text{107}\) The trope of the good death needed to be cultivated; for an individual condemned and scheduled for execution, reputation needed to be rebuilt, not assumed, as the witnesses’ perspectives and interpretations could sometimes be easily swayed by a convincing gallows argument.\(^\text{108}\) With the religious training she had been receiving from Rev. Philip Reinhold Pauli as well as some of the women within the community, Susanna’s understanding of redemption grew. This support, however, would


not be highlighted in the published texts until after her execution, even if it were widely known outside the immediate circles of participants during Susanna’s lifetime. At the time her *Confession* is printed, she was still seen as fallible, filled with mistakes and suffering as the result of her own sins.\(^{109}\)

**The Execution Day**

Susanna’s last day was very well documented and remembered, both by the press and by individuals who had witnessed the event.\(^{110}\) Observers began to collect within the town the night before. The weather was hot, and the high number of people crowded into a small space made it even hotter. Attendance reports vary, with estimates ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 people packed together within the city of Reading.\(^{111}\) Since the entire population of Berks County was only 43,146 in 1810, this means that a large percentage of the county’s populace – along with individuals from neighboring counties and perhaps states – were present on June 10, 1809.\(^{112}\)

\(^{109}\) “Über wo ist der welcher Warnung ben andern ihren Fehlern nimmt, un lässet ab von Sünden?” (*Der Wahre Amerikaner*, May 20, 1809).

\(^{110}\) *Der Wahre Amerikaner*, June 17, 1809. Also see the collected oral histories in HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, *passim*.

\(^{111}\) *Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift* (Lebanon, Pennsylvania), June 13, 1809, gives the estimate at “zwischen 15 und 20,000”; the *Newburyport Herald* (Newburyport, Massachusetts), October 31, 1809, states that “more than 20,000 persons were present.” According to Miller and Bausman, *History of the Reformed Church in Reading, Pa*, page 95, the total population of Reading in 1810 was 3643.

Susanna Cox was led to her death, walking along the road in a procession including her coffin, moving toward the gallows that had been prepared for her execution. She should have been terrified, but that is not how any of the memories regarding her execution day chose to depict her. The demeanor that Susanna exemplified— or, at least, the face that was conveyed via printed text to whatever portion of the interested public had not been present at the execution— conveyed to her observers that she had acknowledged her sins, received forgiveness, and was aware that she would be executed. She had taken responsibility for her son’s death with the published Confession, and she was now prepared to face the consequences associated with that decision.

Many of the details of the execution day were not immediately made widely accessible. Following in their tradition of limiting description and highlighting facts, the Adler’s initial report did not provide any details between her materialization from the jail and the declaration of her death. Those who were not at the execution had to go farther to get the details: farther linguistically, that is, because the description was published the following week in Reading’s English language Weekly Advertiser. This article described the entire procession, from the jail to the gallows:

A little after 11 o’clock the mournful procession moved from the Gaol—the unfortunate Girl with a wonderful serenity intermixed with a smile in her countenance, walked straight up to the awful Place of Execution on the Commons at the foot of the Hill, supported and comforted by two Revd. Ministers, kneeled down as soon as arrived, and committed her last fervent prayer to an Almighty GOD and REDEEMER, to whom she had, during her confinement (after the Death-Warrant being read to her) most earnestly supplicated for mercy and forgiveness of sins and transgressions, with whom she had made her peace and from whom, she assured, had received the comfort of his Mercy and Grace. She shortly after ascended the scaffold, willing surrendering a body of sins for the satisfaction of the offended Laws of the County, when she was launched into Eternity without a struggle. The greatest decency was upheld during the whole
awful scene, and Tears of Sympathy were seen flowing spontaneously from the almost numberless crowd of Spectators. – It was indeed a Day of Sorrow.\textsuperscript{113}

The story around Susanna’s execution march grew substantially. While the initial newspaper articles did not provide a great amount of detail – nor did they need to, since the majority of the citizens of Berks County had witnessed the event first hand – later stories would portray her journey in terminology linking her trial to other execution tropes highlighting the good death. She made her peace with those witnessing her execution, and provided her farewell speech that would follow a model dating back to the Anabaptist martyrs.\textsuperscript{114} She entreated the onlookers to repent of their sins before they met a fate like hers, and then performed a hymn that, according to tradition, was taught to her by Rev. Pauli:

\begin{align*}
Ich armer Mensch; ich armer Sünder, & \quad I am a poor person; I am a poor sinner \\
Steh hier vor Gottes Ungesicht. & \quad Standing here before the face of God \\
Ach Gott! Ach Gott! Verfahr gelinder, & \quad Oh, God! Oh God! Deal with me gently \\
Und geh nich mit mir ins Gericht. & \quad As you bring me into judgment \\
Erbarme dich, erbarme dich, & \quad Have mercy, have mercy, \\
Gott, mein Erbarmer, über mich! & \quad God, show me mercy!\textsuperscript{115}
\end{align*}

Susanna’s use of this hymn was highlighted, especially because her behavior had previously been excused because of her lack of religious training. Her spiritual failings appeared to be forgiven, however, because of the intervention of Rev. Pauli and his colleagues. They provided both material and religious support, and allowed for the transformation of Susanna from a “Weibsbild” who “knew nothing of God and our

\textsuperscript{113} The Weekly Advertiser of Reading, In the County of Berks. June 17, 1809.

\textsuperscript{114} Evans, Rituals of Retribution, 153.

\textsuperscript{115} This is the text reproduced in Der Wahre Amerikaner, June 17,1809, my translation. The tune is not cited, but a popular version featured music composed by J.S. Bach.
“Savior” to an “armer Sünder” who was able to sing a song petitioning God for eternal salvation despite her Earthy sins.

As one journalist observed, “The greatest decency was upheld during the whole awful scene, and tears of sympathy were seen flowing spontaneously from the almost numberless crowd of spectators.” After Susanna had been hanged for a sufficient amount of time, a doctor checked her for vital signs – the crowd apparently believed that he made an attempt to restore her to life – before she was officially declared to be dead and her body was transferred to her relatives. The executioner, who pulled on her foot – according to one source, to fix her shoe; according to another, to compassionately speed her demise; according to another, to show a lack of respect to the dead – was accosted on his way across the river, beaten, and robbed of his fee. Susanna’s sister and brother-in-law, Barbara and Peter Katzenmoyer, claimed the body and buried it, reportedly keeping guard for several days to scare away body snatchers and gawkers alike.

Almost immediately, depictions of her life – including her final hours – were disseminated and adapted. She became the star of a text which is believed to be the most

116 Reading Advertiser, June 17, 1809, cited in Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation.
117 Der Readinger Adler, June 13, 1809.
118 This appears partially in Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation, but also in several oral histories collected in the 1870s and 1880s, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.
popular German-American ballad of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{120} Susanna’s conviction had led to an immediate spate of discussions about her life, conduct, and the appropriateness of her fate, but the discussion died down shortly after her death. It did not disappear, however, and her story continued to be cited for a wide range of purposes. Later accounts would credit Susanna’s treatment as influential in inspiring reforms regarding capital punishment, the treatment of the female accused, and the enforcement of infanticide laws – but no direct correlation can be established.\textsuperscript{121} Instead, Susanna would remain a silent example: those who knew her story believed that it was relevant in the later changes in culture and law, but those in power never acknowledged the connection. What became important were not the details of her actual life, but the reinterpretation that entered the local collective memory. As her story left the pages of the newspapers and the minds of the lawmakers, it entered the purview of storytellers and ballad singers. Susanna was no longer a historical figure; she had lost her historical foundation when the stories about her outnumbered the factual accounts. Her story had now transcended history and entered into legend.\textsuperscript{122}

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\textsuperscript{120} Among others, Trudy E. Gilgenast, \textit{Pennsylvania German Broadsides: A Reflection of Daily Life 1741-1890} (Wilmington, DE: Cedar Tree Books, 2009), xviii, states that only \textit{Der Himmels Br\”ief} can be found in more copies.
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\textsuperscript{121} Richards, \textit{Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation} is the earliest printed text I have discovered that repeats this version. It will appear in later texts as well, but always either citing Richards or quoting him without attribution.
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\textsuperscript{122} Bill Ellis, \textit{Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults: Legends We Live} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), xiii, defines legend as a collection of stories that “grow out of social contexts, which they intend to alter.”
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Continuity

During Susanna’s lifetime, the public’s interpretation of her developed: at first, she had no distinct personality: she was just a servant in the Geehr family, and hadn’t been noticed to any degree. Some would later say that she never left the farm; this was probably an oversimplification of her dedication to her position and the maintenance of her place within the Geehr/Schneider household. From original reports that at least attempted journalistic neutrality, to secondary reports that declared her to be unfeeling, to a final presentation as unlucky, Susanna’s presentation and interpretations highlight not only the public reinterpretations of her self, but also the path of redemption and forgiveness expected within her community. In the end, the published reports distinguished between the condemnation of the crime and the soul of the condemned. Susanna could be an innocent maid who had sinned, and so she could be forgiven. The crime itself, though, could not be forgiven, and so she as the identified perpetrator must face the judicial punishment.
Chapter 2: Clemency and Legal Ramifications

Susanna Cox’s murder conviction is invoked at a variety of times as justification for legal and judicial decisions within Pennsylvania. In 1900, Louis Richards describes Susanna’s case as influencing the development of capital punishment policy of then Governor Simon Snyder.\(^\text{123}\) In the late twentieth century, the Kutztown Folk Festival justified its portrayal of Susanna’s hanging as educational entertainment by explaining that her case was strongly linked to the revision of the American appeals system.\(^\text{124}\) The historical veracity of both of these statements is suspect; no definitive supporting documentation has been found. Yet both demonstrate links between the versions of the past and the interpretations of the present, demonstrating the real or perceived connection between the case of Susanna Cox and the exploration of capital punishment within the Commonwealth.

Éanna Hickey argued that “truth” can be found in the folk narratives that develop around legal cases, especially when the cases themselves do not provide adequate legal


\(^{124}\) The Festival officially proclaims this connection through the press releases available through their website, www.kutztownfestival.com/information/news/releases/2009/04.htm, accessed March 1, 2010 as well as at www.kutztownfestival.com/about/entertainment.shtml; accessed 3/17/2010. Dave Fooks (Executive Director, the Kutztown Folk Festival), in discussion with the author, June 30, 2010, confirms that the Festival and its organizers do indeed believe that this connection is important in the continued performance of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” as it is enacted at the current version of the Festival.
and historical contexts. Susanna’s case features the best of both worlds: legal
documentation and ample folk narratives. Working in concert, these documents can be
used to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the case and the individuals involved.

Louis Richards’ information relied heavily on the court records, newspaper articles, and
published oral histories addressing Susanna’s case. Not all of his statements can be
linked to these documents, however, suggesting that he either had additional sources that
were either not documented, or that his own creativity helped him fill in the gaps. Dave
Fooks, building on the tradition established by those who preceded his association with
the Kutztown Folk Festival, says that he and others considered all of their options when
determining that it would be appropriate to continue to include Susanna’s story as part of
their annual family-oriented heritage festival. Like Richards, he cites information not
supported through outside sources. In both cases, the legal applications – verifiable or
not – help situate Susanna’s story within the greater historical framework of Berks
County.

Interpretations that connect Susanna’s story to the continuing discussion of capital
punishment policy, the appeals process, and the treatment of the female prisoner and
condemned have developed within the regional social memory. Simon Snyder did
encourage legislation to eliminate capital punishment in Pennsylvania, but his interest
preceded Susanna’s case. The timing that introduced her case at the very beginning of

125  ickey, Irish Law and Lawyers in Modern Folk Tradition (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts
Press in Association with the Irish Legal History Society, 1999), 9, 41., acknowledges that few
examples exist where both legal and folklore documentation are sufficient to form a complete
view from both sides.

126  Albert Post, “Early Efforts to Abolish Capital Punishment in Pennsylvania,” The Pennsylvania
Magazine of History and Biography, 68, no. 1 (Jan., 1944), 42, discusses the “farsighted” view
his tenure as governor could have increased the intensity with which he publicly
promoted his belief that the laws of the Commonwealth needed to be modified regarding
capital crimes. Perhaps more important, however, than providing a concrete causal link
between Susanna’s prosecution for murder and the development of related legal policies
is the ongoing interaction of the two issues, linking them in recorded local history if not
in legal precedent. The known connections need to be examined but, perhaps more
importantly, so do the gaps between documentation and memory.

I do not imply that Susanna’s situation directly affected the development of
capital punishment legislation within Pennsylvania, or that the reverse is true. I cannot
prove a direct correlation. What I can demonstrate is that individuals over 200 years later
believe Susanna’s case to have been relevant to these developments. The connections
that are made, whether based on actual relationships or just on circumstantial evidence,
maintain relevance in the popular understanding of the history of capital punishment
within Pennsylvania.

Executive clemency is defined as the ability of the executive (in the United States,
the governor or president) to pardon a condemned criminal. But pardon was not just
available through the legal system. While the laws held her responsible for the death of

of Simon Snyder in his address to the Pennsylvania Senate in 1809, as well as “On Capital
Punishments”, Poulson’s Daily Advertiser, July 17, 1810. Post mistakenly attributes the Daily
Advertiser article to 1809; the article did first appear in 1809, but in the Windham Herald
(Windham, Connecticut).

127 Charles Yorke, Consideration on the Law of Forfeitures, for High Treason (London: J.
Williams, 1775), cited in William West Smithers, Treatise on Executive Clemency in
specifically to the role of the English King, Smithers used the reference to apply also to
executives within the United States.
her child and the governor reinforced that responsibility, public opinion provided Susanna with a greater degree of clemency. Yet the details regarding this forgiveness were not recorded until over a generation later. The potential for community support at the time of her incarceration existed: from the religious community, from a feminine support system developed within Reading, and possibly (but not, most likely, actually) from her family and employers. The forgiveness exhibited by her community, albeit over half a century later, would become central in how Susanna continues to be portrayed within the local social memory.

**Legal Treatment of Infanticide in Early Pennsylvania**

In an era when most infanticide cases that reached the trial stage resulted in either acquittal or the mother’s conviction for the lesser charge of concealment, Susanna Cox’s case resulted in a conviction for the capital crime of first degree murder. And, although Louis Richards’ 1900 account stated that the people of Berks County had felt that Simon Snyder, the first German-American governor of Pennsylvania, would offer her a pardon, her reportedly innocent nature and the seemingly circumstantial evidence did not meet the necessary standard for pardon set by Snyder as established in his own correspondence.\(^{128}\) A significant disconnect existed between the public rhetoric which transformed Susanna from "unfeeling" to unfortunate and ignorant, and the legal standard that held her responsible for her son’s death.

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\(^{128}\) Snyder’s correspondence, maintained at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP), Collection 617, Personal Letters of Simon Snyder. Most of the letters within this collection are addressed to his secretary, Nathaniel Boileau provides some insight into how Snyder evaluated clemency cases, as will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.
Infanticide in early Pennsylvania had a clear legal punishment, set in place by precedent dating back to the reign of James I of England. Prior to 1794, infanticide was considered to be a variety of murder and, therefore, was legally classified as a capital crime. A woman accused of killing her child would have the right to be treated as innocent until proven guilty. Yet under eighteenth century American practices, she would have to prove her own innocence by providing testimony and documentation as to her lack of participation in the child’s death. Women accused of concealing the death of an illegitimate child would face the same treatment. Despite an ongoing legal interest in infanticide, only two women in Berks County met the standard for judicial execution on the charge before Susanna Cox: Elizabeth Graul in 1759 and Catherine Krebs in 1767.

Both Enlightenment thought and prevailing European customs, while not necessarily directly affecting the laws in Pennsylvania, could have influenced interpretations made by immigrants whose formative years had been spent in the

129 21 James I, c.27 (1624), “An Acte to Prevent the Murthering of Bastard Children.” Quoted in Keith Wrightson, “Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England,” Local Population Studies 15(1975), 11; David Hackett Fischer, Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 499; George Fox, in A Declaration of The Ground of Error & Errors, Blasphemy, Blasphemers, and Blasphemies (London: Giles Calvert, at the Black-Spread-Eagle near the West End of Pauls, 1657), 22, references that some kind of outward sign of an inward inability to repent was necessary, but does not go into specifics at this point. The charge was infrequently applied, however, and the execution sentence even more so. Around 1700, the British Crown strongly encouraged a modification that reduced the punishments for sexual crimes – fornication, bastardy, adultery, and concealment – within the colony so that they could no longer carry a capital charge but could, instead, result in “mutilations, brandings, floggings and even castration,” according to Negley K. Teeters, Scaffold and Chair: A Compilation of their Use in Pennsylvania, 1682-1962 (Philadelphia: Sponsored by the Pennsylvania Prison Society, 1963), 1. Charges in New England were still considered to be significantly stronger, but hanging an adulterer became less common throughout the eighteenth century (Fischer, Albion’s Seed, 499, citing J. William Frost, The Quaker Family in Colonial America: a Portrait of the Society of Friends (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 181.

130 Teeters, Scaffold and Chair, 1; Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation. Graul was sentenced in 1758 but, because she was pregnant, her execution was delayed until the birth of the child, HSBC, Genealogical Collection, GA, Collection B 01.
German-speaking areas.\textsuperscript{131} Frederick the Great, who had ruled Prussia for much of the eighteenth century, felt that an unmarried mother was put in a very difficult position, stating

\begin{quote}
[i]nfanticide is… the effect of an inevitable contradiction, one in which a woman is placed when she has either submitted out of weakness or been overpowered by violence. Faced with a choice between disgrace and the death of a creature incapable of feeling pain, who would not prefer the latter to the unavoidable misery to which the woman and her unfortunate offspring would be exposed?\textsuperscript{132}
\end{quote}

According to Regina Schutte, convictions for infanticide in nineteenth century Bavaria were few: children either contributed to the stable family economy or took away from a woman’s ability to support herself.\textsuperscript{133} So late term miscarriages – which many infanticides could have been classified as – rarely resulted in prosecution or extended comment as long as they did not disturb a woman’s ability to continue to fulfill her societal role.

In 1794, the Pennsylvania legal statute governing capital crimes was rewritten. As part of this reconsideration of the law, if the child’s death was suspected to have been caused by another’s actions, the death could be charged as murder, which was still a capital crime. However, concealment of an illegitimate child’s death was reclassified as

\textsuperscript{131} It is important not to oversimplify the geographic issues: Germany as a unified country did not exist until later in the nineteenth century, and a large majority of the immigrants were not Prussian in origin. Paul K. Cressman, "Pennsylvania German Secular Songs," \textit{The Pennsylvania Dutchman} III, no. 9 (October 1, 1951): 7, discusses in greater detail the ethnic and cultural divides within early Pennsylvania culture.


a separate charge that no longer bore the possibility of the death penalty. The 1794 law stated that “the concealment of the death of any such child shall not be conclusive evidence to convict the party indicted of the murder of her child, unless the circumstances attending it be such as shall satisfy the mind of the jury, that she did wilfully and maliciously destroy and take away the life of such child.” The accused’s legal right to be treated as innocent until proven guilty was reaffirmed and reinforced by the time that Susanna Cox was charged with first degree murder in 1809. The burden of proof was placed on the prosecution, making a conviction related to the infant’s death more difficult. The decision to pursue a murder charge rather than the more easily proven charge of concealment indicates that some detail of her case led the prosecution, in the form of attorney Frederick Smith, to believe that willful murder could be proven.

While a conviction on concealment only led to confinement of a few years, even so short a time was significant enough to change the course of a young woman’s life. For a man found guilty of bastardy and fornication, even when child support payments were minimal, any outlay of cash to someone outside their immediate household meant that someone within the household might go without. The legal decision had social and financial ramifications that removed the threat of death but increased the possibility of other long-term consequences. The charges against Susanna went against the trend to pursue convictions for concealment rather than murder. However, this served as a check

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to remind other women that the Commonwealth could and did retain the right to legislate appropriate behavior.

The crimes of bastardy, fornication, concealment, and infanticide were all linked in the Early Republic, although their prosecution fluctuated depending on the perceived severity of the crime, the local interpretations of the law and those involved, and the current political climate.\(^{136}\) According to G.S. Rowe’s findings, the most common successful prosecutions were of women who, like Susanna, were young, unmarried, and poor, because they lacked familial support that would provide other options or, at the very least, help provide alibis and covert assistance.\(^{137}\) Even so, few cases made it to trial—fewer to conviction. Negley Teeters documented only seven women executed for infanticide within the borders of what is now Pennsylvania between 1682 and 1834.\(^{138}\)

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\(^{136}\) Clare Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 70; G.S. Rowe, “Infanticide, Its Judicial Resolution, and Criminal Code Revision in Early Pennsylvania” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 135, No. 2 (June 1991): 200-232. The relative dearth of infanticide cases in the Mid-Atlantic States has more to do with the difficulty of proving the mother’s intent than with the number of seemingly healthy infants who died under questionable circumstances. “Mother” is used because men were rarely charged with infanticide.

\(^{137}\) G.S. Rowe, “Infanticide . . . in Early Pennsylvania,” 205. Perhaps not surprisingly, these characteristics also describe the majority of women accused of infanticide in Germany the century before, according to Otto Ulbricht, “Infanticide in Eighteenth Century Germany,” in *The German Underworld: Deviants and Outcasts in German History*, ed. Richard J. Evans (London: Routledge, 1988).

\(^{138}\) Negley K. Teeters, “Public Executions in Pennsylvania: 1682-1834,” *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 64 (Spring 1960): 85-164, Elizabeth Graul in 1759 and Catherine Krebs in 1767. According to Teeters, only seven women were executed for infanticide during the time period he studied. However, at least one of the individuals listed as committing “murder”, not “infanticide”, was convicted of killing very young children. If the charge of murder is considered, another 10 women are added to the list. G.S. Rowe, “Infanticide in Early Pennsylvania,” 213, documents that approximately 75% of infanticide convictions within early Pennsylvania occurred in Berks, Lancaster, and Chester Counties. Rowe (216) also cites David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern*
my research, I have found records related to three executions and two additional
indictments for infanticide within Berks County between 1759 and 1855; no published
resources account for more. Even with the ongoing legal interest in infanticide, few
cases were prosecuted. Still, something about Susanna’s situation made it worth the time
and energy to indict, incarcerate, try, and execute her.

**Clemency and the Death Penalty**

Capital punishment had been a topic of great discussion within the Early
Republic, as political theorists and the rest of society alike considered what elements of
English law to perpetuate in the new governmental structure. But the issue of capital
punishment in relation to the female accused did not gather much attention, at least, not
until the early 19th century. Whether that newfound interest can be connected with
Susanna Cox or whether the timing is purely coincidental cannot be definitively linked.
In any event, Susanna’s case gained perhaps a greater degree of examination because of
the parallel conversation.

Cases like Susanna's addressed two questions: infanticide and illegitimacy. The
question of the accused’s willful disregard for the life of another intertwined with the
religious implications associated with bastardy and fornication charges, but these
questions seem to have been put aside in the debate addressing capital punishment. The

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*Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), which discusses the relative leniency
of those from certain parts of Germany toward infanticide and child murder.

139 After consulting records in the Historical Society of Berks County, the research done by
Teeters in all of his collected sources, and “Berks has Seen its Last Hanging,” in the Reading
*Weekly Eagle*, June 28, 1913, which lists all of the executions within Berks County to that point, I
believe that all cases that resulted in any kind of legal interaction have been accounted for.
moral issues of the accused’s actions became separate from the crime itself, allowing the debate to focus not on the crime but on the appropriateness of the state’s authority to take an individual’s life. The question became one of retribution versus reform: when was it necessary to punish, and when was it more appropriate to show mercy toward an individual placed in a difficult position.\textsuperscript{140} Balancing morality and legality – the act of supporting the woman whose choices were limited or to punish her for taking the life of her child – made infanticide a challenging charge to try, convict, or justify.

In the case against Susanna Cox, the combination of the physical evidence and lack of familial presence counted heavily against her, despite what appeared to be at least a certain level of support from her employers. She could be interpreted either as a young woman striving for morality who made a mistake, or as an unfeeling mother who put her own needs ahead of those of her unborn child. Opinion was divided as to whether all fornication should be punished, or only that which was persistent enough to result in a child. The debates around Susanna’s situation highlighted this conflict, without finding a universally acceptable solution.

The debate around capital punishment did not start with Susanna. In the late eighteenth century, Pennsylvania physician Benjamin Rush described capital punishment as a way that the State tried to lessen “the horror of taking away human life”, arguing that it significantly increased the number of murders – in this case, state sponsored – that would occur.\textsuperscript{141} He also contended that capital punishment was a human sacrifice to the

\textsuperscript{140} Other individuals made this argument, including Benjamin Rush, \textit{Considerations on the Injustice and Impolicy of Punishing Murder by Death, Extracted from the American Museum} (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1792), 11.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 3.
government, and had no place within a republic such as the United States was trying to form. For Rush, the removal of capital punishment would lead to increased understanding of the “dignity of human nature.” Rush’s argument focused on the role of the State, not the crime of the convicted criminal. He acknowledged that murder was not appropriate within civilized society, while also mentioning several societies which had removed capital punishment only to see a decrease in the number of murders as well. However, he was not opposed to removing a murderer from human society, because the murderer must have such a “malignancy of heart” that a continued existence among others would be detrimental to all. Imprisonment, hard labor, and isolation were all options available for the treatment and punishment of convicted criminals – and all of these options kept the individuals’ lives intact. Any response by the government that encouraged a sentence of capital punishment was, in Rush’s eyes, nothing less than state-sponsored murder.

Even more problematic was the discussion surrounding the appropriateness of the application of capital punishment in cases involving a female accused. Susanna Cox was one of only a few women convicted of any capital crime within Pennsylvania in the late colonial period and the Early Republic. According to Rowe and Marietta, seventy-eight individuals were charged between 1632 and 1801 with infanticide or assistance in

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142 Ibid., 16. I am using “his” as a gender neutral pronoun, but as a specifically chosen one, as Rush and most others addressing the issues of capital punishment focused more on the male perpetrator.

143 Jennifer Manion, Women's Crime and Prison Reform in Early Pennsylvania, 1786-1829 (Diss., Rutgers University, 2008), 95 and Erica Hayden, ““She Keeps the Place in Continual Excitement:” Female Inmates’ Reactions to Incarceration in Antebellum Pennsylvania’s Prisons,” in Pennsylvania History, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Winter 2013), pp. 51-84.
all of Pennsylvania. Negley Teeters, working with court and prison records, uncovered only twenty-one women convicted of capital crimes within the geographic boundaries of Pennsylvania, seven of whom had been specifically accused of infanticide or the murder of a small child. Berks County convicted only three women for infanticide during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – and this was the highest total of any single county except for Chester, which had four. Elizabeth Grouel, in 1759, was convicted of killing one child but managed to get a stay of execution until she gave birth to another. Catherine Krebs was executed on the same charge eight years later, and Susanna Cox was the third. Concealment convictions also occurred, with both Sarah Moser in 1800 and Catherine Schroder in 1808 receiving sentences of labor and imprisonment. So women were not convicted of capital crimes at any great rate, and those that did face these charges tended to be servants, slaves, or other service workers. Susanna, a German servant from the Oley Valley, was accused and convicted of first-degree murder rather than concealment or another lesser charge. According to those discussing her case later,

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145 Negley K. Teeters, Scaffold and Chair, 20-21.
146 I have found two infanticide charges in the HSBC collections, one against Maria Roth in 1820 (Archive Collection, AC 13, Box 2, Folder 2, Item 2), and one against Elisabeth Lauer in 1855, but neither were convicted.
147 HSBC Genealogy Collection B: Boone Family Collection; also HSBC Archives Collection 13: Box 1, Folder 24.
148 HSBC, Genealogy Collection 6, folder 5; cases for concealment would be brought against Catherine Schneider in 1802, Elizabeth Wagaman in 1807 and Betty Denny in 1810; none of whom were convicted for murder. Schneider had been charged with murder, but this verdict was “ignoramus.”
the decision to pursue the capital charge, and Susanna’s incongruity with the other accused infanticides resulted in her case receiving so much outside interest.

The right of the state to legislate execution was one issue; another was the right of an elected executive of that state to override the legislature and offer clemency in capital cases. Twenty years before Susanna’s case, Alexander Hamilton had argued for the executive clemency provision in *The Federalist* #20, by stating, “without an easy access to exceptions in favor of unfortunate guilt, justice would wear a countenance too sanguinary and cruel.”\(^\text{149}\) As Austin Sarat interprets Hamilton’s perspective, clemency can be used to examine the borders of law in order to determine how a precise application of the judicial decision might need to be reconsidered in order to take human nature into account.\(^\text{150}\) In Sarat’s examination, the question becomes whether clemency is an apt reinterpretation of laws that did not adequately address all of the issues at stake, or an allowable act of mercy – or, perhaps, a bit of both.\(^\text{151}\) Daniel T. Kobil states that the result of the pardon can often provide a “false dichotomy” – granting a pardon provides an official response that goes beyond just a demonstration of mercy toward the accused.\(^\text{152}\) In Kobil’s view, clemency petitions are often considered more appealing to

\(^{149}\) Alexander Hamilton, Madison, James, and John Jay, *The Federalist*. Edited by Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961). This commentary in *The Federalist* was originally published on December 11, 1787.


\(^{151}\) Ibid, 33-4.

the grantor when the act of granting mercy also benefits the individual providing that mercy. While Susanna did not have powerful friends whom Snyder was courting for his own benefit, his connection to the German community as well as his strong personal distaste for capital punishment might have made Susanna a politically expedient recipient of an executive pardon. And, in the nineteenth century, the question of who had the authority to determine issues of life and death remained a point of contention.

**The Governor Reacts: Simon Snyder’s Interpretation**

Simon Snyder’s alignment with the anti-capital punishment movement within the Early Republic was well-established, and his vocal opposition to the death penalty had been documented quite early in his term as governor. At the end of his first full year as governor, Snyder called for the Pennsylvania Legislature to repeal capital punishment and rethink the way that prisoners were treated in the Commonwealth. He believed that the law was underutilized in the “suppression of vice and immorality” but that the death penalty needed to be reassessed by “humane and enlightened legislators.” Snyder’s willingness to approach and address difficult political topics was also well-known; he had been ridiculed by the press, including the *Pennsylvania Herald* for, among other things, adhering to Federalist ideologies, not spelling as well as they would like him to, and acting in such a way as could be seen as detrimental to the continued application

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of the Pennsylvania constitution.¹⁵⁶ Yet his strong opinions did not prevent his election to three terms as governor (beating, among others, Judge John Spayd), election to serve as a US Senator, and the constant suggestion of his name as a potential presidential candidate. He was perhaps not universally beloved, but he appeared to hold the respect of a fair number of his constituents.

Almost a hundred years after Susanna Cox was executed, Louis Richards implied that part of the inspiration for Snyder’s strong stance against capital punishment came from his experience with Susanna’s specific case. While no concrete connection has been documented, Snyder’s behavior in relation to Susanna’s situation and his documented opinions regarding later capital cases indicate that he tried to find the balance between his own stance against capital punishment and the laws of the Commonwealth that legislated its application. According to one source, “[c]onsiderable effort was made to induce gruff old Gov. Simon Snyder to grant a pardon.”¹⁵⁷ Another journalist wrote that “it was then believed that other influences were brought to bear upon the mind of the Governor” who decided against pardoning Susanna.¹⁵⁸ Louis Richards praise Snyder’s humanity, but also note that the Governor respected the rule of law.¹⁵⁹ Snyder took his role as final arbiter seriously, considering all issues before making a

¹⁵⁶ Pennsylvania Herald, June 13, 1809 and July 12, 1809 editions. In The Weekly Advertiser of Reading, In the County of Berks, February 18, 1809, an article appeared, the entire text of which was, “REPORT says – SIMON SNYDER IS DEAD! – It is added – He shot himself!” So the governor was not above mocking.

¹⁵⁷ Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! Her Life, Crime, Trial, and Death on the Scaffold (Reading?, Pennsylvania: 1881-1883 (?)), Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection, Ursinus College, Folder 735, Item 11, fifth page.

¹⁵⁸ “The Old Jail” newspaper series from Reading Eagle, circa 1880. Reproduced without citation in the HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, 212.

¹⁵⁹ Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation.
ruling even when he was personally opposed to the law being applied. He had the opportunity to express his opposition to capital punishment as it was applied in Susanna’s case, and he chose to deny her clemency appeal. Even his personal belief that “of all duties which becomes the executive to perform, I can, from experience say, that that of announcing to a fellow-being, the day, the hour, on which, he shall cease to exist, is the most painful and distressing,” he still upheld that the legal standard established by the legislature and enacted by the court remained valid when applied to the evidence against Susanna Cox. Few details were initially available, but later interpretations of the story extrapolated connections between Snyder’s later actions and Susanna’s appeal.

The clemency request that Governor Snyder received had been submitted shortly after the conclusion of Susanna’s trial. According to Gombert’s ballad, the pardon request was personally delivered to the Governor by “Ein Mann, der sehr mitleidig war (a man, who was very compassionate),” but no documentation as to this individual’s identity is extant. A family member might have been expected to make this request, but the Cox family was both poor and noticeably absent from the record of her case. The only consistent mention of her family came after her hanging, when Peter Katzenmoyer, her sister’s husband, claimed her body for burial. Of all of the newspaper articles, ballads, oral histories (both printed and spoken), and every other detail regarding Susanna, only one provides another familial option: in a late nineteenth-century series of

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161 Johann Philip Gombert, “Ein Neues Trauer-Lied, Enthaltend die Geschichte der Susanna Cox, die in Reading wegen dem Mord ihres Kindes hingerichtet wurde” (Reading, PA?): s.n, 1809.
162 Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation.
newspaper articles discussing “The Old Jail” in Reading, Susanna’s father is named as the petitioner:

With an affection, the sincerity of which was indisputable, her father, George Cox, adopting the natural though deeply sorrowful task of obtaining signatures to a memorial in order that executive clemency might be extended toward his daughter. Then, “that poor man, although between seventy and eighty years of age, walked up and down to the Governor’s residence, with the big roll of citizen’s names, at least twice, if not a third time, and invariably called at the jail on his return and communicated his utter failure.” Whether the jury who tried her case, the prosecuting attorney, or either of the witnesses, or how many in Oley township, joined in the appeal, is not at present known, although it was then believed that other influences were brought to bear upon the mind of the Governor, prejudicial to the memorial presented by one so advanced in years, that the life of his child might be spared.163

Since this is the only reference to Susanna’s father, and the only reference to the identity of the man who tried to present her case to the Governor, the connection is possible but not concrete. Other likely supporters might include Jacob Geehr, one of her lawyers, or Rev. Philip Pauli or his associates. Yet no record exists of who put forth the request: even the clemency file maintained by the Pennsylvania State Archives contains only the official denial of pardon.164

This lack of documentation, both within the official record and within the ballad reimagining, might be interpreted to indicate that the individual supporting Susanna’s

163 HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, page 212. No citation can be found; this document was filed with a series of oral histories and newspaper accounts dating to approximately the 1870s and 1880s, but no closer date can be determined. The Heading is “City Sketches” but the Number, present on some of the Sketches, was removed when the article was put into the scrapbook. Suter, Patricia, Russell Earnest and Corinne Earnest, The Hanging of Susanna Cox: The True Story of Pennsylvania’s Most Notorious Infanticide and the Legend That’s Kept it Alive (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2010), 85-6, discuss a number of individuals who might have supported the clemency petition, but did not find any records providing a specific name.

164 Pennsylvania State Archives, RG 25, SC 10 May 1809. According to the archivist, Jonathan R. Stayer, who reviewed the file in 2008, the only document in this, the official clemency file for Susanna Cox, is a copy of the official denial of clemency.
petition was not one of the logical choices. Because the ballad had already mentioned Geehr, it would not have been odd to provide his name, especially since the modification could have been done without changing the scan of the poetry. “Herr Geehr” would fit neatly to replace “Ein Mann” without too much of a disturbance to the flow of the text. But Geehr’s name is not used in this context and, as he and his family disappear from the story following Susanna’s arrest and conviction, there is no evidence that they showed further concern for her. The documents available also do not support the option that her lawyers were the dominant supporters of the clemency request, although they may have been involved in the preparation of the petition.

Simon Snyder reviewed the request for Susanna Cox’s pardon, but determined that the appropriate response would be to uphold the court’s ruling and sentencing recommendations. The official record reads:

The Governor this day took into consideration the case of Susanna Cox, now under sentence of death for murder in the first degree, confined in the jail of the County of Berks, of which crime she was convicted at the last Court of Oyer and Terminer and General Jail Delivery held in the said county - and thereupon a warrant under the Great Seal of the State, and signed by the Governor, was issued to the Sheriff of the County of Berks, George Marx, Esq., commanding him to execute the sentence of the said Court upon her, the said Susanna Cox, on Saturday, the tenth day of June next, between the hours of ten and two of the clock of the said day, at the usual place of execution. The said warrant was immediately transmitted to the said Sheriff of the said County of Berks, with instructions to communicate the same to the prisoner forthwith.  

According to later accounts, including Johann Phillip Gombert’s popular ballad discussing Susanna’s life, the general belief throughout the population was that her

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165 Richards, *Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation*, citing a source from the Executive department at Harrisburg, dated May 9, 1809. The State Archives record (Pennsylvania State Archives, RG-25, SC 10 May 1809) has a file, with nothing other than a statement that the clemency request was received.
chances for a pardon had been strong. Popular opinion, reportedly, seemed to be leaning toward mercy rather than retribution.\footnote{As recorded in Richards, \textit{Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation}. The idea that mercy was appropriate was reiterated in the article from \textit{Der Readinger Adler}, May 9, 1809.} Still, Snyder made the determination that neither his own dislike of capital punishment, nor his ethnic ties to Susanna and the German community within Berks County, nor the seemingly growing popular movement supporting Susanna would be enough for him to overturn the Court’s decision.\footnote{“Interview with George Phillippi”, Richards Scrapbook D, HSBC, 167. Based on clues found in other interviews, this was probably originally published in the Reading \textit{Eagle} in September 1873. Within the text, Phillippi notes that he was Simon Snyder’s nephew.} The death warrant was made public, with \textit{Der Adler} reporting on May 16, 1809:

\begin{quote}
Die Toden-Warrant, 
Für die hinrichtung der unglücklichen Susanna Cox, welche unter dem Todes-Urtheil in dem heistigen Gefängnis sitzt, langte am letztern Mittwoch mit der Post von Lancaster an. Diese bestimmt, daß das Todes-Urtheil der Court auf den Samstag, den 10ten nächsten Juny, in den Stunden zwischen 10 Uhr Bormittags und 2 Uhr Nachmittags, durch den Scheriff vollstrecht warden soll.
\end{quote}

The Death-Warrant, 
For the execution of the ill-fated Susanna Cox, who sits under the death sentence in the prison, arrived on Wednesday with the most recent mail from Lancaster. This confirmed the verdict of the Court and determined that the sentence of death would be carried out on Saturday, the 10\textsuperscript{th} of next June, in the hours between 10 in the morning and 2 in the afternoon, to be determined by the sheriff.\footnote{\textit{Der Readinger Adler}, May 16, 1809.}

Other than the single document denying Susanna’s clemency request, Snyder’s thoughts on this particular case are not recorded. However, his consideration of other clemency requests as well as his published comments on capital punishment provide insight into

\footnote{\textit{Der Readinger Adler}, May 16, 1809.}
how the details of Susanna’s case would have been considered before he arrived at his final decision.

Simon Snyder did consider the identity of the individuals submitting the formal clemency petitions when evaluating the validity of the appeal and his role in granting or denying it. In 1813, it was to Elizabeth Eaton’s benefit that her original defense attorneys had chosen to prepare and present her clemency petition following her conviction for murder. Even though their input did not result in a pardon for Elizabeth Eaton, Simon Snyder did state that this participation by the individual attorneys who had lost her case in the first place was relevant in his decision to reconsider her situation – perhaps a bit more carefully than he would have without their participation in the appeal.\(^{169}\) Snyder’s lack of documented reaction to Susanna’s appeal stands in contrast to his reconsideration of Eaton’s case, which might indicate that the participation of Susanna’s defense lawyers was lacking – or, at least, not publicized – in this construction of her petition. The lack of documentation does not prove the point, but it does raise the question of what evidence, and whose participation, Snyder felt to be the most significant in weighing arguments for and against clemency.

Elizabeth Eaton’s case, and Simon Snyder’s consideration of it, provides additional clues as to Snyder’s thought process when considering his role in overturning capital cases. When reviewing the relevant court documents, Snyder determined that the jury had not provided equal sentencing for Eaton and the other defendant, her son Samuel Harman, despite their apparent equal culpability related to the death of Harman’s wife.\(^{170}\)

\(^{169}\) HSP Collection 617, Personal Letters of Simon Snyder. Letter 8.

\(^{170}\) Ibid.
While Harman received a sentence of hard labor, Eaton was condemned to die. Snyder determined that the most appropriate response would be to order a second trial for Eaton, this time in front of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. He stated that he did not want his order for a new trial to be seen as an indication that he believed her to be innocent. Instead, he argued that this would be an opportunity for the case to be heard and deliberated on a second time with the hope that she would receive punishment more in line with that of her son – who was, in Snyder’s eyes, “equally if not more heinously guilty than her self”. Snyder’s action was not a plea for special treatment for Eaton, but was instead driven by his belief that the original jury sentenced the two convicted murders differently because of their gender. Snyder still doubted the appropriateness of his action, but believed that it could be justified because, in his words (addressed to his secretary Nathaniel Boileau), “If I err I am on the side of mercy – I trust, my friend, I am sure my God will forgive me.” Simon Snyder did not question Elizabeth Eaton’s guilt, nor did he make excuses for her. He believed that his responsibility to the people of Pennsylvania required him to uphold even laws that he did not personally support. And, while he did not support capital punishment, he supported the unequal application of the law even less.

Simon Snyder had a few more opportunities to consider petitions to apply clemency in capital cases. In 1816, Snyder was asked to consider the case of Richard Smith who was accused of killing John Carson. Carson had been absent from Philadelphia for several years, and had been declared dead. Following the declaration of

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171 Ibid.
172 Ibid. Also Letters 39-42.
his death, his supposed widow, Ann, had married Smith. When the two men met, a confrontation developed that resulted in John Carson’s death and Richard Smith’s incarceration.¹⁷³ Snyder had a personal incentive to show leniency toward Smith: the man’s friends threatened to harm the governor or a member of his family in order to force the pardon and, apparently, had the means to do so. According to Susan Branson, Ann Carson’s stated belief was that, despite Snyder’s desire to maintain his gubernatorial dignity, he would still prioritize the safety of himself and his family over upholding the letter of the law.¹⁷⁴ Ann Carson’s estimation had been incorrect: after deliberation and consultation, Snyder voiced his astonishment at the audacity of those involved. The governor viewed the words of Ann Carson, Richard Smith, and their supporters to be “open perjury” and an “attempt to circumvent the integrity” of the court proceedings.¹⁷⁵ In Richard Smith’s case, Snyder did not grant a pardon but did take the warnings seriously and do what he could to protect his family.

In another legal case from 1816, Snyder decided that it was appropriate to pardon William Douglass who had been convicted and sentenced for adultery.¹⁷⁶ Again, Snyder’s tone indicates a certain level of ambivalence toward the accused himself, questioning Douglass’ character. However, Snyder examined the trial transcript and his “perusal of the testimony delivered at the trial has created doubts in my mind of the

¹⁷³ This case is the focus of Susan Branson, Dangerous to Know: Women, Crime, and Notoriety in the Early Republic (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), and Simon Snyder’s role in Ann Carson’s treatment is discussed thoroughly.

¹⁷⁴ Branson, Dangerous to Know, 50.

¹⁷⁵ HSP Collection 617, Personal Letters of Simon Snyder. Letters 39-42 and 44.

¹⁷⁶ HSP Collection 617, Personal Letters of Simon Snyder. Letter 44 provides significant detail related to Douglass’ case as part of the postscript.
fairness of the conviction.” Snyder notes the presence of an alibi which was, seemingly, ignored by the jury. It is for this reason, not because of his belief in the character of the individual, that he determined a pardon to be the most appropriate course of action. He then comments that the conviction – even with the pardon – will “always attach to his character”, and that Douglass’ role as a local Justice of the Peace should be reconsidered at the very least. In this situation, the implied character of the accused did not sway Snyder’s decision, but the disregard for a piece of evidence did.\textsuperscript{177}

Without documentary evidence related to the specific case, it is difficult to determine exactly how Simon Snyder reasoned his decision regarding Susanna Cox. His arguments when reviewing the other clemency requests indicate some reasons why Susanna’s case did not meet Snyder’s standard for issuing a pardon. His regard for the individuals who had tried and adjudicated the case might also have affected his decision: he had long-standing personal relationships with several of the legal officials involved, knowing and, apparently, trusting their abilities. He did not question the quality of their prosecution, the rigor of her defense, or the fairness of the application of her sentence. Snyder’s consideration of other appeals for clemency offer some insight into how he formulated his approach to the subject as a whole, but do not completely explain why he chose to approach her case as he did. Perhaps two accusations of filicide that became public during Susanna’s incarceration tipped the balance out of her favor. In York, a mulatto woman named Elisabeth Moore was executed on May 27, 1809 for the death of her children. Moore confessed to, among other things, smothering an infant daughter and

\textsuperscript{177} HSP Collection 617, Personal Letters of Simon Snyder. Letter 49 provides an additional example.
poisoning a two-year-old son. Then, in early May, accusations of infanticide arose against Mary Meloy, a servant living in the household of a judge in Lancaster County. According to existing records, Meloy, who was sixteen, brutally beat her then six-month-old baby.

While Mary Meloy was eventually acquitted, Richards later speculates that her arrest was enough to convince Snyder that a pardon to one woman accused of infanticide would lead to others believing that they, too, would either not be prosecuted or would receive clemency should they choose to commit a similar crime. Richards draws evidence for this supposition from his interview with Snyder's nephew George Phillippi who, over 60 years later, presented details associated with Meloy’s case when asked to relay what he remembered of Susanna’s story. In Phillippi’s memory, Susanna had been caring for the child since its birth but, when the child was just about six months old, she decided to kill it. He remembered the case so vividly, he thought, at least partially because of the graphic nature of this particular murder against such a young victim.

Another record, compiled using Phillippi’s story but also incorporating others, places the


179 *Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wokenschrift*, May 9, 1809. The indictment for Mary Meloy cites her crime, but does not note the court’s decision. Louis Richards explains that Meloy was acquitted. Russell Earnest (Pennsylvania German scholar and collector) in discussion with the author, September 17, 2010, stated his interpretation that Meloy’s acquittal had more to do with her employer and her personal appearance than with her actual innocence.

180 Again, Louis Richards’ work states this observation as fact. This interpretation is perpetuated in the reenactment held at the Kutztown Festival every year, where the text June DeTurk performs from states that “The State Authorities were quite perturbed, they were afraid that Susanna would be acquitted.”

child’s age at six weeks, and states that the Geehr family had, until that point, accepted
the child within their household. The age of the mother, the age of the child, and the
details of the crime match better with Mary Meloy than with Susanna Cox, but the two
cases had been melded in the mind of an individual whose youth at the time of the
original events indicate a strong possibility that his knowledge of both cases developed as
much from hearing stories throughout his life as from remembrances of the events as they
happened.

So, on May 9th, only a few days after Mary Meloy was indicted for the death of
her child, the Governor sent the formal notice to Berks County Sheriff Marx ordering
Susanna’s execution a month later. The notice regarding the denial of pardon was
published in the newspapers the following week – with the Adler conveying little more
than the factual details as recorded above. However, Lancaster’s Der Wahre Amerikaner,
citing “A Reading Paper”, provided the details of the Governor’s decree while also
referring to Susanna as “barbarisch (barbaric)” alongside a strong religious injunction
against sin. Providing even more commentary, the next article on the page directly
questioned “aber was Gutes kan aus einer Hinrichtung entstehen? (but what good can
come of an execution?)” and continues on to cite the same Biblical interpretation used by
Friedrich in the May 9, 1809 issue of Der Adler: “Christus gebiet Gnade und Leben, und
sagt: „Darum send barmherzig, wie auch euer Bater im Himmel barmherzig ist” (Christ

182 Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! Her Life, Crime, Trial, and Death on the
Scaffold, fourth page.
183 Pennsylvania State Archives, RG-25, SC 10 May 1809; Der Readinger Adler, May 16, 1809; Der
Wahre Amerikaner, May 20, 1809 and May 27, 1809; Der Weltbothe und Libanoner Wockenschrift, May 16, 1809.
entreats for grace and life, and says “Therefore show mercy, as your Father in Heaven is merciful.””

Directly and indirectly, the Governor is censured for his decision not to offer mercy to the accused woman. Yet his thought processes related to Susanna’s specific case were never publicly explained, and the papers at the time did not try to interpret his reasons but, instead, blamed all three branches of government for allowing capital punishment to even be an option.

Within a year of Susanna Cox’s execution, an argument that, once again, framed capital punishment as a relic of Old Testament vengeance would be published first in Windham, Connecticut’s *Herald* in 1810 and then in Philadelphia in 1811 in *Poulson’s Daily Advertiser*. Capital crimes as a whole provided the impetus of the pamphlet, but the anonymous author – who styled himself Philanthropos – did not just speak of capital punishment in the abstract. Instead, he explored some of the nuances within the legal framework that helped determine punishments for a wide range of specific crimes. He referred particularly to cases involving infanticide by arguing that “a mother may not exonerate herself from the charge of her troublesome, and, oftentimes, refractory offspring, by destroying it.” Yet he also did not support the right of the State to impose a capital sentence, even on an errant mother. In his construction, while infanticide was not legally or morally justified, neither was the judicial removal of human

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185 *Der Wahre Amerikaner*, May 20, 1809; *Der Readinger Adler*, May 9, 1809. The verse cited is Luke 6:36.

186 Windham *Herald*, vol. XX, Issues 91-95, March, 1810. Also found in *Essays on Capital Punishments, republished from Poulson’s Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia: Brown and Merritt, 1811). I will be referring to the *Essays* rather than the originals published in the papers. Alfred Post, “Early Efforts to Abolish Capital Punishment in Pennsylvania,” states that this text was originally published in 1809. The available versions all date to 1810 or 1811, but that does not mean that an earlier version was not available.

life regardless of the individual’s crime. But, as Philanthropos argued, if the judicial system did not have the right to make a determination on the life or death of an individual, how did that affect the governor’s ability to provide a pardon or commutation of the same? Philanthropos called for a reworking of the law, which, despite ongoing efforts of the governor and others, would not receive the necessary support in the legislature.

After Susanna Cox: Clemency and Sympathy

The argument concerning the appropriate application of capital punishment did not end at the conclusion of Simon Snyder’s terms as governor. Instead, the conversation continued, both in the legislature and the public sphere, within Pennsylvania as well as the Republic in general. In 1834, a “Gentleman of the Bar” published a pamphlet detailing the reasons why Christian doctrines should more strongly guide the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and its laws. He argues that, since the Supreme Court declared that Christianity has influence in the Commonwealth, Christian teachings should be adhered to in the passage and application of laws.\textsuperscript{188} In the particular case he was addressing, the accused had murdered in anger, but the Courts had come to their decision to enact legal vengeance in a reasoned setting. He challenged the Courts to find a better alternative to what he interpreted as the reasoned decision to murder the convicted man. The “Gentleman” stressed the importance of acting according to the Christian “law of love” rather than the “law of fear” so often applied in the legal arena. He cited

\textsuperscript{188} A Gentleman of the Bar. An argument against capital punishments (Doylestown, Pennsylvania: J. Kelly, 1834), 14.
“everyone” as agreeing that, since individuals do not have the right to take their own lives, neither should the State have that right.\(^{189}\) This argument did not demonstrate a significant development since Snyder’s term, but it did demonstrate that the argument against capital punishment could gain momentum even without the staunch support of the governor and others within the government. Legislators presented bills to replace capital punishment with other forms of reprimand but, despite several votes, capital punishment remained part of the legal framework within Pennsylvania. The House proposed several bills beginning in 1812 to try to reform the death penalty. While these bills rarely got out of committee, they did begin to achieve some success with House Bill #557 in 1852. Part of the argument focused on the hypothesis that the “Act of 1794 had in its preamble statements to the effect that, frequently, moderate and certain punishments were better than severe and excessive ones, and that the primary aim of the law was to reform and not to exterminate.”\(^ {190}\) This was the most successful attempt in the nineteenth century; bills were proposed but rarely voted on. The framework of punishments established in 1794 was reaffirmed in 1860, but questioned again by the legislature in 1874.\(^ {191}\) While the arguments against capital punishment continued, the death penalty continued to be an option within Pennsylvania. As will be demonstrated later, the issues surrounding this form of judicial punishment did not leave the public imagination, and influenced both the application and the interpretation of the related laws.

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 9, 13.


In the early twentieth century, Susanna Cox’s case was brought back to public attention. The 1901 publication of Louis Richards' article originally presented before the Historical Society of Berks County may suggest a return of public interest in Susanna’s case within the legal history of Berks County and its surrounding area. Richards, in his position as the President of the HSBC, intentionally researched local legal cases to better understand his adopted home and its people. And, after he had originally presented his paper but around the same time it was published, many of the issues he addressed related to capital punishment laws would become relevant with the arrest and prosecution of Berks County resident Kate Edwards.

Susanna’s case arose again in the popular press in the early 1900s because of the shared location, legal charge, and gender between her and that surrounding the murder of John Edwards. In 1901, Kate Edwards and Samuel Greason conspired to murder Kate’s husband, John, in Stouchsburg, a small community on the other side of Berks County from where Susanna Cox had lived in Oley and Amity. Based on the evidence available, it is unlikely that Kate was responsible for the blow that killed her husband: most likely, that had been done by Greason. However, Kate admitted her guilt in organizing and directing the attack, if not necessarily endorsing the actual murder. She

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192 Corinne Earnest in discussion with the author, September 17, 2010, mentioned her observation that the printing of “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” throughout the 19th century could be directly linked to the occurrence of related cases in the region. Because no definitive publication dates can be proven for these texts, the argument is difficult to make. Mrs. Earnest also requested that I not release this observation until after the publication of Suter, Earnest and Earnest’s *The Hanging of Susanna Cox*. This text was published in 2010, and I have respected her request.

193 The Reading *Eagle*, January 10, 1905; the Duluth, Minnesota *News Tribune*, February 17, 1905, reprinted an article published in Reading, Pennsylvania on February 16, 1905, using Louis Richards’ text about Susanna Cox. Cox’s memory was once again invoked in the Reading *Weekly Eagle* of June 28, 1913, with the announcement of the arrival of the electric chair in for those convicted of a capital crime in Berks County.
acknowledged her own role purely as part of a plea for mercy toward Greason, her alleged lover, blaming herself as the instigator of the violent action. For the first time in almost 100 years, a woman in Berks County was convicted of a capital crime and sentenced to death.

On January 10, 1905, the Reading Eagle published an article that intentionally connected the legal ramifications of both of their acts. The story spread; an article from Reading would be reprinted in the Duluth, Minnesota News Tribune on February 17, 1905, directly quoting Louis Richards’ text about Susanna in an article that began with an update on Kate Edwards. The historical reference to Susanna Cox gave context to help explain why Edwards, who had admitted her crime and been convicted over three years prior, still waited in jail for the governor to enact her death sentence. Eight years later, as Edwards continued to serve time, Cox’s memory was once again invoked in the Reading Weekly Eagle of June 28, 1913, with the announcement of the arrival of the electric chair in for those convicted of a capital crime in Berks County. Susanna’s identity as the last woman executed in Berks County, had apparently become even more relevant as the Commonwealth had made the decision to switch from hangings to electrocutions as the preferred method of execution.194

An echo of the later descriptions of Susanna Cox can be found in the images presented of Kate Edwards. As Cox received praise for her developed piety, Edwards was lauded for her “transformation from an uncivilized almost brutish creature into a

194 “Berks has Seen its Last Hanging,” Reading Weekly Eagle, June 28, 1913. Found in the collection of Wayne Homan (Scrapbook #8, page 30, Berks County Archives)
woman of fair school education and even a certain refinement and culture.”

This mirrors some of the descriptions of Susanna at the end of her life, especially, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the memories that were maintained and then recorded almost 70 years later. Susanna’s presentation after her death foreshadows this redefinition of the female accused: where in life she was unlucky at best and unfeeling at worst, in death she would become a diamond in the rough who had the potential for a life filled with behavior deemed appropriate by the community.

Conclusion

While Susanna Cox’s case did not singlehandedly change the path of the American Appeals system, as the publicity associated with the Kutztown Folk Festival has claimed, nor did her case directly impact the path of capital punishment legislation. However, her case did begin a conversation, at least locally, related to capital punishment and the issues of the female accused. While the public might see gender as a reason for leniency, the law was clear that, since the crime was not gender specific, neither should the treatment of the punishment be.

Based on the more extensive details provided relating to his other decisions, Simon Snyder carefully considered capital cases before signing the death warrant. While he did not support the death penalty, neither did he support executive privilege that allowed the governor to make decisions for political expediency. In Snyder’s interpretation, Susanna’s case did not meet the standard for

195 “Seek Pardon for Mrs. Kate Edwards,” Meriden Morning Record, Sept 16, 1913, 3.

196 For additional discussion, see chapter 3 of this document. Many of the oral histories will be drawn from Louis Richards’ collected scrapbooks of newspaper articles from the 1860s-1890s.

197 William West Smithers, 170-171.
clemency: the trial had been fair, the jury had been qualified, the legal authorities involved had not informed him of any irregularities. But this is not how the case is remembered: it is invoked both to show the inadequacies of the law and the limitations of executive clemency. Susanna’s legal standing did not change but, as discussed in the next chapter, her public persona would once again transform to fit into a different cultural norm.
Chapter 3: Susanna Retold: Ballads and Oral Histories

“Ein Neues Trauer-Lied, Enthaltend die Geschichte der Susanna Cox, die in Reading wegen dem Mord ihres Kindes hingerichtet wurde.”

Attributed to Johann Philip Gombert, 1809.198

Ach merket auf ihr Menschen all,  Pay attention, all you people
nun wird’s euch vorgesagt  Only would I say this tale to you
von einem sehr betrübten Fall,  Of a very sorrowful incident
von einer armen Magd  Of a poor girl

Sie hatte lang in Oley gedient,  She had long served in Oley
Wohl bei dem Jacob Gehr;  Well with the Jacob Gehr's
Ihr Name war Susanna Cox,  Her name was Susanna Cox
Wie ich ihn hab' gehört.  As I have heard it said.

Sie hatte gar kein'n Unterricht  She had no training
In Welt und geistlich Recht,  In the world and holy Right
Sie wußt' den Willen Gottes nicht,  She did not know the Will of God
Und auch nicht sein Gesetz.  And also not His law

Das ist uns Menschen wohl bekannt  It is well known to us men
Und geht so in der Welt,  And goes so in the world
Wer von der Schrift hat kein Verstand,  The one with no understanding of the Word,
der thut was ihm gefällt.  does what pleases him.

Ihr Nachbar, der uns ist bewußt,  Her neighbor, who to us is known
Sein Namen der war Mertz,  His name was Mertz
Hat sie verführt durch Fleisches-Lust,  He seduced her through the lusts of the flesh
In Unfall sie gestürzt.  And brought about her downfall

Ein Beispiel, gleich von Adam's Zeit,  An example, here from Adam's time
Wie uns die Bibel lehrt,  As the the Bible teaches us
Wie jene Schlang, der Satan’s Geist,  How that serpent, Satan's spirit,

198 This particular version is part of the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, item 66. Translation by Dorothy Noyes and the author, 2013.
Die Eva hat verführt.

Durch die Verführung kam der Tod von Anfang in die Welt;
So ging es der Susanna Cox durch diesen Mannsgesell.

Er achtet' die Gesetze nicht, Er hielt nur für Spott
Was uns die heil'ge Schrift verbiet'
Im siebenten Gebot.

Als Ehmann er sie hat verführt, Und sie gebracht in Noth,
Wird es bereuen wohl zu spät, Einmal nach seinem Tod.

Sie hat es nicht geoffenbart, Sie schämt sich vor den Leut',
darum es Niemand soll' erfahr'n Vor der Gebärungszeit.

Im achtzehnhundert neunten Jahr, den vierzehnten Februar,
Des Morgens früh um halb fünf Uhr, Sie's Kind zur Welt gebar.

Da diese arme Sünderin Verblendet war so fest,
Hat sie ihr neugebornes Kind In die Ewigkeit versetzt.

Sobald es aber war entdeckt, Daß dieser Mord geschehen,
So wurd' sie in Arrest gesetzt Und sollte es gesteh'n.

Ein' Jury ward sogleich bestellt, Sie sollte es nachsehn;
Was dieser armen Sünderin Für Urtheil sollt geschehen.
Sie hielt wohl bei derselben an,  
Und bittet um Genad:  
Doch klagten sie sie schuldig an  
Des Mords im ersten Grad.

She conducted herself up well  
And asked for grace:  
But they asked for her to be found guilty  
Of murder in the first degree

Man führte sie in's Courhaus h'nein,  
wo der Herr Richter Spayd,  
Wo sie ihr schrecklich Tods-  
Urtheil Mit Weinen angehört.

She was taken into the courthouse  
Under the judgment of Judge Spayd  
Where she heard her terrible  
death sentence with tears

Ein jeder kann nun denken wohl,  
Wie es ihr war zu Muth,  
Da sie auf'm Richtplatz sterben sollt',  
Bedauernswerthes Blut!

One can well imagine  
What her courage was like  
That she at the judgment square should die  
Oh pitiful blood!

Die Todtenwarrant man bald schrieb  
Für diese arme Magd,  
Und ward zum Gouvernör geschickt  
Nach der Lancaster Stadt.

The death warrant was soon written  
For this poor maid  
And was sent to the Governor  
Over in Lancaster city.

Ein Mann, der sehr mitleidig war,  
Den hat sie selbst geschickt,  
Zum Gouvernör in jener Stadt,  
Der hat für sie gebitt.

A man, who was very compassionate  
Took himself off  
To the Governor in that city.  
Where he pleaded on her behalf.

Allein für sie war kein Pardon,  
Gehangen musst' sie sein,  
den zehnten Tag im Juni  
Die Welt zum Augenschein.

For her alone there was no pardon  
She must be hanged  
The tenth day in June  
Before the eyes of the world.

Die Todten Warrant wurd' geschickt,  
Ihr vorgelesen gleich,  
Da hat sie brünstig Gott gebitt  
Um Gnad im Himmelreich.

The death warrant was sent  
And read aloud to her  
Then she passionately petitioned God  
For grace in Heaven

Sie ward in ihrem Bußzustand  
Besucht von Geistlichkeit,  
Und sie hat ernstlich Buß gethan  
Und ihre Sünd bereut.

She was in her penitence  
Visited by the clergy  
And she had earnestly done penance  
And repented of her sins

Sie wurd’ aus der Gefangenschaft  
Um elf Uhr ausgeführt,  
Dann ging es nach dem Hinrichsplatz,  
Bedauernsvoller Schritt!

She was led from her captivity  
Around eleven o'clock  
Then she went toward the place of execution  
ith many regretful steps!
Sie warnte alle Menschen treu,  
Besonders junge Leut',  
Und sprach: "Nehmt ein Exempel Euch  
An meinem Endschicksal heut."

She warned all the good people  
Especially the young  
And said "All of you take example  
From my final fate today."

Sie kniete auf die Erde hin  
Und ruft den Herren an,  
Er möcht vergeben alle Sünd',  
Die sie allhier gethan.

She knelt on the ground  
And called out to God  
That he might forgive all the sins  
That she had done here.

Ihr Weinen war Mitleidenswerth,  
Wie sie lag auf den Knie,  
Die Thränen fielen auf die Erd'  
Viel' weinten über sie.

Her crying was worthy of compassion  
How she stayed on her knees  
Her tears fell to the Earth  
Many cried over her

Sie sprach: "Ich geh' zur Ewigkeit  
In einem Augenblick;  
Ach Gott! nimm auf mich in Dein Reich,  
Zerstoss mich Sünd'rin nicht!"

She spoke "I go to Eternity  
In just a moment  
Oh, God! Take me into your Kingdom  
Do not break me, a sinner!"

Nach Diesem ward sie hingericht,  
Mitleidenswerther Schritt,  
Nach siebenzehn Minuten ist  
Schon Leib und Seel getrennt.

After this was she executed  
With pitiful steps  
After seventeen minutes  
Her body and soul were parted

Nach ihrem Tode ward mit Fleiss,  
Von Doktoren viel probirt,  
Zu bringen sie zum Leben gleich,  
Jedoch es war zu spät.

After her death diligently  
The doctors made many attempts  
To return her to life  
Yet it was too late.

Wer dieses Liedchen hat gemacht  
Und es euch neu gedicht',  
Der hat den Jammer mitbetracht't,  
War selbst bei em Gericht.

The one who made this little song  
And composed it anew  
Participated in the lamentation,  
Was himself there in the court.

Ihr Menschen all auf Erden hört  
Nur dieses Beispiel an,  
Wenn Jemand ist so ungelehrt,  
Wie's ihm ergehen kann.

All people on the earth, just  
Listen to this example  
When someone is so unlearned  
What can become of her.

Sie lebte nicht gar lang in Freud,  
Als sie im Unfall war;  
Bracht ihre ganze Lebenszeit,  
Auf vier und zwanzig Jahr.

She did not live very long in joy  
Before she found her undoing  
Her whole span of life broke  
At four and twenty years
Before Susanna Cox’s execution on June 10, 1809, her story was spread through conversation and the popular press. After her execution, though, her story began to reappear in popular culture in a variety of forms. Sometime in the six months immediately following Susanna’s execution, the ballad retelling of her life story was written and published. This was not just a modification in the presentation medium, but a shift from a more factual version – or, at least, a version that performed verisimilitude – into one that utilized literary and musical devices to make the story both more appealing and memorable.

The ballad circulated in published form throughout the nineteenth century, from a range of printers and with a variety of slight typographical modifications. The story regained widespread public interest almost 70 years after Susanna’s execution when a few interested newspaper reporters interviewed a group of long-time Berks County residents. The focus of their questions was on the Reading of the past: the interviews were conducted shortly after the American Centennial celebrations when local

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199 Few of the published broadsides have dates printed on them. Some have been placed within a date range based on the printing press used, others because of the other documents with which they were located. Russell Earnest, et al, *Flying Leaves and One-Sheets: Pennsylvania German Broadsides, Fraktur and Their Printers* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Books, 2005), 18, cite personal communication with Ron Lieberman as stating that approximately 80 versions of “Susanna Cox” survive, mostly written in German. Don Yoder reproduces two versions (one in English, and one in German) in *The Pennsylvania German Broadside: A History and Guide* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005). Pennsylvania State University has six available for review as part of the Digital Collections (http://collection1.libraries.psu.edu). Trudy Gilgenast states that only *Der Himmels Brief* can be found in more copies. This documentation is a bit off, however, because it is based on the number of surviving texts rather than on details of printed copies, which information is difficult to discern. Walter E. Boyer, "The German Broadside Song of Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1959): 47, also cites the ubiquitous nature of this ballad.
antiquarians began to realize that large portions of local history had been lost due to a lack of official documentation.\textsuperscript{200}

The resulting oral histories addressed life in the early part of the nineteenth century, including occupational and personal stories, but, almost invariably, also delved into local stories and scandals. The story of Susanna Cox was a popular topic, with many of the interviewees discussing their interpretations of her case and their memories of her execution day.\textsuperscript{201} These memories were used as the foundation of a pamphlet published in the early 1880s; the story is recorded in a family memoir from 1876; a student used the ballad as a translation exercise in the 1860s.\textsuperscript{202} This revival resulted in at least two publications of the story, as well as the invocation of Susanna’s case in the consideration


\textsuperscript{202} Additional oral histories can be found, including \textit{Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! Her Life, Crime, Trial, and Death on the Scaffold} (Reading?, Pennsylvania: 1881-1883 (?)). J. Van Reed, \textit{Centennial Book of Reminiscences, Traditions, Recollections, Habits, Manners, and Customs, and of what I Know of the Olden Times, Written Expressly for the Van Reed family by J Van Reed AD 1876}. HSBC, Genealogical Collection, GA, Van Reed 1876, 20334. Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection, Ursinus College, Folder 735, Item 11.
of a Berks County murder in 1901.\textsuperscript{203} The original documentation was largely ignored as the story spread on its own merit, without the benefit of appropriate citations and the verification of facts. The story addressing Susanna’s life and death had started as part of the historical record but became a part of the local folklore as elements were reinterpreted and reframed based on the interests of the current population.

The story – in both its ballad and oral history forms – provided an outlet for individuals to reform their views of women, crime, and the past of their community. The compelling character of the story is evinced by the text's widespread distribution and reprinting, to a degree not recorded in any other ballad from the Pennsylvania German corpus. The story, which had been popular both within Berks County and beyond, continued to be part of both the folklore and the social memory within the region and the greater Pennsylvania German community. The specifics of the case became less relevant with the growth of sympathetic interest in the idealized version of the convicted woman.

These different interpretations show how Susanna’s story developed within her community. The ballad – written almost immediately by someone who claimed to have been in the courtroom and at her execution– would help shape some later interpretations, but the recorded personal memories do not always agree with the details provided within the printed text. Taking all of the later printed reinterpretations of the story into context helps provide an outline of the developing views of the people of Berks County. Susanna appeared first as a ballad heroine, then as an icon of the past, then as the subject of a seemingly-innocuous translation assignment, and then again as an example against which

\textsuperscript{203} The Reading \textit{Eagle}, January 10, 1905; the Duluth, Minnesota \textit{News Tribune}, February 17, 1905, reprinted an article published in Reading, Pennsylvania on February 16, 1905, using Louis Richards’ text about Susanna Cox.
the community could gauge its treatment of the female accused. While the ballad presentation recurred the most often, the presence of the oral histories demonstrates that the story was not limited to one means of transmission.

**The Background of the Ballad**

“Ein Neues Trauer-Lied, Enthaltend die Geschichte der Susanna Cox, die in Reading wegen den Mord ihres Kindes hingerichtet wurde (A New Dirge, Telling the History of Susanna Cox, who was hanged in Reading following the Death of her Child)” was written and published sometime in the second half of 1809 – possibly within days following Susanna’s execution, but probably later in the course of the year. The individual usually credited as the composer piece is Johann Philip Gombert, who has been identified as a school teacher from Bern Township, Berks County – not a member of

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204 Johann Phillip Gombert (?), “Ein Neues Trauer-Lied, Enthaltend die Geschichte der Susanna Cox, die in Reading wegen dem Mord ihres Kindes hingerichtet wurde,” ([Reading, PA?]: s.n, 1809). Unless specific versions are indicated, I will refer to the story collectively as “Susanna Cox”. While Gombert is usually credited as the author, Don Yoder in *The Pennsylvania German Broadside*, 49, indicates that several other individuals might have had better opportunity to write the unsigned ballad. The lack of verifiable dates of performance and publication should not raise questions, as even Albert F. Buffington, *Pennsylvania German Secular Songs*, (Breinigsville, PA: The Pennsylvania German Society), 165, states that there were songs that he knew weren’t performed for him as an outsider, and others that he chose to include in his collection without translation because either he or the performers deemed them too bawdy. Thomas R. Brendle and William S. Troxell, “Pennsylvania German Songs” in *Pennsylvania Songs and Ballads*. Ed. George Korson, 62-128 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), documents a performed version of “Susanna Cox” in 1936. Their research notes and texts from field work are problematic, since the texts are exact replicas of printed copies – and the translation provided is not a literal version, but Johann Philip Gombert, *A New Dirge, Containing the History of Susanna Cox, Who Was Executed at Reading, Berks Co., Pa., for the Murder of Her Own Infant Child*. Translated by Louis Storck (Pennsylvania, 1865), which is heavily romanticized.
the immediate community of Oley, but from only 13 miles away – and definitely affiliated with the same linguistic and ethnic group.\textsuperscript{205}

The language used to compose the piece is a typical version of High German. While some of the letters have been changed (B appears often where V would be expected, for example), the text as a whole is written in standard, albeit somewhat archaic, literary German: not until later did Pennsylvania Dutch, or Pennsylvanisch-Deitsch, become a firm dialect with a literary tradition of its own. The choice to compose the text in High German made the piece accessible to a more geographically diverse audience, and followed in the German-language publishing tradition common in Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{206} At least by 1845, if not before, an English translation was also in circulation, allowing the story to be transmitted beyond the original linguistic community and to the English-speaking population as well.\textsuperscript{207} The ballad also moved geographically: at least one version was printed and disseminated in Ontario, Canada and a good number of published broadsides made it back to German-speaking Europe.\textsuperscript{208}

Most of the extant published ballads appear as broadsheets, not necessarily in predictable

\textsuperscript{205} Don Yoder, \textit{Pennsylvania German Broadsides}, citing Alfred Shoemaker (who did not cite his sources, but Yoder trusts that his information is, if not accurate, an accurate reflection of what locals would have understood to be true), 49.

\textsuperscript{206} Yoder, \textit{The Pennsylvania German Broadsides}, xiv.

\textsuperscript{207} Earliest documented English versions date to 1845 (Richard M. Dorson, \textit{American Folklore} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 87), but Robert D. Bethke, “Chapbook ‘Gallows-Literature’ in Nineteenth-Century Pennsylvania.” \textit{Pennsylvania Folklife} XX.1 (1970): 2-15 states that the English version was available “not long” following the German version. Most printed versions of the broadside lack a publishers mark or a publication date. The first English version that I have found with a definitive publication date is Storck’s translation, published in 1865.

\textsuperscript{208} According to Dave Fooks in discussion with the author, February 14, 2013. Mr. Fooks is the Executive Director of the Kutztown Folk Festival. He has been contacted by individuals from several countries, especially Germany, who are interested in the Susanna Cox story. His example is Dr. Dieter Pesch, affiliated with the Kommerner Museum, who is an avid collector of Susanna Cox materials.
sizes. Don Yoder notes at least eighty different versions of the ballad are still available; I have seen, in original, reprint, or electronic copy, about 20 of these. The broadsides are rectangular, with a variety of sizes and proportions. Some have borders; some do not. A very few contain musical suggestions; some provide an additional standardized verse intended to mark the text as a Trauerlied.

Transmission of the Text

The transmission of the “Ballad of Susanna Cox” can be linked to the publication and diffusion of published versions, but few definitive indications of dissemination as part of the oral tradition can be concretely identified. However, two observed patterns of transmission within the regional and linguistic community support the idea that the ballad was also performed. While a performance does not automatically result in the text entering the oral tradition, it does signify an interest in the topic that encouraged at least occasional oral transmission. In addition, the recurrent publication of the ballad indicates that this interest continues throughout the nineteenth century. This continued publication of the ballad text could have aided the dissemination of the story, even if the performed ballad fell out of favor.

Evidence on some printed broadsides provides evidence of the expected performance of the piece: it continues to appear in printed text, sometimes with information about how it is to be performed. At least one of the broadsides believed to be in circulation in 1809 does contain the shaped note tune for the piece, which would allow

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209 See Appendix D for complete list of versions consulted; the largest collection of Susanna Cox ballads available online can be viewed through the Pennsylvania State University Library’s site, libraries.psu.edu, which links directly to their Pennsylvania German Broadsides collection.
a performer familiar with that style of musical notation to follow the tune. The dissemination indicates that the ballad continued to be read at the least, but could often also be sung from the text and then discussed.

The documented pattern of broadside dissemination within rural communities in Pennsylvania also provides insight into how the details of these texts were transmitted. According to Don Yoder, peddlers would teach the ballad tune to a potential client, hoping that the individual would then buy the broadside so that they had a record of the text for when they performed. This pattern kept the dissemination of the ballad in the hands of the traveling chapmen as well as the individuals they were most likely to do business with, usually the women of the household. Whether distributed purely in print, or with an oral component, the story told in the ballad as printed presented a new version of Susanna. The North American interpretations were not just copies made from previous texts (although these did exist), nor were they just bastardizations of older broadsides, modified with new details to keep up with contemporary news, although these also could be found. While the newer broadsides did share foundations in form and structure with those that came before, they were still newly composed and focused on the specific issues most relevant to the intended audience.

Additional characterization and motivation that had been lacking in many of the previous published accounts now become more prominent. She was refashioned into an ideal sympathetic ballad protagonist. The ballad can be read to see both how the story fulfilled

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210 One of the texts cited by Yoder, from the Roughwood Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia, contains the shaped-note tune. According to the Library Company, this text was published in 1809.

211 Yoder, The Pennsylvania German Broadside, passim.
local expectations, addressing the range of ethnic and cultural influences that had taken root in Berks County, and at what points her story presented a tension within the community’s definition of appropriate behavior. While the story was reframed to fit within the generic expectations of a broadside ballad, “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” also presented some of the local culture’s points of discussion. Even when the ballad found a new life addressing these regional cultural tensions, she remained the focus. So, when the performer created, or audience interpreted, compassion toward the subject, it was not a nameless woman who had sinned, but the very real historical figure of Susanna. Reading about her as the subject of the ballad maintained her memory within the public imagination.

**Come All Ye**

The initial verse of “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” contains a call to the audience to heed the words as presented so that they can all learn from the mistakes of the sinner. The text entreats

> Ach merket auf ihr Menschen all, Pay attention, all you people
> Nun wird’s euch vorgesagt Now would I say this tale to you
> Von einem sehr betrübten Fall, Of a very sorrowful incident
> Von einer armen Magd. 212 Of a poor girl 213.

This opening followed a common pattern: many broadside ballads appearing in both English and German begin with a similar entreaty and are, therefore, grouped together.

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213 Ibid., translation by Dorothy Noyes and the author, 2013. Unless otherwise noted, all ballad translations within this chapter will be from this version.
under the heading “Come All Ye.” The choice of words used to describe Susanna in this first paragraph – in the original, “armer Magd (poor maid)”; in the English translations, everything from “poor girl” to “deluded maid” – sets the tone for the ballad as a whole, both in the original and in the subsequent versions. Susanna is the protagonist of the ballad, and she is, as would become clear, accused of having carried out a serious crime. But, as will be revealed as the ballad continues, she is also the object of sympathy.

While Susanna was not an ideal ballad heroine, she did share many characteristics with other accused mothers within folklore. German tradition, according to Tom Cheesman’s study of Continental German ballads, dictated that Susanna’s life be accorded more worth than that of the child. Cheesman also presents the German infanticide ballad tradition as highlighting the details that were often easily available – or believably fabricated – as part of the overall story. However, despite ample descriptions of the condition of the child’s body, the ballad describing Susanna’s case focuses on the religious framework rather than the voyeuristic gore. As Juha Pentikäinen and Anne O’Connor discuss, the nuanced presentations of dead children and their mothers could portray the accused as either a victim or a criminal, depending on the means of presenting


215 “Poor damsel” from Louis Storck’s 1865 translation; “deluded maid” from Johann Philip Gombert, *A New Mournful Song, containing the History of Susanna Cox Who was Hung in Reading for Infanticide, in the Year 1809* (Pennsylvania, undated), in the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, Item 77.

the case. A woman accused of killing her child could be a sympathetic figure in a community that valued her life over that of a fragile infant. In a different cultural situation, the same woman could be portrayed as a criminal because she disturbed the peace to such a degree that legal intervention was the community’s only option. Or perhaps the law was only a means of enforcing religious doctrine when the woman’s actions broke with the community’s religious interpretation of the sanctity of life – both hers and the child’s.

Susanna, even as a character within a ballad, does not have to fulfill just one role. She can be both a child murderer and a victim; she can be both the aggressor and the innocent. Jean R. Freedman problematizes the idea that ballads provide a monolithic interpretation of a community’s views on a particular subject: a “multiplicity of opinions” can be found when considering both literary and journalistic presentations of the same story. This text is not the only communal interpretation of an infanticidal mother, even while it is the only piece addressing this issue within the Pennsylvania German ballad corpus. By combining the array of ballads and oral histories about Susanna with existing materials regarding other infanticides, her story can be used to better understand that “multiplicity of opinions” on the topic. This includes the ability to greater explore the issues surrounding the value of a woman – any woman, including a marginalized servant – within a rural society.


The introduction of the subject

Following the opening verse grounding the piece in the relevant traditions, the next three verses provide background into the subject of the text. Here, the specific details of Susanna Cox’s life and circumstances are outlined — at least to the extent that they would help situate her life. Her position as a servant and her identification with the household of Jacob Geehr is established through the text. The German original, as well as many of the English translations, provides these details as factual content without interpretive adjectives. One version of the text reads

Sie hatte lang in Oley g’dient, She had long served in Oley
Wohl bey dem Jacob Gehr! Well with the Jacob Gehr’s
Ihr Name war Susanna Cox, Her name was Susanna Cox
Wie ich ihn hab' gehört. As I have heard it said.²¹⁹

The assumption was that the audience would already be familiar with the story. Still, the greater degree of detail regarding her employer, living situation, and other specifics indicate that the details of the child’s death might have been conveyed within the community more quickly than the details about her origin and working situation. At least one English version, however, takes this opportunity to continue to build either sympathy or curiosity for the subject by describing her as “Susanna Cox, a country-maid,/ Young, and of beauty rare”.²²⁰ While utilizing standard literary tropes to describe the female subject in a manner that fit within the ballad’s meter, this line also foreshadows the transcribed oral histories that would appear starting in the 1870s: whatever Susanna’s true

²¹⁹ Gombert, in the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, Item 66, verse 2, Noyes and Spanos translation.

²²⁰ Storck’s translation of Gombert, verse 2, also reproduced almost word for word by Thomas R. Brendle and William S. Troxell, “Pennsylvania German Songs.”
physical appearance was, those who had seen her remembered her as fresh, young and quite pretty.

**A Call to Improve Religious Education**

The third verse, which remains virtually identical regardless of language or version, explains exactly why Susanna’s case was deemed appropriate for wide distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sie hatte gar kein Unterricht</td>
<td>She had no training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Welt und geistlich Recht,</td>
<td>In the world and holy Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sie wußt den Willen Gottes nicht,</td>
<td>She did not know the Will of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und auch nicht sein Gesetz.</td>
<td>And also not His law</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The text put Susanna’s lack of religious education in the forefront: if she had been properly educated, she would have better understood the consequences of her actions. This specific issue was a recurring theme that connected those who had committed crimes of morality with calls for their compassionate treatment. Susanna provided an example of this and, therefore, it could be argued that she should not be held culpable in the death of her child. This gap in her training becomes an argument in her favor: religion – or, at least, the rhetoric associated with it – remained a strong force in guiding personal and public conduct. To have not received the training necessary to interpret the application of religious teachings in her own life was a failing of the society rather than of the woman. She could not be expected to know something that she had not been taught: like the infanticides Kant considered, Susanna functioned in a “state of nature”: her actions were driven by a natural force that went beyond the dictates of the
community. \(^{221}\) Subjecting her to the laws of the Commonwealth would not be appropriate, as she had already placed herself beyond the reach of those laws by ignoring the fundamental dictate protecting women who followed accepted societal patterns by ensuring their children were born legitimate.

Even Susanna’s critics agreed, at least after her trial, that she had met almost all of the requirements dictating respectable behavior. Yet her life was still believed to have been separate from the dictates and teachings of the Christian Church, which again moved her out of the jurisdiction of the establishment. Religious pluralism in the region had, in this case, led to the separation of church and state. In similar cases throughout the New England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the government would have been significantly more involved because of the strong connection with the church, but many Puritan women were terrified to invoke any protection that might have been granted by the laws against rape. \(^{222}\) Two infanticide cases in New Hampshire in 1739 led to a local pastor preaching a sermon advocating for the education of women; the sermon was then published and disseminated outside the immediate environs. This message made a strong connection between illegal behavior and a lack of religious or even secular education. In this construction, had the women convicted of infanticide been better informed as to the culturally-acceptable legal and spiritual guidelines, they would have made choices more in line with community standards. Again, those with authority in the community acknowledge some level of culpability for not providing adequate educational


opportunities. 223 Even in the 1832 suspicious death of Sarah Cornell, an unmarried, pregnant factory worker, in Rhode Island, the interaction between organized authority and public discussion shaped how her body and reputation were treated as additional details became available. 224

Susanna’s case is presented in a way that it appears that a significant portion of the local community shared the idea that, if the state or the church had been more involved earlier in her life, the end result would have been different. Perhaps she would not have gotten pregnant in the first place, or a suitable solution would have been found regarding her long-term situation, or, at the very least, accommodations would have been made to provide for the child. So, for the individuals writing, translating, and disseminating Susanna’s story, the relevance extended beyond the life of the specific individual. They did not see her fate as an issue about just her own lack of understanding, but a call to better education – especially religious catechesis – for the masses as well. 225

223 Arthur Browne, Religious Education of Children Recommended in a Sermon Preach’d in the Church of Portsmouth December 27th 1739. Being the Day Appointed for the Execution of Penelope Kenny. (Boston: Printed and Sold by S. Kneeland and T. Green, in Queenstreet over against the Prison, 1739)


225 The article discussing Susanna in Der Readinger Adler, May 9, 1809, also highlights the importance of education, especially religious and moral.
The father of Susanna’s child was never identified during the trial, and only initials were used in the text of her Confession. But, in the ballad, the fifth verse is often used to identify the father and condemn his actions:

Ihr Nachbar, der uns ist bewußt,            Her neighbor, who to us is known
Sein Namen der war Mertz,                  His name was Mertz
Hat sie verführt durch Fleisches Lust,     He seduced her through the lusts of the flesh
In Unfall sie gestürzt.                    And brought about her downfall.

The last two lines explain why she allowed herself to be seduced. He is the seducer, but it is her downfall. He is identified in this text with one reference to his name; she is only identified twice by name, but more often as the subject of sympathetic terms rather than as the “prisoner” that appeared throughout many of the early newspaper articles. His specific identity was not important in this context: his actions against both Susanna and the rules governing appropriate behavior for a married Christian man was. The indictment was not specifically against the individual: it was against all men who committed fornication and especially those who shirked their responsibilities.

The next few verses, however, are even less forgiving to Mertz’s role in Susanna’s seduction and subsequent actions, stating that he intentionally acted without respect for God’s laws. The condemnation of the child’s father is drawn out over the course of four verses. The actions of the man who seduced the young, innocent Susanna were likened to those of the serpent which had directly led to Adam and Eve’s expulsion.
The child’s father is damned for treating God’s laws with contempt and ignoring the Seventh Commandment:

Er achtet die Gesetze nicht,  
He did not respect God's laws
Er hielte nur für Spott,  
He held only as mockery
Was uns die heil'ge Schrift verbiet,  
What holy Scripture forbids us
Im siebenten Gebot.  
In the seventh Commandment

Als Ehmann er sie hat verführt,  
How as a married man he seduced her
Und sie gebracht in Noth,  
And brought her into misery
Wird es bereuen wohl zu spät,  
He would rue it, much too late
Einmal nach seinem Tod.  
Perhaps after his death.

The blame is placed on him as someone who should have been in control of his own behavior, and be more aware of his accountability to others. He was expected to have the appropriate religious training and should have, therefore, not encouraged another to join him in his iniquity. Yet, despite this strong condemnation of his actions, he is not the subject of the ballad nor was he the recipient of communal or legal censure.

Susanna had been seduced and made miserable – and she regretted having allowed herself to be so used. The verses places the blame for Susanna’s pregnancy firmly on the shoulders of the unseen married man for taking advantage of her, but Gombert’s text also makes the ballad incarnation of Susanna acknowledge that she held some power in the actions leading to her child’s conception and subsequent death. She could not be portrayed as a virtuous maiden, for she did not reject her suitor’s advances: all indications are that innocence was not expected but movement toward respectability.

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226 This comparison bore import in the period, as the story of Adam and Eve was another popular broadside topic, Yoder, *The Pennsylvania German Broadsides*, 194-5.

227 The pronoun “seinem” is somewhat ambiguous, and could refer to either the father or to the child, or even possibly to Susanna. I consulted two different nineteenth century English versions to see how the pronoun was translated: both focus on the father. Johann Gombert, *A New Mournful Song Containing the History of Susanna Cox Who was Hung in Reading for Infanticide, in the Year 1809* (Reading, Pennsylvania: s.n., 18--–) and Gombert, trans. Storeck, *A New Dirge*. 117
was. Susanna was “verführt (seduced),” which could mean any number of things from responding positively but chastely to the spoken words of love, to being forcibly raped.\textsuperscript{228} Because of the great power a woman in labor held over a man in Pennsylvania – the law demanded that a woman’s identification of her child’s father during childbirth must be accepted – the identification of the father as a rapist was not necessary for Susanna to receive financial support. But the lack of this identification implies that Susanna’s potential role in her child’s death could not be explained away because of any violence she had experienced from the father.

Whatever had actually passed between Susanna and her child’s father, the ballad text implies that she had been taken advantage of. He was married, she was presented as innocent. *He* held God’s laws in contempt; *he* caused her downfall; *he* brought her into misery. In contrast, *she* regretted her actions; *she* was blinded in her confusion; *she* asked for grace. She was not granted absolution, but was, instead, presented in a manner that demonstrated her vulnerability and lack of malicious intent. While there is no denial of Susanna's at least marginally willing participation in the conception of the child, she somehow managed to maintain her status as the victim while Peter Mertz received righteous indignation at the pen of the ballad author.

\textsuperscript{228} The words for rape – notzücht and Vergewaltigung – appear to have not been in use within the printed text in Pennsylvania in 1809. “Notzücht” was used in some legal texts as early as 1623, according to Francisca Loetz, *Sexualisierte Gewalt 1500-1850: Plädoyer für eine historische Gewaltforschung* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag GmbH, 2012). *Farbige Franzosen Am Rhein: Ein Notschrei Deutscher Frauen.* (Berlin: Engelmann, 1920). The codification of “notzücht” as a crime in Germany was not normalized until about 1918, but the term had been in circulation within legal texts for at least 300 years before that. “Vergewaltigung” gained application and began appearing in the papers in the 1870s and later. The first reference I could find was in “Allerlei”, Cincinnati *Volksfreund*, July 30, 1879.
Other ballads performed told the tales of women who had been rejected by their family because of immoral actions. These stories warned about the extremes: the English ballad “Mary of the Wild Moor” told of a young woman whose father refused to accept her and her illegitimate child, so they froze to death on his doorstep. However, the censure was not with the girl for getting pregnant, but with the father for denying her support.\(^{229}\) In a similar vein, “Wicked Polly” shows the unhappy end of a young woman who lived a licentious life—albeit with no documented offspring, illegitimate or otherwise. Polly, by all accounts a fictional ballad subject, realized right before her painful death that she had not repented her actions.\(^{230}\) She begged her parents for their forgiveness,

She’d call’d her mother to her bead,  
Her eyes were rolling in her head;  
When I am dead remember well,  
Your wicked Polly screams in hell.

The tears are lost you shed for me,  
My soul is lost I plainly see;  
O! mother, mother, fare you well,  
My soul will soon be dragg’d to hell.

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\(^{230}\) Walter E. Boyer, “The German Broadside Song of Pennsylvania,” 17, states his belief that Polly was originally written in German (and related to another ballad titled “Des Sünders Sterbenbett”). Don Yoder, *Pennsylvania German Broadside*, 321, n. 26, disagrees with Boyer, explaining his interpretation that the English version predates the German. Regardless of which came first, the English ballad was recorded in several locations by the Lomaxes, and the German version shows up in Pennsylvania and other areas inhabited by the Pennsylvania Germans. For my purposes, the origin is not as relevant as the ballad’s continued use within the German-speaking communities, but it is relevant to note that, as far as can be determined, this ballad is fictional rather than biographical.
My earthly father fare you well,
My soul is lost and doom’d to hell;
The flaming wrath begins to roll,
I am a lost and ruined soul.\textsuperscript{231}

However, she understood that she “must burn for evermore,” once she realized that she was headed for Hell, not the redemption she had hoped to achieve in her old age when she stated “I’ll turn to God when I get old,/ And he will then receive my soul.” Polly’s repentance was not enough, as she was still relegated to the underworld. But the ballad author still managed to get in the traditional request for all sinners to search for their way to “Return to God and seek his face” even though the voice making this request was not Polly’s own.

While Polly does receive some absolution, her portrayal demonstrates a smaller degree of compassion than that shown toward Susanna. For both Polly and Susanna, their downfall resulted from their own actions. But, while Susanna lacked religious education and, therefore, had been neglected by the community, Polly had grown up in an apparently respectable family and should have known better. Polly turned her back on her community; Susanna’s community had ignored her before realizing that their neglect had contributed to her downfall. The end result – the death of the protagonist – was the same in both, but the interpretations demonstrated more community empathy in regard to Susanna, especially since she was held responsible not only for her own indiscretions, but also those of the father of her child.

“The Ballad of Susanna Cox” has few variants that do more than change the spelling and syntax. While the overall structure of the text in many of the ballad printings remains very similar throughout the myriad versions, one modification appears more often than any other: the removal of the fifth verse and its identification of Susanna’s seducer as “Mertz.”

William Troxell and Thomas Brendle comment on this as the only significant content difference within the corpus of texts which, other than the occasional inclusion of an additional introductory or conclusion stanza, remained relatively stable. The texts that remove this verse, however, not only lose the direct accusation against Herr Mertz (whose identity is questionable to begin with), but also the most damning line of the ballad toward Susanna herself: “Hat sie verführt durch Fleisches Lust (She was seduced through the lusts of the flesh).” Perhaps the identification lost its import as the ballad traveled, both temporally and geographically, focusing on the main character and removing even the reference to others within the story. The removal of Mertz’s name refocused the text on Susanna without placing blame on another. Or, perhaps, the author or printer had a personal relationship with Mertz and did not want him to receive the negative publicity; yet the name was widespread enough, even with the addition of “Peter,” that the association with a specific individual might not have been possible. With the difficult dating on the broadsides, location and date cannot be completely determined, so it is difficult to tell where and when his identification could have been relevant to the printer.

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232 Of the eleven texts (13, if you count Troxell and Brendle’s texts as separate, despite their striking similarities to the printed broadsides), 9 (10) are in German and 2(3) are in English. The fifth verse is present in all but 2 German versions (including that collected by Troxell and Brendle), and in all of the English translations.

233 Troxell and Brendel, *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends*, 121
The strong condemnation of Mertz’s actions, when present, is not intended to absolve Susanna of her sin. Instead, it adds to the presentation of her as a weak young woman who could be led into iniquity by someone with a dominant personality. The Anglo-American interpretations of the Scottish ballad “Mary Hamilton” developed in a similar way, but with a stronger emotional impact as “Mary Hamilton” became firmly ensconced in the oral tradition. “Mary Hamilton” grew to focus more on the emotional core within the text as its oral presentations developed to engage the listener rather than just provide a thorough sequence of events. An argument against “Susanna Cox” as a viable part of the local oral tradition is that the subsequent versions do not eliminate more of the narrative detail in favor of a stronger focus on the emotional core. This text intentionally provides a religious polemic, presenting Susanna’s entire story as an argument for the better education across gender and socio-economic lines. The ballad’s author intentionally chose to include Christian ideology, positioning this text as too pious for performance at social gatherings yet too secular for religious settings.

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234 Several interpretations, including Bathsheba Doran, Nest (New York: Samuel French, 2008) and Wendel Allen, The Hanging of Susanna Cox: A Docudrama (Alexandria, VA: Legend Books, 1989), state firmly that they feel Geehr was the father.


236 George Pullen Jackson, “Pennsylvania Dutch Spirituals,” in The Musical Quarterly, Vol. 38, no.1 (January, 1952), 83, discusses some of the ideas present in these texts, none of which focus on modern individuals. He also notes the distinct lack of Continental German music within the Pennsylvania German spiritual tradition. Don Yoder, Pennsylvania Spirituals (Lancaster: Pennsylvania Folklife Society, 1961) presents approximately 150 spirituals which, again, do not focus on the stories of modern individuals. Henry W. Shoemaker, Mountain Minstrelsy of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Newman F. McGirr, 1931), 2, cites the tendency of the Pennsylvania Dutch youth toward upbeat music, and also toward songs with British antecedents above those of
have limited the options for performance, but the text as a whole still maintained cultural relevance as demonstrated through its many reprints.

But even with the deletion of the one identifying verse, four others discuss the seduction and condemn the child’s father. The other verses refer to him in descriptive terms, as “Manngesell (neighbor man)” and “Ehemann (married man)” taking away his individuality and first referencing the specific characteristics that would have made him a good suitor for Susanna, then acknowledging the one issue – his married status – that would have made the child’s legitimacy impossible. Describing him in less identifiable terms allows the ballad author to focus on his role in bringing about Susanna’s death, even if his exact identity is not known. Because he was the child’s father, he held responsibility for his actions, despite Susanna facing the greater public and spiritual censure. A Biblical framework is placed around Susanna’s fate, which is then rhetorically linked to that of Eve:

Wie jene Schlang, der Satan’s Geist, How that serpent, Satan's spirit,
Die Eva hat verführt. Had seduced Eve.

The existence of someone who did impregnate her, and his part in contributing to the circumstances leading to Susanna’s crime, are not questioned. But the act of removing the verse identifying Mertz indicates how much power can be controlled just through the invocation of an individual’s name. Unnamed, he still is culpable for the end result, but

German origin. This reference must be considered with caution, however, as it is described in the index of MacEdward Leach and Henry Glassie, *A Guide for Collectors of Oral Traditions and Folk Cultural Material in Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1973) as “weak on annotation” and using “much questionable material.” They also state that D.K. Wilgus considered the collection “frustrating.” However, since the information provided is supported in other sources, including Yoder, *The Pennsylvania German Broadside*, 42, it is worth noting.
the focus returns to Susanna. It was her child – even though another had helped create it. It was her decision to kill (or, as she maintained, simply not help) the child, regardless of whether the father’s support could have assisted her in maintaining the child and herself. Without his name, the man who was involved still held responsibility, but he became more of a symbol of a stereotypical seducer rather than the manifestation of a specific individual. Whether this omission gained sympathy for Susanna or reduced the power of her accusations against him is not recorded in historical documentation or folkloric tradition.

*The Death of the Child*

The seducer’s name may be omitted because of the questionable identification, but the end result maintains the focus of the actions described within the text on Susanna. Even while she had every right to accuse another for his share in the bastardy and fornication that resulted in her child’s birth, Susanna maintained responsibility for her own behavior and the consequences of it. The trial text states that she admitted the child was hers; her published *Confession* stipulated her remorse as to his death.\(^{237}\) Later in the ballad, after she had received coaching in appropriate religious piety from the local clergy, she would entreat the local youth to see the results of her actions and make better choices. But, for now, accepting her fate moved her another step toward redemption, and

\(^{237}\) Jacob Geehr’s testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58; *The Lezten Wörte und das Eserbe-Bekenntniß die Susanna Cox, Welche am 10ten Juny, 1089, hingerichted worden, Auf denen Commons der Stadt Reading, in Berks Caunty, Für die Ermordung Ihres neugebohrnen unehlichen Kindes, An dem leztern 14ten Februar,* from the collection of Russell and Corinne Earnest, Clayton, Delaware, with the notation “Confession of SC signature of 8. Composite of Breininger copy + Bruckman newspaper 23 June 1809.”
not publicizing the father’s name placed more of the censure on herself. She might also have been remaining silent in order to protect the father: this was certainly the case when Elizabeth Wilson kept silent on the identification of her sons’ killer. Wilson made this choice because her sons’ father, who would later be identified as the true murderer, had threatened to harm her family if she informed the authorities as to his identity. Susanna’s motivations are not so easily discernible.

Yet the ballad does not absolve Susanna of responsibility related to the death of the child. Instead, her imputed actions are revealed to the reader/listener as part of the exposition of the story, not hiding within the story, but also not providing more information than is needed to convey the seriousness of the end result. But, while the newspaper stories published after her trial would frequently convey the specifics of Dr. John Otto’s testimony, stating the condition and treatment of the child’s body, the ballad focuses on Susanna’s confusion with which she had responded when faced with the reality of a child.

According to the eleventh verse, Susanna’s child was born so early in the morning that no one else in the Geehr household would have necessarily been stirring, so the family was granted an alibi for not knowing about or participating in the birth and subsequent death of the child. This timing and lack of support also allowed Susanna some flexibility in how she was presented: as she had been alone when the child was born, she might not have been in a condition that allowed her to care for her own needs as well as those of the child. But the next verse quickly dispels any thought that, perhaps,

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the child’s death had not been the result of an intentional act on Susanna’s part.

According to the ballad text, Susanna’s actions are credited with directly leading to the death of her son, but she is granted some measure of sympathy because of her inability to think clearly under the stresses of childbirth:

Da diese arme Sünderin,
Verblindet war so fest,
Hat sie ihr neugebornes Kind
In Ewigkeit versetzt.

There this poor Sinner
Was so completely blinded
That she sent her newborn Child
into eternity.

She had successfully hidden her pregnancy, and no one had questioned her before her child’s birth.\textsuperscript{239} She claimed that she did not realize that she was pregnant. Perhaps she did not; perhaps she was in denial. The ballad text acknowledges that “Sie schämt sich vor den Leut’, (She was shamed by what the people would think),” implying that she understood the moral implications of giving birth to an illegitimate child. Susanna’s presentation in the ballad text highlights the effects that the stress of going against the morals and traditions established within her community had on her. She was not described as evil – while her seducer had been compared to the serpent and called “unworthy”, she was described as full of “despair” and afraid of “disgrace.”\textsuperscript{240} Both would have to reconcile themselves with God, but only one would have to face the full power of the Pennsylvania legal system. No formal charges were filed against an individual based on Susanna’s identification of the father; his name did not come up in the trial, despite at least one, possibly two, of the witnesses knowing his name. While

\textsuperscript{239} See testimony from Susanna Cox trial before the Berks County Court of Oyer and Terminer, April 7, 1809, transcribed by Louis Richards, HSBC Archive Collection 13, No. 58, discussed in Chapter 1. Recall that both Jacob Geehr and John Baum relied heavily on the testimony of the women of the Schneider/Geehr household.

\textsuperscript{240} Gombert, Storck translation, 1865.
legal trends held the father financially responsible, in this case, no legal charges affected the father. Susanna had been tried in the court of law; this text was the ballad author’s opportunity to try the child’s father in the court of public opinion.

The connection between Susanna’s confusion and the end result of a dead child was made by the ballad author. This helped to explain the disconnect between her original denial of any wrongdoing and her eventual confession to causing the child’s death. According to the statements that Susanna herself made to the legal authorities immediately following the discovery of the child’s body, she did not initially believe her own actions had been to blame. She steadfastly stated her own innocence, acknowledging that the child was hers but stating that it had been born dead. Then, in her Confession, constructed at least in part to request forgiveness and heavenly absolution, she claimed responsibility. The blinding confusion noted by the ballad author allows for this connection: she did not realize at first that her actions had caused the child’s death, so she did not admit culpability. But, after contemplation and instruction in doctrine, she came out of the darkness of her denial and allowed herself to confess her wrongdoing.  

The ballad author’s phrasing helps make the argument that Susanna had been confused, not untruthful, when she made her initial statement.

Susanna Cox’s ballad story avoids detailed descriptions of her child’s death, in great contrast to the majority of German infanticide ballads published in Europe.  

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241 The Lezten Wörte und das Eserbe- Bekenntniß die Susanna Cox, Welche am 10ten Juny, 1089, hingerichtet worden, Auf denen Commons der Stadt Reading, in Berks Caunty, Für die Ermordung Ihres neugebohrnen unehlichen Kindes, An dem leztern 14ten Februar. From the Russell D. Earnest Archives, Clayton, Delaware. Translated by Jeremy B. Williams, who used this version as well as the Libioner printed excerpt to compile the most complete interpretation.

religious influences within her community kept the text focused on the improvement of the subject as an example for the masses. Because of the intent to gloss over the gory details, the text jumps from the vague depiction of the death of the child to Susanna’s discovery and arrest. Even the coroner’s portrayal of the condition of the child’s body – a description that was easily available throughout the popular press – is avoided. The child was discovered, Susanna was arrested, and she was asked for a confession. In the German, this is phrased “Und sollte es gestehen. (And must confess it).” But the English translators took some liberties with this wording. Storck utilized “The foul deed to confess” in 1865, while another undated text gives Susanna a bit more credit, stating that she had been “asked to own her guilt.” This ties well into the idea presented in the Confession that she realized her error and asked immediately for forgiveness, while also not contradicting her initial denial of wrongdoing. Her admission of guilt also helps justify the legal actions taken against her. If she had truly been innocent, then the law was at fault. But in later interpretations she admitted her guilt and, therefore, the law had been applied appropriately.

The question of her intent remains undetermined, based on the choice of words used in the ballad. Susanna Cox had not cruelly killed her child; she had acted out of fear and the blindness that came from not understanding the spiritual consequences of her actions. This is in contrast to Mary Hamilton’s behavior toward her own illegitimate newborn, who she threw into the sea as she cried out “Sink ye, swim ye, bonny wee

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244 Gombert, Storck translation.
Instead, Susanna’s message of maternal hopelessness reads much more like that of another infanticide broadside protagonist, Fanny Amlett, whose actions against her child were taken “With anguish and despair most wild.” Despite the end result of execution for both the fictional Amlett and the historical Cox, the rhetoric surrounding the reasons for their actions still shows them in as favorable a light as was possible for a woman accused of killing a child. Almost 200 years before postpartum depression became an accepted diagnosis, maternal anguish and emotional distress was expected, especially in women who had recently given birth. These factors did not excuse the mothers’ actions, but they were used as part of the argument that had led in Pennsylvania to infanticide being charged differently from murder in all but the most violent of cases. However, when used appropriately in the court of public opinion, maternal emotion – even of a woman convicted of infanticide – could be a powerful argument both for her actions and for a favorable review by the reading or listening public.

The treatment of Mary Hamilton, in a ballad probably originally composed during the sixteenth century, differs from that of the ballads describing the lives of Susanna Cox and Fanny Amlett, both written in the nineteenth century. “Mary Hamilton” is generally classified as a historical ballad, even though the named protagonist was not, in fact, a


246 Executions of criminals: more generally known by the uninviting name of "Dying speeches". Execution broadside (Fanny Amlett), digital image held at the Harvard University Law Library. Dated between 1813 and 1840.

247 A source for additional details regarding the development of postpartum depression as a defense, see Keira V. Williams, "Susan Smith, the "Mommy Myth," and Maternal Crimes at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century" (roundtable discussion, Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, Amherst, Massachusetts, June 12, 2011).
historical character, nor is there independent documentation verifying the events of the story.⁴⁴ But still, the ballad bearing her name demonstrates several key factors regarding the treatment of women accused of infanticide at the time the piece was created as well as when it was recorded a few hundred years later.⁴⁹ As Tristram Coffin said, “[a] girl is a girl, the law is the law, in any age, any place.”⁵⁰ Women accused of infanticide did not receive much sympathy within the ballad tradition: they killed their child and deserved their fate. However, as Sharon M. Harris notes, a trend develops throughout eighteenth-century New England toward the use of infanticide cases as arguments against the widespread application of capital punishment. This was, in her research, especially true in murder cases when extenuating circumstances existed – and the stress of being an unmarried mother who had hidden her pregnancy was deemed “extenuating.”⁵¹ So, when a woman was able to ask for forgiveness for her actions, her public persona – both in factual presentations and in ballad reimaginings – could allow for the development of a display of sympathy toward the accused.

Perhaps Fanny Amlett and Susanna Cox’s public personas benefitted from this ongoing support of the maternal figure, even when that mother had transgressed societal

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⁴⁴ Tristram P. Coffin, “Mary Hamilton and the Anglo-American Ballad as an Art Form,” 212. Many of the supporting details of Mary Hamilton’s story can be verified, but the overall piece should be considered more a work of historical fiction than fact: the incident itself, Mary Stuart’s reaction, and Darnley’s supposed betrayal of the Queen were all created for the purpose of the ballad.


⁵⁰ Tristram P. Coffin, “Mary Hamilton,” 212.

expectations. Despite the continued and strengthened legal response, the printed accounts of these women’s lives (real or fictitious) portrayed them sympathetically. Fanny Amlett was fictitious, but this does not prevent the ballad addressing her story from demonstrating her humanity. In the 250 (or so) years since the fictitious Mary Hamilton had been accused of a dalliance with the Queen’s husband, her presentation transformed from a view of an unfeeling woman to that of a misguided child in need of protection, not condemnation. Where Mary Hamilton consciously took her child’s life, Susanna Cox and Fanny Amlett had acted out of fear and a lack of understanding.

Susanna Cox benefits from the reinterpretation of the infanticidal mother, at least in the court of public opinion. The rhetoric surrounding Fanny Amlett case is significantly different from that related to Cox – and, other than the empathy shown her, is much more like that used to discuss Mary Hamilton. That both Hamilton and Amlett are fictitious might be seen as an argument mitigating the harshness of their literary treatment: they were stereotypes only and could not receive compassion. Susanna Cox could. However, if Mary Hardcastle, a nineteenth-century English woman hanged for infanticide whose story was told as a broadside ballad, is included, the idea that the mother’s actions would be completely masked to allow for a greater degree of compassion must be disregarded. For the broadside explaining Mary Hardcastle’s crime quite graphically presents the details of the murder of her child and the attempted incineration of the body. Yet, even with such specific negative depiction, this ballad subject is still granted the ability to argue her own case by explaining her situation and
begging forgiveness of both humanity and God. The ability of the convicted woman to recreate her own image into that of a penitent sinner allowed her to fulfill the stereotype of the “good death.” At the end of her life, Susanna was able to perform that which was required to convince her community – but, more importantly, her God – of her suitability for redemption and salvation.

So it is not necessarily historical time, or geography, or truth of detail that affects the presentation of the woman in an infanticide ballad. The ballads describe her personal downfall, both in succumbing to the wiles of her child’s father and then in deciding to end (or not support, depending on the perspective) the child’s life. While all of these elements bear relevance, and the formula that helped structure the creation of an infanticide ballad remained quite similar, something about Susanna Cox’s case granted her an additional degree of compassionate presentation from Gombert, who chose to highlight her reformation rather than her sin. Not only was Susanna’s situation described sympathetically, but the specific details of her crime against her son were downplayed. The child’s death needed to be addressed, and Susanna’s part in it alluded to, but Gombert intentionally chose not to linger on these topics when his time could more usefully be spent arguing in favor of Susanna’s salvation.

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252 An account of the execution of Mary Hardcastle, who was executed at the new drop, London, on Monday Aug. 23, 1824, for the murder of her male bastard child. [S.l.] ; Reprinted for J. Cooper, by W. Stephenson., [1824]., digital image, Harvard Law School Library.

Immediately after the text announces that Susanna sent her child “to eternity,” the narrative moves away from Susanna and the child and into the legal assessment of the case. The details of her arrest, trial, and appearance before Judge Spayd are condensed and narrated in only five verses. In a ballad consisting of 32 verses, this length is significant, but the text provided within four of these five verses reads more like a journalistic description than a ballad intended to invoke compassion. The basic narrative within these five verses consists of the calling of the jury (Verse 14), the verdict with her reaction (Verse 15), the sentence in the courthouse (Verse 16), and the reference to the delivery of the death warrant to the governor (Verse 18). Within this already brief description, only two phrases highlight any kind of bias in Susanna’s case – and, in this situation, both references show a positive opinion of the accused. She continued to be described as an “armen Sünderin (poor sinner)” whose execution order led the people to respond so that “Viel’ weinten über sie.” (Many wept over her.)

However, the seventeenth verse, surrounded by the journalistic response, portrays a different tone which further promotes Susanna’s presentation as an “armen Sünderin” rather than as the now-convicted murderer.

Ein jeder kann nun denken wohl, One can now imagine
Wie es ihr war zu Muth, What her courage was like
Das sie auf’m Richplatz sterben soll, That she at the judgment square should die
Bedaurenswerthes Blut. And lose her pitiful blood.254

Within the description of her trial, conviction, and reception of the death warrant, Susanna’s humanity is still considered relevant. She is humanized through the description of what she must have been considering: the readers are entreated to contemplate how she must have felt as she faced her own execution. Alongside the effects on her of realization that her child was dead and, if she had not actually caused its death, she also had not aided in its survival, she now had to accept these consequences with the associated judicial and spiritual rebukes.

**The Greater Community Reacts**

The ballad provides details about the community’s reactions that match well with the descriptions immediately available in the contemporary popular press. The subtle references to the reception by those in attendance at the trial bring into question the possibility that the official legal verdict might not have resonated with the local community. Reinforcing this possibility, the next few verses within the ballad switch back and forth between the official results and the community reaction while also detailing Susanna’s response to the events occurring around her.

The next indication that the community felt some responsibility for her came with the reference to

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Ein Mann der sehr mitleidig war,    A man, who was very compassionate
Den hat sie selbst geschickt,       Took himself off
Zum Gouvernör in dieser Stadt,     To the Governor in that city.
Der hat für sie gebitt.            Where he pleaded on her behalf.
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Susanna’s case would not be overturned, and her public execution was scheduled for the city center. But the compassionate man who failed became part of the legend.
surrounding Susanna’s life. In the ballad, he represents the community response that treated Susanna favorably despite her legal culpability in the death of her son. The ballad author introduced the notion of community support, whether that community was real or imagined. In this version of events, Susanna is now no longer alone. She might have felt the need to hide her pregnancy and childbirth from her employers and the greater community, but they had, apparently, seen something in Susanna that was worth compassion, if not direct support.

While Johann Gombert only alluded to this support in the published ballad, later oral histories would discuss Susanna’s case and provide even greater details of the community response. These histories began to appear in the 1870s – right around the American Centennial celebration – to document how individuals with longer memories “would be able in many respects to hold up the light of former days to the present generation.” At least one family memoir contains Susanna’s story, but most of the extant versions seem to have been collected by one or two journalists associated with the Reading Eagle, and then compiled into a pamphlet published around 1881-2.

Some of the details provided did not match the historical record, indicating that, even for individuals who had witnessed the event, the story had changed over time. Most of the published oral histories share a few similarities, including the detail from several

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255 “Reminiscences of an Octogenarian,” HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, page 164. The text is dated using external data to be from the Reading Eagle, September 15, 1873.

256 Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! Her Life, Crime, Trial, and Death on the Scaffold, from the Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection, Ursinus College. Based on the details provided within the text and illustrations, and the connection with the oral histories collected and published in 1881, I believe that the text was written after the oral histories were published in the Eagle in 1881 and before 1883, when one of the companies who advertised in the pamphlet went out of business. Thanks to Marlise Schoeny of Ohio State University’s Historical Textile and Clothing Museum for assistance dating the illustrations.
that they had been granted special access to view from a closer location because of their connections with the military guard on duty that day. These similarities in experience and detail indicate that the individuals interviewed were friends, had experienced the execution together, and had probably reinforced their memories with discussions throughout their lives. Their stories overlap too much for them not to have been cognizant of each others’ presence on the execution day, and the way that the versions paralleled each other demonstrates how the story had grown and changed because of interactions between the parties involved.257

The men interviewed spoke of the strong community reaction, citing the size of the crowd and the great uproar against her execution. One newspaper columnist, basing his article on the documented oral histories as well as other relevant sources, stated that

[i]t also became a matter of deep anxiety on the part of the town and country people “to see poor Susan;” and to such an extent was this desire carried, that a charge was made for admission to the jail! The price with the amount realized we pass over! Hundreds, if not thousands, were gratified by witnessing the poor girl – who was not, either before or after trial, strictly confined in the “murder room,” but partook of her meals with the family of the gaoler, slept with a member therof, and assisted in any matter of household duty. The positively serious often left the jail dissatisfied, because Susan had not exhibited according to expectation! As a contrast, doomed as she was to death, her case and position was rightly considered by the Rev. Philip Rhinehold Pauli, to whose unremitting attention and advice much of her resignation and coolness was attributable.258

The community’s interest was framed as compassion, but it manifested itself as a form of voyeurism. Her story was appropriated, her personality was reshaped without her explicit


consent, and, while the visitors appeared to be showing her support, many were more interested in seeing how she reacted than in truly providing her with their support.\(^{259}\)

The populace was not Susanna’s only source of support: the ballad text and many of the later writing outline a strong connection with the local churchmen

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\begin{align*}
\text{Sie ward in ihrem Bußzustand} & \quad \text{She was in her guilty condition} \\
\text{Besucht von Geistlichkeit;} & \quad \text{Visited by the clergy} \\
\text{Und sie hat ernstlich Buß gethan,} & \quad \text{And she had earnestly done penance} \\
\text{Und ihre Sünd bereut.} & \quad \text{And repented of her sins}
\end{align*}
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“The clergy” mainly took the form of Philip Reinhold Pauli from the Reformed Church, but at least one other clergy member was believed to have provided her spiritual support as well.\(^{260}\) Rev. Pauli visited Susanna regularly while she resided in Reading Jail, and he accompanied her on the day of her execution. Whether the clergymen’s actions were made because of compassion, duty, external pressure, or a combination of the three, their visible support of Susanna Cox improved her standing for some who recorded her story, perhaps contributing to the transformation of her presentation from law-breaker into misguided innocent.

**The Convicted Woman’s Countenance**

While setting the scene for Susanna’s execution day, the narrator of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” at the Kutztown Folk Festival describes Susanna’s

\(^{259}\) Amy Shuman, *Other People’s Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 5, discusses the intersections of empathy and voyeurism. While empathy as a word did not exist, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, until 1904, some of the individual community members did exhibit behavior that resembles the later construction of empathy as a means of understanding another’s plight without becoming personally involved in it.

appearance. First, part of Louis Storck’s English translation of the Gombert ballad is recited, referring to Susanna as “[y]oung, and of beauty rare” but this is more of a ballad trope than it is a literal translation of the original text. Later in the same performance, the narrator states that “[n]ever in her whole life had Susanna had a new dress. The women of Reading who had visited her frequently while she was in jail made her a lovely white dress with black bows. The first day Susanna wore her new dress was her last day alive.” These two references to Susanna’s physical appearance and clothing choices do not appear in the original German ballad, appearing only later in English translations. The closest to a contemporary description of Susanna’s appearance focused on her attitude, not her appearance, stating that “[i]hr Weinen war Mitleidenswerth (Her weeping was worthy of compassion).” Not her face, nor her clothing, but the quality of her cry received mention. In one of the Reime (Rhymes), also published right around the time of her death, the text notes that “[d]ein Weinen ist vor Gott erhört (Thy weeping has been heard by God)”. Her actions, not her appearance, gain the desired effect in this text as well, indicating that physical appearance mattered more to those observing in this world, including the large crowds who waited to visit her in prison and those who lined up on her execution day, than to those that she believed were evaluating her worthiness for the next.


262 Gombert, in the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, Item 66, verse 26, my translation

263 *Reime über die Bekehrung der Susanna Cox vor ihrer Hinrichtung am 10ten Juny, 1809, in Berks County, wegen der Ermordung ihres unehlichen Kindes* (Pennsylvania: J. Ritter and Co., 1809[?]), my translation. From the Earnest Archives and Library, Broadside File 129F. Corinne Earnest allowed me access to her translation as well, which was much more lyrical but slightly less literal, so I have chosen to use my own instead.
Within the immediate newspaper articles, references to Susanna’s character, execution, and the actions of others could be found – but no reference to her physical appearance.\textsuperscript{264} In a region with limited literacy, in either English or German, the predominant readers of newspaper texts were more interested in foreign affairs than they were in the sartorial choices of a convicted murderess. So published records regarding Susanna’s appearance were not prioritized, and neither was this information conveyed within the Johann Philip Gombert’s ballad, or within the published Reime.\textsuperscript{265}

How did the description of what she wore, and how she came by that dress, become part of her story as it is transmitted today? The most cited, and easily accessible, version of Susanna’s story was the 1900 Susanna Cox: Her Crime and Its Expiation written by Louis Richards, in which he describes her as having “a vigorous bodily frame, prepossessing countenance and a cheerful and willing disposition.”\textsuperscript{266} George Phillippi, who had been interviewed about 1873 by a Reading Eagle reporter, remembered Susanna as “a very pretty girl; she had black hair, black eyes and red cheeks. Her appearance is yet vivid in my mind to-day.”\textsuperscript{267} J. van Reed, writing in his family’s book of reminiscences in 1876, reinforces this physical description, stating that Susanna “was a good looking girl with black eyes and hair and red cheeks.”\textsuperscript{268} The dark hair and eyes,

\textsuperscript{264} In this case, a lack of data provides the evidence: no record viewed that was published before 1875 records details of Susanna’s attire on her execution day.

\textsuperscript{265} Reime über die Bekehrung der Susanna Cox

\textsuperscript{266} Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation

\textsuperscript{267} “Second Interview with George Phillippi” in Reading Eagle, circa September 29, 1873. No date is recorded, but the text mentions that the first interview had been published “[a] fortnight ago” and that can be dated to September 15, 1873. HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, page 167.

\textsuperscript{268} J. Van Reed, Centennial Book of Reminiscences, 120.
with the bright red cheeks, commonly appear in these histories, introducing this specific physical description into the corpus of details about her appearance.

Before her execution, as Louis Richards describes it, “there was completed for her by friendly female hands the white dress, trimmed with wide black ribbons, in which she was to walk forth to her doom, and which was to be her garment in death as well.” 269

Somewhere between the writing of the ballad in 1809 and Richards’ exploration of the story in 1900, the detail of the white dress with black ribbons becomes an integral part of Susanna’s life story. The first reference to the dress, at least in written text, comes with the collection of oral histories from the 1870s-1880s. This appears in what is perhaps the most commonly reproduced oral history, that of Jacob Pile, whose memories were captured 66 years after the events, by the Elk County Advocate.270 In this text, Pile described Susanna as appearing “in her white dress having a broad black ribbon around her waist.” J. Van Reed reiterated not only the appearance that Susanna presented to the world on her execution day, but also provided additional detail related to Susanna’s last days. Transmitting an anecdote that had either been passed down by someone with the appropriate knowledge, or had been constructed as fitting with the overall picture of the repentant sinner, Van Reed described that Susanna

appeared to have manifested a wonderful degree of resignation, in regard of her fate. On the evening before the execution she was visited in Prison by an old lady to whom she showed the Shroud that had been made for

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269 Ibid.

270 This retelling is so popular that it was reproduced in Don Yoder’s Pennsylvania Broadsides as well as, most recently, on the 204th anniversary of the child’s death, February 14, 2013, in the Reading Eagle. The original, with additional material not reproduced in either more recent version, found in The Elk County Advocate, September 23, 1875.
her. The poor Girl said “This is too long for me I can’t walk well in it tomorrow. I beleave I will put a tuck in it.”

This description of Susanna’s dress contains two important features: the description of the garment as a shroud and the fact that it had been made for her by another. No reference regarding the garment’s appearance was included, other than the garment’s excessive length. But soon, Susanna’s white dress with black ribbons would become a recurrent part of any description of her, taking on all of the characteristics that her Victorian chroniclers deemed appropriate.

The use of the term “dress” itself raises questions of historical accuracy. According to Ellen Gehret, most rural Pennsylvania German women around the turn of the 19th century wore two piece garments that would not be described as a “dress.” Instead, they wore what was referred to as petticoats – a heavier overskirt – topped with a chemise in summer and short coat with a peplum the rest of the year. Also, many of the garments worn by rural Pennsylvania women were constructed of woven fabrics from mostly local materials. They often had patterns within the fabric, resulting from the dyeing of the individual threads rather than of the fabric as a whole.

But Susanna’s execution garment is consistently described as a dress, indicating that it would have been a single piece – or, at least, a single color – rather than separate items of potentially distinct patterns. Marlise Schoeny, of The Ohio State University’s

271 Ibid., 120
272 Ellen J. Gehret, Rural Pennsylvania Clothing: A Study of the Wearing Apparel of the German and English Inhabitants both Men and Women who Resided in Southeastern Pennsylvania in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century (York, Pennsylvania: Liberty Cap Books, George Shumway, 1976. This description is substantiated by the illustrations of Lewis Miller as collected in Lewis Miller: Sketches and Chronicles (York, Pennsylvania: The Historical Society of York County, 1966), esp. 45-55. Many of Miller’s sketches are colored, with different colorings for petticoat and short coat, but some appear to intentionally be left white.
Textiles and Fashion Museum, notes that fashion traveled quickly out of the urban areas, and so Susanna’s dress could have followed the popular styles found in Philadelphia. Assuming Pile’s memory was accurate, a dress constructed by some of the fashion-conscious townswomen of Reading would likely have been cut in the Empire-style and constructed of a lightweight white material, perhaps cotton, with short sleeves in deference to the weather.\textsuperscript{273} While the idea that “dirty clothing indicated a blemished soul” could, on its own, discourage a woman like Susanna from owning a piece of clothing that would so easily show the stains and wear of her position, she did not have much choice and would have worn what was provided for her.\textsuperscript{274} The only description of Susanna’s clothing before her execution comes from pamphlet dated to the early 1880s, in which Susanna’s attire during her trial was described as “brown homespun” with a white handkerchief and a black silk hat.\textsuperscript{275} Susanna probably owned two sets of clothing, but the dress chosen for her trial may have also been provided to her by another. So, while her trial attire is described very differently from that worn on her execution day, these variations may be based more on the vagaries of fashion and weather than on a specific political or personal statement made by the fabric choice. Since contemporary sources ignore the detail of the dress, and the documents that do contain a description come from individuals recalling an event from 60 years previous, it is difficult to tell

\textsuperscript{273} Marlise Schoeny (Assistant Curator, Ohio State’s Historical Textiles and Clothing Museum) in discussion with the author, December 28, 2012, Columbus, Ohio. Schoeny was able to show me several examples of period dresses, most of which were white cotton, decorated with monochromatic embroidery or ribbon decorations in the same fabric as that used for the majority of the dress.


\textsuperscript{275} Complete History of the Execution of Susannah Cox! Her Life, Crime, Trial, and Death on the Scaffold, from the Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection, Ursinus College.
what the true style was. At least a partial reconstruction of Susanna’s execution attire can be hypothesized by combining the eyewitness accounts with details of textile and fashion history.

Based on all available information, the dress was, most likely, close to white without any distinctive pattern of a different color. White has symbolically been used to demonstrate purity. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Tess and the other young girls of the community wore white dresses as part of their costume for the dance to welcome Spring; Thomas Hardy contrasts the image of the carefree youth in their white dresses to foreshadow the innocence that was about to be broken.²⁷⁶ And, while white would not become the absolute fashion for wedding dresses until Queen Victoria established the new tradition in 1840, a white dress was appropriate and acceptable for a new bride to wear as part of her overall ensemble.²⁷⁷ These examples come out of the English tradition, which is fitting because early nineteenth-century Berks County had many cultural influences which could reinforce these traditions. German tradition linked white and black with executions, and the condemned would frequently appear for their own execution in a combination of those colors. In 1772 in Frankfort, Susanna Margarethe Brandt, also convicted of infanticide, wore what was described as a shroud “consisting of a white bonnet, a white linen jacked with a black bow, a white dress, and white gloves.” The shroud was interpreted to show her “transitional state” and her absolution through

²⁷⁶ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1920), esp. 14-15. The story was set in 1804 and written in 1891. Like many of the accounts of Susanna’s execution, this text is filtered through the time between the events and the time of its publication.

While the white execution garments would be legislated out of fashion, at least in Berlin, in 1800, to be replaced by a uniform of sackcloth rather than individual finery, the image of the condemned dressed in white remained ingrained in German traditions.

However, a white garment by itself did not hold a strong significance for an individual living in 1809. On the contrary, much clothing right around the turn of the century would have at least started out white, even for servants. Light white fabric, whether cotton or a locally-produced textile, was easy to layer with other garments, and it was easy to clean as all that was needed was bleach. So it would not have been uncommon for a servant to own a white garment – or, at least, a garment that had been white at one point. Marlise Schoeny showed me a wide range of dresses appropriate to the place and time, explaining that cotton would have been a common choice for a young woman’s summer dress. But, according to George Phillippi, writing about his life in Reading in the early 1800s, cotton was not common among his neighbors. As Phillippi put it, “[n]early every family raised flax, spun it into yarn and had it wove. All the families who didn’t belong to the “upper ten” wore clothes made out of tow” – and as we know, tow (that is, flax fiber) was found in the mouth of the dead child. So a dress made out of cotton would be a special investment indeed and, if Susanna’s supporters

278 Evans, Rituals of Retribution, 68-69. According to Evans, Brandt was the inspiration for Goethe’s Gretchen.
279 Marlise Schoeny in discussion with the author, December 2012. Ellen J. Gehret, Rural Pennsylvania Clothing, and Linda Baumgartner, What Clothes Reveal, provide additional and different details for approximately the same period, referencing the wider range of materials used. I provide both perspectives, as they do work together to show why white might or might not have been a special event dress for a woman in Susanna’s location and social class.
within Reading felt it appropriate to make her a cotton dress, the garment would have
been even more symbolic of community support.

All memories of Susanna’s dress quite clearly reference the black ribbons. So the
odd feature was not the white dress, but the black ribbons that became part of her
depiction beginning with Jacob Pile’s retelling. Ribbons of a contrasting color were not
typically found in this period, even as sashes, except in the formal attire of younger
girls. 281 Susanna’s ribbons appear consistently in Pile and Richards' accounts, which are
perhaps the most widespread versions. And, while they were not typical in the majority
of fashion traditions, they do appear with some frequency in references to German
execution or funeral attire. Ribbons in general were frivolous additions and did not serve
any purpose beyond decoration. 282 The ribbons’ appearance goes against both majority
culture fashion, which leaned toward the clean Empire style with few embellishments,
and away from the Pennsylvania German fashion, which sometimes used aprons or
jackets of contrasting colors as ornaments, but rarely ribbons. If the dress was as Pile
described, however, the ribbons must have had some purpose given that the dress would
not be worn more than a few hours. Black was the color of mourning, and it was not
uncommon for both women and men to wear black ribbons as a sign of respect for the
dead when they chose to forgo full mourning attire. 283 Susanna’s ribbons fit in to this
tradition, but their description makes them appear to have been more integrated into the


282 John Martin Vincent, *Costume and Conduct in the Laws of Basel, Bern, and Zurich 1370-1800*
(New York: Greenwood Press, 1935), 63. As a good number of the immigrants to Berks County
had ties to Switzerland, this law would not have been unknown.

overall costume than were the traditional arm bands. Jacob Pile describes the ribbons as wide and wrapping around Susanna’s waist, connecting them in his presentation with the black garments worn by the clergymen who supported her: “Susanna Cox, in her white dress, having a broad black ribbon around her waist, and a minister on each side of her dressed in black.”\textsuperscript{284} So the black ribbons, in combination with the white dress, indicate an intentional restructuring of Susanna’s image – either by the dressmaker or the reminiscers – again, to highlight her repentance. She was an innocent – a child perhaps – as shown through the choice of a white dress. She was in mourning – perhaps for herself, perhaps for her child – demonstrated through the black ribbons. She was supported by the community – explicitly by those individuals who chose to walk beside her to the gallows, and implicitly by those who put the effort in to designing and executing the dress she wore, or by those who remembered this as having been done.

\textit{The Convicted Woman’s Dress: Signs of a Developing Gendered Community?}

The “white dress, trimmed with wide black ribbons,” did not come from Susanna’s existing wardrobe. According to the oral history retellings, it was made for her not by her employer or a family member, but by some of the women of Reading who had, most likely, never met her before her arrest. The dress suggests an outward expression of the community support toward her. The effort that went into creating a dress – not to mention the expense of the material itself – was significant. Why did the women within Reading believe it was necessary, at Susanna’s execution, to treat her to something she had never had before? Were their intentions pious and philanthropic, or were these

\textsuperscript{284} The Elk County \textit{Advocate}, September 23, 1875.
individuals eager for the opportunity to demonstrate community support, producing a culturally-approved form of subversion, or serve some other purpose known only to themselves? Or did they combine the outward sign of philanthropy with their own voyeuristic interest in obtaining additional details related to the region’s latest topic of interest?

And who were these women? The specific definition of their place within the larger society is not established through the historical record. They were identified collectively in the text written by Louis Richards, which refers to sources that are no longer extant.285 According to the available information, the women were most likely, German, middle class, and active churchgoers. The connection with Susanna probably developed alongside her growing attachment to the Rev. Philip Reinhold Pauli, and the women would possibly have been part of the Reformed Church of Reading’s congregation. They also had a religious obligation toward charitable works. Within the Reformed tradition in Pennsylvania, acts of charity toward the indigent were not unusual; in this case, assisting Susanna granted not just the opportunity to provide charity but the opportunity to obtain additional insider gossip related to her situation.286

285 Richards seems to draw heavily from the Oral Histories published in the 1870s and 80s, which had all been presented by men. By the time he wrote, only a very few individuals who would have remembered the execution would still have been alive. The references to these women in Oral Histories, Richards’ writings, and other later texts imply the position of these women, but no verifiable documentation has been found.

The women involved also were more likely to live within the confines of Reading proper rather than out in the surrounding townships, as Susanna had. Perhaps one of her supporters was Mrs. Kerper, the wife of the Jailer, who is the only woman reported to have provided Susanna with any form of public support during and after her trial.\footnote{287} According to the local history related in the Reading Eagle’s “The Old Jail” series, Mrs. Kerper accompanied Susanna to her sentencing and provided literal support, holding her up when she fainted. So Susanna was adopted and supported, at least through material means, by women whose socio-economic, geographic, and possibly even religious affiliations differed from the family and employers with whom she had spent the majority of her life. The support came not the companions of her youth from Amity Township, nor the confederates of her working years in Oley. These supporting women could be considered philanthropists or busybodies, but they made a conscious decision to shun conventional behavior and support a woman whom others had dismissed.

By convicting Susanna of “Murder in the First Degree,” the Court had declared that Susanna had broken her connection with what was perceived as the most fundamental role of women in her culture: the production and nurturing of children.\footnote{288} Despite this disconnect from cultural and gendered expectations, a group of women – virtual strangers – chose to invest themselves in Susanna’s life by performing tasks normally assigned to female family members.\footnote{289} Their knowledge of the gendered nature

\footnote{287}{“City Sketches: the Old Jail,” published approximately 1881 in the Reading Eagle, HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, 212.}

\footnote{288}{For a complete description of the concept of Republican Motherhood, see Mary Beth Norton, Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).}

\footnote{289}{My thanks to Willow Mullins for suggesting this idea.}
of her situation led not necessarily to sympathy but to commiseration. Better than the men who were trying and convicting her, these women from Reading understood the nuances of Susanna’s predicament. Even if they had never been in a similar position, their actions indicate that they viewed her situation as one that had not been appropriately addressed through legal means. Many may have stayed away to avoid the taint associated with a convicted criminal, but some still made the decision to interact with her, whether motivated by charity or curiosity.

The references to Susanna’s dress, and its construction by some of the women of Reading, suggest the possibility of a greater community of female communication and commiseration than can be established through other means. The historical record does not document the actions of the women of the area; the ballad does not mention their input. Even the court record masks the input of the Schneider and Geehr women, since the record of their interactions was filtered through Jacob Geehr’s interpretation rather than through their own words. So what, other than a few scattered references to female assistance, leads me to believe that perhaps a community of women worked together to assist Susanna? Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser address the construction of a women’s culture: existing within the greater culture, but not necessarily receiving the input or attention of the men who, at least in 1809, were the ones that maintained the official histories. As Radner and Lanser argued, “we assume that in many, if not most, societies there is a realm of practice that is primarily or exclusively women's domain, through which women may develop a set of common signifying practices (beliefs, understandings, behaviors, rituals – hence a *culture*) whose meanings are not necessarily
accessible to men of the same group.” The creation of the dress might not represent a sign of solidarity: it might be purely the act of a community that did not want to be embarrassed at a public event. But, then again, it might. The appearance of the dress in the 1870s indicates that it contained relevance at that point, even if it hadn’t in 1809. The recurrence of the descriptions of the dress, and of the women who made it, indicate the potential for more. The marked nature of the dress, and its appearance in male-voiced narratives from over sixty years later, indicate to me that something beyond just the desire for cultural conformity drove the production of Susanna’s execution dress. The “women of Reading” were not a monolithic group, blindly providing support without context or personal motivation. But, whoever they were, they saw Susanna’s public presentation on her execution day to be part of their own self-expression. And so, because of their investment in Susanna’s case, they made a conscious decision to put themselves in public view as supporting an individual who had not just broken the laws of the Commonwealth but had also broken at least two of God’s Commandments.

If Radner and Lanser’s interpretation of women’s cultures can be applied to Susanna’s situation, it might indicate that the women of Reading behaved differently toward Susanna not just out of curiosity or a sense of charitable obligation, although both of those issues could be in play. Instead, these women interpreted Susanna’s case differently because of their ability to understand her reasons even when they could not understand the outcome. There is no indication that the women of the town openly petitioned for her release or forgiveness, but there is also no indication that they didn’t

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encourage the men associated with them to utilize their public influence to support Susanna. While the women of Reading did not publicly argue with the legal case, the creation of a dress for Susanna to wear at her execution would indicate that the “official” legal stance was not necessarily accepted by all factions within the community.

So, when women associated with the greater community did assist Susanna during her incarceration, why does no record exist regarding the input of the women within her own family, or that of the Schneiders and Geehrs? Is it because they felt she was guilty – or because they cared little for the outcome of the trial – or because they believed so strongly in the worth of the legal system that they thought she would be exonerated and could, thereafter, return to work? If many women of the community came together to help Susanna, why were the women closest to her absent from this support? It may have been that they wanted to distance themselves from her because of the fear of what would happen to their own reputation. The newspaper articles, however, continued to present the family in a positive light, and the ballad only named them as her employers.\textsuperscript{291} Jacob Geehr’s name consistently was mentioned as a possible father for Susanna’s child but, as stated in the first chapter, if this connection were true, he should have been excluded from testifying for the prosecution in Susanna’s trial. But perhaps the stigma associated with Susanna’s crime made it so that the family as a whole chose to disassociate themselves from her case. Jacob Geehr’s testimony provides some details as to why the women of his family were not more present: his wife was ill, and his mother-in-law, based on the notes about her “laughing” at Susanna’s illness, perhaps did not share the

\textsuperscript{291} Gombert, verse two, all versions; Poulson’s \textit{Daily Advertiser} (Philadelphia), May 10, 1809, discusses the family’s concern for Susanna.
community’s newfound compassion toward the accused. While Susanna was able to revise her own presentation to those who did not know her well, her actions made a permanent break with the family who had trusted her with their own children.

As for Susanna’s birth family, every indication was that they were poor and geographically removed from the immediate occurrences in Reading – with two exceptions. Susanna’s father, in one oral history, becomes associated with the man who pled for her pardon.292 Peter Katzenmoyer, the husband of Susanna’s sister Barbara, claimed her body and provided her with a burial plot.293 According to one oral history presented to me by an informant, the family went back to using their German name “Gax” and moved from Berks County in order to avoid connections between Susanna and themselves. Even after her death, those most immediately connected to the accused individual did not want the association to be made.294 So, while the men of Susanna’s family took steps to clear her name and, by extension their own, the women were visibly absent from the conversation.

At the Kutztown Folk Festival, the audience is told that Susanna received the attentions of “the women of Reading.”295 This phrasing offers a powerful vision of a supportive female community, attractive to modern viewers. This assumption of a

293 Richards, Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation
294 Alfred L. Shoemaker notes that, in the late 1940s, individuals throughout Oley were interested in establishing their homes as places where Susanna Cox had been (Transcript from Radio Broadcast entitled “Old Berks,” Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection, Ursinus College). And, 200 years later, I was warned to state my intentions clearly, because the current owner of the Schneider farm was not interested in becoming a stop on the “Susanna Cox” tour.
295 For the full transcription of June DeTurk’s presentation of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” from July 1, 2009, see Appendix E.
monolithic feminine community essentializes the many differing – and sometimes conflicting – identities held by women within a given region. Susanna is not simply identified as “woman”; to do so would have allowed her critics to ignore the variety of corporate contexts that determine her actions and placement within the greater society. Her cultural identification held just as much strength in her self-identity and in the identities of those who chose to work, publicly or surreptitiously, on her behalf.\footnote{Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 196, would support the move away from expressing womanhood as a monolithic “Other.” As Mohanty states, women are too often lumped together simply because it is easier to put them together than it is to explore more deeply to determine how the individual defines herself as a unique individual as well as within varying corporate contexts. Mohanty argues against women being defined in opposition to men: she believes that cultural traditions carry a stronger connection between individuals than do the common experiences of gender.} For Susanna, this problematizing of the issue of gender is valid: while her case would be significantly different if she were not female, it would also be different if she were not German, or not affiliated with the Reformed Church, or not of that specific locality, or not a servant. Indeed, definition by ethnic origins, or social class, or linguistic identity, rather than by gender, would have allowed the discourse to evolve, even if that evolution had been different from what did happen. The dividing line was, perhaps, not as absolute, and the change in emphasis allows for a different dynamic between the individuals in question.\footnote{Ruth Behar, “Introduction: Out of Exile,” Women Writing Culture, Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 19.}
**Further Considerations: Susanna’s Dress as a Victorian Construction of Purity**

I return to the original gap in the source material. Susanna’s execution garb did not garner attention, at least in the extant sources, until the 1870s. No one at the time of her execution believed that it was relevant to note her appearance, and so the accuracy of the later retellings cannot be verified. So what if the white dress, with black ribbons, sewn by the women of Reading as a sign of support for Susanna, was a later construction? What if what is described in several accounts was just a fiction, inventing both the dress and its communal origins? This would change my interpretation that Susanna and her case immediately affected the people of Berks County. It would eliminate the supposition that women within the community felt compelled to provide what support they could to Susanna, even as she prepared for her execution.

It is possible that the details of Susanna’s dress are not accurate, or that they did not resonate with her contemporaries. If this is true, it is not the impact on the original community that matters, but the impact on those who remembered and passed along the information to future generations. At some point, the story developed to describe the existence, appearance, and origin of the dress. The dress was added to her story, either from the memory of observers or from the idea that it *should* have existed as described. And, if it is a fiction, then it was created and perpetuated by the community for whom it served a useful purpose. In this case, the cultural question is not whether or not the dress was real or imagined: it is presented as truth, and remembered as such, and should be treated as a relevant cultural fact of the 1870s, if not of 1809. Whether or not the dress appeared as described, if the recollection of the dress was strong enough to create such a powerful memory, then the constructed image import transcends its reality. The image
gains relevance, with or without documented proof, because the social memory of the region perpetuates its existence as part of the story.

As described, the dress did bear symbolism, both in the period in which it was made, and in the way that the image has been perpetuated in the 200 years since. The production of the dress, and its presentation to Susanna, demonstrate a connection between Susanna and the dress’ creators that redefine Susanna as more than just a female prisoner for whom some compassion was shown. Instead, something about Susanna inspired this group of women to donate time and materials for her. These actions also indicate a level of community forgiveness or, at the very least, compassion. This forgiveness was not received from the legal establishment, as her life still ended in execution, but from the religious authorities and a portion of the women within the community.

She did not die an outsider, but as someone who held insider status at the moment of her execution, even if that status had only recently been granted. Susanna’s transgressions brought her to the attention of the women of the community and, ultimately, led to her acceptance as more than just an interloper. She became virtually – but not actually – one of them: at the very least, a member of the Christian community, with (some of the) rights and privileges, at least for a while. While her condemned status prevented her from thoroughly “becoming” a fully-vetted member of her community, she was able to “play” at the role of a community member.298 Susanna Cox “played” as a

298 Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry 1650-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5. The female ballad warrior described by Dianne Dugaw was often able to “play” the role of a man if required to by circumstances. Unlike Dianne Dugaw’s ballad
member of the Oley community by meeting with its religious officials, acting as an upstanding young woman should while incarcerated and executed, and otherwise behaving as if the only odd thing in her life was her residence within the jail. The white dress was her costume for the play: she could only wear it while performing the role of an accepted member of her society. But she could wear it, thanks to the women who had made it for her, so she was able to perform her role in the drama of repentance and redemption that unfolded at the end of her life.

**The Death March**

Regardless of the support Susanna might have received from the general population, the end result was still her execution on June 10, 1809. The ballad describes her travel in a single verse, stating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German text</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sie wurd’ aus der Gefangenschaft</td>
<td>She was led from her captivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um 11 Uhr ausgeführt,</td>
<td>Around eleven o’clock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dann gieng es nach dem Hinrichsplatz,</td>
<td>Then she went toward the place of execution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedauernsvoller Schritt.</td>
<td>With many regretful steps!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The later oral histories elaborate on this part of the story. It seems that George Phillippi and George Heller had experienced the hanging from similar vantage points. Their older brothers had been part of the military detachment sent to moderate the events, allowing the two younger boys to join them in the inner circle around the gallows. Jacob Pile

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299 Gombert, in the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, Item 77, translates the last line as “[i]t caused a moral shock.”

was not far away, with his father and siblings, and Jacob Hoff had also been close enough to remember specific details of the event.  

All recall certain details in similar ways: the funeral march down the street, the white dress, the presence of Rev. Pauli. But some specific interpretations stand out. Hoff recalled that Susanna wore the noose already tied around her neck, tucked beneath her dress, as she walked from the jail to the gallows. Pile recalls what he believed to be the exact dimensions and capabilities of the gallows with great detail, and that a woman named Mrs. Hertlein, who had traveled to the execution with the Pile family, called out an invocation for Susanna’s soul.

Before the Hangman could fulfill his task, however, Susanna was given the opportunity to speak. The record of her words varies among the witnesses and the ballad: the ballad says she entreated the gathered crowd to pay attention to her sins and not repeat her actions. Several of the contemporary sources just list a hymn that she presented, declaring herself to be a sinner and requesting God’s forgiveness. In any case, her entreaty was interpreted as being specifically directed toward the young, which fits, given her own youth and the nature of the actions that had led to her conviction and execution. But this kind of request was not unusual – several condemned women on the gallows made similar entreaties according to the ballads and broadsides describing their executions.

301 “Recollections of Olden Times: Interesting Incidents that Occurred in this City Three-Quarters of a Century Ago and Within the Memory of Jacob B. Hoff,” HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, 348.
302 Der Wahre Amerikaner.
303 For examples, see cited texts discussing Fanny Amlett and Elizabeth Wilson, as well as Johannes Copperberger, Ein neues Lied, von der Mordgeschichte des Joseph Miller: welcher im Januar 1822, einer Sonntags-Nacht, seine schwangere Frau und zwei Kinder auf eine grausame
So is the ballad author relaying the intent of the condemned, even if the text itself is embellished? While it is difficult to distinguish between Susanna’s intent and her chronicler’s interpretation, the frequent reiteration of the hymn and her own entreaty indicates a strong possibility that, while the actual words recorded might not have been her own but the content closely matched her intent. The recorded version of her last words might not have been her own, but did follow the prescribed traditions of the execution genre.

The ballad convention did have some foundation in actual practice. Others in similar situations performed contrition with similar words. Ruth Blay, in 1768 New Hampshire, pled for mercy in order to have more time to prepare herself for her death, even as she admitted her guilt. Elizabeth Wilson’s chronicler, albeit fictionalizing the protagonist, requested that Wilson be granted forgiveness, as her only crime had been that she had succumbed to “[t]he tenderness and sensibility that prevails in the minds of females, subjects them to many temptations and dangers from which men are in a manner exempt.” Mary Hardcastle admitted her guilt and acknowledged that meeting her baby “[b]efore a just God” would be a challenge, but she asks for consideration in her newly-constructed role as a repentant sinner.

304 Art ermordet und sich selbst erhing, welches alles, wie man glaubt, aus Armuth geschah (Lebanon, PA, 1822) for a counter example of a male subject.
305 Caroline Marvin, Hanging Ruth Blay (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010), 87-88.
306 Anon., The Victim of Seduction! Some Interesting Particulars of the Life and Untimely Fate of Miss Harriot Wilson Who was Publicly Executed in the State of Pennsylvania in the Year 1802, for the Murder of her Infant (Boston: J. Wilkey, 1802).
306 “An Account of the Execution of Mary Hardcastle”
Did the women (and some men) all perform this particular request because it was expected of them or because they all independently came to the conclusion that the entreaty was necessary, or is it a construction of the woman’s biographer, or a generic convention? It is unlikely that multiple women, in the same setting, independently decided that the same entreaty was necessary. But the other two options – that the women themselves were intentionally following a trope, or that the request was made not by the condemned but by their chronicler, both contain some validity. The ballad relaying the story of Susanna Cox’s life was, almost certainly, written by a man – as were most of the other ballads relaying the lives of the condemned females. But the voice used is that of a woman – in this case, a young woman whose life is forfeit due to her own actions.

Susanna’s plea for forgiveness must be seen through the filter of another’s words – either through a hymn that was chosen with the support and approval of her male clergy, or through the words recorded on her behalf by her biographer. How Susanna herself felt is hidden underneath these words that were not of her own creation. Yet for a woman who, at the very least, was not known for her eloquence, and, at the worst, was intellectually challenged, she left those who witnessed her execution with the strong impression of her own repentance. Whether or not these words were exactly her own matters less than that they reflect how her story was passed along.

307 Jean R. Freedman, “With Child…,” 7, discusses the distinction between songs about women and songs by women.
308 The exception is Mary Hardcastle’s poem which, according to the broadside itself, was composed by the condemned woman herself. The verses included in Hardcastle’s broadside are in fairly uniform iambic pentameter, not ballad meter. They maintain a ABAB rhyme structure.
Susanna assumed the attitude of repentance through her acknowledgement of the sin associated with her actions. She had, with the publication of her *Confession*, ceased claiming innocence for the child’s death. Instead, Susanna chose the guise of a penitent: she aligned herself with the Biblical tax collector, who acknowledged that his sins, whatever they had been, could only be forgiven through God’s divine grace. This choice led to Susanna’s appropriateness as a ballad subject: unlike Joseph Miller, about whom a ballad would be written following his 1813 murder-suicide, Susanna could still be portrayed as having a soul that was capable of being redeemed. Consequently, the ballad depicting her story would focus on that possibility of redemption and the hope that her example would prevent others from following the same path.

The ballad author lingers on Susanna’s repentance for four verses, first granting her words to entreat those gathered to turn away from her example (verse 23), then allowing her to perform penitence by kneeling on the ground to pray (verse 24), then describing her voice as “Mitleidenswerth (worthy of compassion)” as she knelt and cried (verse 25), then entreatling God to forgive her sins (verse 26). The public reaction to this active sign of contrition was quite positive. Her impassioned plea for forgiveness received the expected reaction from the crowd: “Viel' weinten über sie (Many cried over her).” The public presentation of her execution was handled in such a way that not only attracted an excessively large crowd, but also elicited a strong emotional response.

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The observers came to gawk, but they left having been touched by the drama of the situation. Or, at least, that was the impression that the ballad was composed to convey, and this interpretation remains one of the defining features of the legend that has grown around the life story of Susanna Cox: she herself is pitied while her crime is condemned. Despite the growing sympathy from the crowd, Susanna’s hanging proceeded without protest. Her death was timed at seventeen minutes from hanging until her last breath. This time period is inordinately long and implies considerable suffering on Susanna’s part. In contrast, Harriot Wilson apparently hanged for “nearly a minute” before she began to demonstrate signs that her death was imminent.\footnote{“Victim of Seduction,” 7.} According to the Gombert ballad, the doctors examined Susanna and were perceived by the viewing audience to have made an attempt to revive her after she had been removed from the scaffold.

Another story not referenced in the ballad came to light in these later oral histories. The hangman, an unidentified “German” stranger, had been observed pulling on Susanna’s feet while she was hanging. George Heller, in his recounting, explained the man’s actions during the execution itself by stating that “[w]hen the cart was drawn from under the woman, and she was left suspended, she struggled violently, and the hangman, who was a stranger in the town, ran under her, caught her feet, and hung to her body. This was considered brutal, and threats were made.”\footnote{“Old Time Reminiscences,” HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, 348.} The men who retold this story had all been between eight and fourteen years old at the time of Susanna’s execution, so their memories recalled their youthful reactions. Their ongoing interaction with each other also helped solidify this among other details.
Even if the retellings had been modified by years of conversation and reinterpretation, the remembrance of this particular detail indicates that it held relevance for those who had seen the event and remembered the description. Louis Richards’ version provides a bit more context for the action, explaining “[s]ome have asserted that the hangman completed his function with an act of brutality by jerking the ankles of the victim to hasten her death. Others said - and this appears the more probable - that he merely stooped to adjust her low shoes which were likely to fall off her feet in the struggle.”

Richards spoke with the objectivity granted by both time and distance: he had not witnessed the events, nor were any of his family members involved. Both George Heller and George Phillippi continue their narratives by discussing the attacks made on the hangman as he tried to leave town: the hangman lost all his money as some of the men and boys of the area abused him, and he was apparently glad to get out of town without permanent damage.

The final verse provides the summary of Susanna’s life – she hadn’t lived long “Als sie im Umfall war (before she found her undoing).” Whether that undoing developed from her lack of education, or from her lack of confidence in the people around her, remains open to interpretation. Her execution took place when she was 24 years old and, according to the ballad, considered ignorant enough to mitigate at least

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314 Richards, *Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation*

315 In Louis Richards, *A Memorial Tribute to the Late John Richards* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1885) and Louis Richards, *Memoir of Louisa Silvers Richards: A Tribute of Affection* (Philadelphia: [s.n.], 1891), Richards quite prolifically described the lives of his parents. Both were from areas that made it unlikely that they traveled to Reading for the event, and Richards himself was not born for a few more decades. His interest in the case was based in a desire to better understand the history of his adopted home.

316 Gombert, in the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, Item 66, Verse 32.
some of her guilt. At least one interpretation depicts her as simple-minded: she was believed to not just be an innocent, or misguided, but actually mentally challenged to the point that her actions could be explained away by the unofficial diagnosis of mental incompetence. Yet this was not enough to earn her a stay of execution. She may have killed a child – or she may not have, as the evidence provided enough room for debate. But it was the loss of her life that the ballad author saw as such a tragedy. He does not downplay the severity of her actions, but he does allow for the expression of her human frailty. She was not expected to be a perfect example of feminine goodness, but neither was she expected to have the ability to cope on her own with the situation she had found herself in. If, as the text implied, she had received an appropriate upbringing and education, she might have been able to withstand the advances of her seducer. But, since she had not, the author did what he believed to be appropriate in granting her literary assistance toward the establishment of a “good death.”

Conclusion

Susanna’s actions, as recorded in the ballad retellings and oral histories addressing her life, demonstrated her public conversion into a repentant sinner who complies with community norms. At the end of her life, she dressed the part; she spoke the expected words; she displayed a suitable level of penitence in her actions. She

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appropriately performed a resignation to her fate and a supplication to God so that this image of the repentant sinner overcame the horror of the reality of her death.

The invocation given at the beginning of just a few ballad versions provides the reader with a forewarning as to the end result of the text. It is a stock stanza, tying Susanna’s story even more into the German broadside ballad tradition:

“Die Geschichte, dies Euch erzählt,  
Sie bleibt auf ewig neu,  
Und wer nur Einmal sie höret,  
Dem bricht das Herz entzwei.”318

"The story I’m going to tell you,  
Forever will be new.  
And who but once doth hear it,  
’T will break his heart in two.”319

Susanna’s execution took place as expected; not even the attentions of the best local doctors could revive her.320 Nor were they supposed to: the actions that appeared to the crowd to be an attempt to revive the condemned was really more a verification of death. The pain and terror that must have been part of the seventeen minutes Susanna hanged, slowly being strangled, lost importance as the viewers and reviewers focused on the positive. Whether they did this to reframe the life of Susanna Cox, or to allow themselves to justify their own participation in the communal festival of death, is unclear even to those that recorded their personal experiences.

Susanna had died, and her body was claimed by her family, who reportedly buried the body and provided it with protection for several nights to prevent grave robbers. Susanna found her final resting place on Katzenmoyer’s farm. Or did she? One version of the story, recorded many years later, says that Susanna’s body was kept within the

318 The German text is very similar to Heinrich Heine, “Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen”
319 Louis Storck translation, 1865.
Katzenmoyer home for several days as protection. During that time, a large number of medical students and doctors were seen travelling the road toward the Katzenmoyer home late at night. The implication was that they were granted supervised access to the body, if for no other reason than to prevent them from exhuming Susanna at a later point.

Other references to Susanna’s fate state that, during a road expansion in the early 1900s, a body believed to be Susanna’s was found and removed to a different location – most likely, the local Potter’s Field. While Susanna’s story is, apparently, not quite interesting enough to earn a place in the copious collections of local ghost stories, the tale has shown up several times in the Reading Eagle newspaper, as well as in the newsletters of the local schools. According to one of Reading’s Northeast Middle School’s newsletters, the Potter’s Field where Susanna had been buried had been relocated when the school was built. Susanna still haunts the school, wandering the halls and providing the student body with their own ghost to compare to those living at rival schools.

Jacob Pile did not remember – or, at least, did not relay – the graphic details specific to the hanging itself; Johann Phillip Gombert did not present Susanna as an irretrievably evil individual; the Reading newspapers did not condemn her at her death. Instead, the memories and written texts remember Susanna as a misguided innocent rather than as a hardened criminal. She was not a social pariah who had killed her child from deliberate

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321 According to Charles J. Adams III, “Woman Hanged for Infanticide Linked to Haunting in Helltown,” Reading Eagle, October 9, 2005, which cites a lost 1900 article that provides much more information, the property had been owned by Peter Katzenmoyer’s father, and it was to this house that Susanna’s family brought her body after the execution. Whether it was to protect the body, as often stated, or to allow for select medical students to perform examinations, as the article argues, is unknown.

322 Reading Daily Times, March 15, 1905.

323 Adams, “Woman Hanged for Infanticide.” Reading Northeast’s school newsletter, stored in the Russell D. Earnest Library and Archives, Clayton, DE.
wickedness; she was the product of the community and, ultimately, their responsibility. With the guidance of her spiritual and sartorial advisors, Susanna was able to reframe her own public presentation to best take advantage of cultural and societal expectations. Some local women dressed her as one of their own; they provided a coded message to anyone with the cultural insight to understand that Susanna had achieved community membership at her death, despite her inability to achieve that status had she never been accused or convicted.
Chapter 4: Susanna’s Story Reborn in Performance

Three times a day, for nine days right around July 4\textsuperscript{th}, the Kutztown Folk Festival held in Kutztown, Pennsylvania presents a performance titled “The Execution of Suzanna Cox.”\footnote{This is the spelling utilized in the Festival programs, as well as on their promotional signage. For that reason, I will utilize this spelling when describing the performance, despite the historical documentation that typically refers to the young woman in question as “Susanna Cox.” Alternate spellings of her first name – including Suzanna and Susannah – appear with some frequency. Of course, owing to the non-standardization of spelling or grammar in the nineteenth century, these changes can occur within a single text. Her last name is also sometimes mentioned as “Gax.”} In this ten-minute presentation, the life story of the title character is retold with the assistance of just a narrator, a “hangman”, a gallows and a steel-reinforced doll. The current performance speaks to the history of the area, the German people living in it, and the ways that the Festival has developed in the 64 years since its beginnings. The contextualization provided by the details of the past and of the presentation’s development will allow for a deeper understanding of the current performance and its evolution over the course of the Festival’s history. The performance has become part of the pageantry of the Festival while still maintaining its roots in the traditional storytelling so characteristic of performed ballads. The presentation bridges the genres of ballad, pageant, reenactment and heritage, providing a concrete link to the past while striving for contemporary cultural relevance.
The Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival in Kutztown

In early July, 1950, the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival was presented for the first time on the Fairgrounds in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. This Festival was the next stage in a movement designed to preserve and publicize the “authentic” Pennsylvania Dutch experience, at least partially to downplay growing regional commercialism. The state and regional marketing boards had determined that the Pennsylvania Dutch provided a good example of a traditional American ethnic group, so they began to encourage tourism to Lancaster County and the surrounding areas as an escape from the pressures of modern life. Spearheaded by J. William Frey, Alfred Shoemaker and Don Yoder, all professors at Lancaster’s Franklin and Marshall College, the Festival was designed to bring together craftspeople, performers, storytellers, cooks, and experts in related fields in order to entertain and enlighten a population that was moving away from its traditional roots. The Festival organizers hoped that presenting material in a manner intended to both showcase the past and emphasize the cultural continuities with the present would help preserve and promote the ideals of the non-sectarian Pennsylvania

2 I will discuss the issues involved in the Festival’s name later in this chapter. As I stated in the introduction, I am departing from my use of the term “Pennsylvania German” because the culture described in this chapter self-identifies in the 20th and 21st centuries as “Pennsylvania Dutch.” Because it is this interpretation of the originally German-speaking population of Pennsylvania that I am focusing on, I believe it is important to utilize the terms that they use for themselves.

3 I use quotes because of the ongoing debate as to whether or not this goal was achieved in the Festival setting. Don Yoder, “The World Came to Kutztown to our Dutch Folk Festival,” The Pennsylvania Dutchman 2, no. 6 (August, 1950): 1, specifically mentions that this was his goal in helping to design the Festival. This was, most likely, also a comment made against some of the trends in local historical pageantry mentioned by David Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 178, especially decisions such as that made in St. Louis to paint white people copper rather than employ Native individuals to portray their own ancestors.
Dutch of the region. While other heritage festivals intentionally distanced the historical past from the discussion of contemporary issues, the Festival in Kutztown chose instead to highlight the persistence of the culture being presented. Historical references and contemporary interpretations both were integrated to intentionally link the shared history of the ethnic group and the region to the current interpretations of the Pennsylvania Dutch involved. This decision did not provide for the inclusion of mainstream popular culture, but instead focused on those traditions with strong regional and ethnic roots.

Berks County was chosen as the site of the Festival at least in part to separate its purpose from the growing tourist interest in the Amish and Mennonites within Lancaster County – an even more interesting fact given that the founders’ employer, and the Festival’s earliest sponsor, was Lancaster County’s Franklin and Marshall College, which applied the additional monies received to their burgeoning Folklore and Folklife program. The Festival’s storage facilities were originally also in Lancaster County, on a tract of land purchased in anticipation of a future heritage museum that never reached fruition. This separation from what was increasingly being considered the center of

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5 Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry, 288.

6 To examine the Festival’s publicity, see www.kutztownfestival.com/interestingarticles/thekff.pdf; accessed 5/7/2013.

7 The Festival was originally sponsored by Franklin and Marshall College, with the proceeds going to sponsor their folklore center (“Pennsylvania Dutch Festival Set for Kutztown, July 3-6,” Reading Eagle, June 8, 1952: 17). The control of the Festival changed hands several times, as did the name, with Ursinus College managing it between 1969 and 1994. Then, in 1994, when Ursinus decided to sell its rights to the Festival, a businessman named Richard Thomas purchased the Festival and moved it to the Schuylkill Fairgrounds. A group that had previously run a Festival through Kutztown University took over the Kutztown location in 1996, and competing festivals existed for a few years thereafter (Jaclyn LaPlaca, “Two Kutztown Festivals are Ready to Duel Again,” The Morning Call (Allentown, PA), Wednesday, June 25, 1997: B01). This
Pennsylvania Dutch tourism culture made sense on two levels. One was to increase the area that would and could attract the tourists in search of models of Pennsylvania Dutch culture, but also, perhaps, to draw the attention away from the Plain Folk who were much more abundant in Lancaster County and much less willing to meet with or speak to visitors.\(^8\)

While the Festival was always a commercial venture, and would later become a source of income for several organizations and academic institutions, the ideology with which Shoemaker, Yoder, and Frey approached it in the early days remained an underlying motif in the marketing and in how Shoemaker approached his position as executive director.\(^9\) The original focus on authenticity, touted early in the marketing for the Festival and reinforced at least once, in Alliene Saeger DeChant’s 1965 published memories, has been modulated into a balance between the maintenance and focus on both the traditional cultural aspects linked with the local community and the commodification of products so closely associated.\(^10\)

\(^8\) Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 148, talks about removing sites from maps in order to protect them from the random visitors. The specific implications for those in the Pennsylvania Dutch community becomes apparent after the release of the movie “Witness”, which led to widespread tourism of the curious but uninformed (William T. Parsons, “The Pernicious Effects of *Witness* Upon Plain-Worldly Relations,” *Pennsylvania Folklife* 36, no.3 (Spring 1987), 133.

\(^9\) Several articles have been written about Shoemaker and his financial indiscretions, including Eaby, “I Remember Well,” and Devlin, “Founder Vanished.”

\(^10\) Alliene Saeger DeChant, “Sixteen Years of the Folk Festival,” *Pennsylvania Folklife* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1965): 10-13. For additional details regarding authenticity and potential explanations
The name of the Festival has shifted over time, first adding the location in small letters, and then downplaying the “Pennsylvania Dutch” label, finally becoming “The Kutztown Folk Festival” as it is currently called. The movement away from singling out the specific ethnic group in the name of the Festival parallels the growing interest in incorporating other cultural groups outside those with roots in the Germanic languages. Beginning in 1951, performances that reflected non-Germanic cultures began to be featured. That second year of the Festival contained additional presentations and exhibits highlighting the cultures in Pennsylvania associated with the British Isles; in 2012, presentations on those involved with all aspects of the Civil War were included. And throughout, musical styles from the wide range of traditions found within the Commonwealth could be heard. These additions reinforced the role of the Festival in preserving and perpetuating the “public historical imagery” that would help explain the past and its relationship to the ongoing self-definition of the geographical and ethnic communities’ common to the region.

The Festival – under any of its names – developed at least partially in reaction to the early twentieth century pageants described by David Glassberg. These large, elaborate displays often took the form of plays, parades, or displays of music and dance.

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11 Pennsylvania Folklife reproduced the Festival’s programs for 1961 and 1990, inclusive, and then again in 1997.
12 In 2012, the two most prominently-featured groups included Seasons, a group of 5 siblings who played Celtic music on traditional instruments, and the Celtic Martins, a family band who also played Celtic and Irish music. Both groups returned in 2013.
13 The importance of public historical imagery highlighted in Glassberg, starting on page 1.
While many were designed and run by civic organizations in order to put forth a particular view of the community and its history, the interpretations of the events did not always match the intent. The Kutztown Festival based its structure more on the Pennsylvania Folk Festivals staged in the 1930s, but still adopted the pieces of the pageant tradition deemed most appropriate.\textsuperscript{15} Still, the Kutztown Festival avoided the pattern of the giant historical spectacles. While plays depicting elements of local life have been included into the Festival almost since the beginning, as have parades allowing individuals and organizations to tout their own agendas, the highlights of the Festival have been in the multiplicity, not singularity, of events. Over time, the organizers and participants in the Festival have generated a tradition and a community among themselves stands apart from, but maintains strong connections to, the local region. The end result is a community established within the temporal and geographic boundaries of the Festival that defines itself by its participation in the event.

The Kutztown Folk Festival is not a pageant, although it maintains some of the characteristics of the pageants described by Glassberg. Instead, the events at Kutztown fit into Beverly Stoeltje’s definition of a festival, as it is regularly scheduled, public, participatory and complex. And, with the growing emphasis on reflecting the culture of the entire area rather than just Frey, Shoemaker and Yoder’s chosen interpretation of the Pennsylvania Dutch, it is “multiple in voice, scene, and purpose.”\textsuperscript{16} It is locally touted as


\textsuperscript{16} Beverly J. Stoeltje, \textit{Festival. Folklore, Cultural Performances and Popular Entertainments}, ed. Richard Bauman (New York, 1992), 261. Interestingly, while the founders so carefully constructed the view of the Pennsylvania Dutch that they believed to be most appropriate, Frey criticized George Korson for constructing his own – albeit different – version of the local culture.
having served as a model for the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, further
demonstrating the ability of the Festival to meet – or possibly, to have formed – the
definition of festival. The fear that commodification would overtake the traditional
aspects, addressed by Alliene DeChant, was at some point overtaken by the desire to
attract and keep tourists who would come once to see the events, but would return every
year to shop for items such as quilts and foodstuffs. And, in return, these goods would
be used as an incentive to encourage individuals to return year after year. The
commercial aspects brought some to the Festival and, while they were shopping and
eating, they could not help but be exposed to a wider view of the regional communities
represented therein.

The Kutztown Folk Festival fulfills a fundamental purpose of folklife festivals –
that is, to help perpetuate “a symbolically constructed image of the popular roots of
American national culture by traditionalizing, valorizing, and legitimizing selected
aspects of vernacular culture drawn from the diverse ethnic, regional, and occupational

and interpretation of the folk song tradition in *The Pennsylvania Dutchman* in an advertisement

17 I have heard this a few times, most notably from Dave Fooks in discussion with the author,
February 14, 2013. I have looked for documentation from the Smithsonian, and it does not seem
to exist. The veracity – or lack thereof – of this claim adds to the social memory surrounding the
Festival as a whole.

18 DeChant, “Sixteen Years of the Folk Festival,” 12; the growing commercialism of the Festival
would later be criticized by Richard Shaner, “Kutztown Folk Festival a Poor Imitation,” *The
Morning Call* (Allentown, Pennsylvania), July 24, 2002.

19 Rough statistics provided by the Kutztown Folk Festival staff in 2013 indicate that most
visitors attend once every three years or more.
groups seen to make up American society.” The Festival has been intentionally constructed to take a traditional culture, preserve it, and present aspects of it to an audience consisting predominantly of individuals with no concrete connection to the culture depicted. Performances, demonstrations, and vendors chosen as appropriate for the Festival are intended to showcase elements of the Pennsylvania Dutch as well as local culture – the raw along with the glorious.

The Festival also provides a display of local and ethnic cultural heritage. This is demonstrated through the way that the Festival organizers have chosen to celebrate the culture of the past without ignoring the impact that this culture has on the present and future. The Festival does not denigrate the present, although some aspects of the Festival focus on local life at the time of its founding rather than adjusting to modern sensibilities. However, this is part of how the Festival organizers choose to market and present themselves: the timelessness of the culture is not dependent on modern advancements, and can be frozen in the 1950s without losing relevance. This intentional encapsulation of a particular period of time reinforces the continuity argument: elements that have been presented in similar forms over 60 years maintain their relevance and continue to influence current developments. The Festival focuses on maintaining and presenting traditional folkways that, it could be argued, are steadily becoming more marginalized as the older generations die and the younger choose to forgo their heritage in order to immerse themselves in modern majority culture. The Festival also demonstrates how the Pennsylvania Dutch culture has adapted and changed to meet the needs of modern

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society. For example, demonstrations relay traditional techniques of gathering and processing wool alongside the marketing of items made of the same substance but using more modern technology.

Even with the inclusion of elements of other cultures, the Kutztown Festival does truly focus on the traditions of the local Pennsylvania Dutch – those individuals who came to America before 1800, intermarried, and helped form a new cultural foundation based on German language and folkways – rather than the full German American community. As Susan Isaacs distinguished between the two groups, the Pennsylvania Dutch consider handcrafts central to their identity and speak a language developed in the New World, while the German Americans focus on the maintenance of their German heritage in their new country.21 This split is evident in how celebrations are developed and staged: traditional German “oompa” bands are not out of place at the Kutztown Festival, even though they are outnumbered even by the prominence of Celtic roots music. But these groups do not receive the time commitment or resources available to some of the more traditional Pennsylvania Dutch performers, such as Keith Brintzenhoff.22 To be part of the Festival is not, by definition, to be Pennsylvania Dutch. Many of the vendors, for example, do not identify with the Pennsylvania Dutch community, with the geographic region, or with a particular linguistic group. But they have participated over time and they do see themselves as part of the ephemeral community that is formed for the duration of the Festival itself. Some festivalgoers also

see themselves as part of the Festival community, even when they do not specifically identify with the region or the dominant culture. While some do call themselves “local” or “Pennsylvania Dutch” others simply state that their ongoing attendance is because of their own traditions, and their desire to be a part of the overall Festival experience.\(^{23}\)

This conversation about how to maintain the traditional culture while also working within modern society is not new within the German American community. As Zach Langley explores in his dissertation research, the tension between the maintenance of “Dutchy” heritage and the interaction with the modern world has been a part of the German American discourse at least since the founding of the Pennsylvania German Society in 1891.\(^{24}\) These educated individuals, who functioned appropriately within the majority, English-speaking, technology-accepting culture, wanted to maintain traditional German American language and folk arts as they were at that point. They believed that the continued use of these cultural elements by rural people would degrade the integrity of the culture. Again, this highlights the divide between the German Americans, whose affiliations were with the Fatherland of their family’s origin, and the Pennsylvania Dutch, whose family origins and affiliations continue to be as complicated and complex as many of the other earlier American immigrants. The split is cultural now, as shown by the

\(^{23}\) I will discuss this in more detail in both this chapter and the next, but the observation is based on conversations held in 2010 and 2012 with several informants, most of whom chose to remain on a first-name only basis with me.

difference between events such as the Kutztown Folk Festival and a traditional Oktoberfest celebration, but some unity does exist in the shared language – written, at least – and similarities in religious affiliations.

The Kutztown Folk Festival, originating sixty years after the beginning of the Pennsylvania German Society, arose from motivations similar to those of the German-Americans, but sympathetic to the “Dutch” culture that had taken shape in America, and concerned with the effects of tourism in the region. J. William Fry, Don Yoder, and Alfred L. Shoemaker were academics with strong personal ties to the Pennsylvania Dutch community who believed that it was appropriate to build a Festival to showcase traditional Pennsylvania Dutch culture before it was transformed by commercialism. They built a Festival to preserve the culture as it was at that time. Sixty years later, therefore, it represents a culture of the past. Finding the balance between past and present has resulted in many of the individuals participating in the Festival reframing their own understanding of Pennsylvania Dutch culture into a context that maintains its integrity while also allowing for connections with modern culture. Those who represent the Pennsylvania Dutch at the Kutztown Folk Festival serve not just as presenters, but as translators, both of the culture as it is today and as it used to be.

Over the more than 60 years of the Festival, some elements have been reshaped, reformed, and removed, based on the developing cultural sensibilities of the intended audience. Director Dave Fooks is asked on a regular basis how the decision is made to keep certain presentations and vendors while removing others. In several interviews, Fooks repeatedly reiterates the relevance of portraying all aspects of the culture, but also

25 Yoder, “The World Came to Kutztown”: 1.
the importance of understanding what is and is not acceptable to the outsiders who provide the greatest portion of the Festival’s attendance. Fooks frequently gives the example of the Festival’s earlier demonstration of pig butchering. For many years, it was possible to visit pigs in the petting zoo, see the butchering, and have a meal of pork roasted right on site. The butchering presentation was removed partially because of changes in the law, but also because of the outreach mission of the Festival. Now, while it is still possible to pet the pigs and eat the pork, the direct connection between the two activities is no longer available. Despite the very real presence of butchering and animal preparation in many Pennsylvania Dutch families – indeed, in many farming families regardless of ethnic or regional origin – the demonstration went beyond the sensibilities of the anticipated audience. Fooks believed that, if the butchering had been continued, licensing boards and the Health Department would have involved themselves, and the visitors “from New Jersey” would have been discouraged from attendance at the Festival as a whole. If someone wanted to see a butchering, he said, he could tell them who to speak with, but he and the board had decided that this kind of demonstration no longer needed to be a part of their mission. Instead, they decided that it was important to attract, not alienate, those who lacked the cultural competence to contextualize all of the

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26 Larry Fox, “Festivals are as Old as Civilization.” *Washington Post* June 6, 2003, final ed.

27 Thelia Jean Eaby, “The Country Butcher,” *Pennsylvania Folklife*. Folk Festival Issue 32, no.4 (Summer 1983): 29-31, describes the butchering as performed at that time, mentioning specifically that the USDA had cleared the presentation. The Butchering appears on the Festival Map for 1987 (reproduced on the back cover of *Pennsylvania Folklife*, 36, no. 4 (Summer 1987) but is replaced by a variety of craft demonstrations in the Summer 1988 (37, no. 4) issue. Interestingly, the Butchering had taken place on the location that would, in the late 1990s, become the home of the Hanging.

elements still found within the current actions of those identifying as Pennsylvania Dutch.

While it was no longer possible to butcher a pig or trade animal skins at the Festival, it was still possible to witness the reenactment of a hanging. The Festival organizers have discussed the appropriateness of the hanging on many occasions, but they have always decided to continue the performance of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox.” The popularity of the performance and the representation of what was deemed a relevant historical event overtook any objections regarding the specific content. Fooks considers the Hanging to be a part of the educational purpose of the Festival; he does not see it as entertainment. Rather, he hopes that individuals will use the opportunity to witness the event as an opportunity to gain deeper understanding about history and the culture.29

The History of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox”

In the second issue of The Pennsylvania Dutchman newspaper, edited by J. William Frey, Don Yoder, and Alfred L. Shoemaker and published in mid 1949, two articles appeared discussing the “Susanna Cox” ballad.30 These articles focused on the lasting memory of the execution and provided a discussion of the authorship of the ballad itself: nowhere was the charge against Susanna mentioned. In later issues of the Dutchman, the editors would be questioned for not providing the context. Even the title

29 Fooks in discussion with the author, February 14, 2013.

under which the ballad is referenced, “Das Trauerlied von der Susanna Cox,” ignores the section of the title describing her crime. Whether by intent or by chance, the lack of information provided in the Dutchman might have helped generate interest in George Korson’s book Pennsylvania Songs and Legends, published a few months later. The publication of Korson’s text also allowed the Dutchman to continue to ignore the context of Susanna’s execution and focus on the long-term impact the case had on the area.\(^3\)

When the Pennsylvania German Folk Festival began a year later in 1950, the organizers determined that Susanna’s story was a relevant means of explaining local culture through musical entertainment. The original program included an evening of murder ballads scheduled for the third evening of the Festival on July 3. This publicity for this presentation highlighted the performances of the songs relaying the stories about both the infanticide Susanna Cox and the filicide Joseph Miller.\(^3\) No records of the structure of this original performance can be found, and the personal memories of Festival attendants and presenters I have been able to interview either do not go back that far, or cannot distinguish between the specific years because the memories have merged

\(^3\) J. William Frey, advertisement for George Korson’s Pennsylvania Songs and Legends, Pennsylvania Dutchman 1, no 13 (July 28, 1949): 7. D.K. Wilgus was also not a fan of Korson’s work or methodology, according to a typed note that appeared in Francis Lee Utley’s copy of Pennsylvania Songs and Legends donated to The Ohio State University Libraries. The note is now in the collection of Ohio State’s Center for Folklore Studies. While Wilgus did not specifically discuss the chapter addressing Susanna Cox, he did question the song choice and focus presented by one of the chapters regarding which he felt more strongly.

\(^3\) The Pennsylvania Dutchman 2, no. 5 (July 1950): 4, advertises a night of murder ballads featuring the songs about Susanna Cox and Joseph Miller. The ballads seem to have been left off the program in 1951 (according to the publicity published in The Pennsylvania Dutchman 3, no. 3 (June 1, 1951)).
together.\textsuperscript{33} After the first year, no written documentation verifies that these ballads continued to be performed as part of the Festival: the program does not mention them specifically, and the musical entertainments starting in 1951 appear to focus on a wider range of folk songs. The “Susanna Cox” ballad seems to then disappear from the program – at least, from receiving its own billing on the program. For the next several years, hymn sings, folk songs, Amish slow songs, and performances out of other traditions dominated the musical stage. These were songs that expressed “the appreciation for the simple things in life.”\textsuperscript{34} Based on this lack of documentary verification, the later publicity push when “Susanna Cox” was performed at the Festival in 1963, and Don Yoder’s memories of the return of the ballad at that point, it is reasonable to infer that “Susanna Cox” did not make an appearance at the Festival again until the 1963 revival.\textsuperscript{35}

But why were these two ballads chosen, and why did only Susanna’s story continue to be told in this setting? “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” has been touted as the most widely-printed text within the Pennsylvania German broadside tradition; while

\textsuperscript{33} Because of a change in ownership of the Festival in the mid 1990s, records from the original Festival have been lost or destroyed. All that is left comes from the press and individuals’ memories. The Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection in the Pennsylvania Folklife Society Collection at Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA, contains a few handwritten notes regarding the Festival, but little official documentation.

\textsuperscript{34} Paul K. Cressman, “Pennsylvania German Secular Songs,” \textit{The Pennsylvania Dutchman} 3, no. 9 (October 1, 1951): 7.

\textsuperscript{35} Don Yoder in discussion with the author, June 30, 2009. Also see “Commemorate ‘Hanging’ at Dutch Folk Festival,” \textit{Plain Dealer} (Cleveland, OH), June 23, 1963: 141. Online. Accessed 4/27/2013. Don Yoder, \textit{The Pennsylvania German Broadsides: A History and Guide}. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, 49, states that he had convinced “a Lehigh County farmer’s wife of eighty-nine years, who was visiting the Festival from the Allentown area” to perform the ballad at the 1961 Festival, but whether this date was misremembered, or the performance was not officially part of the Festival program is unclear.
“Joseph Miller” had been popular, its publication and distribution was not as broad.  
Most of the events featured in Susanna’s story took place less than 20 miles from 
Kutztown, firmly in a region closely aligned with Pennsylvania Dutch (and German) 
culture. Joseph Miller had been a more recent immigrant, of Polish origin, and, 
apparently, not as well-integrated into his community as the people of Reading and the 
Ballad’s author wanted to make Susanna appear. Both ballads together provided a 
balance of the view of nineteenth-century Pennsylvania crime and punishment. Joseph 
Miller had brutally murdered his family before hanging himself, and the ballad reflects 
that gore. “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” downplays her actual crime, describes it in even 
less detail, and focuses on the themes of repentance widespread in popular culture. The 
ballad provided an opportunity to showcase the community as the supporters – if not 
saviors – of a friendless young woman. And, subsequently, Susanna’s story becomes 
connected in topic, if not in form, to those describing fairy tale maidens who had to be 
rescued so that they could achieve their happily-ever-after. Where “Joseph Miller” 
highlighted the violence of the individual and the graphic results of his actions, “Susanna 
Cox” focused instead on the community and its positive support.

Lied, von der Mordgeschichte des Joseph Miller: welcher im Januar 1822, einer Sonntags-Nacht, 
seine schwangere Frau und zwei Kinder auf eine grausame Art ermordet und sich selbst erhing, 
welches alles, wie man glaubt, aus Armuth geschah,” (Lebanon, PA: 1822).


38 Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: 
Random House Times Books, 1994), 28-9. Although Douglas focuses on Disney’s princesses, 
the end result is the same.
No reference to the story of Susanna Cox appearing in any form at the Festival is made until 1963, when the gallows appears on the map of the Festival grounds. That year, the publicity for the Festival focused on the discovery of a performer who was willing to perform “The Ballad of Susanna Cox”:

The largest public hanging in early Pennsylvania annals, the hanging of Susanna Cox in 1809 on Gallows Hill at Reading for doing away with her newborn infant, will be commemorated at this year’s 14th annual Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival….

THE HANGING will be featured at this year’s festival because of the discovery within the last six months of the last surviving ballad singer in all of Pennsylvania Dutchland, 79-year-old Carrie Bonser Weaver of Moravian Emmaus. Her uniqueness as a folksinger rests with her using the third of the Dutch Country’s three tongues, “Church Deitsch,” now all but forgotten.

Carrie Bonser Weaver will sing her “Church German” ballads daily during the festival at a replica of the early gallows now under construction. Among the ballads is “The Sad and Mournful Tale of Susanna Cox,” written about the hanging of the luckless maid and one of the most widely sung ballads in Pennsylvania’s folksong tradition.

Without fail, from 1963 until 2013 – and anticipated for at least several years into the future – Susanna’s story has been featured in some way at the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival in all of its various names and locations.

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39 “The Ballad of Susanna Cox” may have been performed at some point during the Festival between 1951 and 1962 (inclusive), but it does not appear in any of the printed advertisements or descriptions. See J. William Frey, “Three Worlds Came to the Second Annual Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival,” The Pennsylvania Dutchman 3, no. 6 (August 1, 1951): 1. Also, advertisements and schedules for some of the early Festivals can be found on the first page of The Pennsylvania Dutchman 3, no. 5 (July 1, 1951); vol. 4, no. 3 (July 1952), all produced on the first page of the paper. The reappearance of the Ballad can be noted in “Folk Festival Program,” Pennsylvania Folklife, 13, no. 3 (July 1963): 28-32, and on the map of the Kutztown Fairgrounds reproduced in the same volume on page 57.


41 I will discuss this in some detail later, but Dave Fooks mentioned in passing to me that he might decide to let the story of Susanna take a few years off, at least, when June DeTurk retires from the presentation (Feb 14, 2013).
I asked some long-time participants about their earliest Festival experiences, to see how Susanna’s story fit into their memories. Understandably, the details of specific years have merged together as they contemplate events that happened over sixty years ago. Elaine Vardjan attended the Festival as a young girl, quickly moving from observer to participant as she assisted various family members at their craft booths. Her memories of the early years of the Festival focus on the personalities present, not the performances given, and her timeline is based more on the events of her own life than on the specific years. Her memory of the Festival confirms that Susanna’s story was “always” part of the events. She does not remember the Festival without Susanna’s story, but she also does not remember Susanna’s story in any iteration that predates the text written by Richard Gougler in the 1970s and still used at the time of our 2013 interview. While this reflects her acknowledged lack of interest in the performance, it also confirms how her own experiences overrode the “truth”: she remembers the events and personalities as they were relevant in her life. Ollie the basket maker, Brummy the herbalist, Johnny Ott the hex sign painter, and Helen Ford the decorative painter all affected Mrs. Vardjan directly, both in her youth and as an adult. Her responsibilities and focus were not on the specific performance, so she remembered that the Hanging was represented as part of the Festival, but did not believe that it was necessary for her to experience it more than once or twice. As will be discussed in the following chapter, some long-time Festival

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42 Elaine Vardjan (long time participant and vendor at the Kutztown Folk Festival) in discussion with the author, February 11, 2013.

43 Most of the individuals who worked at the Festival agreed that witnessing the Hanging once or twice was all that they felt was necessary. Zach Langley (in discussion with the author June 30, 2012), who had served as a reenactor at the Festival for several years and, as a graduate student at
attendees held the alternate view, believing that their annual participation in the Festival was not complete if they did not view the Hanging during their visit.

*The Pennsylvania Dutchman* highlights the “sad spectacle of this bright June day burned itself into the memory of our Pennsylvania Dutch people” and how “[m]illions of our forebears read it or heard it sung.” Since the editors of this newspaper were instrumental in designing the Festival’s early structure, their interpretation of the import of the text would have helped determine the ballad’s performance. When asked why “Susanna Cox” had become part of the Festival, Don Yoder focused on the ballad’s position as the most popular broadside – printed and presented – in the German language tradition in Pennsylvania. In a *Pennsylvania Folklife* article published in 1965, Don Yoder states “[i]t is for this reason – the fact that hangings produced ballads – that the Folk Festival includes daily a reenactment of the hanging of Susanna Cox, on an authentic recreated gallows modeled on the original in the Mercer Museum of the Bucks County Historical Society.” The place of the Ballad and the story itself, in his view, takes a secondary place to its contextual and literary relevance. This also adds to the argument as to why it is Susanna Cox’s story rather than Joseph Miller’s that gains a permanent home at the Festival: with the widespread circulation of “The Ballad of

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45 Don Yoder, “Kutztown and America,” *Pennsylvania Folklife* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1965): 9. Sara Good, of the Mercer Museum, had never heard that the Kutztown gallows was based on the Mercer gallows. She verified that the Mercer gallows had been in use in the area around Northampton, but she did not know specific years or whether it had traveled outside Bucks County (e-mail conversation with the author, April 2013). Allison DeKorte provided pictures of the Mercer gallows and it does structurally appear to be similar to that used in Kutztown.
Susanna Cox” in the nineteenth century, its historical distribution indicates that it reached a larger, more geographically-diverse population.\footnote{This argument has been made by Yoder (The Pennsylvania German Broadside) as well as others; he cites one of his informants as cataloging more than 80 versions of the Ballad. Corinne Earnest (e-mail correspondence, October 8, 2011), notes that a version of the German broadside was published in Ontario, Canada, in 1836.}

While other stories centered on Berks County and its folklore existed, Susanna’s was deemed the most appropriate for the Festival setting. I’ve asked multiple people why Susanna Cox’s story was chosen, and why it has continued to be produced. The answer I have received has always been a variation on a theme: this specific story is reproduced because it is important to do so due to, depending on the source, the story’s connection to the local community, its legal relevance, the ballad’s distribution within the North American German populations. Don Yoder, in 2009, relayed a slightly different story than he had in the Pennsylvania Folklife article of 1965: Susanna’s story is reenacted now because it is part of the history of the Festival as well as of the area and its people.\footnote{Don Yoder in discussion with the author, June 30, 2009, Chester, PA.}

No single factor began the presentation, and it is the combination of the relevant issues that help the performance continue to be presented, and to be positively received. But, whatever the motivations were, Susanna’s story was chosen as a representative tale regarding the local Pennsylvania Dutch people and the shared literature of the German-speaking population within North America. And, whether or not it really was representative at the time it was chosen, years of calling it such has transformed it into what it has always been billed as. Susanna’s story now embodies an accessible description of how the community reacted to aberrations in individual actions within
Berks County’s historical past. “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” was built on an existing ballad tradition, but grew and changed into a re-invented tradition: it was not, as with some truly invented traditions, plucked from the obscure path and instilled with significance by academics when the culture being reflected had not considered it relevant. But the performance and the specific perspective of the story have been transformed into a touchstone for the culture of the Festival itself, rather than that of the region.

**The Text**

As discussed previously, early Festival performances of Susanna’s story consisted of musical presentations. In both the original Festival year of 1950, and in the reintroduction of the Ballad in 1963, the text utilized was the High German version credited to Johann Philip Gombert.\(^{48}\) The time frame for the change from the Ballad – spoken or sung – to the current text is not clearly defined. The documents recording the Festival and the performance focus on the pageantry, not the text, and the official records from the Festival are not extant before the mid 1990s. Personal memories are also not exact: my informants who can talk about the 1960s and 1970s remember the Hanging as a constant fixture, recalling images but not specifics.\(^{49}\) This, again, raises the question of whether the exact dates are what holds import or whether it is the memories that have been created which supersede the need for documentary specificity. Because the


\(^{49}\) Informants who directly addressed this issue include Elaine Vardjan (attending since at least the mid-1950s), Dave Fooks (who began working at the Festival as a woodworker in 1970), and Diane Goldstein (who attended the Festival in her youth).
memories are so strong, and because they have coalesced into a description of the nostalgic era of time past, perhaps the exact timeline is not as necessary as is the overall impression for my purposes here.

Reproduction English-language versions of the Ballad were distributed at the Festival in the mid-1960s, to aid in the education of the Festival attendees.\textsuperscript{50} Then, in 1970, Richard Gougler, a World War II veteran, local high school math teacher, train connoisseur, and amateur playwright/director, took on the task of creating a text to go along with the performance addressing Susanna’s life and death.\textsuperscript{51} He was also responsible for several of the plays that became part of the Festival during the 1970s – plays designed to show the issues faced by the Plain Folk, rather than what had been seen as dramatized stereotypes in previously performed plays. Among his other works were the texts to the popular plays “The Shunning” and “We like our Country but we love our God,” the Amish wedding performance, and a performance based on the life of Regina Hartman, who had been kidnapped by Indians.

Richard Gougler’s text drew from several sources, including Louis Richards’ 1900 \textit{Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation}, Gombert’s ballad (especially Louis

\textsuperscript{50} Johann Phillip Gombert, \textit{A New Dirge Containing the History of Susanna Cox who was executed at Reading, Berks Co., Pa., for the Murder of her own Infant Child.} Trans. Louis Storck. Pennsylvania, 1865. Thanks to Don Yoder for sharing copies of this reproduction from his collection.

Storck’s translation), and research done in 1971 by Wayne Homan. Homan’s article, published in *Pennsylvania Folklife*, retold Susanna’s story by combining details of the historical documents and the Festival performance. Homan’s explanation is not merely a reiteration of the existing materials; he includes geographical information, pictures from the Festival, and a discussion of the publication patterns of the broadside. This interpretation of Susanna’s story is structured similarly to what Gougler would soon produce.

Beyond the description of Susanna’s case, Wayne Homan also addresses an issue in the continuity of the Festival. Johnny Brendel, who had contributed his talents to the performance of the Hanging for several years, had died in 1971. Perhaps this change in personnel became part of the impetus to modify the presentation, and the timing was right for Richard Gougler to step in and use his skills to rethink how the story was conveyed. Whatever the reason, and whatever the year, the presentation changed significantly with Gougler’s input. From the beginning text, calling the people to heed the words of the presenter, to the ending recital of the text that states “her exit, infamy!” the entire text lasts less than 8 minutes. Including set up and tear down, the entire presentation lasts less than 20 minutes total.

When June DeTurk took over the balladeer’s role in the mid 1990s, she had the support of the Festival organizers to change the presentation if she thought it was appropriate. She made a few minor changes, incorporating a few verses of Storck’s

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translation of the ballad but chose, overall, to maintain the integrity of Gouglers’s text and
the performance as a whole.53 Mrs. DeTurk shared with me the notes from which she
presents Susanna’s story every year. The bulk of it is a photocopy of Richard Gouglers’s
original text, with some handwritten modifications, both her own and from previous
performers.54 Her major contribution was the direct inclusion of the ballad, using the
same version which Don Yoder had reprinted and had distributed during the Festival in
1964. Mrs. DeTurk carries only her copy of the text, in a black choir
folder, with her on
the Fairgrounds. She does have a file of additional resources, which include documents
with different interpretations of the story that she has received from a variety of
sources.55 She has consulted these to add to her own understanding, but hasn’t seen a
need to modify the text any further.

The Setting

The Kutztown Fairgrounds, which has been home to one version or another of the
Kutztown Folk Festival since 1950, is located just off the campus of Kutztown
University.56 The property itself contains approximately 30 acres, including several

53 June DeTurk (performer at the Kutztown Folk Festival) in discussion with the author, June-July
2012; Dave Fooks in discussion with the author, February 14, 2013.

54 See Appendix E for her text, and Appendix F for a reproduction of the actual script. Thanks to
June DeTurk for permitting the reproduction of these items.

55 These include George M. Meiser IX and Gloria Jean Meiser. The Passing Scene (16 Vols),
(Reading, PA: Historical Society of Berks County, 1982-), especially Volume 15, which contains
material about Susanna Cox. When I spoke with Mrs. DeTurk in July of 2012, I had recently
discovered the Storck translation, so I shared that this was the text she had been using.

56 In 1950, what is now Kutztown University was then known as Kutztown State Teachers
College; it became Kutztown State College in 1960 and achieved University Status in 1983 – a
few years after the Festival changed its affiliations to Ursinus College (details verified at
permanent buildings, a stage and a grandstand that can seat over 2000. Previously in the Festival’s tenure, the performance, now titled “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” was staged on or next to the central commons. The billing for the event changed over time as well: programs from the Festival show the variations in locations but, more importantly, the placement of the Hanging on the events page shows a move away from treating the presentation as a hallmark event of the Festival. From a prominent placement in the upper-left hand corner of the program, to a location on the second to bottom line of the right hand side, the Hanging moved out of favor as other events, including the butchering, a short-lived portrayal of one woman’s abduction by and life with a local Indian tribe, and extended plays, moved in and out of favor. Yet the Hanging was not removed from the roster of events. On the contrary, it may be one of the individual presentations that has maintained the longest continuous tenure at the Festival.

As of 2013, the Hanging’s current location is at the far northwest end of the fairgrounds. The vendors placed in this area used to complain that they got very little foot traffic because no consistent performances drew the crowds. So, when rethinking the placement of performances and presentations after the change in Festival sponsorship

57 An aerial map of the region can be examined at http://www.kutztownfairgrounds.com/rentalsaerialmap.htm, accessed 10/22/2012; Photo courtesy Kutztown Folk Festival; labeled “Susanna Coxe 1955” shows a large group of people watching something at the Hanging’s current location. I pointed this out to Dave Fooks, and he reiterated that the picture was of individuals witnessing the butchering, not the Hanging, and that he would work with his staff to have the identification corrected. As of August 2013, the photo was still misattributed.

during the 1990s, the new management decided to encourage visitors to explore the liminal areas of the fairgrounds. The Hanging was moved to its current location on the far end, and children’s activities were added in another less-frequently visited area. Now the vendors near the Hanging have less to complain about in terms of business; instead, they comment on the lack of variety in both that presentation and in the live music that features only a few performers in rotation.

The gallows is built of solid wood, rebuilt and reinforced yearly. It has 13 steps, leading up to a platform with a wooden railing at waist-level and a bar designed specifically to hold the rope from which the condemned would hang. The platform floor contains a trap door, normally held shut with a padlock unless the gallows is in official use. It is through this trap door that the doll “Suzanna” is hanged. The gallows has been described as historically accurate due to its similarity to the model kept at the Mercer Museum in Doylestown. However, based on the information provided in the historical record, this gallows is not the same style as that on which Susanna Cox was executed. Her gallows was a much simpler affair, consisting of something to hang from and a set up that allowed a horse cart to be driven up underneath, and then drive off to allow the condemned to hang. The Kutztown gallows is more like what would have been used in the later part of the nineteenth century, but the trap door makes the performance easier to stage.

If the gallows were not present, the location would not seem that different from any other part of the Festival. Behind the staged area is a portion of the parking lot.

59 The description provided by both Richards (Crime and Expiation) and Jacob Pile (The Elk County Advocate (Ridgeway, PA) September 23, 1875).
reserved for vendors; behind that, a neighborhood filled with single-family homes. Photos from the 1950s show fields behind the location; the growth of Kutztown proper has bordered the fairgrounds – and, by extension, the Festival – with modernity despite attempts to maintain cultural continuity within the boundaries of the Festival itself. Even over the past 4 years, modifications to the location have been made. A boundary between the Fairgrounds and the outside world has become more pronounced: what had been a simple post and rail fence in 2009 became a solid barrier by 2012. A stage for musical performances has flanked the gallows on one side; vendors have traditionally been on the other but, in 2012, a demonstration on laundry techniques took their place. Most observers sit on the grassy slope or available hay bales in front of the gallows stage; others peruse the offerings of the vendors placed in the pig stalls on the top of the hill. The performance itself takes only about eight minutes – ten, if you count the hangman’s set up time – and the presentation is so understated that many don’t realize it is going on and proceed to walk about, even between the presentation and the audience. In 2009, during one of the performances, what appeared to be a grandmother and a 4 or 5 year old boy proceeded to amble lazily right in front of the gallows during Mrs. DeTurk’s performance, arguing loudly, oblivious to their observers.

60 Photos in the collection of the Kutztown Folk Festival can be, in part, viewed on their website (http://www.kutztownfestival.com/historicalphotos.shtml, accessed 5/11/2013). They also maintain a large collection of unlabeled print photos and slides which are in the process of being preserved and made accessible. Thanks to Len Smith and Dave Fooks who granted me access to these photos.

61 The proprietor of this exhibit (in discussion with the author, July 2, 2012) was upset by the move to this location. He does not object to being next to the Hanging because of the content itself, but because the number of families with children – the primary audience for his exhibit – is significantly lower than it had been at their previous location near the front gate. He was told that the move was to help bring people down to his new area, but he did not witness the end result. However, as he had nothing to sell, the change did not provide any financial burden.
When the performance was staged on the central commons, my informants remember a much larger, livelier crowd. According to several different accounts, the performance was so popular that it could attract an audience that spread from the commons center out to the back gate – a distance I measured at close to 250 feet. So the location has moved but the content has stayed relatively constant – and the text itself has changed little in 40 years. Perhaps the larger audiences occurred because of the location or the lower frequency of the performance, and perhaps because of the adjustment in the social mores of the Festival attendees. I observed that the better-attended presentations in the years I attended coincided with better weather, or occurred in covered venues throughout the Fairgrounds. So, for some, a hanging is only entertaining if the breeze is right and the shade is in place. Lori, who has sold baskets for the last few years at the top of the ridge overlooking the Hanging, noticed that her sales and the size of the crowds varied based more on the weather and on placement of the 4th of July within the week than on any other factors.

**The Personnel**

The performance and the affiliated performers have changed dramatically over the years. A series of performers have served within the presentation and, even as the text has remained relatively static, the presentation has been interpreted differently depending on who was in charge. In 1976, a narrator who presumably sang part of the performance, Janeen and Jenny (long-time Festival attendees and participants) in discussion with the author, July 2012. They don’t seem to connect this memory with their others about the changes in hours that allowed for a wider range of festivities, rather than the current sedate 6 PM closing.

Lori Savidge (basketmaker and vendor) in discussion with the author, July 2, 2010.
his guitar accompanist, and a hangman constituted the human cast. These three roles seem to be those most commonly filled, although the current performance, which has been the standard in more recent years, has two human performers and no accompanying music. The role sometimes described as the “Balladeer” although there is no indication that the piece has consistently been sung, has reportedly been filled by Carl Nygard, Johnny Brendel, Richard Gougler’s son, and others. As of 2013, this position (now referred to as the “narrator”) is filled by June DeTurk, who took it over in 1995. Mrs. DeTurk is generally considered to be the first woman to serve as the balladeer, although Elaine Vardjan remembers one of her predecessors as a “fat woman who also sang hymns in the Union Church.”

Mrs. DeTurk presents Richard Gougler’s traditional text with a few of her own modifications. Although she had been encouraged to consider significant changes to the script, she decided instead to continue to use Gougler’s text with the slight modification

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64 Nygard was the performer in 1976 (Heather Thomas, “Legend of Susanna Cox Retold: Festival Hanging Popular,” Reading Eagle July 7, 1976: 15). Mrs. DeTurk, as well as a few other informants, remember that Gougler’s son performed in the early 1990s; Johnny Brendel is cited as the most memorable performer by Don Yoder (2009 interview), and referenced by Wayne Homan, “The Sorrow Song of Susanna Cox,” in 1971. Also, a photo with a caption discussing Brendel can be found in the Folk Festival section of Pennsylvania Folklife, Summer 1968, Vol. XVII, No. 4.

65 Vardjan in discussion with the author, February 11, 2013. Perhaps this discrepancy can be at least partially explained by the split in the mid 1990s, which meant that two different individuals were performing the role. During the period that the Festival split in the late 1990s, both Festivals maintained performances of Susanna’s story – the “old” Festival, which moved to Summit Station, using the existing Suzanna doll and gallows and the “new” Festival, which took over the space at the Kutztown Fairgrounds, revamping their own versions of both. When the “old” Festival folded in 1999, the “new” one made an effort to buy any memorabilia and materials that remained, but neither the gallows nor the Suzanna doll were made available. Dave Fooks (February, 2013) believes that the gallows were destroyed, either through use or to be repurposed. He has no idea what happened to Suzanna, but did mention that he specifically looked out for her so that the Festival would have a backup.
Mrs. DeTurk was, as of 2013, ninety years old, and she stated to several people that her time participating in the Hanging was probably limited. While she continues to perform, however, she insists on doing her best and, while she rarely wanders from the script other than to add emphasis on issues that she believes to be relevant at the time, she does continue to gather materials about Susanna’s story. When I met her in 2009 for the first time, she claimed ignorance of any parts of the story other than what she said in the performance. In 2010, she was willing to speak with me to a greater extent, and demonstrated her truly deep understanding of the material and story.

The change was not in her level of knowledge – although, as she said, she was always receiving additional information – but in her willingness to communicate that knowledge with another. In 2009, I was just another gawking tourist whose presence interrupted her schedule. By 2012, after seeing me for a few years and hearing why I was interested in the story, we were able to speak in a more mutually-beneficial way.

The other actor portrays the Hangman, a role traditionally filled by a teenage boy. Usually, the boy chosen for this position is also part of the Festival set-up crew, and might also perform in one of the other presentations. He has to have a certain amount of strength and height to be able to set up and take down the presentation, but he also tends to start young so that, hopefully, he will be available for more than one year. The performer in 2012 was “almost 17”, and had either been the Hangman or assisted with the role for three years.

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66 She was not aware of this specific reference; she just built her performance off that of those who went before her.

67 His real name, according to Lori Savidge, is Joey. I observed him training for the role in 2010 but did not have Institutional Review Board approval to interview a minor.
The third role currently depicted is played by a doll, not a human. One of the main props used is a life-sized effigy of “Suzanna.” The doll, which was first used in the 1960s, went through several incarnations. Because she needs to fall through the gallows, not just flop around, a soft rag doll or even a mannequin was not heavy enough. The doll in use for many years could fold in half for easy transport and storage, and she had a variety of heads, including one mannequin head and what appear to be soft sculpture doll heads, with hair ranging from black (in 1976) to blonde (the early 1990s) to the current reddish-brown.\textsuperscript{68} In one incarnation, she was described as having “stuffings”, as the observers were concerned that these would fall out over the course of the Festival week’s abuses.\textsuperscript{69} While the current doll wears a black hood over her head, this was not always the case. Many of the older pictures provide a look at Suzanna’s face, which, at that time, was intentionally cartoonish so as to not appear to be a live human. The doll currently in use was built around 1996, utilizing a steel skeleton. Originally, this doll’s skeleton joints were fused. However, after a few years of the doll hitting the wrong parts of the gallows as well as landing in some socially-inappropriate positions, the skeleton was rebuilt with articulated joints.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{68} Thomas, 1976; Linda Tadic, “The Ballad of Susanna Cox,” unreleased (1994) film proposal, Linda Tadic, HSBC LC32, Berks County Collection, Box 05, Folder 05; personal observation (February 2013, Kutztown, PA) for current doll. According to Heather Thomas, “Legend of Susanna Cox Retold,” the doll used in 1976 had been a modified mannequin, described as having a previous life as one of Santa’s elves.


\textsuperscript{70} Dave Fooks in discussion with the author, June 2010 and February 2013. The crowd reaction was confirmed in 2010 by both Lori Savidge and Paul Estler, whose stands were at the top of the ridge that year.
The Suzanna doll gets a new dress every few years, as the wear and tear on her, both during the Festival and during the other 51 weeks of the year when she lives in her coffin in a storage shed, leads to the deterioration of the dress. In every reincarnation, the dress has followed the description given by Jacob Pile and been white with black trim.\(^71\) One of the earliest extant pictures of the Suzanna doll is from 1968, showing a blonde doll with a white dress, black collar, and black ribbons in a line down the front of the bodice.\(^72\) In 1976, Suzanna’s dress was white, with long sleeves and a high neck decorated with a black ribbon. An undated picture (probably from the late 1980s or early 1990s) from the Festival archives shows Suzanna with a high-waisted, long-sleeved white dress over white pants; a black triangular collar, hood, gloves, and shoes.

Carol Heppe has remade Suzanna’s dress on several occasions. As she stated in our correspondence, she strove to build on what had already been done.\(^73\) Her expertise is in costuming and quilting; she reused the collar and bows because her sources confirmed that this was appropriate to the time period. She did not claim to know anything about the historical accuracy of the dress she was constructing; she was more concerned with the logistics of the performance and continuing the Festival’s traditions.

\(^71\) Jacob Pile, *The Elk County Advocate* (Ridgeway, PA) September 23, 1875; reprinted several other times, notably in Yoder, *The Pennsylvania German Broadside*: 46; and most recently, by Ron Devlin, “11-Year-Old Saw Execution,” *Reading Eagle*, February 14, 2013, accessed online 5/11/2013. Based on the sources used for the rest of the presentation, it is more likely that Richard Gougler consulted Louis Richards’ work rather than Jacob Pile’s. However, since Pile’s description of the dress is the oldest I’ve found, I cite him as the original source that was then utilized by Richards. Also, I say black “trim” rather than “ribbons,” as found in the primary texts, because the dress used in 2009 and 2010 was wearing a black collar rather than black ribbons.

\(^72\) “Festival Highlights” 29-37 in *Pennsylvania Folklife* 27, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 29-37. Also a picture from the Festival archives. This picture only shows Suzanna from the waist up; Brendel is standing in front of her and an unidentified woman dressed appropriately for 1968 stands next to both on the Gallows.

\(^73\) Carol Heppe, e-mail correspondence, February, 2013.
Heppe designed and created the version in use in 2009, which continued the usage of the collar, but otherwise changed the silhouette to include a natural waist. All versions contained pantaloons to cover the skeletal structure and maintain decorum if the doll’s skirts did not land as expected. The overall style of the dress followed the pattern of the modern Plain Folk and the local women living in the 1830s and 1840s. In this version, the back of Suzanna’s dress was badly stained, probably from sitting on a rusting metal chair in the rain. This imperfection, rather than taking away from the presentation, added a level of verisimilitude, as a white garment would be difficult to keep pristine throughout the rigors of an execution by hanging.

The most recent version of Suzanna’s dress made its debut in 2012. It was designed by a Festival employee who identified herself to me as Jenny. After Jenny repaired the skeleton, she carefully researched Susanna Cox’s life in order to best design the new dress according to the recorded descriptions. Jenny started with a dress that had originally been used as Laurey’s wedding dress in a local theatre production of *Oklahoma*!. With that foundation of a white dress, she attached what she described as “large, black ribbons.” Jenny was especially proud of the size of the black ribbons – she felt that Suzanna had been done a disservice over the past few years by not having the appropriate large bows. The removal of the collar and the increase in the bows’ size changed the appearance of the Suzanna doll significantly; the cotton of the dress added to

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74 Jenny did not volunteer her last name, so I did not ask for it. When I spoke with Dave Fooks and he was putting me in contact with several of the individuals associated with the Festival, I specifically mentioned Jenny, but he either was not able or was not willing to provide me with her contact information.

75 She did not cite her sources, and, as I was encouraging her to tell the story as she interpreted it, I did not ask for specific citations.
the period-appropriateness but the inclusion of satin ribbon and small lace trim, which made sense for a theatrical reproduction of a wedding dress from 1906 Oklahoma, still kept the dress from being as period-appropriate as Jenny had hoped it would be. Still, the repurposing of the dress was in keeping with the traditions of the region in the early nineteenth century, even if Susanna’s specific dress had, according to all accounts including the one used in the performance text, been a new garment.

Performance of the “Execution of Suzanna Cox” in the Early Twenty-First Century

As witnessed in 2009-2012, the performance of the “Execution of Suzanna Cox” has experienced only minor changes in staging, costume, and personnel, and only slight variations in text. The current performance begins with the setting of the stage.

The first sign of impending action occurs with the arrival of the teenage Hangman, dressed in clothing that is designed to evoke the same kind of timelessness as do most of the outfits of the vendors and performers. He prepares the area for the performance. The order of his actions has varied slightly with the different performances, but the main features include testing the microphone used by the narrator; arranging the necessary props; and setting the locks and ropes on the gallows trap door in order for it to function as intended. The teenager will then remove himself from the

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76 I have discussed the historical dress and its potential significance in Chapter 3.

77 This is how the performance is billed. All historical documentation indicates that her name is spelled “Susanna”, but, because of the spelling used for the performance, I will refer to the doll as “Suzanna.” Richard Gougler’s text titled the presentation “The Hanging of Susanna Cox.”

78 “Seth”, the performer in 2009 and 2010, chose to wear dark pants, a plaid shirt, suspenders, and a wide-brimmed hat. “Jonathan”, in training in 2010 and in charge in 2011 and 2012, chose to wear the dark pants and shirt he would need for his continuing role as the Hangman.
gallows and put on an executioner’s hood so that he can return later in the performance in the guise of the Hangman. In the interim, and regardless of the individual serving in the role, he would often spend his time waiting for his entrance in the stall of basket maker Lori, whose twin children were almost the same age as the performer.\textsuperscript{79}

Right before the performance begins, the Suzanna doll is placed upon a folding metal chair over top of the gallows trap door. The noose now arrives at the gallows already tied around Suzanna’s neck. Several years ago, the noose was tied on the support and then Suzanna was put into it but, after a child was caught daring a sibling to try the noose, the Festival programmers wisely decided that keeping the rope with Suzanna would provide an extra level of safety. It also adds an additional historical nod, although this was not the intent, because Suzanna is described by one observer as wearing her own noose around her neck throughout the funeral procession.\textsuperscript{80} The rope is then attached to the top bar of the gallows by the Hangman, who throws it around the support several times before tying it loosely off so that it holds fast but is still manageable when he comes to tear down the set later. The Hangman has measured the rope so that, hopefully, Suzanna will hang just below the trap door opening. If he makes an error, that miscalculation can lead to the doll either remaining partially above the trap door or banging into what lies beneath. Prior to 2012, Suzanna’s coffin was placed next to the gallows. However, in 2012, the decision was made to instead place the coffin underneath

\textsuperscript{79} Lori Savidge also took some responsibility for the young men, maintaining their cell phone numbers, and the numbers of the vendors near their other working locations, in case they forgot to arrive for the performance.

\textsuperscript{80} “Recollections of Olden Times: Interesting Incidents that Occurred in this City Three-Quarters of a Century Ago and Within the Memory of Jacob B. Hoff,” HSBC, Louis Richards Scrapbook D, 348.
the gallows. This relocation also resulted in the rethinking of the length of the noose, but did add an extra element of verisimilitude, as the one version of the story indicates that Suzanna rode to her execution sitting on her own coffin. Now, at the end of the performance, she falls into the coffin that will – literally as well as figuratively – become her resting place.

Once the stage is set, June DeTurk begins her role. She performs her part with reverence, usually wearing a black skirt and jacket, almost always with a lighter white blouse underneath. To be able to negotiate the stairs as well as aid her transit around the Festival, Mrs. DeTurk wears black sneakers. But, to balance out the informality of this choice, she wears a large-brimmed black hat which features the only color in her ensemble – a pink flower on the brim. First, she climbs up the 13 rickety steps to the top of the gallows and positions herself as far away as possible from the loosely-closed trap door. Then, after she has verified that the microphone is working, she almost invariably plunges right into the text. When she intentionally varies her choice of words, her comments usually involve a statement regarding the weather (especially if high heat or winds led, as they did in 2010, to her decision to remain on the ground during the performance) or an additional historical fact.\footnote{One of the vendors discussed how he and his wife try to make the most out of hearing the Hanging text more than 20 times a year by noting the variations and mistakes made. Apparently, Mrs. DeTurk’s most common error is a juxtaposition of numbers, i.e. 1908 rather than 1809.} In 2009, she was very deliberate in emphasizing that the events happened “exactly 200 years ago” although her stress on the words was the only indication that this fact held any specific significance.

While Mrs. DeTurk’s performance text did vary to a certain extent, since she would occasionally misremember dates or modify details, the overall content remained
the same throughout the approximately 25 times I have witnessed the presentation. Her trademark choir folder, with her notes tucked inside, went with her up onto the gallows, but the folder was rarely opened, and never do I remember her actually consulting the papers. As she explained it to me, she took her role very seriously and would pull out her notes weeks in advance, in order to begin to refresh her memory of the text, and see what modifications in tone or emphasis she felt it was appropriate to make. She performs using a clear, relatively unaccented voice, utilizing the formality of the language as designed by Gougler to capture that of the ballad translator. Mrs. DeTurk does not at any time present the text in German or the local dialect; while previous performers had felt it appropriate to do so, she does not.

For the beginning of the presentation, Mrs. DeTurk chose to add the traditional “come all ye” introduction as found in the 1865 version of the translated ballad, requesting that

All ye who feel for others woes
With hearts compassionate
Listen to this woeful tale
About this poor damsel’s fate. After reciting three more verses, Mrs. DeTurk states her purpose by requesting that the assembled observers join her to “let us look back at the events that led to the death of Susanna Cox. Although they took place 200 years ago, they have a strange parallel on the world today.” She then switches back to third person, to provide the historical story.

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82 Mrs. DeTurk says that she’s never spent the Fourth of July anywhere but at the Festival, and she doesn’t plan to change her plans any time soon. She rarely feels limited by her age – outside the Festival, she teaches yoga – but she has, in times of high wind or high temperatures, changed her performance position.

While some of the phrases she uses are intended to sway the population toward empathy for Susanna, she does not provide commentary but, instead, performs the script as written. In the middle of her discussion of Susanna’s origins and position in the Geehr/Schneider family, she slows down her speech to mention that “At the age of 13, Susanna was bound out to the Snyder family, with the understanding that she would work there for board and lodging, and continue to work there until someone came to marry her. No one ever came for Susanna.” Mrs. DeTurk utilizes pauses along with her slight vocal modulation to highlight the significance of the statement in relation to the rest of the story. She will then continue at her previous rate to relay Susanna’s biographical information. With a very few exceptions, Mrs. DeTurk will remain standing throughout the performance. She might move to adjust her hat, but for little other purpose. She typically has a bottle of water at her feet, but she does not drink during the performance. Her stationary stance does not encourage participation, but it does protect her from accidental harm; the Gallows’ trap door is quite large and right behind her, and she does not want to misstep. So, while she speaks to the audience, she does not invite them to speak or participate, just to observe and contemplate.

As Mrs. DeTurk recites the part of the story that outlined the role of the Hangman, the same young man who had set up the stage, now completely dressed in black with his face covered with a hood, reenters the scene and proceeds to the gallows. Occasionally, she will say “the Hangman,” and then pause, waiting to be sure that he is on his way. Sometimes, depending on how long it took him to start moving, she would repeat the words after she had verified his compliance, continuing with the story as he performed his tasks. Jonathan, the young man who portrayed the role of the Hangman in
2011 and 2012, had a habit of losing track of where he was supposed to be and when. While he never strayed far once he actually got to the area around the gallows, he occasionally became so engrossed in a conversation that he would lose track of the performance and need this push to return to his duties. When Mrs. DeTurk reaches the point at which Suzanna should be hanged, the Hangman pulls the rope that releases the latch on the trap door. Suzanna falls through, often banging her head into the door and hitting the falling metal chair as she swings in front of the onlookers.

At the end of the performance, individuals in the audience normally do not know how to react. Partially this is because the contextual clues do not completely indicate that the performance is over. There is no curtain to close, and Mrs. DeTurk remains on the top of the gallows for at least a few seconds. When the audience realizes that the performance is, indeed, over, many will applaud before exiting the area. Some leave discussing what they’ve witnessed, and others move on to the next experience of the day.

The performance of the hanging itself experiences more variations than the text. Mrs. DeTurk has command of the script; the Hangman acts his part consistently. But the technical and environmental aspects are not always as predictable. Depending on how Suzanna’s noose was tied, the direction of the wind, the integrity of the gallows’ hardware, and the previous stresses on the Suzanna doll, a wide range of variations – even mishaps – could occur. While the Hangman seemed to have the length of the rope measured off for consistency, he did not measure this precisely every time. In 2009, during one of the performances, the latches holding the trap door in place stuck, and Seth was unable to release the door even after several strong tugs. Mrs. DeTurk, standing at the top of the gallows, remaining stationary because the trap door might open at any
second, provided one of her few breaks in character. She ad libbed, stating, “We have been having some problems. It was working well the last two days. So you’ll have to return at 2:00 and I’m sure Susanna won’t be quite as fortunate then.” As soon as she was done with this request for the audience to return, the door released and Suzanna was, finally, hanged. The audience response was enthusiastic: more than with other performances, they understood that the performance had ended and it was now an appropriate time to applaud. In 2010, the first Hanging of the season ended dramatically, as the stability of Suzanna’s skeleton had not been tested after her year in storage and one of her metal legs fell off. This reminded several of my informants of other aberrations from past years, leading to stories describing sticking trap doors, weather-related problems, a decapitation, and at least one other missing limb.

Some observers do demonstrate a significant interest in the performance, closely examining the gallows and its environs. Often, individuals will engage Mrs. DeTurk or one of the other Festival employees in a conversation. The informational boards provide additional information about “gallows lore.” On several occasions, individuals have posed themselves for pictures with the hanging Suzanna. The participating individuals crossed gender, generational, and race boundaries: one grandmother took the picture of her approximately 8-year-old twin granddaughters alongside the hanging Suzanna; a group of teenage boys, with at least one African American member, wandered by and decided to pose; a small group of older men also stopped to smile for the camera with

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84 From July 1, 2009, performance.
their arms around Susanna’s hanging form.85 They left with a visual reminder of the event, but, perhaps, more as a commemoration of their own participation than of the event itself. The individuals taking pictures with the hanging doll did not seem to care that the item hanging behind them was the representation of a person. They chose to memorialize their attendance and, perhaps, shock some of their friends with the image.

After the crowd disperses, the hangman will clean up the area. He will place Suzanna back in her coffin, return the microphone to the performance stage, and reset the locks on the gallows trap door. He will then change clothing as appropriate and return to his other responsibilities. Mrs. DeTurk also resumes her other position at the Festival, singing hymns and providing historical context within the Union Church on the main commons. Suzanna will remain in her coffin next to or underneath the gallows until the next performance; the small stage next to the gallows is often used for musical acts, performing in a wide range of genres.

**Experiences**

I have witnessed the Hanging multiple times, in 2009, 2010, and 2012. On these occasions, I have had the opportunity to speak with audience members, Festival vendors and workers, and individuals more tied to the Pennsylvania Dutch culture than to the Festival itself. I have also met with other individuals associated with the Festival – or just from the local region – to discuss their reactions and interpretations. Reactions vary widely, not just based on my informants’ position and prior knowledge, but based on how

85 From all years I have attended the Festival, I have video and/or photographs of individuals having their picture taken with the Susanna doll while she was still hanging. The older gentlemen attended in 2009; the grandmother and twins, as well as the teenagers, were observed in 2012.
they viewed the Hanging in the context of the Festival as a whole. Many long-time attendees believed that the Hanging was an appropriate part of the overall experience, mainly because, in their construction of the Festival, it had always been there. No one could remember why a big green chair was always central on the main commons, and no one could remember why the hanging was staged as it was. But they maintained a common conception that these were things that had always been the way they were now, or that the changes had been made for the better: they were part of the history of the Festival itself, whether or not they could explain the specific connections with the people and place.

My expectation for the first hanging that I attended, in 2009, was quite different than the reality I experienced. I had read the journalistic interpretations, both in newspapers and in Pennsylvania Folklife. These presentations discussed the impact of the piece, not the specifics of the performance. So I filled in the missing details based on Jacob Pile’s firsthand description of his own experience of Susanna’s execution. I expected a solemn procession, perhaps with a band and some sort of military presence, with reenactors portraying Susanna, Rev. Pauli and other relevant characters. I also thought that “Susanna” would express her dying words (in a suitable English translation, of course), or sing the hymn she had learned for the occasion, warning the audience

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86 I had a conversation with Patrick Donmoyer and Zach Langley on June 30, 2012, in which I asked about the Big Green Chair. Neither had an answer, although they both had personal and professional interests in the Festival. Zach flagged me down a few days later to let me know that he has asked around. No one else knew, either. When I spoke with Dave Fooks in February 2013, he explained that, while it held no official significance, it had been important enough for him to track down and purchase after the “other” Festival had stopped. Elaine Vardjan (February 11, 2013) also stated that she knew of no official significance.

87 Pile, The Elk County Advocate.
against following her example, stating her acknowledgement that she was a sinner and asking for forgiveness.

While staged for effect, the hanging as presented today at the Kutztown Festival presents less drama than the historical event as described in the memories of Jacob Pile. And, according to Don Yoder in 2009, I shouldn’t have been surprised with the disconnect between the historical record and the staged performance. Dr. Yoder acknowledged that while the performance was much simpler than what I had expected, insisted that it was exactly as it should be in the context of the Festival itself. Historical accuracy remained relevant, but it became secondary if a decision regarding the feasibility and appropriateness of the presentation needed to be taken into consideration. Dave Fooks also believed that historical accuracy was important – but, again, in context. For Fooks and those running the Festival, maintaining the tradition of the performance as it had been presented over time remained more relevant than establishing or reexamining the accuracy of that performance as related to the historical record.

The presentation is as a retelling, with the hanging at the end of a figure that is quite obviously a doll. This is not a reenactment in the true sense of the term: only one individual plays a role; the performance is a monologue relaying the story, not a dialogue reliving the story. Still, the decision was made to tell the story rather than reenact it; hearing the words allowed the listener to maintain a psychological distance from the

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88 Don Yoder in discussion with the author, June 30, 2009.
89 Rebecca Schneider, Reenactment: On Performing Remains (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2010), 3.
event in a way that a more graphic reenactment would not.  This is not unlike the reenactment of a slave auction in Colonial Williamsburg, without the extensive cast and limiting participatory experiences. While the staff at Williamsburg believed that including the slave auction as a part of their offerings was relevant, they also made the decision to act out the events rather than incorporate audience participation. In both situations, recounting instead of reenacting the story acknowledged both the charged nature of the topic and the need to tell the story regardless: the possible public relations fallout was considered, but deemed to be less significant than the relevance of the topic.

**Relevance of Story in the greater context of the Festival**

Susanna’s story has been part of the greater ethnic and geographic communities over the past 200 years, but most now only know it in the context of the Festival performance. The ballad based on her life has fallen out of popular performance, except by those interested in preserving it as a part of the culture. She is no longer just a historical figure, or just the protagonist in a Trauerlied. The name “Susanna Cox” serves as a cultural ideograph: an individual reacts one way or another to her name, dependant

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90 Stacy F. Roth, *Past Into Present: Effective Techniques for First Person Historical Interpretation* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 164, 171. Roth, in her discussion of living history exhibits, mentions that many uncomfortable issues were addressed through retelling rather than reenacting if it was believed that the reenacting would take away from the museum-goers overall experience. However, some events such as slave auctions, funerals, childbirth, and illness were still seen as important enough to portray within the context of the living history museum.

91 Janeen and Jenny in discussion with the author, July 2012. Neither provided their last name and I did not ask for it. It is also discussed in Don Yoder, *Pennsylvania German Broadsides*; and Russell and Corinne Earnest with Edward L. Rosenberry, *Flying Leaves and One Sheets* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Books, 2005).
on how the individual is familiar with the story.\textsuperscript{92} Today, the connection is more often made to the Festival performance than to any other aspect of her story, however, since it is through the Festival performance that her story has reached beyond the boundaries of locality and ethnicity. She has been transformed into an intentional representation of the history, heritage, and tradition of the Pennsylvania Dutch community. But the question remains: did she reach this status because of the inherent qualities of her story, or because someone decided that a story was necessary as a part of the Festival and hers was simply available? Perhaps the latter option resulted in the original selection of Susanna’s story for the Festival, but the ongoing presentation continues both because of the perceived relevance of the story in the greater community and because of the adherence to the traditions associated with its performance.

While the story is used to represent the greater communities defined by geography, ethnicity, and gender, it is also a reflection of how the Festival organizers have interpreted the historical community’s treatment of Susanna. Even with the societal developments over the past 60 years, Susanna’s story is still presented as a reflection of how the people of Berks County reacted to transgressive community members. Susanna’s story is not that of a well-behaved exemplar of Pennsylvania Dutch womanhood. But it is not Susanna’s actions that form the central focus of the Festival’s reasoning: it is the community reaction and response when confronted with one of their own whose actions were deemed illegal and against a mother’s innate nature. They don’t

want to remove the performance, despite occasional protests, not only for its historical value, but for its historical place within the Festival itself.

This is how those that have developed, marketed, and performed the Hanging as a part of the Kutztown Folk Festival over the past 64 years have tried with intention to remake and represent Susanna. Or, at least, that is what the propaganda would imply. This is not always how the story is interpreted, with reactions ranging from compassion regarding her memory to outright hostility toward historical figures and those with the authority to continue the modern presentation.

The story did take on a new life when the Festival planners decided to make it a daily element within the Festival. The performance now represents both the Pennsylvania German tradition, as it portrays elements that have been part of their culture since the Ballad was first written in 1809. It is also an example of heritage that this same Pennsylvania Dutch group has determined needs to be portrayed in a relatively static form over the past fifty years. And it is also a new tradition, representing the intersection of the original community with that of the Festival planners and that of the Festival goers.

Is it possible to examine the role that this performance holds in the public understanding of the goals of the Festival itself, but not necessarily possible to point to just one definition that it fulfills in the understanding of the community it is intended to represent. The portrayal of the event both becomes its own tradition, with a life separate from either what it was meant to convey and from the modern culture, but it maintains connections to both. This bridge between past, present, and festival adds vitality to the story, both increasing its efficacy as an example because of the more widespread understanding and
granting the story a renewed vitality that it might not have achieved without the public retelling.

The performance of “Execution of Suzanna Cox” is the continuation of an existing tradition: it builds on the ballads and stories that have circulated throughout Berks County and the surrounding region since 1809. The story is both part of the canon of Berks County legends, and a cultural ideograph that ties the people of the region together through their shared interactions related to that tradition. But this usage of tradition does not encompass all options, as some traditional items and actions are mutable, adapting to the changes within the culture in which they are found, but maintaining their purpose within the community. And, while many claim that the story is ubiquitous in the region, others do not remember ever encountering it outside the context of the Festival itself. In at least once case, an informant unaffiliated with the Festival asked me if I thought that “they” would ever let Susanna rest. She didn’t understand why people, especially those involved with the Festival, couldn’t let the story fade into oblivion. After all, in her view Susanna had deserved her punishment because of the baby’s fate.93

While the story is part of the tradition of the region and its people, the presentation and its newfound fame in this context can be seen as something that is invented or, at least, repurposed to serve its particular role.94 The presentation builds on what was, by all accounts, the most widespread and popular Pennsylvania German ballad

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93 Betty Burdan, e-mail correspondence, February 2013.
of the nineteenth century, but that was not, in comparison to stories surrounding local figures including Daniel Boone and Conrad Wieser, as culturally accessible. But Susanna’s story belongs solely to Berks County history, while Boone and Weiser have to be shared with other outlanders because of their political influence.

Still, the performance incorporates “formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” which indicates that the story has taken on a new life that is separate from that of the printed and performed ballad in the 19th century. However, the performance itself might be considered part of either a new tradition, or it might be seen as a logical next step in presenting the story to a wider audience, following this pattern of “formalization and ritualization.” To all appearances, the event could be interpreted either as something new or as something old that has been reworked to convey new relevance. The significance lies with how the people who are experiencing the event interpret it. Therefore, the interpretation of the performance, its reception, and its production would be necessary to help determine the role of this tradition within the Pennsylvania Dutch community as well as within the community of individuals who attend the Festival.

95 Daniel Boone is most commonly associated with Kentucky, but was born in Berks County. His family’s homestead now houses a museum and archive. Conrad Weiser was one of the founding fathers of Berks County, aiding in the establishment of the county borders as well as negotiating long-standing peace agreements with the local Native tribes. Isaac Crawford Sutton, “The Boones in Pennsylvania,” originally published in The Historical Review of Berks County, April 1949, and Frederick S. Weiser, “Conrad Weiser, Peacemaker of Colonial Pennsylvania,” originally published in The Historical Review of Berks County, Summer 1960. Both articles now housed on the HSBC website, http://www.berkshistory.org/articles/, accessed July 31, 2013.

96 Hobsbawm, 4.
Chapter 5: The Current Audience Interpretations – and Reinterpretations

Susanna Cox’s story has been retold at the Kutztown Folk Festival for at least 50 consecutive years. Individuals have heard the story and subsequently sought more information, ignored it, or misremembered large details – all dependent on their own interpretation of the story within the specific context of the Festival. For many, Susanna’s story stands out of time; it happened “long ago” when laws, morals, and personal interactions were significantly different. Susanna’s story is thereby linked to others also presented at the Festival: stories that could reflect a period several hundred years in the past, or within the storyteller’s own experiences. Understanding these stories in the appropriate context requires a certain level of cultural competence: visitors to the Kutztown Festival understand “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” – usually referred to just as “The Hanging” – on different levels, depending on their familiarity with the location, community, and historical time period. To show complete cultural competence – and, therefore, community membership – is to demonstrate understanding of these

references, and then participate in the construction or continuance of the community.  

Even when context is provided, the verifiable historical facts remain less important than how the community formed by participation in the Festival chooses to explore the presentations within their own contexts. This community comes into being once a year, for nine days, when those who plan the Festival interact with those who identify themselves with the region or ethnic group, and those who come to observe a culture that is separate from their own.

It is impossible to witness the Hanging without having the trappings of modern society infiltrate the space. In the area next to the gallows performance space exist vendors, a laundry exhibit, a wooden fence, the meat market, modern houses, and a large parking lot. Because of this integration of modernity, it is nearly impossible to separate the events of the Hanging’s performance from the realities surrounding it. Yet the choice to attend a heritage festival gives those witnessing the Hanging an opportunity to break with their own reality.  

Within the boundaries of the Festival, many are able to find mechanisms that allow themselves to suspend their own “real” time. This provides the possibility that they will be able to at least partially immerse themselves in the period and culture depicted by the Festival itself.

While the Festival states one of its goals as demonstrating the living culture of the Pennsylvania Dutch, many of the presentations, including “The Execution of Suzanna

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421 Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*.

“Cox”, explicitly or implicitly perform the past.\textsuperscript{423} Only in a few cases, such as the Hanging, will a specific historical time be stated. Within this specific performance, a balance can be found between the past and the present. While the morals contemporary to the actual events are voiced, those shared by the individuals witnessing the presentation are also believed to be relevant. Like the elders whom Charles Briggs observed drawing conversational antitheses between past and present, those engaged in the Festival find a way to continue the conversation between that which was and that which is to continue to reinterpret the relevance of the issues presented by the presentation of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox.”

With the Hanging, the period portrayed is defined through the historical context while also depicting a generic aura of a simpler time, which the contemporary viewers don’t necessarily even try to understand. Instead, the implications of a time past – the wooden gallows, the hangman’s chosen garb, the invoking of the traditional ballad – allow even the least historically-oriented observer to achieve some association of the events being portrayed with that time and culture rooted in the past. The attempt to reconstruct a past event is made plausible and compelling to attendees because the setting of the Festival skews toward that implied earlier time. The anachronistic gallows – historic, yes, but based on those used in the second half of the nineteenth century – does not distract any but the most literal-minded.\textsuperscript{424} This follows a tradition associated with

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\textsuperscript{423} Briggs, \textit{Competence in Performance}, 82 discusses the conversations that the elders he studied had with each other, where they not only discussed their topic but brought it into the context of “antes” and “ahora” – roughly translated, the world of the past in conversation with the world of the present.

\textsuperscript{424} Sara Good (affiliated with the Mercer Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania), e-mail communication with the author, April 2013.
\end{footnotesize}
living history sites: if the known facts appear accurate, the audience will be better able to interpret the sensory details presented in a more meaningful way. Subsequently, the audience will then be able to better interpret the performance to gain understanding of the period and events depicted rather than just experiencing them as entertainment: in this way, realism has been granted primacy over nostalgia. While the Hanging does not promote itself as either “living history” or “reenactment”, it utilizes elements of each genre in designing and presenting the details of this and other presentations. The integration of these concepts is not always successful; not all in attendance will necessarily be able to distance themselves from the reality of their twenty-first century lives. But many – at least, many of those willing to speak with me – acknowledged that the event they experienced discussed issues not governed by modern sensibilities. A few, however, saw the connection between what had happened in the past and what was chosen as appropriate to represent in the present, and questioned what the continuation of the performance of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” meant both within the culture of the Festival and within their own cultural contexts.

“Real” Time and “Festival” Time

According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, many observers of reenactments choose to keep the reality of their own lives separate from the fantasy that is created through their participation in a decontextualized historical presentation. The observers


426 I am using the term “reenactment” not because “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” fits this traditional definition, but because that is how it is referred in the popular press and by the
are able to accomplish this by allowing for the temporary suspension of “real” time. So, while the participants are involved with the presentation itself, they can immerse themselves in the reality of the event they’re witnessing, and, at least partially, set aside from their own issues to better experience those depicted within the reenactment. The Kutztown Folk Festival guidebook heralds the performance of the Hanging as an opportunity to “[b]e a part of the jury as you witness the reenactment of Suzanna Cox’s prosecution and hanging, the last woman ever executed in Pennsylvania, and whose death brought about the American Appeals System, the cornerstone of our American Legal Rights today.”

Following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s construction, an individual viewing “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” should be able to at least make an attempt to become not just an observer but a participant in the events taking place, even with modern elements surrounding the period-specific performance.

Is this separation between an individual’s lived reality and the virtual reality of the Festival experience even a possibility within the context of this specific...
performance? Again, the separation between intent and reality within the Hanging’s staging. Where the stated intent is to invite the audience into the past in order to better understand an event, the reality does not provide an opportunity for participation or even immersion. The viewer does not become part of the presentation – modern dress and attitudes remain in place. The staging of the performance, however, with a single speaker reciting a text and a large gap between the gallows and the audience, does not present an opportunity for participation. The nature of the presentation is very different from that experienced at some of the locations Kirshenblatt-Gimblett examined. Plimouth Plantation, for example, employs a large number of trained, costumed interpreters to demonstrate the affairs of normal life within the colony as depicted in 1627. So, while a large number of contemporary observers could participate in the daily life of the Plantation on any given day, the ratio of interpreters to audience is significantly higher than that at the Kutztown Folk Festival which employs two individuals – one who, at least in this incarnation, does not perform in costume – to staff the entire Hanging.

Costumed individuals have never been in short supply at Kutztown, but most wear their garb without assuming the specific persona of a historical or cultural character.

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429 For the most recent information specifically from Plimouth Plantation, their website is the most accurate (“Plimouth Plantation,” http://www.plimoth.org/what-see-do/17th-century-english-village/english-village-faqs accessed 11/21/2012). Many scholars, including Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Stacy Roth, Scott Magelssen, and Richard Handler use Plimouth as a case study.

430 Plimouth identifies their costumed employees and volunteers as “interpreters.” I choose the term “performers” for Kutztown, although this does not necessarily encompass all individuals who choose to portray a particular costume, perspective, or period.
Instead, they are themselves, just dressed in a traditional manner as they deem appropriate. From the teenagers serving at the food tents, to the vendors identifying themselves and their goods with the relevant culture even when they might not themselves be a part of it, to the women displaying the quilts, these individuals did not believe it was necessary to pretend to be something they were not, just to dress in such a way as to align themselves with the Pennsylvania Dutch culture. Even the reenactors staffing the Army encampment spoke as contemporary individuals – while they presented details of the period depicted by their clothing, they spoke as an outside observer. “We” did not build the barns, “they” did. I asked one of the reenactors for some assistance in taking a picture, and joked with him about whether or not he was allowed to handle a digital camera. But he did not view his role as immersing himself completely in the character to the exclusion of 21st century life; he saw himself as an interpreter and performer who was part of this century but explaining, in his case, the role of local individuals in the American Civil War while also wearing a period-appropriate costume.431 His companion went so far as to find a pair of 19th century glasses that were close enough to his true prescription that he could wear them while in uniform and still be able to see.

Describing the Hanging performance as a reenactment, as is done in the Festival’s press releases and the subsequent media stories – is a bit of a misnomer.432 The term reenactment implies that individuals will be taking on roles and speaking in the voice of

431 I never learned his name, despite several conversations in which he participated. However, he did later himself as “Zach’s Dad,” which most likely, indicates that his last name was Langley.
historical (factual or composite) characters. It is also not living history, although the idea that it is possible to suspend at least part of your own reality in order to enter someone else’s is very much present. The presentation is also not a pageant like those so popular in the early twentieth century, despite the perception in the early 1950s that this would be the dominant presentation method at the Festival. This misconception was so prevalent that J. William Frey addressed it directly in his summation of the second annual Festival, to ensure that the faithful readers of the *Pennsylvania Dutchman* knew that this had never been the intent. As Frey described the situation, “[t]hose who expected a pageant found something quite different: this was not a group of actors dressed in fancy costumes reciting memorized and rehearsed lines to depict some historical event – no, this was just the Pennsylvania Dutch folk on parade.” But, in reality, the presentation of “The Execution of Susanna Cox” in its current presentation is perhaps closest to the pageant format, or that of a stage play. The performing individuals adopt roles in order to present material for the consumption of an audience that is separate because of the implied barrier between performance and observation space. The stated intent now is to create a space where Festival attendees can be a part of the history of the local German-speaking community. The Festival’s press releases emphasize this focus, instructing individuals to attend not because of the entertainment value, but in order to witness the

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events and judge their worth on their own. The audience is instructed to immerse themselves in the process, but the format does not necessarily invite them to do so.

Despite the intent to provide additional contextualization to the culture and its historical significance, the performance of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” is not designed to immerse the individuals completely in the culture of 1809. This differentiates the Hanging from living history experiences available at other sites. Mrs. DeTurk’s chosen outfit – always a variation on a black skirt, black hat, dark sneakers, and a white or black blouse – demonstrates respect for the text but no attempt at period authenticity. Previous performers, including Johnny Brendel whose picture appeared frequently in *Pennsylvania Folklife* during the 1960s, dressed in the generic work pants, shirt, suspenders, and wide-brimmed hat so common amongst the men working at the Festival. The setting evoked authenticity to someone unfamiliar with the text, but the gallows was not the kind described specifically in Susanna’s situation. The use of microphones, water bottles, and metal chairs all connect the presentation with the current culture without requiring immersion. These items are not viewed as anachronisms, because the presentation is not intended to be absolutely historically accurate.

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437 According to Louis Richards. *Susanna Cox: Her Crime and its Expiation* and Jacob Pile, *The Elk County Advocate* (Ridgeway, PA) September 23, 1875; Susanna was strung up and then the cart was moved away from her feet. The gallows at the Festival, which was, as previously discussed, based on that at the Mercer Museum in Doylestown, PA, has a trap door mechanism.
Photo 1: The Gallows, July 2, 2012. The performance would begin a half hour later.
Photo 2: June DeTurk and “Suzanna” during the performance of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox,” July 1, 2012. While Mrs. DeTurk usually wore all black, the heat on this day led her to cooler attire.
Photo 4: “Suzanna” in her coffin, with her folding chair, after a performance on June 30, 2012.
Photo 5: Tourists, with “Suzanna”. Picture taken July 1, 2009; note the differences in “Suzanna’s” dress as compared to 2012 photos.
The accommodation of past to present within the performance mirrors that of the overall Festival. The stated goals of the Festival over time have continued to focus on demonstrating to the greater population the intricacies of the living and historical culture of the Pennsylvania Dutch. By presenting the Hanging with historical elements but not absolute historical accuracy allows both for outsiders to make connections with the presentation, and to distance their modern sensibilities from the historical details being presented. Those who felt personally invested in the Festival interpret the presentation differently from those who are visiting, but the vendors, who were both a part of the Festival community and separate from it, provided an additional perspective. The locals, the “outlanders” and the vendors approach the Hanging and the Festival with their own expectations and interpretations which, when put together, provide a more comprehensive view of the experience than any one group by itself.  

The Locals

Many of the people I spoke with in 2012 identified themselves as “local”, including several of the vendors and festival-workers. June DeTurk had been attending the Festival for as long as she could remember, and didn’t know how she would spend the Fourth of July if she wasn’t on the Fairgrounds. She was so local that, until a recent move, she had been able to walk from her home. Other individuals identified

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438 J. William Frey, “Three Worlds”: 1. The “three worlds” of that time were the Dutch, the outlanders, and the people who just came to eat. I have slightly redrawn these lines, as will be discussed throughout this chapter.

439 June DeTurk in discussion with the author, July 2013.
themselves as being from, or having lived in, Oley, Reading, Kutztown, Bethlehem, Allentown, or Harrisburg – close enough that they felt a connection with the region and its history, but not always close enough to identify completely as part of the local culture. And, with very few exceptions, they associated the story of Susanna with the Festival, not with the region itself. They did not think of it as something that belonged to them as citizens of Berks County, or as culturally-united Pennsylvania Dutch. The historical connection did not permeate their self-identification: they were able to distance themselves, in almost every case, from the events as portrayed. The performance, as they saw it, allowed for this separation: it did not inspire action or engage their empathy. They identified the historical and cultural break between “back then” and “now” even as they saw the importance of the performance within the culture and traditions of the Festival itself. Many of the locals in attendance searched to situate the content of the performance within their own cultural understanding: they considered a range of historical and popular contexts within which to index Susanna’s story.

Several individuals who self-identified as Pennsylvania German (or Dutch, depending on their own perspective) attended the Festival not only to reconnect with their cultural heritage, but also to bring the younger generation so that they, too, could know more about their culture in its present and historical incarnations.440 One visitor, Ruth,

440 There wasn’t a clear delineation between the use of German and Dutch when speaking with some Festival attendees – partially because, at the time, I was more interested in how people identified with the Festival rather than the specific label they used for themselves. Those affiliated with the Festival, including Professor David Valuska (retired professor of History at Kutztown University and the Pennsylvania German Heritage Center) in discussion with the author July 1, 2012, intentionally self-identified as “Dutch.”
identified with the Festival on many levels. As she put it, the Festival started the year she was born, and, while she hadn’t attended as a child, she has faithfully visited annually for more than 30 years. As far as she can remember, she has attended the Hanging each year. Ruth did not view her attendance at the Festival and the Hanging as a solitary experience. She came with friends of her own generation and, over the last several years, they had experienced the events — including an annual visit to the Hanging — accompanied by her friends’ now six-year-old grandchild. Ruth had developed her Festival attendance into a personal ritual: she came not only because she was interested, but because it had become part of the cycle of her year.

She and her friends all identified as Pennsylvania Dutch, and they saw the Festival as one way to celebrate that heritage while passing it along to the next generation. They used the Festival activities as an opportunity to discuss history and the treatment of individuals in a time before now. This included a discussion with the six-year-old about hangings and why they had been performed: people who broke the law had to be punished, and hanging was the method of choice. Ruth’s tone when explaining the hanging lacked emotion, as if she were explaining a distant historical event rather than discussing the life of an individual human being. I asked Ruth and her friends how they felt about the content of the presentation, especially in relation to their accompanying child. They did not have a problem with the content or with how it was presented: it was an established part of the Festival, and they

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441 Ruth, not her real name, identified herself as having “grown up south of here”, but she now lives in Bethlehem, to the north.

442 Alfred L. Shoemaker wrote extensively about the Pennsylvania Dutch year cycles, both in the books Eastertide in Pennsylvania, a Folk Cultural Study (Kutztown: Pennsylvania Folklife Society, 1960) and Christmas in Pennsylvania, a Folk Cultural Study (Kutztown: Pennsylvania Folklore Society, 1959), as well as in many articles published in Pennsylvania Folklife.
were there to experience the whole. They made sure to answer all of the child’s questions as thoroughly as possible, but using age-appropriate terms. The rest of the Festival allowed Ruth and her friends to reconnect with their ethnic roots, even when their everyday life demonstrated a greater connection to majority culture. They did not believe that it was necessary to live completely within the world of the Pennsylvania Dutch in order to identify as part of the group, nor did they believe that their assimilation into the majority culture affected their ethnic connections.

Others saw attendance at the Festival as a way of establishing or reestablishing their ties to the locality. Two recent college graduates were both looking for ways to connect or reconnect with the local culture. Marie identified herself as a native of Berks County, but new to the Festival; her companion, Steve, had just recently moved to the area. They both saw attendance at the Festival as a whole and at the Hanging in particular as the gateway to community involvement. For Marie, a life-long county resident, it was a rite of passage and a step into adulthood to be a part of the events. For Steve, attendance provided a foundation of cultural competence, allowing him to develop a greater sense of personal investment in his new community. Perhaps his new position as a community political organizer gave him the added impetus to improve his knowledge of the region so that he could converse with the people whose vote he hoped to sway. In any situation, the idea that attendance at the Festival would help grant cultural citizenship to an outsider reinforces the importance of the Festival – if not the Hanging on its own – as a significant shared experience within the geographically-designated community.

443 Marie and Steve (Festival visitors) in discussion with the author, Kutztown, PA, July 2, 2012.
Marie both stood out and blended in: she was African American and a representative of an age demographic not much in attendance on a weekday afternoon. But she had been a German major, was able to understand (if not speak) the local dialect, and had grown up in Reading. When asked for her reaction to the performance, she mentioned that she had been especially struck by the comment noting that the Hanging was still relevant today. This had caused her to consider recent news stories, and triggered a memory of a legal case from Reading. The case involved the discovery and prosecution of a woman in whose home frozen fetuses had been found. Despite some gaps in the details of the modern story – I was unable to find a record of this case from Reading, but a similar narrative did exist featuring a Philadelphia physician – Marie was able to immediately make a connection between the two cases based on their relationship to the gorier side of childbirth. Placing the story in Reading more closely aligned it with Susanna’s tale, doubly connecting the two stories not just through similarities of topic but also of location. Marie had made the connection between Susanna’s story and a locally-relevant issue, relating it not to history but urban legend. Marie thought of Susanna’s story purely in the context of the Festival: she had done a lot of research specifically related to the Festival and had decided that this particular presentation was something that she wanted to see. She had not learned it in school or heard it from other sources in any way that she could identify outside the context of the Festival.

444 Marie is her real name. She gave me a business card, and offered to help with any translations I was doing, as she had some experience interpreting local historical documents as part of her undergraduate experience at Franklin and Marshall.

445 http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-6234652-504083.html, accessed December 11, 2012; Marie’s memory was good for the generalities but weak on the specifics: the case appears to have taken place in Philadelphia, not Reading, and it featured a doctor, not a private individual.
Marie was not the only one to mentally link Susanna’s story to other legal cases. Mrs. DeTurk’s words entreating the audience to consider the relevance of Susanna’s case rang true to several other individuals, and on a more personal level in 2012 than in previous years. Several mentioned the relation to the 2008 case of 22-year-old Casey Anthony, who had been accused but acquitted of killing her 2-year-old daughter Caylee.\textsuperscript{446} For these audience members, the links between the cases were formed because of the perceived similarities between the crimes of the mother. In these situations, the audience members sympathized with the child that had lost its life, rather than the mother who was the focus of both stories. The media depictions of Caylee Anthony colored the interpretations of Susanna more than any prior knowledge of Susanna or the historical period in which she lived. Not all minds immediately jumped to this particular story, but many did, especially because of how often additional details of the Anthony case had been discussed within the mainstream media in the months leading up to the 2012 Festival.\textsuperscript{447} For several people, the specifics of Susanna’s case were just a historical framework because of which they were reminded of all of the current crimes against children, both real and fictional.

At least one other informant compared the case to a \textit{Law and Order} episode she had seen recently. She remembered the episode elaborating on a case where two teenagers had abandoned their newborn, but had been able to plead innocence and,

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{446} Only a few weeks before the Festival, Casey Anthony granted CNN’s Piers Morgan an interview. Her impassioned plea for understanding may have still been in the minds of those in attendance at the Hanging. \textcolor{red}{http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/12/justice/florida-casey-anthony, accessed April 16, 2013}

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{447} I do remember Casey Anthony being mentioned in passing at the 2010 Festival, but the frequency and vehemence with which individuals discussed the connection only truly became noticeable in 2012.
therefore, receive the mercy of the court because of their age and believed ignorance. The informant had been engaged by the discussion of what evidence had been used to acquit the young people, and was sad that they had not been held responsible for their actions. She continued to insist that the teenagers would have been better off facing judicial punishment, if only to understand a bit of what impact their actions could have on others.\textsuperscript{448} She felt that this ending was in stark contrast to Susanna’s situation, since Susanna had to deal with the consequences of her actions perhaps too severely. In my informant’s view, a solution somewhere between exoneration and execution seemed to be more appropriate in both situations. Another informant made the connection between Susanna’s hanging and a tradition at Cornell University. According to his memory, Cornell’s special collections include the brain of a criminal mastermind who had been one of the last people hanged in the state of New York.\textsuperscript{449} According to the version of the story he was familiar with, the museum at Cornell kept many brains in its collection, but this criminal’s was, reportedly, the largest. Here, the connection was not in the crime, but in the end result of judicial execution and the significance of the extremes – Susanna was the last woman publicly hanged in Pennsylvania; the brain stored at Cornell was given priority because of its size. The informant used the connection between these two stories to help him situate the content of the performance within his current understanding; he had to provide cultural context in order to address the issues raised in

\textsuperscript{448} The closest episode I have been able to identify is Dick Wolf and Dawn DeNoon, “Taboo,” \textit{Law and Order: Special Victims’ Unit}, Season 7, Episode 14, directed by Arthur W. Forney (January 17, 2006). However, the mother who abandons her child is older (in college) and the child is a product of incest.

\textsuperscript{449} Corey Ryan Earle, "From Elms to Brains: Cornellians Who Gave Back in Unique Ways," \textit{EZRA} IV No. 2 (Winter 2012), identifies the individual as Edward Rulloff and confirms the details of the rest of the story.
the performance. He could not just accept the story at its face value; it did not make as much sense in isolation as it did in conversation with other memories.

The judicial connections struck more than one observer. Rob, when asked what he thought about the Hanging, exclaimed that he had seen it many times but it never completely made sense to him. Rob self-identified as Pennsylvania Dutch, and he consistently accompanied his family to the Festival on an annual basis. The first analog to Susanna’s case that occurred to him was a grand jury trial that he had encountered many years prior. In this trial, the female defendant was accused of managing a drug trafficking ring. As Rob described it, the evidence clearly pointed to her not dealing the drugs herself, but, instead, facilitating connections between the dealers and the suppliers. The evidence was strong, and she was later convicted and sentenced to a life term. Rob felt sorry for her, as she had been pregnant during the trial and would, therefore, never see her child “unless someone brought it to the jail.” But he also acknowledged that the evidence clearly indicated her guilt, which had not, in his eyes, been true in Susanna Cox’s trial.

Rob felt that the evidence against Susanna, as presented, was circumstantial at best, but that she was held responsible because it was the custom of the times and someone had to carry the blame for the child’s death. He spoke to me along with his friend, Ruth, who kept commenting that she saw Susanna as a poor country girl, who hadn’t had any other options. While Rob agreed, he also was slightly more pragmatic.

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450 Not his real name. He attended in the company of his wife, their six-year-old granddaughter, and their friend, “Ruth.” Rob, his wife, and Ruth all appeared to be in their late 50s or early 60s. Ruth did inform me that she was born the year that the Festival had started, which would have made her 62 in 2012.
Susanna was, in his interpretation, probably guilty of the crime, but the evidence did not warrant the death sentence. After Rob had spent several minutes explaining his rationale to me, he just gave up and fell back on the common opinion “that’s how they did it back then.” The distance of time justified differences in interpretation and application of the law. What he would have interpreted today as an egregious overextension of authority could be explained in its historical context as a difference in the social and legal application of motivations and actions. Rob’s view of the past allowed for a simpler interpretation of the world because the technology and investigative skills did not encourage a greater exploration of her innocence or guilt. After stating several times that the evidence was circumstantial, he also mentioned that her conviction had been a given simply because she was a woman and her baby had died. “Someone had to be guilty,” he said, and so it must be Susanna. Rob did not understand the choices that were made, but he acknowledged that he did not have to. He knew that the difference in cultural norms was enough to explain even his own self-identified ethnic groups’ decisions of 200 years prior as foreign to his sensibilities. He did not get what Robert Darnton calls the historical “joke” and, instead of trying to unravel it according to his own contemporary cultural and social norms, he acknowledged the gap in cultural identification. Rob’s acknowledgement of the chronological difference in community interpretations of violence and the treatment of the accused is different from that of many of the individuals I spoke with. I frequently heard “that’s how they did things back then” or a more detailed version of the same, especially when an adult was explaining the concept of hanging to a

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child. One mother asked her young child if she wanted to attend the performance. She explained it by saying, “They’re going to hand that doll. A long time ago, when people were sent to jail, sometimes they wouldn’t stay in jail but they’d be killed. That’s what’s going on here. She did something wrong.” This mother distanced herself from the modern issues of capital punishment by situating the story in the historical past. The decision to execute an individual was not made at the Festival; just the decision to present that execution as educational entertainment. Like this mother, Rob allowed for the idea that events of the past could stay relevant in that past without needing direct parallels in the present. Both saw some parallels, but Rob distanced himself from them by choosing to leave the story in the past; the mother chose not to explore modern applications with her young child.

While some individuals did identify themselves as locals, they remained one step removed from the Festival because of their role as visitors, not participants. They came, sometimes every year, but still viewed the Festival from the perspective of outsiders. Their interpretations were quite different from those of the invested individuals who dedicated large portions of their summers to preparing for, performing during, and cleaning up after the Festival. Still, the visitors affiliated themselves with the culture depicted, if not the community at work. But even more removed from the knowledge of the inner workings of the Festival and the reasons behind some of its organizers’ decisions were those individuals who attended the Festival not because they felt a kinship

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Although I did not have IRB approval to speak to minors, as an observer of public behavior, I could not escape hearing the loud conversations held between individuals. With two exceptions, though, the informants I approached were not accompanied by children.
to the Festival or the people depicted, but because they wanted to experience a heritage festival.

**The “Outlanders”**

Those who are not Pennsylvania Dutch – or not from a particular region, or religion, or inclination – are frequently referred to as “outlanders” or, in some situations, “auslaenders”. In a 1965 article in the journal *Pennsylvania Folklife*, Alliene DeChant provides an even more specific description, indicating that those individuals who experience the Festival for the first time, and from outside the county, are the true “outlanders”. These are individuals who come to witness the Festival, but remain observers through their intentional separation from the geographic and cultural communities portrayed within the Festival. Without the complex understanding of the culture behind the Festival, and the culture of the Festival, they approached the portrayal of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” from perspectives that illumine the story based on a different set of experiences than that of the individuals who self-identified with the culture portrayed within the Festival.

As with some of the locals, some of the outsider interpretations were clearly influenced by contemporary anxieties about child abuse, as well as public debate over abortion rights. Many of the positive depictions of Susanna focused on the sins of those who seduced her and those who did not support her; not trying to justify her actions but

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to help share the blame with others. In more than one instance, an informant with no discernible ties to the region or the culture implied that Susanna’s punishment was not only appropriate, but that the application of the same law for similar crimes might still be appropriate in 2012. In an interview with The Reading Eagle, a visitor expressed how her impression of the Hanging was colored by “how [Susanna Cox] violated that infant.”

Helen, who spoke with me after one of the performances in 2010, had a similar reaction. When I first approached her to see if she’d consent to an interview, she admitted that she had missed the first few minutes of the performance, and hadn’t heard the details of the crime. For this reason, she didn’t think her opinion would be of much use. Still, she continued to share her impressions, so I continued to listen. She mentioned that she was shocked to see a hanging staged at the Festival, and she thought it was even stranger that the individual executed was female. She then asked me about the details she had missed. I did my best to convey Mrs. DeTurk’s version of the story to her, and her attitude changed immediately. She no longer questioned the Hanging because, as she saw it, no crime against a child could be punished harshly enough.

Unlike many who just accepted the judicial punishment as how it was done “back then”, Helen stated that our current laws had become too lenient toward those who harmed children. Of all the people who granted me interviews, she is the only one to so clearly state that the punishment fit the crime. All others absorbed at least a bit of the empathy Mrs. DeTurk’s performance was intended to elicit. I do not believe that Helen

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455 Not her real name – I never asked it and she did not volunteer it.
missed so much of the performance that she had missed these entreaties, but their content was irrelevant because of her overarching identification with the child and not the mother. The combination of missed context and her own concerns led to her inability to suspend her own reality and experience the story without the filter of her modern sensibilities. But, unlike most others, she saw the present as uncivilized for their leniency toward those who committed violence against children rather than judging the past for its apparent barbaric nature. The historical context bore less relevance than the modern applications: demonstrating the strength of prior punishments only highlighted the inadequacies of current legal patterns.

The legal and moral actions of the past, as presented in “The Execution of Suzanna Cox”, were frequently measured against current judicial and societal norms. In 2010, a family arrived late and missed the first several minutes of the presentation. While they were, apparently, able to catch up on most details of the story, they also did not realize what Susanna’s crime had been. At the end of the presentation, the older woman approached the teenaged hangman as he was cleaning up the props and returning the Suzanna doll to the coffin. I had not been paying full attention to their interaction at first, as I had been conducting a different interview, but the woman’s animated agitation drew several viewers. She was visibly upset, and it appeared that she was directing her anger toward the teenage Seth as the closest available target. Seth, for his part, responded quietly to her questions and gesticulated toward Mrs. DeTurk and the other adults associated with the performance. Seth’s outward appearance remained professional and,

456 The family consisted of a pregnant woman in her 20s and her parents, as well as a sleeping toddler.
as the woman continued to berate him, he continued with his duties. It appeared that he was doing his best to complete his assignments without reacting to the woman’s critique, but his work was taking longer than usual. From my vantage point near the vendors on the top of the hill, it soon became apparent that his slower pace was intentional. As he was putting Suzanna’s effigy into the coffin, the doll’s arm started twitching, almost imperceptibly at first, but then with some greater movements. Seth may simply have been uncomfortable and nervous under the circumstances, or he may have been deliberately manipulating the arm. Conceivably he was used to this kind of harassment, and had learned how to retain his professionalism (and his job) while still having a little fun with the observer.

I approached the woman after she was done venting her anger at the teenage performer, and asked if she would be willing to speak with me. She was happy to have someone else that was willing to listen to her concerns. She was incensed that a hanging would be performed so calmly at what was billed as a family folk festival, and she felt that better publicity and signage would have been useful in helping herself and others avoid the presentation if they so chose. She calmed down somewhat, though, by Seth’s explanation that Susanna’s crime had been infanticide. The historical punishment, in her eyes, fit the crime. So, while she had come to terms with the reasons for the event in its historical time frame, she still could not understand why this event had been chosen for performance in this setting. Her daughter, noticeably pregnant and accompanied by a sleeping toddler, stayed quiet on the subject, but her husband did not. He commented

457 Similar stories of “reanimation” at wakes can be found in Peter Narváez, ““Tricks and Fun”: Subversive Pleasures at Newfoundland Wakes,” *Western Folklore* 53, no. 4 (Oct., 1994): 270. Thanks to Diane Goldstein for this reference.
that hangings were common in “those days” and that his grandfather, who had lived in frontier Texas, had seen them on a regular basis. In his grandfather’s eyes, the hanging was useful to deter others from behaving in the same way as the accused.

The husband’s interpretation of the performance was much more contextualized than his wife’s: hangings had been a part of life, without any question. She did not argue with him on this point, but she never gave up the idea that the performance at the festival was inappropriate. They focused on different issues: he cared more for the historical perspective, and chose to interpret the performance utilizing a framework that explained why the original actions were taken. He was an observer, not a participant, and he was able to suspend his own modern reality in order to enter into the reality framed by this historical retelling. For his wife, the historical situation was a non-issue. She did not object to the portrayal of historical events in general; she objected to portrayal of this specific event.458

While neither visitor from Texas was able to suspend reality, the woman’s response was, in many ways, more rooted in modern sensibilities. As he critiqued the historical content, she questioned the appropriateness of the place and time of the presentation. She could not accept a disconnect between the past and the present. As she interpreted the situation, topics that were unacceptable now should not be discussed in a public setting, much less in a context that was accessible to families and children. She was so situated in her own culture that she had trouble allowing for the differences reflected in others’.459 The couple differed on the purpose of the presentation, and the

458 Paul A. Pickering, “‘No Witnesses. No Leads. No Problems,’” 110-112,
459 Dave Fooks in discussion with the author, July 1, 2010.
Festival as a whole: did it exist to represent and present the past, or to purely provide appropriate entertainment in the present?

Linda, who had lived about an hour away in Chester County for over 20 years but did not consider herself to be a “local” or part of the Pennsylvania Dutch community, returned to the Festival after several years away. She came this year specifically at my invitation, but was excited to be able to bring her children, ages 6 and 3, to experience the Festival. For my part, I looked forward to the opportunity to experience the Festival in the company of someone I’d known most of my life, as Linda is my cousin. When we spoke on the phone a few days earlier, I did explain to her the specific presentation that I was there to see. I wanted her to be able to make the decision about whether or not she was comfortable with her children witnessing the Hanging. She had seen it previously and, while she remembered few of the specifics, she did not see any reason why her children could not attend. After we all saw the performance together, I asked Linda to share her impressions. She responded that, in the setting of a festival specifically designed to present and celebrate the history of a people and an area, a historical performance such as this one was completely appropriate. She thought it made sense in context, but would have been grossly out of place at a community carnival or other event. As she saw it, the performance was similar to that of a professional storyteller sharing ghost stories with children at Halloween: in context, and with age-appropriate explanation, it served a purpose in informing the audience about the events of the historical past.

Linda D’Isabella (Festival visitor) in discussion with the author, July 3, 2012.
Could it be that the spread of the media coverage has deflated the shock value of performed violence, or have modern societal norms done that without news coverage? While the performance does not provide graphic reality, it does still present a visual representation of a woman’s death. I acknowledge that many of my informants had seen the performance more than once, but several – especially among the outlanders – were first time viewers without prior knowledge. Most of my informants did not consider the specific historical implications: instead, they internalized the “back in the day” framework that they felt was appropriate for the setting of the festival. The 2012 Festival theme supported this interpretation, as the featured activities all surrounded the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. So Festival-goers were primed for an exploration of the historical past rather than examples of a living culture. The distinction had been made more strongly in previous years, when modernity seemed to clash more violently with the upholding of tradition. But the traditional mode of performing Susanna’s story, using the same text that had been in existence for at least 40 years, actually seemed to add to both its respectability and its appropriateness. For many who viewed the event on a regular basis, the content mattered less than the performance. It was the performance that provided continuity and, even when they disagreed with what was being said, they appreciated that the Festival organizers refused to give in to the pressure to remove yet another connection to the Festival’s own past.

*The Last Participant Group: The Vendors*

In 1951, J. William Frey, writing about the Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Festival, discussed the three different types of people who he believed were in attendance at the
Festival: the Dutch, the outsiders who wanted to learn more about the Dutch, and those who were just there for the food. Over time, these distinctions have reformed, and a new third group has emerged: individuals who were there for a specific purpose. Where once it was for the food, now it is for the commerce. While much attention has been paid to the performers, other participants, and the outlanders, another group with a vested interest in the success of the Festival and, by extension, the Hanging, co-exists: the vendors. These individuals have an economic stake in the Festival, both because of their participation and anticipated ability to sell their wares, but also because their reputation and subsequent ability to sell through festivals and other means could be affected by the way they manage their actions. So the vendors maintain an interest in the success of the Festival, but they are also independent contractors with their own agendas. In the past, most would have been affiliated with the local community or the Pennsylvania Dutch traditions. Now, their identity comes more from their continued creation of handcrafted goods that appeal to individuals attending a heritage festival. The vendors’ individual success or failure during the week of the Festival relies on their ability to meet the expectations of the crowd with the quality and presentation of their product and themselves.

In the early days of the Festival, metal was not allowed on the grounds, and the vendors tended to produce goods that were firmly identified with regional Pennsylvania

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461 Frey, “Three Worlds”: 1. It should be noted that the Kutztown Festival’s original claim to fame is the funnel cake. The Festival’s publicity verifies this: http://www.kutztownfestival.com/interestingarticles/funnelcake.pdf, accessed April 14, 2013. Dave Fooks, in our February 2013 interview, explained that Lester Miller occasionally changes the story in which he usually credits his wife with making the first funnel cake and will instead credit his mother.
Dutch tradition. This changed gradually, so that now the vendors come from a wide range of locations, including a toymaker from Michigan, a stamp producer from Florida, and a woodworker from Kentucky. All vendors must sell items made in the United States, and many are still produced locally or even on site. Several demonstrate their trade at the Festival, including woodworkers, basket weavers, and the glass blowers of Wheaton, New Jersey. These goods are then immediately available for sale.

The vendors had mixed reactions to the Hanging. Those with booths right along the top of the ridge next to the performance tended to engage more readily with the story— or, at least, acknowledge that they had before they had reached their own saturation point. These individuals also expressed great respect for June DeTurk, even when they had heard the Hanging performance more times than they could count. But others found the performance to be ineffectual, especially due to its repetitive nature. One vendor’s only reaction to Susanna was to note that “she’s been hanged about 3000 times by now,” before changing the subject. Lori Savidge was happy to have her basket stall placed so close to the Hanging because, in her view, this would grant her access to a bigger and more consistent crowd. Individuals came to see the performance, usually staying long enough to explore the environs and survey the vendors’ wares. Other vendors found the performance culturally significant: several commented that it was original, different from any other performance that they’d witnessed or heard about. They all seemed to believe that it was a vibrant part of the Festival, even those that did not particularly appreciate it.

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462 Dave Fooks in discussion with the author, 2010.
464 Art vendor in discussion with the author, June 30, 2012.
One vendor, specializing in stamps, placed in a building near the gallows, had taken time away from his booth to go out and see the Hanging. He acknowledged that his only connection to the region and the culture was his financial stake in the success of the Festival. He had been on the festival circuit for many years and, in all of his travels, he could not remember seeing another reenactment of a hanging. The unique nature of the performance is what struck him as significant. He did not need to know the details of the historical case in order to appreciate that this was a different experience than at other festivals along his route. However, he did acknowledge that every festival had its own character and, regardless of where he went or what the focus of the festival was, the stories presented were interpreted and displayed in similar ways. He said that the stories were sometimes embellished and sometimes corrected, but they always followed similar patterns in presentation. So, while the Hanging was different in content, it was similar in form.

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465 Trials and executions involving witches, American Civil War-era criminals, and defeated warriors from the border battles between Scotland and England have all spawned their own reenactment culture. Famous individuals, including but not limited to Joan of Arc, Ned Kelly and, of course, Jesus of Nazareth, are frequently incorporated into commemorative events. Paul A. Pickering, “‘No Witnesses. No Leads. No Problems’”: 110-112, specifically focuses on the reenactments of Ned Kelly’s case, which includes his final conviction but does not include a scene of his actual execution. “1864 Hanging Re-Enactment Today,” Montana Standard, Jan 7, 2012, tells of an event in Bannack, Montana which was designed to “end a reign of terror” of the local sheriff and his men. Twentieth century reenactments – especially those presenting anything associated with Nazi Germany – are very careful to avoid the performance of an execution because the events occurred within living memory and they want to respect the individuals involved, according to Lauren Welker, e-mail conversations with the author, October 2012 and April 2013. The only other named women whose executions by hanging are reenacted are those tried in witchcraft cases. Joan of Arc and others have become the subject of reenactments, including in 1996 in Milwaukee, at Marquette University (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Oct 14, 1996). Beechworth, Victoria, Australia runs a historical festival that, at first glance, is much like Kutztown but, instead of celebrating a particular heritage, it celebrates a moment in their history: their connection to Ned Kelly. His trial is reenacted as is his departure from Beechworth. Since he was not executed in Beechworth, they do not show this.

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The framework of providing some level of understanding because of Susanna’s gender and social standing appears in some others’ comments. Agnes had sold her jewelry creations at the Festival for multiple years, and in a variety of locations right along the top of the ridge. Both times I spoke with her, in 2010 and 2012, she asked the same question about the story behind the performance. She wanted to know why Susanna, whom she consistently referred to as “that poor girl,” was held responsible for the death of the child. Several times, she repeated similar words, stating that “I just think it’s terrible that she got hanged and nothing happened to that man.” This theme provided the major link to the story for her, and seemed to be her major insight into Susanna’s life. For her, Susanna was not the essentialized “poor damsel” described in the text of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox.” Instead, Agnes believed that Susanna had still held some responsibility for her own actions but had been badly misused by the individuals around her. After having seen or heard the performance at least a hundred times, Agnes thought that Susanna’s life was more tragic because she had to deal with the combined consequences of her own and someone else’s actions. Agnes did not interpret the child’s death as the impetus behind Susanna’s execution: instead, she focused on the actions that led to the birth of the child, holding both parents responsible.

Other vendors told stories that did not describe the content of the performance as much as retell the history of the performance itself. Dave Fooks, who started out at the Festival as a woodcarver in the early 1970s, told me about the Suzanna doll’s life under the Festival’s previous Executive Director. As Fooks put it,

466 In my notes, her name is Agnes, but that is a pseudonym. See Chapter 2 for additional information about bastardy and fornication charges in nineteenth century Pennsylvania.
“There was no screwing around, very professional. Craftsmen and entertainers being what they are, they had to play. And you might come in to your booth one morning middle of the week, you’re hot, you’re tired, you open up the back of your booth and here’s Suzanna Cox laying there. And you go “Oh my God” and you knew if you were caught with Suzanna Cox in your booth you’d probably be thrown out. So you know they used to wrap her up and scoot her back down to the Hanging. A couple years ago, a craftsman opened up her booth and there was Suzanna Cox hanging in her booth with a suicide note on her.”

Fooks told me later that the Suzanna doll that had been used at the time was significantly less sturdy than the current model, and it easily folded in half. This made its transport much less cumbersome and probably contributed to the number of excursions in which the doll could participate.

Paul Estler, who had sold his woodworked items at the Festival on many occasions, also shared a variation on this story which echoed Fooks’ version. In addition, he told me about his own contribution to the official performance of the Hanging. On the last day of the Festival several years before, he left his stall to stand behind the pig stalls during one of the performances. He’d already heard the story close to 20 times in the past week, and he decided to add his own part. Paul waited until Mrs. DeTurk recited the part of the performance when she stated, “Susanna was bound out to the Schneider family, with the understanding that she would work there for board and lodging, and continue to work there until someone came to marry her. No one ever came

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467 Fooks in discussion with the author, June 30, 2010.
468 Fooks, in discussion with the author, February 14, 2013, as we were examining the Susanna doll in her coffin at the Kutztown Fairgrounds.
469 Paul Estler (wood product vendor) in discussion with the author, Kutztown, PA, June-July 2010.
for Susanna.” Paul timed his response, and fit his reply in to Mrs. DeTurk’s natural pause for breath. He yelled, “I’m coming for you, Susanna! I’ll be there soon!” His sense of fun was balanced by his sense of fairness – he didn’t want to disturb the performers or ruin the experience for them, and so he waited until the end of the Festival to express himself in this manner. Paul used this as an opportunity to add his own personal touch to the performance that he had witnessed so many times over the course of that and other years – and there seemed to be no negative repercussions, as he continued to return to the Festival, promoted to a prime location along the main shopping thoroughfare by 2012.

The actions taken by Paul Estler, Dave Fooks, and their compatriots were not described as attempts to show a lack of respect for Susanna or for what happened to her. Instead, they were aimed at the others involved with the Festival, especially those in authority. The repeated performance took away the impact of its message for those who heard it multiple times but not by choice: they were responding to the long hours, hot weather, and perceived strictness that led a creative bunch of individuals to seek outlets for their energies that had been so strongly directed toward customer service and Festival-appropriate behavior. Paul was quick to note his admiration of June DeTurk that led to the moderation of his actions; Dave Fooks described the absolute mental exhaustion that he experienced every year toward the end of the Festival’s run.

Josephine, a doll-maker who has been a vendor at the Festival for many years, decided

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471 No one else specifically mentioned this incident, although it was in line with several of the “strange occurrences” that were reported as happening over the years.
after 2012 that she could no longer handle the rigor of the experience.\textsuperscript{472} She made a good number of sales at the Festival; she did not mind her location close to the gallows; she had a good rapport with the vendors around her. But it all drained her, and her overexposure to the Hanging and the overarching Pennsylvania Dutch culture took away from her ability to truly enjoy her craft and its products.

Other vendors, though, remembered the Festival of their youth – during the period before the split and reformation of the Festival in 1995 – as incorporating a more laid back environment that was highly conducive to teenage fun as well as participation by the greater community.\textsuperscript{473} Perhaps, to them, the most important difference was that the Festival was open later in the evening. The atmosphere later in the evening was less structured, which was a positive in their opinions but, apparently, staying open later was not financially feasible for many of the vendors and other workers. To these participants who commented on the Festival of their youth (one a vendor and the other a volunteer), the changes detracted from the sense of community that had been built during the day, and reduced the participation of locals who were not able to dedicate daytime hours to the event. The evening hours provided a place to gather after jobs and other responsibilities had been addressed. Removing that opportunity meant that the greater local community – at least, those not already involved in the Festival – were excluded from some of the activities.

\textsuperscript{472} Josephine (handcrafted toy vendor) in discussion with the author, June 30, 2012; July 2, 2012; July 5, 2010.

\textsuperscript{473} I did not ask the age of my informants, and very few volunteered it. The individuals describing the Festival of their youth all seemed to be between their mid thirties and mid 40s, which would place their “teenage years” in approximately the mid-1980s through mid-1990s.

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In a few cases, the nostalgia of having been life-long (or, at least, long-time) Festival attendees overrode any issues. Janeen, who had assured me on the first day of the Festival in 2012 that she had never seen the Hanging before, remembered a few days later, after many viewings of the current performance, that she had, in fact, seen it on several occasions in her youth.\footnote{Janeen, in discussion with the author, June 30, 2012. She was in her mid-thirties in 2012.} Multiple viewings were required in order for her to retrieve the memory but, once she discovered it, she spoke with authority on the subject. It did not matter that several years had passed since her last encounter with the material and the presentation. What did matter was that, after witnessing it both now and as a young person, she could see where the most appropriate changes would be made so that it would continue to be accessible for the next generation. She had assisted her sister, another vendor positioned on the other side of the fairgrounds, over the past few years, always trying to earn the approval of the Festival organizers so that she could have her own stall at the Festival to sell her repurposed metal art. She did not believe that her position next to the Hanging was ironic or intentional in any way, despite the skeletons, jack-o-lanterns, and ghosts that were the focus of her craft.\footnote{Dave Fooks, February 14, 2013, laughed when I asked if the placement of Janeen’s “Metal Spooks” stand was intentional. He stated that it was not intentional, but he had been happy with the coincidence.} Janeen appreciated her location, and had not yet reached the saturation point of some of her neighbors who had been there for several more years.

Several individuals commented on the disconnect between large portions of the local community and the culture of the festival: local residents came in for one day to experience the Festival as a part of their yearly tradition, but they were not compelled to
return for a second day or find any other way to connect with related events. Based on the memories shared by Janeen and Jenny, this limit on local participation had not been a part of their memories of the Festival of the past. The ending time of the Festival also affected the vendors and participants, as they knew their business would start winding down later in the afternoon, not pick up because of an influx of locals who came over after they got off work. Lori, the basket maker, agreed to be interviewed by me, but asked that I not come before 4:00 so as not to disturb her business. The later time was better for her, since the flow of customers decreased dramatically by that point, and her teenage children could handle the diminished traffic without her. Zach, who has volunteered as a reenactor many times over the past few years, appearing in 2012 in the guise of an American Civil War medic, vocalized his hope one day that an impending storm would hit right around 3:30 – late enough that most of the people would give up and leave rather than wait to see if the activities would resume afterward. These are not the signs of a Festival that encourages raucous evening behavior and, indeed, the most rambunctious actions I witnessed involved a local band, the Celtic Martins, opening up the stage to any performers who wanted to join them.

For most vendors near the Gallows, the repetition of the Hanging performance became an annoyance or a source of amusement; for many of the locals who attended one or two performances, it provided continuity and historical context; for the performers and those associated with the Festival, it was a crucial connection to their communal and institutional history. These reactions have been repeated outside the Festival grounds: individuals plugged in to historical events quickly tire of the story, hoping to focus on something else; newcomers and some locals are fascinated by the background story;
those with financial ties to the region embrace it for its commercial value. In August 2013, the Reading Theatre Project intends to stage a new production based on Susanna’s life, relying on historical documents as well as the Earnests’ popular history account of the story.\textsuperscript{476}

\textit{Suggested Improvements}

While the festival attendees appreciated the continuity of the presentation of Susanna Cox’s hanging, many of those associated with the Festival seemed to have their own ideas about how to make the presentation “better”. In some cases, this meant more “exciting” to a society raised on graphic violence in television and on film. For others, the focus was on making the story more accessible to outsiders. For a few individuals, the hope was that the Hanging could be made more marketable or more attractive to those who might be looking to purchase goods and just needed an enticement to be near the products that they did not yet know they needed. Several people told me their own ideas as to how to rewrite and restage the Hanging, if given the chance.

One vendor, who had grown up in the area and attended the Festival in her youth as well, thought that it would be appropriate to remove all the “old timey” language to

\textsuperscript{476} I was first informed of The Reading Theatre Project’s performance while at the Historical Society of Berks County. Lisa Adams (HSBC Assistant Archivist) in discussion with the author, February 12, 2013, told me about the company’s recent visit to the Historical Society to review the documents stored there. The Reading Theatre Project has titled their performance “May Be Honest,” after a line attributed to Susanna Cox. It was performed August 2, 2013, in Reading, PA. http://readingtheaterproject.com/productions/, accessed 5/13/2013; Patricia Suter, Russell Earnest and Corinne Earnest. \textit{The Hanging of Susanna Cox: The True Story of Pennsylvania’s Most Notorious Infanticide and the Legend That’s Kept It Alive} (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2010).
update the presentation. She thought that the language used created a barrier between the performance and the audience, and that it also did not draw the audience in to the conversation so that they could engage with the story. The references to change always respected the performers and Richard Gougler’s text. But there was this constant underlying question: does the current presentation, written by Richard Gougler in the early 1970s and modified by June DeTurk in the mid 1990s, create too much or too little verisimilitude? Can the audience “live in” history because they can see the connections between what they’re witnessing and their own lives? Or must they suspend their own time in order to accept the mores of those who lived in the past and, thus, accept the events and outcome of the performance? Or can both work in concert to present a more rounded interpretation of both the presentation and the historical event it reflects? If the interpretation that the language is a barrier, not a benefit, is widespread, then the ability to understand the events in context could prove impossible. In this scenario, the choice of words, and the simplicity of the performance, takes away from the ability of the viewers to immerse themselves the world of the time in question. This makes sense, as the performance is not a true reenactment: the only historical character, other than the Suzanna doll, who appears is the hangman. For a reenactment is what the audience today seems to expect, even though the Festival grew out of and in opposition to the early 20th century notion of the pageant. The audience is separated from the performance, serving as witnesses to the events, not participants in them, at the execution day.

477 The phrase belongs to Janeen, as she used it several times.
479 Roth, Past Into Present, 161; Kirshenblatt–Gimblett, Destination Culture, 195
One vendor had seen the presentation many times, but not in several years. After witnessing the performance several times this year, she identified a disconnect between the emotional impact intended by the performers and the frequently indifferent response shown by the audience. Perhaps something about the presentation has changed – or, perhaps, the audience has changed in ways that have not been compensated for by the presentation. It could also be the age of the observer: children process experiences – including folklore – according to their developmental stage. They remember things from their past with either nostalgia or disdain. Diane Goldstein, who attended the Festival as a child growing up in eastern Pennsylvania, remembers the Hanging with nostalgia: along with the locally-produced goods and the food, she and her family always had to go “see that woman get hanged.” While she hadn’t completely understood the story in her youth, she definitely understood that seeing the Hanging was a vital part of her family’s yearly cycle of activities.

For some observers, the theatrical fourth wall allows for a desired distance from the details being presented; others wish for a higher degree of allowed audience participation. That additional separation allows the viewer to remain detached, not only from the performance, but from the issues presented. Infanticide and the judicial treatment of women are easier to process with if a separation – of time, distance, culture, or all three – can be established, no matter how arbitrary. But the audience’s inclusion in the presentation, even by proximity, creates a greater possibility for personal discomfort.


481 Diane Goldstein (President of the American Folklore Society who attended the Kutztown Folk Festival as a child) in discussion with the author, April 13, 2013.
The style chosen as the format for this performance allows the audience to establish a barrier, so that they have a built-in excuse to avoid becoming part of the events. Whether they consciously make the decision not to participate, or unconsciously follow along with the trends, the observers have to make a decision as to how to engage (or not) with the presentation. And, perhaps, this lack of compulsion is what helps the presentation remain relevant – if sometimes deemed dated. There is not a hidden modern social commentary – the text blatanty states that the presentation’s purpose is to provide the details of a historical incident and how the community reacted. It is this community reaction that becomes so dominant, because it highlights the relevance and impact the local Pennsylvania Dutch community had held in the historic timeframe. A single version of the story, or a single interpretation of the community within which the context of the story developed, is not internalized by those interviewed. If a common theme does arise, it is pity for Susanna tempered with a belief that, in the time period discussed, the punishment was appropriate for the crime. So maybe there is a consistent message that is received: crime and punishment 200 years ago were “different” than today. How the individuals viewing the performance interpret that difference is part of the benefit of the performance as a whole.

But perhaps the issue was not too much historical context, but too little. In the effort to keep the presentation short and sweet, what details were eliminated? In previous years, according to several of the vendors, one of the sons of Richard Gougler would

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482 A contemporary retelling of Susanna’s story that does bear a political message would be Bathsheba Doran, _Nest_ (New York: Samuel French, 2008). Doran utilizes the framework of the play to discuss the treatment of the mentally disabled as well as the constraints of traditional marriage.
perform the ballad on the music stage next to the gallows. Publicity from the Festival in the mid-1980s confirms the presence of an individual fulfilling the part of “balladeer,” and the discussions imply that a musical component was included. A return to this tradition would be, the current commenters believe, a good way to present the story in a different context. They hypothesize that the addition of the music would bring more people down to the gallows stage for performances and, hopefully (as the comment came from a vendor) encourage them to shop before, during, and after the performance. One suggested that an educational presentation, discussing the “real” story of Susanna Cox, would be beneficial so that people could gain a greater understanding of the context, not just the performance. Yet, in 2010, when Patricia Suter and Corinne Earnest, who had just published a popular history version of Susanna’s story, were present, only a few individuals stuck around in the 100 degree weather to speak with them after the performance. This may have been because of the informality of their presence; if they had been scheduled as speakers on the lecture stage, the reaction and size of the audience may have been very different. I’m not sure that more information would be appreciated

Janeen, Jenny and Mrs. DeTurk all referenced the balladeer. His existence, if not the precise identity, is confirmed in several Pennsylvania Folklife issues. I have not specifically seen the Gougler name attached to any of the performers, but enough gaps exist in the documentation as to allow for any possibility.

When I spoke with Dr. Yoder in 2009, he commented on how few people still performed the ballad. He had requested that a woman (Probably Carrie Bonser Weaver in 1963, as documented in “Commemorate ‘Hanging’ at Dutch Folk Festival,” Plain Dealer (Cleveland, Ohio), June 23, 1963: 141. Online. Accessed 4/27/2013) at the Festival perform it for him; she had done so, but, according to him, reluctantly. Since that time, the Dolpehock Sanger Chor performed an excerpt of the ballad on their Berks County Closed Access TV show, and Charles Evans III recorded a spoken-word version of it on his album Tracks. Some of those include Bathsheba Doran’s play Nest, musical group Those Galloping Hordes’ concept album Things I grew Up With, a 1994 unreleased movie written by Linda Tadic, tentatively titled “The Ballad of Susanna Cox,” and “May Be Honest,” which was written and produced by members of the Reading Theatre Project in August, 2013.
by a portion of the audience members. While the performance is intended for educational purposes, most of the audience consider it to be entertainment above all else. So an educational component would perhaps make them less likely to be comfortable experiencing the culture and more like they were in a classroom setting.

Other changes were suggested. Jenny, who had done significant research as part of her task to provide the Susanna doll with a new costume, thought it would be appropriate to restage the performance, moving away from Gougler’s text and Mrs. DeTurk’s modifications. Interpreting her research through her own theatrical background, her vision seemed to combine a return to historical accuracy (at least, accuracy to the version she was most familiar with) with a greater visual and auditory impact. When I mentioned to one of the local scholars my initial surprise that the staging of the performance did not fall more in line with the printed versions of the execution day, he agreed that it was surprising that such a simple presentation had not only survived but thrived.485

So, while some who have witnessed the Hanging describe it as boring, anachronistic, or even too graphic, others believe that the maintenance of the text and performance adds to their understanding of the topic and the greater community. Dramatic change would, most likely, result in significant debate amongst the faithful. And dramatic change is coming – June DeTurk, at the age of 90, announced that the end of her participation is near. Others told me that 2012 would be her last year; she herself spoke as if she wanted to continue to participate a little longer and did return for 2013.

485 Patrick Donmoyer, in discussion with the author, June 30, 2012.
Perhaps her replacement will provoke dramatic changes; perhaps continuity will outweigh innovation.

**Susanna’s story, as told by those at the Festival:**

When I spoke with individuals at the Festival, whether they were involved in the performance or not, I heard a wide range of versions relating Susanna’s story. Most versions followed fairly faithfully the official version provided by Mrs. DeTurk. But some had constructed their own versions of the story, either because of outside knowledge, personal experience, or the incorporation of popular culture. These versions show the beginning of the next incarnation of Susanna’s story – that which leaves the Festival and is reintroduced into the wider community.

The version of Susanna’s story as related by Dave Fooks is perhaps the most powerful. Not powerful in terms of the topic, but because this version is why he continues to support the reenactment as part of the Festival. As Fooks relates the story, he had initially been inclined to remove the Hanging from the offerings of the Festival when he took over in 1995. He was concerned that, with the Festival’s new emphasis on “family fun,” a hanging might be inappropriate. So, as he puts it, he did his research. He cannot provide citations for his sources, and I have not been able to verify them based on what he did remember. But this lack of documented authority enforces the continuity of the story in oral culture. This is both problematic, since there is no way to trace the origins of the tale, and intriguing, as the story has once again moved out of the official purview and into oral tradition.

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486 The quotations come from my interview with Fooks conducted in June of 2010.
The story that Fooks tells is of the importance of Susanna’s punishment on the people that witnessed her execution. According to his sources,

the mob of 15,000 people marched on the state capital in protest. And the state legislature in their infinite wisdom saw this big mob after them and got together real quick and passed a law saying that an execution always could be appealed to the governor of the state, and then shortly after all the other states did that, too. So, in effect, Susanna Cox is responsible for the appeals system that is in existence today. And I thought that was significant enough to keep on hanging her.487

Fooks’ version describing the long-term effect of the story on the legal system shows how the implied significance can take on larger meaning. This is the only reference I have found that makes a direct connection between Susanna’s case and the American Appeals System, and the significance is carried through into the publicity for the Festival.488 The historical record does relate that anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people attended Susanna’s execution, and that part of the event’s appeal arose not only from the details of the case but also from the belief that Susanna was going to be one of the last individuals publicly executed in the Commonwealth.489 But no documentation exists that connects Susanna’s execution with a march on Lancaster. When the Festival office receives complaints about the content or presentation of the Hanging, it is the

487 Dave Fooks, July 1, 2010.
488 This reference can also be found in the current publicity for the Festival, arising from Fooks’ interpretation. As I’ve discussed in other chapters, Governor Snyder’s aversion to capital punishment was well-documented before Susanna’s case, but no extant documentation indicates that he directly cited her situation as influencing his decision. Elizabeth Wilson, in 1785, received her pardon from the local authorities not from the governor. So there was a legal change, or, at least, an escalation in the case of Susanna Cox.
489 The closest documentary source for this would be Louis Richards’ 1900 retelling, where he implies that Susanna’s case influenced Governor Snyder’s ongoing crusade against capital punishment. Richards also did not provide any citations or definitive consultable sources, and his focus was on capital punishment, not the system of appeals. Fooks’ version reimagines the details and reframed them into a useful form in such a way that I will continue to look for an as-yet-undiscovered intermediary source.
historical justification that they present to the complainant. In Fooks’ memory, most individuals accept this argument and are willing to also accept the reasons behind the Hanging’s continued inclusion in the Festival.

The social memory surrounding Susanna has overwritten her historical situation once again. The historical record only holds so much value when publicly-available reinterpretations exist in an accessible format. Dave Fooks’ research holds this version of events to be true and, consequently, he determined that it was worthwhile to continue the presentation of the Festival in the form it is currently in. So, whether or not the information he was given can be verified, it has been influential, and the reinterpretation and representation of the story within the context of the Festival and the larger culture that it represents becomes valid. Within the recreated world surrounding the Festival, the idea that Susanna Cox influenced the appeals court system is powerful: the audience associates the Hanging with the changes in the Appeals system and, therefore, allows a bit more leeway when dealing with what are often seen as questionable aspects of the story as a whole. So, rather than thinking of this development as a lack in documentation, it can instead be viewed as the next stage in the reinterpretation of the story. The details are not based in historical fact, but in remembered belief. Like the stories described by Neil Jarman and Guy Beiner in their work, Susanna’s story has been reinterpreted and reapplied so many times that, inevitably, it has jumped out of the

490 He told me, during both of our conversations in 2010 and 2013, that he had been cited in an article for the Michigan Law Review and another for the New York Law Review. He could not provide the citations, and I have yet to locate either published article, made especially difficult since he did not specify which New York Law Review (New York University, or CUNY).
documentation and become, once again, part of the oral culture of the festival and the region.\footnote{Neil Jarman, \textit{Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland} (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997), 1}

Dave Fooks isn’t the only one at the Festival who has done additional research. Mrs. DeTurk has been collecting pieces of the Susanna Cox story, and she was very excited about the last addition to her collection, which included copies of the \textit{Passing Scene} articles published by the Historical Society of Berks County over the past several years. These new findings would not lead to a change in her presentation; they just helped her explore other interpretations of the available material. Nothing in her new documents changed the factual data presented in the Hanging, but that didn’t change her excitement at learning a piece of the story that had, previously, not been known to her.

Jenny, who refitted the Suzanna doll before the 2012 Festival, also had her own interpretation of Susanna’s story.\footnote{Jenny, in discussion with the author, July 2, 2012.} She had done a great deal of research as she took the task of redesigning Suzanna’s appearance very seriously, and wanted to show respect to both the historical figure and her steel-skeletoned reincarnation. I met Jenny at an information booth, where, every year, a quilt was set up for visitors to sign and sew. I had not gone to this booth in order to find an informant; my goal was to get out of the sun, recharge, and get ready for the next round of performances and interviews. But, as I should already have known, informants can be found anywhere. Jenny and I struck up a conversation around the quilt, which led to me explaining my interest in the Festival. As soon as she heard what I was studying, she lit up and began to share the version of
Susanna’s story that was most familiar to her. As she understood it, Susanna had been afflicted with many problems related to social interactions. Jenny did not believe that Susanna was actually developmentally disabled, but she did believe that some condition led to her remaining in the Geehr’s family instead of marrying and starting her own family. The specific word that Jenny chose was “autistic”, indicating not a limitation on Susanna’s mental capacity, but rather on her ability to interact with the world. Susanna had been with the Geehr family since she was “nine or ten” and had seen the births of the Geehr children, but probably did not truly understand conception. So she had difficulties interpreting the baby’s father’s advances, and she didn’t realize that her actions would potentially lead to pregnancy. In Jenny’s version of the story, Susanna’s social problems had been taken advantage of by both the baby’s father, whose actions led to her pregnancy, and the Geehr family who had not provided adequate protection for her.

Jenny had her own piece of the story from the Festival to add to the mix. She had been tasked with fixing the Suzanna doll in the off season, and had decided that she needed to do some research into Susanna’s life and death. Jenny drove around Reading and Oley to several of the locations featured in the story to get a better feel for the place and events. For part of the journey, Jenny brought “Suzanna” along for the ride. It had been Jenny’s intention for “Suzanna” to sit in the car with her as she visited the house in Reading where Susanna’s sister Barbara Katzenmoyer reportedly had lived and which, according to some accounts, had been the location of Susanna’s burial. However, “Suzanna’s” metal skeleton was too rigid to allow her to ride comfortably inside the
passenger compartment of the car. Instead, she had to make the trip folded into the trunk. Following these excursions, Jenny repaired the skeleton and outfitted Suzanna in a new dress, made over from a theatre costume. She carefully read everything she could find in order to make the dress meet both with the expectations of the Festival attendees and with her own guidelines for historical accuracy. While the dress itself was probably too elaborate for the time period and Susanna’s station with its rows of lace, the spirit of repurposing would have been appropriate. So, while Susanna herself got a new dress for the first time at her execution, the effigy got a made-over dress such as all of Susanna’s other dresses would have been.

The new directions proposed for Susanna’s story are influenced by the story and the traditions around its interpretation both in the Festival and in the community. These changes mirror what Richard Bauman identified as one of the developments of folklore as a discipline: first, folklore studied things of the past, then events of the present slowly earned acknowledgement and study. Maybe the impetus for changing the staging and performance of the Hanging – an event that has inspired reinterpretation in about 40 years – demonstrates the growth within the Festival community as well. As Dave Fooks says, the only thing that Festival attendees hate more than repetition is change. But perhaps the rumbling about potential change demonstrates a necessary development in the culture of

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493 The new Suzanna doll was constructed in 1995-6. Originally, the articulated steel skeleton was so loose that the body flopped all around when hanged, so the decision was made to weld the joints so that the skeleton would hang more like an inert body.

494 Jenny did not cite her sources, and, as I was encouraging her to tell the story as she interpreted it, I did not ask for specific references.

the Festival, from reproducing things of the past to reinterpreting them in reference to the present and future.

**Moving Forward**

The Hanging has provoked discussion, derision, and debate, but it continues to be performed. Viewers sometimes doubt its appropriateness in the current setting, but the overall interpretation is that the historical context and the continuity of the performance override these concerns. Apathy also plays a role: even those who did not think the Hanging was appropriate were not willing to promote their concerns beyond perhaps a complaint to the management office. In 2012, the issue that received the greatest amount of concern was not related to the Hanging or to any of the presentations. Instead, it related to the issues associated with the well-being of the animals in the petting zoo. The situation of the live animals elicited more comment, since their status as rehabilitated rescues – explaining their occasionally battered but healthy appearance – had not been widely disseminated. So, once again, the live, physically-present animals gained more compassion than the human featured as the subject of a theatrical performance.\textsuperscript{496}

But perhaps this is not apathy. While the goal might be to allow for the suspension of “real” time during the portrayal of many of the folklife elements of the Festival, this intent does not necessarily extend to all aspects. Those who superficially engage with the story do not necessarily see its purpose outside the commercial aspects.

\textsuperscript{496} The Festival’s facebook page ran a real-time discussion of the petting zoo issue, with one individual voicing her concern; Dave Fooks constructing an almost immediate response; and many fans voicing their support for the rescue operation that had been supplying the animals for many years.
for the Festival. Some interpret it the way the Festival planners intended; some take their own direction. Perhaps the most telling versions come from those who use this tale as a springboard for examining other issues: those who make connections with events in their own lives, popular culture, or stories in the news. For them, Susanna’s story moves beyond the static presentation offered by the Festival in order to become something new and relevant. No longer is she secluded in the annals of history or the confines of the Festival. Instead, the story has reentered popular culture in subtle but present ways.

Many who witness the performance at the Festival identify the story as both part of the Festival and as a historical incident. Does a separation exist that makes Susanna’s story purely an artifact from the distant past, or does it contain some kernels of truth within which a modern audience can find some relevance? June DeTurk intentionally stresses the parts of the text that emphasize “a strange parallel on the world today,” hoping that her presentation will encourage observers to contextualize what they learn about Susanna. As will be discussed in the following chapter, observers have a range of reactions to the performance, some of which do involve forming connections between the interpretations of past and present.

The performance of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” is not just a piece of the tradition – canon or invented – for the people living within Berks County and its immediate environs. Instead, the story has been transformed into a piece that has

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497 During a class discussion (led in Dr. Amy Shuman’s Ohio State University’s English 597.01 class, “The Disability Experience in the Contemporary World,” taught Spring Quarter, 2012) in which I introduced Susanna’s story, the first question that the students needed to have clarified was whether or not she was a free worker or a slave. This mattered both because of the status of the child, and because they needed to know whether or not she had the choice to leave her place of employment.

498 See chapter 5.
relevance within the local community but, more importantly, within the ephemeral community formed by the shared experience of the Kutztown Folk Festival. It is both “heritage,” defined as the commodification of something exotic, and the foundation of a new canon. Susanna’s case is used both to show the differences in treatment in the past and the connections of the present with that past. While the original intention of including this story as a part of the Festival is not the reason it is currently maintained, the performance itself has become a consistent and expected ideograph by which the Festival as a whole can be identified in certain contexts.

The Hanging, as presented at the Kutztown Festival, contains both elements of present culture and the refractions of past culture. The story has its roots in the past, but it has also developed over time to carry a meaning more relevant in the context of the present day. Continuing traditional cultural elements mean more to insiders. In this situation, however, the insider/outsider definition is not drawn by ethnic or geographic boundaries. Instead, both sides are at least partially determined by the line drawn between those who identify with the performance of the Festival, and those who identify themselves as tourists or outside observers. Those not directly affiliated with the community of the Festival describe their connections according to a wide range of self-identities. The visitors would not have considered themselves to be outlanders by name – that term for them belongs to the local Pennsylvania Dutch community – but neither would they have claimed anything connection greater than a common German heritage.

Susanna’s story – expressing how one marginalized member of the historical community had sinned, been convicted, and died repentant – was and is something

499 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture: 149, 150.
outside the normal experiences of twentieth and twenty-first century citizens. This leads the story to be both part of the endemic canon because of its familiarity, and exotic because of the divide between the reality that led to Susanna’s actions and treatment and the reality of her modern audience. It also helps form the beginning of the new canon associated with the Festival: the aspects of the past that legitimize the continuation of the story also legitimize the connections between the Festival and the culture it is designed to represent. Without that cultural and historical context, the interpretation of the Festival as a staging of heritage would be valueless: the historical value cannot be retroactively applied because of the desire of those in the present for it to exist. But neither should that historical value be assumed or overinflated. The authenticity of the interpretation and presentation disappears if the story either loses its relevance in the present, or lacked any in the past.

One of the questions I asked before I witnessed the performance for the first time was “why a hanging?” Yoder, Fooks, and others put forward different versions of the same justification: that this particular event is relevant in Berks County history and does, therefore, earn a reasonable location in the corpus of local history, folklore, and urban legend. Another question that perhaps bears a bit more relevance is “why is this hanging continued?” It must be at least partially an economic decision: the Festival organizers

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500 Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 67. This definition of heritage is similar to how Regina Bendix describes one aspect of authentic object: if something is authentic, it has characteristics which legitimize the present through its references to the past. For a different view on the definition of traditional in relation to artifacts within a culture, see Tamás Hofer, “The Perception of Tradition in European Ethnology,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 21 (2/3): 135. Dan Ben-Amos, “The Seven Strands of Tradition: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 21 (2/3): 105-107, also provides a framework within which Susanna’s role as a part of the tradition can be evaluated.
choose to keep what generates conversation and funds, such as the Hanging and the Celtic bands, and remove what causes conversation but alienates the public, such as the demonstrations of tanning and butchery. While the tanning and butchery might be significantly more relevant to the daily lives of the people represented by the Festival, the mundane nature of these tasks does not counterbalance the issues of visible gore. Instead, as of 2011, the routine aspects of traditional Pennsylvania Dutch life had become reintegrated into the Festival through the introduction of a “wash house” display, demonstrating the patterns of cleaning over the past few hundred years. The necessity of hard work, and the focus on accomplishing realistic tasks, stays the same: only the focus changes from pig carcasses to dirty laundry.

It is, apparently, acceptable to discuss the hanging of a human in the abstract but unacceptable to view the utilization of animal products for human consumption. Thatching roofs, carding wool, and blowing glass are all acceptable demonstrations, because no animals were harmed in the production of the goods. Human nature, according to one informant, supports the idea that animals are innocent and, therefore, should not receive our wrath. Humans, she goes on to argue, are vindictive and capable of great destruction. Therefore, other humans are more likely to appreciate witnessing the condemnation of one of their own rather than violence against an animal, even when that animal is being used for the benefit of the people and animals involved.

502 Alice (a nurse with no affiliation to Kutztown or the Festival), in discussion with the author, March 2012, in response to the question “why is the hanging okay but not a butchering?”
As part of the Festival, the Hanging must be maintained and continued, even when individuals would like to make alterations or “improvements”. Not even those who felt that massive changes to the overall structure of the Festival felt that the Hanging should be discontinued. Indeed, the recommendation was more toward elaboration than removal. Even while the Festival no longer brought on reactions of “grimacing, cringing and, in some cases, fainting,”503 it still inspired some level of reflection from its viewers.

Conclusion: “She’s not there, you know”

In the summer of 2012, following what I thought was a detailed road map, I went on a trip through Oley, intending to locate the farm where Susanna had lived. I had a lovely drive around the area, but still managed to get completely lost. I know now that I drove past the farm at least three times. I tried again in February of 2013, with the assistance of a member of the local graveyard preservation society. Finally successful, I was able to see where Susanna had lived and pay my respects to the Schneiders and Geehrs with whose stories I have spent so much of the past few years.

My guide and others consistently reminded me that no one knew where Susanna’s corporeal remains were. They insisted that she was not buried at the Schneider farm, and that there really wasn’t any reason for me to visit that or other locations. In their views, the lack of a corporeal connection removed the value of the location. Alfred Shoemaker, writing in the 1940s, would have disagreed with them. Shoemaker acknowledged that he was not interested in uncovering details of Susanna’s innocence or guilt, but descriptions of her geographical situatedness. He cared less about her crime than he did about her pervasiveness within the community.\(^1\) The attitude has changed: no longer is a connection to Susanna Cox the same as that to George Washington. But her lack of

\(^1\) Radio Broadcast script titled “Old Berks,” from the Alfred L. Shoemaker Collection, Myrin Library, Ursinus College, 724-30.
corporeal placement does not eliminate her presence from Oley or from the corporate imagination of Berks County. Even if the people deny her presence, the conversations that occur as associated with the history and culture of the area continues to situate her story within their borders.

The desire to dissociate the place from the story also hit a chord with one of my family members. As I was trying to explain why different members of the Berks County community were still so invested in Susanna’s historical situatedness, she exclaimed, “You’d think they’d get over it after 200 years.” She understood why the Hanging was interesting, and why the historical piece drew attention, but she couldn’t understand why so many within Berks County still saw Susanna’s story as relevant to their own lives. At a history conference several years ago, one of the other presenters, without knowing my topic, stated that many women within Pennsylvania were worthy of study, but “not those like Susanna Cox. Everyone knows that story.” And, as one of the vendors at the Kutztown Folk Festival put it, “they’ve been hanging that poor woman for years. You think they’d let her die already.”

And therein lies my fascination with Susanna Cox. She has not gone away in 200 years; her story continues to be an ideograph around which community discussions form. Whether discussing the performance at the Festival or the story in its historical context, Susanna continues to influence her community long after most of her contemporaries

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2 All interviewed sources in this section shall remain anonymous. Conversations with Berks County citizens occurred in June and July of 2012 and February of 2013, in various locations throughout Berks County; the family conversation referenced occurred in January 2013 in Blacklick, Ohio; the vendor was interviewed in June 2012 in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. The historian’s comment came at the 2009 Pennsylvania Historical Association meeting in Chester, Pennsylvania.
have been forgotten. One of my informants, a former teacher, had been given a
collection of newspaper articles about Susanna by one of her students. The student didn’t
know where the documents had originated; the teacher did not either. But somehow,
copies of microfilm of newspaper articles had been relevant enough for a family to share
with their child, and allow that child to also share with classmates and teachers. The
story was again disseminated by a combination of published and oral records, sharing the
official and non-canon versions alike.

When people find out what I am studying, I get three questions, usually in this
order. “She was Amish, right?” (No, she was associated with the German Reformed
Church). “You must be Pennsylvania Dutch because why else would you care about this
story?” (No, I had a German grandmother, but her family arrived in Maryland around
1848 and finally settled on Long Island). And, perhaps the most direct of all: “Did she do
it?” (That answer is a little more complicated).

Did Susanna Cox kill her son? Did it matter for her trial? Does it affect how she
is interpreted within twenty-first century culture? It depends on who is consulted, and
what evidence is deemed relevant. But figuring out her innocence or guilt was never my
purpose, and my interpretation of the evidence to that end is not the point of my interest
in the story. What is the point is how her synchronic and diachronic community
interpreted her case. In most cases, her guilt has been assumed.

But some have tried to alleviate her role by accusing others for their roles. The
Geehrs receive blame because they hadn’t provided her with better opportunities within

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The copies appear to be from the microfilm collection of the Historical Society of Berks
County, due to a few context clues.
their home. The child’s father was at fault for seducing her and then leaving her to face the consequences alone. Or maybe she was guilty, but her lack of options provides some form of justification. Maybe she did it, but what were her other choices? Should she have received Old Testament retribution – or could she be rehabilitated in jail? As I have discussed, an argument on Susanna’s part, arguing the possibility of postpartum depression, has appeared, as has the interpretation of the use of the word “simple” in her description to mean that she was mentally deficient. All of these different arguments for her exoneration – as well as the other arguments that any action taken against a child should be punishable by death – are relics of the time in which they arose, not decisive assessments of the historical event. Gaps in the historical evidence abound: the missing trial records, details that appear years later with no prior documentation, suppositions regarding her relationships with family, friends, and employers. I have worked with the historical evidence and the ongoing interpretations, but a definitive answer to the questions of “why” is still a work in progress.

Susanna’s story is not embedded completely in 1809. Like other legends, it can be remade and reformed according to contemporary needs. However, the new interpretations do not change the motivations of the individuals who were involved in the original case. Susanna cannot have the mentality of a twenty-first century woman, because she wasn’t one. That doesn’t mean that she had to fit every stereotype; it just means that her actions were constrained by the limitations of when and where she lived. She did not have a voice in her own trial, not because she did not want one, but because the legal strictures prevented it. Modern criticisms should not be toward the individuals who obeyed the laws, but toward the laws themselves.
Susanna Cox has not been forgiven for her culpability in the death of her child. But I do believe she has been redeemed, because she is not remembered purely as a woman who sinned. Her story can be applied and reapplied according to the needs of the speaker. Depending on the context, Susanna can provide an example of sinner, a citizen who committed one crime which allows us to know more about her, or a woman failed by the legal establishment. Alfred Shoemaker saw the story as a means to explore the legends associated with a particular locale; Don Yoder took this one step farther to talk about the ballad as representative within the entire Pennsylvania German musical corpus. Current attendees at the Kutztown Folk Festival witness “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” sometimes because they are intrigued by the process or by the public spectacle, but others come because it is a part of their experience as a part of the Festival.

One of the issues remains the ability to separate the historical event from its ongoing cultural significance. Was Susanna mistreated within her own time? She was held to the standard of the law and, while the evidence might have been read differently to achieve a different result, the jury did not see reasonable doubt. Other women in her situation also faced the same punishment; men who committed murder, regardless of the victim’s age, also faced the death penalty. Perhaps a different result would have been possible if the circumstances had been different, but her treatment was in accordance with tradition and the application of the law at the time she was tried. Applying twenty-first century sensibilities on her or the others associated with the case would be inappropriate when looking at the historical situation, but provide a wide range of possibilities when examining the significance of the story within the current local social memory.
One of the first questions I asked myself when looking into the Festival aspect of Susanna’s story was to try to figure out why the community and the festival organizers would perpetuate the story of someone who broke the law. After all, wouldn’t they want to show just the positives? Why show that the Pennsylvania Dutch were also fallible individuals? Is the story merely representative of the ballad corpus – as Don Yoder argued in 1964 – or, as Dave Fooks justifies it today, is it relevant because of connections to changes within the legal system? And why, when the Festival’s tendency is to rotate presentations out every few years, has “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” been a constant fixture since the early 1960s?

After examining all of the published and archival materials, performing dozens of personal interviews, and witnessing the Hanging at least thirty times, I have come to the conclusion that the story isn’t preserved because Susanna broke the law, or because she was responsible for her child’s death. She isn’t what is important in the story – she is just the catalyst. The issue that matters is how the people reacted to her life and death, both in the historical time frame and today. Her story is still known because she did not fit into the mold of an appropriate woman of her time. This is how the details of her life entered the written record, and it provides an insight into what was acceptable behavior by showing what was not. Susanna’s story truly can be used as an example of how “the margins illuminate the center, and that cultural history … is incomplete without hearing from people on the edge.”4 Knowing how she broke the law, and that the community argued that extenuating circumstances should have granted her some additional leniency,

provides a space in which to explore the grey area between legal definitions and community reinterpretations.

Has Susanna Cox been redeemed by her community? Yes, and no. Yes, in the sense that her memory is problematized by additional factors rather than just evaluated on the initial newspaper reports. While many still interpret her memory in a single dimension as “the woman who killed her baby,” others see connections to fictional retellings, local or institutional legends, and recent news stories. And that in itself is a form of redemption: Susanna’s story allows for more than one interpretation. She needs to be a victim, rather than a criminal, so that her story can be invoked as argument against capital punishment, the incarceration of women, and the reform of the laws related to infanticide. The modern reenactment was deemed appropriate because it provides evidence that community events were influential in American life. Her story is designed to excite interest in the complexity of the past, showing that the German heritage within Pennsylvania had more to it than the purely decorative elements most familiar to outsiders. While Susanna had been just a young woman who sinned, she became a cultural icon, not through her own actions, but through the transformation of her story throughout the life of the Festival itself.

So no, Susanna Cox is not there. Susanna Cox cannot be found on the Schneider farm, or at her sister-in-law’s old address, or even in a specific spot in Potter’s field. She is not in the mannequin that is hanged at the Kutztown Folk Festival, nor is she in the

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5 The long-term opinion that the people of Pennsylvania were against capital punishment was reinforced in articles, including one in the Duluth News Tribune, February 17, 1905, which repeated Richards’ phrase that “[t]he hanging of a woman was then, as it is now, repugnant to the people of Pennsylvania.”
documents found at the Historical Society of Berks County. But she does still live in Berks County, and will continue to do so as long as her story is spread either through public presentations or the legends of the region.

Susanna was redeemed – not because newly-discovered evidence exonerated her or because later generations determined that infanticide was not worthy of judicial punishment. But the culturally-constructed image of a young, impressionable woman who lacked education and familial support became stronger than any other presented. Her redemption came from the community, not from the official structures that had condemned her. Her story still resonates in Berks County and among those interested in Pennsylvania German language and culture because it combines local specificity with broad human concerns. Not because everyone who hears it has broken religious or legislative strictures, but because error exists. And so does redemption. Susanna is no more or less guilty of her son’s death because of the reinterpretations of her life. But the constant reimagining of her case within the contemporary cultural consciousness provides a recurring point of comparison. And, perhaps more importantly, the recurring considerations of her person and her case demonstrate the ongoing discussion related to transgressive women and their place within society. Susanna as an individual becomes a symbol of a more corporate identity: defining not expected behavior, but one situation in which the unexpected provides an opportunity for further exploration into the community’s interpretation of their own norms and ideals.
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**Oral Histories From the HSBC Louis Richards Notebooks**

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APPENDIX A: Gombert Ballad, with Translation

“Ein Neues Trauer-Lied, Enthaltend die Geschichte der Susanna Cox, die in Reading wegen dem Mord ihres Kindes hingerichtet wurde.”

Attributed to Johann Philip Gombert, 1809.

Ach merket auf ihr Menschen all, Pay attention, all you people
Nun wird’s euch vorgesagt Now would I say this tale to you
Von einem sehr betrübten Fall, Of a very sorrowful incident
Von einer armen Magd. Of a poor girl

Sie hatte lang in Oley g’dient, She had long served in Oley
Wohl bey dem Jacob Gehr! Well with the Jacob Gehr’s
Ihr Name war Susanna Cox, Her name was Susanna Cox
Wie ich ihn hab’ gehört. As I have heard it said.

Sie hatte gar kein Unterricht She had no training
In Welt und geistlich Recht, In the world and holy Right
Sie waßt den Willen Gottes nicht, She did not know the Will of God
Und auch nicht sein Gesetz. And also not His law

Das ist uns Menschen wohl bekannt, It is well known to us men
Und geht so in der Welt, And goes so in the world
Wer von der Schrift hat kein Verstand, The one with no understanding of the Word,
Der thut was ihm gefällt. does what pleases him.

Take notice now ye people all, And hear what will be said
About a very gloomy case, Of a deluded maid.

She served as maid, in Oley long, With one named Jacob Gehr,
Her name was Miss Susanna Cox I heard it mentioned there.

No education she received, She knew but what she saw;
The will of God she did not know, Nor aught about his law.

It is well known to us men To most people it is known
How in the world it goes; – They who the Scriptures do not
Will do just what they chose.

6 Johann Gombert, Ein Neues Trauer-Lied, Enthaltend die Geschichte der Susanna Cox, die in Reading wegen dem Mord ihres Kindes hingerichtet wurde (Reading, Pennsylvania?: s.n., 1809) in the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, Item 66.

7 Ibid., translation by Dorothy Noyes and the author, 2013.

8 Johann Gombert, A New Mournful Song Containing the History of Susanna Cox Who was Hung in Reading for Infanticide, in the Year 1809 (Reading, Pennsylvania: s.n., 18--) in the Pennsylvania German Broadsides and Fraktur Collection at Pennsylvania State University Libraries, Item 77.
Ihr Nachbar, der uns ist bewußt, Her neighbor, who to us is known
Sein Namen der war Mertz, His name was Mertz
Hat sie verführt durch Fleisches Lust, He seduced her through the lusts of the flesh
In Unfall sie gestürzt. And brought about her downfall

Ein Beyspiel gleich von Adam's Zeit, An example, here from Adam's time
Wie uns die Bibel lehrt, As the Bible teaches us
Whose name was Mertz, withal,
Wie jene Schlang, der Satan’s Lust, How that serpent, Satan's spirit,
In Unfall sie gestürzt. And brought her to her fall.

Die Eva hat verführt. Had seduced Eve.
Durch diesen Mannsgesell. Through this neighbor man
Through that seduction came the death
Von Anfang in die Welt; At the beginning of the world
So gieng es der Susanna Cox And so it goes with Susanna Cox
The world when it began;
Durch diesen Mannsgesell. By this deceptive man.

Er achtet die Gesetze nicht, He did not respect God's laws
Er hielte nur für Spott, He held only as mockery
The law be held in disrespect,
Was uns die heil'ge Schrift verbiet, From what the Scriptures do forbid
In the seventh Commandment
Im siebenten Gebot. In that heptade command.

Als Ehmann er sie hat verführt, How as a married man he seduced her
Und sie gebracht in Noth, And brought her into misery
And brought her in distress;
Einmal nach seinem Tod. Perhaps after his death.

Sie hat es nicht geoffenbart, She did not reveal her condition
Sie schämt sich vor den Leut, She was ashamed of what people would think
She had this matter not revealed,
Darum es Niemand sollt erfahr'n Therefore no one knew
She thought no person would take note
Before the time of the birth
Of her delivery.

Im achtzehn hundert neunten Jahr, In 1809
den vierzehnten Februar, On the fourteenth of February
In eighteen hundred and ninth year,
Des Morgens früh um halb fünf Uhr, In the early morning, at 4:30
In February, fourteenth day,
Sie's Kind zur Welt gebahr. Her child entered the world
Her child was born, they say.
Da diese arme Sünderin,  
Verblendet war so fest,  
Hat sie ihr neugebornes Kind  
In Ewigkeit versetzt.  

There this poor Sinner  
Was so completely blinded  
That she sent her newborn Child  
into eternity.  

Sobald es aber war entdeckt,  
Daß dieser Mord geschehen,  
So wurd’ sie in Arrest gesetzt  
Und sollte es gestehen.  

As soon it was discovered  
That this murder had occurred  
She was arrested  
And must confess it.  

Ein' Jury ward sogleich bestellt,  
Sie sollte es nachsehen:  
Was dieser armen Sünderin,  
Für Urtheil sollt geschehen.  

A Jury was immediately called  
It would make the decision  
What this poor sinner  
Would receive as a verdict  

Sie hielt wohl bey derselben an,  
Und bittet um Gena:  
Doch klagten sie sie schuldig an  
Des Mords im ersten Grad.  

She held herself up well  
And asked for grace:  
But they asked for her  
Of murder in the first degree  

Man führte sie in's Courhaus  
h'nein,  
Wo der Richter Herr Spayd,  
Wo sie ihr schrecklich  
Mit Weinen angehört.  

She was taken into the courthouse  
Under judgment of Judge Spayd  
Where she heard her terrible  
Death sentence with tears  

Ein jeder kann nun denken wohl,  
Wie es ihr war zu Muth,  
Da sie auf'm Richtplatz sterben sollt,  
Bedauernswerthes Blut!  

One can well imagine  
What her courage was like  
That she at the judgment square should die  
And lose her pitiful blood!  

Die Todtenwarrant man bald schrieb,  
Für diese arme Magd,  
Und ward zum Gouvernör geschickt  
Nach der Lancaster Stadt.  

The death warrant was soon written  
For this poor maid  
And was sent to the Governor  
Over in Lancaster city.  

Ein Mann der sehr mitleidig war,  
Den sie selbst geschickt,  
Zum Gouvernör in dieser Stadt,  
Der hat für sie gebitt.  

A man, who was  
very compassionate  
Took himself off  
To the Governor in that city.  
Where he pleaded on her behalf.  

A man who was compassionate  
She hast’ly sent before,  
Unto the governor of state,  
Who plead and sued for her.
Allein für sie war kein Pardon,  
Gehangen mußt' sie seyn,  
Den zehnten Tag im Juny,  
Die Welt zum Augenschein.

For her alone there was no pardon  
She must be hanged  
The tenth day in June  
Before the eyes of the world.

But he for her no pardon found:  
Alas! She must be hung  
Already on the tenth of June,  
To show the world 'twas wrong.

Die Todten Warrant wurd' geschickt,  
Ihr vorgelesen gleich,  
Da hat sie brünstig Gott gebitt,  
Um Gnaden im Himmelreich.

The death warrant was sent  
And read aloud to her  
Then she passionately petitioned God  
For grace in Heaven

The death-warrant was soon returned  
And then to her was read: —  
To God she prayed most fervently  
For grace till she was dead.

Sie ward in ihrem Bußzustand  
Besucht von Geistlichkeit;  
Und sie hat ernstlich Buß gethan,  
Und ihre Sünd bereut.

She was in her penitence  
Visited by the clergy  
And she had earnestly done penance  
And repented of her sins

She was in her repentance by  
The clergy taught redress,  
For she repented candidly,  
And did her sins confess.

Sie wurd' aus der Gefangenschaft  
Um 11 Uhr ausgeführt,  
Dann ging es nach dem Hinrichsplatz,  
Bedauernsvoller Schritt.

She was led from her captivity  
Around eleven o'clock  
Then she went toward the place of execution  
With many regretful steps!

From prison she was taken out,  
About eleven o’clock,  
Upon the execution-place –  
It caused a moral shock.

Sie warnte alle Menschen treu,  
Besonders junge Leut,  
Und sprach: "nehmt ein Exempel euch,  
An meinem Endschicksal heut."

She warned all the good people  
Especially the young  
And said "All of you take example  
From my final fate today."

She cautioned all mankind around,  
The young especially,  
And said, “Take an example now,  
By my ill fate to-day.

Sie kniete auf die Erde hin,  
Und ruft den Herrn an,  
Er möchte vergeben alle Sünd,  
Die sie allhier gethan.

She knelt on the ground  
And called out to God  
That he might forgive all the sins  
That she had done here.

She knelt upon the earth in prayer,  
And asked the Lord alone,  
That he would all her sins forgive,  
Which ever she had done.

Ihr Weinen war Mitleidswerth,  
Wie sie lag auf den Knie,  
Die Thränen fielen auf die Erd,  
Viel weinten über sie.

Her crying was worthy of compassion  
How she stayed on her knees  
Her tears fell to the Earth  
Many cried over her

Her weeping was so sorrowful,  
As on her knees she lay;  
Her tear-drops fell upon the earth—  
They wept for her that day,

Sie sprach: "Ich geh zur Ewigkeit,  
In einem Augenblick;  
Ach Gott! nimm mich in deinem Reich,  
Verstoß mich Sünderin nicht."

She spoke "I go to Eternity  
In just a moment  
Oh, God! Take me into your Kingdom  
Do not break me, a sinner!"

She said, “I go t’eternity  
Now instantly. O God,  
Take me into thy kingdom, see,  
Reject me sinner not!”
Nach diesem ward sie hingericht, After this was she executed She’s executed afterward: –
Mitleidenswerther Schritt,9 With pitiful steps! A lamentable deed!
Nach siebenzehn Minuten ist After seventeen minutes And after seventeen minutes time,
Schon Leib und Seel getrennt. Her body and soul were parted Her parting soul had fled.

Nach ihrem Tode ward mit Fleiß, After her death diligently And after she was dead, in vain,
Von Doktoren viel probirt, The doctors made many attempts The doctors tried their skill
Zu bringen sie zum Leben gleich, To return her to life To bring her back to life again,
Jedoch es war zu spät. Yet it was too late. But all too late and ill.

Wer dieses Liedchen hat gemacht, The one who made this little song And who did this song compose
Und es euch neu gedicht‘, And composed it anew And earnestly did dictate,
Der hat den Jammer mit betracht, Participated in the lamentation, Did all this misery behold,
War selbst bey dem Gericht. Was himself there in the court. Was near the judgment seat.

Ihr Menschen all auf Erden hört All people on the earth, just Ye people all on earth give ear,
Nur dieses Beyspiel an, Listen to this example Take this example here,
Wenn jemand ist so ungelehrt, When someone is so unlearned When people are so ignorant,
Wie's ihm ergehen kann. What can become of her. How they at last may fare.

Sie lebte nicht gar lang in Freud, She did not live very long in joy She did not live in pleasure long
Als sie im Unfall war; Before she found her undoing Ere she was in the snare,
Bracht ihre ganze Lebenszeit, Her whole span of life broke She brought her whole life’s journey on
Auf vier und zwanzig Jahr. At four and twenty years To four and twenty years.

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APPENDIX B: Storck Translation of Gombert Ballad

Gombert, Johann Philip, *A New Dirge, Containing the History of Susanna Cox, who was executed at Reading for the murder of her own child*¹

"The story I'm going to tell you,
Forever will be new.
And who but once doth hear it,
'T will break his heart in two."

All ye who feel for others' woes,
With hearts compassionate,
Oh!! Listen to the woeful tale,
Of a poor damsel's fate!

Susanna Cox, a country-maid,
Young, and of beauty rare,
In Oley as a servant had
Long lived with Jacob Gehr.

Ne'er had she been instructed in
The course of human law,
Nor did she know God's Holy Word,
Which strikes the world with awe.

For, ev'ry one must be aware
Of what he daily sees,
That whom the scriptures don't restrain,
They'll do just what they please.

Her neighbor, well remember we –
MERZ was his second name –
He recklessly led her astray
By lust's unhallowed flame.

¹ Gombert, Johann Philip, *A New Dirge, Containing the History of Susanna Cox, who was executed at Reading for the murder of her own child*, Louis Storck, trans. (Pennsylvania: ca. 1865). WorldCat library search engine notes that this text could have been published as early as 1848, but the printed dates give 1865.
An instant which, from Adam's time,
The race of man defiled,
When Satan, in a serpent's garb,
His help-mate Eve beguiled.

Death followed in seduction's train,
When first the world began –
This happened to Susanna Cox
Through that unworthy man.

What in his seventh commandment God,
What sacred laws forbid,
He wantonly trod under foot
And laughed, and scoffed at it.

Though married, to seduce this girl
He did not hesitate –
He'll rue it when he's dead and gone,
But then 'twill be too late!

Fear of disgrace prevented her
From making known her state
Which she by ev'ry means concealed
Despair did indicate

The eighteen hundred and ninth year,
At half past four at morn,
The fourteenth day of February,
The unhappy child was born.

So far misled this sinner was,
So much bewildered she,
That she her helpless infant's soul
Sent to eternity,

As soon as rumor did at her
Point as a murderess,
Off was she hurried to the jail,
The foul deed to confess.

A jury then empannelled was
To investigate her case,
And to decide accordingly
What sentence should take place.
Although she supplicated hard
To pardon her great sin,
Of murder in the first degree
The guilty brought her in.

Ere long she in the court-house was
Arraigned before Judge Spayd,
Where, shedding many scorching tears,
She learned her awful fate.

Each one may easily conceive
What her own feelings were
To think, Oh lamentable case!
What end awaited her.

The to the Governor was sent,
Who lived in Lancaster,
The warrant which contained her doom,
For his own signature.

A gentleman who pitied her,
Had by herself been sent
To supplicate the Executive
Law's rigor to suspend.

But she no pardon could obtain,
For she was to be hung
As early as the tenth of June,
To warn both old and young.

The warrant was returned, and read
In her dark prison-cell,
When fervently she prayed to God
To save her soul from hell.

The clergy oft did visit her
In her repentant state,
For earnestly she penance did,
Preparing for her fate.

Just as the clock did strike elev'n,
She straightways from the jail
Was led to where the gallows stood,
Oh lamentable tale!
She faithfully admonished all,
Young folks especially,
"Oh let," said she, "my dreadful fate
To you a warning be."

She humbly knelt upon the ground,
And called in her distress
Upon the Lord to pardon all
Her sins and wickedness.

So piteous her crying was,
Her anguish and her fears so great
That ev'ry heart was moved,
And ev'ry eye shed tears.

She said: "I in an instant shall
Go to eternity;
Oh God! For my redeemer's sake,
Turn not they face from me."

She then was made to undergo
The punishment of death;
Scarce sev'nteen minutes had expired
When she resigned her breath.

Although without the least delay
Their skill the doctors tried,
To bring her back to life again
Was to their art denied.

He that composed this little song,
In mem'ry of the event,
Was present at the closing scene
And did the trial attend.

Let all who live upon this earth,
By her example see,
What dire disgrace may those befall
Who're raised illiterately.

Short was, and sad, her pilgrimage,
Her youth mere drudgery,
Her age but twenty years and four,
Her exit – infamy.
### APPENDIX C: Bastardy, Fornication and Infanticide Charges in Berks County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Charge</th>
<th>Names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1785</td>
<td>Bastardy</td>
<td>Elizabeth Thorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Samuel Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>Fornication and begetting a bastard child</td>
<td>Christian Hagenburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mary Stahler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>Fornication</td>
<td>John Jacob Strunk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Catherine Faigen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1799</td>
<td>Bastardy</td>
<td>Sarah Holbarton</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>William Walters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Concealment</td>
<td>Sarah Moser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>Murder (verdict: <em>ignoramus</em>)</td>
<td>Catharine Schneider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1807</td>
<td>Concealment</td>
<td>Elizabeth Wagner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1809</td>
<td>Bastardy</td>
<td>William Klapp</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sally Ermel</td>
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<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>Fornication and bastardy</td>
<td>Jonas Baum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elisabeth Levan, witness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>Murder (ignoramus); concealing child</td>
<td>Betty Denny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812</td>
<td>Fornication</td>
<td>John Meyer</td>
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<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>Bastardy</td>
<td>John Speice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Catherine Bricker, witness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>Fornication</td>
<td>Perrey Meiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>With Catherina Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Bastardy</td>
<td>John Hartman</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hanna Keller, witness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1821</td>
<td>Fornication and bastardy</td>
<td>John Weston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sally Lamb</td>
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<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Fornication and bastardy</td>
<td>Nathan Zimmer</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ester Feldhoff</td>
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<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>Bastardy</td>
<td>Jacob Herschner</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maria Bernheisel,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>Suspect</td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
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<td>1821</td>
<td>Fornication and bastardy</td>
<td>Hugh Robeson</td>
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<td>1825</td>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>Lydia Karchner</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1833</td>
<td>Murder of bastard child</td>
<td>Maria Roth</td>
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<td>1840</td>
<td>Fornication and bastardy</td>
<td>John Matz</td>
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<td>1855</td>
<td>Murder of bastard child</td>
<td>Elisabeth Lauer</td>
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<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Fornication and bastardy</td>
<td>Constance Zimmerman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data for this section is compiled from the following:

Berks and Montgomery County Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 81, 222.

Berks County Legal Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Archives Collection 28, Folder B, HSBC.

Archive Box 1, Folders C, D, and E, HSBC

Archive Box 2, Folders 1 and 2, HSBC

Archive Collection 13, Box 2, Folder 2, Item 2, HSBC
APPENDIX D: List of Available Ballad Versions


Gombert, Johann. *A New Mournful Song Containing the History of Susanna Cox, Who was Hung in Reading for Infanticide, in the Year 1809*. Reading, Pennsylvania: s.n., 18--.


APPENDIX E: Text of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox” 2009

Performance of “The Execution of Suzanna Cox,” text from July 1, 2009 at 11:30 AM. The Narrator is June DeTurk, who adapted the script written by Richard Gougler in the 1970s. The ballad selections included are all from Louis Storck’s 1865 translation of Johann Philip Gombert’s original ballad text.

All ye who feel for others' woes,
With hearts compassionate,
Oh!! Listen to the woeful tale,
Of a poor damsel's fate!

Susanna Cox, a country-maid,
Young, and of beauty rare,
In Oley as a servant had
Long lived with Jacob Gehr.

Ne'er had she been instructed in
The course of human law,
Nor did she know God's Holy Word,
Which strikes the world with awe.

For, ev'ry one must be aware
Of what he daily sees,
That whom the scriptures don't restrain,
They'll do just what they please.

With this grim warning in mind, let us look back at the events that led to the death of Susanna Cox. Although they took place 200 years ago, they have a strange parallel on

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514 The Execution of Suzanna Cox, narr. June DeTurk, Kutztown Folk Festival, Kutztown, Pennsylvania, July 1, 2009. Mrs. DeTurk adapted the script written by Richard Gougler in the 1970s. The ballad selections included are all from Louis Storck’s 1865 translation of Johann Philip Gombert’s original ballad text. Thanks to Mrs. DeTurk for granting me permission to reprint the text.
the world today. Susanna was born in 1785. Very little was known about her family but that it was large and they had very little money. At the age of 13, Susanna was bound out to the Snyder family, with the understanding that she would work there for board and lodging, and continue to work there until someone came to marry her. No one ever came for Susanna.

The Schneiders lived on a large farm in the Oley Valley approximately 20 miles south of here. Susanna never left that Oley Valley. She never learned to read nor write. Why, she couldn’t even sign her own name and she had very little religious training. On a neighboring farm lived the Mertz family. Mr. Mertz, the father of two children, took notice of Susanna and started to visit her secretly at night. When Susanna became pregnant she was so upset that she hid it from everyone, because she was afraid she would be put out of the Snyder household where she’d been for 11 years and was quite happy.

On Friday, Feb 17, 1809, Jacob Geehr, a son-in-law of the Snyders went into the coal cellar. This is a separate building, built of stone and piled against a huge bank. There, he found a frozen body of a male baby wrapped in an old coat. When questioned, Susanna admitted it was hers. It had been born dead three days before and she was so upset she didn’t know what to do so she hid it. An inquest revealed, however, the baby’s jaw was broken, the tongue had been torn loose, and a wad of flax was stuffed in the baby’s throat. Susanna was arrested, she pleaded not guilty. She was placed in the jail at 5th and Washington streets in Reading the county seat to await trial. Previously, there had been two other women in Berks County who were hanged for the killing of their children.
Now, they were hanged on an old law brought from England. And the law stated that the mother did not have to be responsible for the death, concealing it was enough for the hanging sentence. The liberal thinkers of that day tried to get this law changed in 1794 when it was necessary to prove that the mother actually caused the death. In 1809, a woman had been tried for killing her child, and she was acquitted. And now came another one, Susanna Cox.

The State Authorities were quite perturbed, they were afraid that Susanna would be acquitted. At this time there was much aversion to strict laws, and much money was collected for Susanna’s defense. The three ablest attorneys were secured for this defense. In fact, it was this legal battle that led to the interest in Susanna. The case was tried on Friday April 7th, 1809 in front of Judge John Spayd. The trial lasted one day, the jury deliberated for 4 hours. The verdict: guilty. On Saturday she had to be hanged. Judge Spayd had no other choice, she had to be hanged. Having to pronounce this sentence was so upsetting to him, that he had to resign his bench within the month.

Now while waiting to be hanged, Susanna was again confined to the jail at Fifth and Washington Street. Where she spent the days as the maid to Sheriff Marx, even taking her meals with them at the table. And again forces rallied and tried to save Susanna. This time they pleaded with Governor Simon Snyder. And they thought they were succeeding when a Lancaster County woman was arrested for killing her child.

Governor Snyder ordered Susanna to be hung on Saturday, June the 10th, between 10 AM and 2 PM. Rev. Philip Reinhold Pauli, a pastor for the Reformed Church in Reading had been giving Susanna religious training while she was confined to the old jail. When her commutation was denied, Susanna then admitted her guilt to Reverend
Pauli. Never in her whole life had Susanna had a new dress. The women of Reading who had visited her frequently while she was in jail made her a lovely white dress with black bows. The first day Susanna wore her new dress was her last day alive.

The procession from the old jail at Fifth and Washington Streets and then down to Penn and all the way up Penn to City Park where Gallows hill was located was a regular parade. It included an order, an infantry, a horse-drawn wagon with a coffin on it, Susanna, leaning on the arm of Rev Pauley, the sheriff’s party, and a group of onlookers estimated to be approximately 20,000. The hangman, whose identity was never revealed, arrived masked. When he finished… as he arrived, he was paid with silver dollars, that was the custom. When he was finished, he got to 6th and Penn. He was grabbed and beaten by the crowd. He managed to escape. He rushed down to the foot of Penn, and was just in time to get on the ferry that was crossing the Schuylkill River. After a hymn that Susanna had memorized, and Rev. Pauli, that did the prayer, the deed was done.

Susanna was the last woman in Pennsylvania to be publically executed. After Susanna’s death, there were a lot of poems and songs written about her. I’m going to share a portion of one of the poems with you.

Just as the clock did strike elev'n,
She straightways from the jail
Was led to where the gallows stood,
Oh lamentable tale!

So piteous her crying was,
Her anguish and her fears so great
That ev'ry heart was moved,
And ev'ry eye shed tears.

She then was made to undergo
The punishment of death;
Scarce sev'nteen minutes had expired
When she resigned her breath.

Short was, and sad, her pilgrimage,
Her youth mere drudgery,
Her age but twenty years and four,
Her exit – infamy.

(At this point in the script, the Hangman pulls on the rope and “Suzanna” falls through.

However, on this date, the trap door stuck, so Mrs. DeTurk continued speaking)

We have been having some problems. It was working well the last two days. So you’ll
have to return at 2:00 and I’m sure Susanna won’t be quite as fortunate then.

Thank you.

(And now the trap door opened.)
APPENDIX F: Images of the script for “The Hanging of Susanna Cox”

Photo 6: The opening of Richard Gougler's original text, from Mrs. DeTurk's collection.

515 Richard C. Gougler, "The Hanging of Susanna Cox" June DeTurk Collection. The Kutztown Folk Festival advertises the event as “The Execution of Suzanna Cox,” but Gougler’s text specifically uses the other title. Mrs. DeTurk adapted the script written by Richard Gougler in the 1970s. The ballad selections included are all from Louis Storck’s 1865 translation of Johann Philip Gombert’s original ballad text. Thanks to Mrs. DeTurk for granting me permission to reprint these images.
Photo 8: The last two pages of Richard Gougler's text, with June DeTurk's annotations.
Never in her whole life did Susanna have a new dress. Now the women of Reading, who visited her frequently, made her a white dress trimmed with black bows. The first day she wore a new dress was her last day alive.

The procession from The Old Jail at 5th and Washington Streets to Penn Street and then up Penn to City Park where Gallows Hill was located was a regular parade. It included, in order: a troop of infantry, a fife and drum corps playing a funeral march, a horse-drawn bagon with the coffin on it, Susanna leaning on the arm of Rev. Pauli, the sheriff’s party and the crowd of onlookers estimated to be about 20,000.

The hangman, whose identity was never revealed, arrived masked. As was tradition, he was paid on the spot with silver dollars. When he was finished, he got as far as 6th and Penn where he was caught by the crowd and beaten. He was able to escape and ran to the foot of Penn Street where he just managed to get on the ferry as it was leaving to cross the Schuylkill River.

The hangman threw his clothing into the river to give the impression that he was dead, but it was seen by a number of people on the ferry, and he was forced to wear it until he reached the shore.

After a prayer by Rev. Pauli, a hymn, which Susanna had memorized, was sung. And then the deed was done.

She was the last woman to be publicly executed in Pennsylvania. After her death there were many poems written about Susanna. This is part of one of them.

She spoke just as the clock struck twelve, and as the sun set, she said, "I will not go with you, dead or alive."

The hangman then left, and Susanna was left to die.