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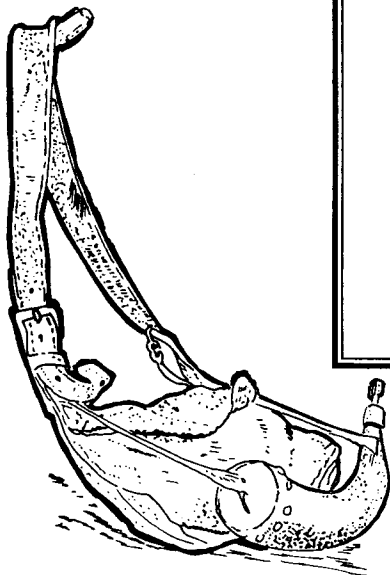
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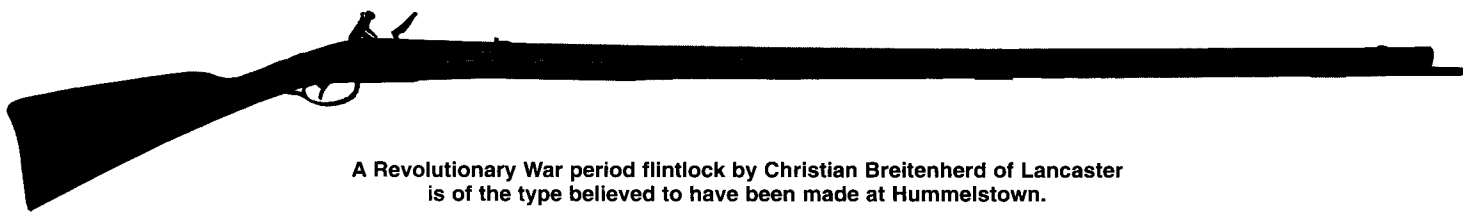
**Scholar, Historian, Collector, Artist,
and Icon on the Kentucky Rifle and Early Firearms**
July 9, 1909–April 25, 2007



Rifles and Muskets on the Swatara: Clandestine Hummelstown Factory Armed the Revolution

J. Wayne Heckert, Ed.D.

2007



A Revolutionary War period flintlock by Christian Breitenherd of Lancaster is of the type believed to have been made at Hummelstown.

Background

The backdrop for our story is straightforward. The American Revolution was underway, and 1777 was an especially tough year for the colonists. The eastern seaboard was under attack by the British, and the Philadelphia region was a primary target. To make matters worse, early in the year, the revolutionary gunpowder mill on French Creek near present-day Phoenixville blew up. This setback was reported to the Pennsylvania Council of Safety, executives of the provisional government, on March 10, 1777 by revolutionary powder master and armorer, Peter Dehaven (De Haven).¹

Dehaven was not only the chief of the powder mill, but also the superintendent of the state gun lock factory in Philadelphia.² This factory, located on Cherry St. between 3rd and 4th Sts., was in operation by March 1776, but Dehaven's relationship with the revolutionary government goes back to 1775 when it was reported that he delivered 55 1/2 pounds of saltpeter for the making of gunpowder.³ Black powder, the propellant used in all muzzle loading firearms of the time, is made of saltpeter (potassium nitrate), charcoal and sulfur. Dehaven was also granted 100 pounds by Council on January 22, 1776, for firelocks.⁴ Both gunpowder and flintlocks (firelocks) were in short supply, being embargoed by the British as tools of war. In April 1776, Dehaven was empowered by the Council and paid 50 pounds to "make public the art of boring and grinding gun barrels, and instructing such persons as they shall require to be taught that art."⁵

When it came to revolutionary armament in and about Philadelphia, Peter Dehaven was the key man. By January 3, 1777 he reported to Council that he had "nineteen men at guns at French Creek,"⁶ implying that some gun building or component manufacture was going on at or near the doomed powder mill as well as at the lock factory downtown. On February 1, Council paid Dehaven 11 pounds, 5 shillings for two muskets, and 35 pounds, 15 shillings for "three months superintending the gun lock factory."⁷

1777 was a busy year for Dehaven and his assembly of gunsmiths and powder makers. In spite of the impediments, production appeared to continue, but the stuff of war was always in short supply for the militias and the Continental Army. On September 7, Dehaven wrote an urgent letter to the Council: "We have got some information that there is a part of Mr. Howe's army within four miles of Downing's Town and I believe they intend for our magazine and we are in a very poor situation for defending it. I suggest moving the powder by wagon toward Reading, "but to what place I am a stranger."⁸ This letter found the Council of Safety in its own whirlwind, as they were hastily gathering their papers in preparation to flee the city of Philadelphia themselves and move inland. They needed a buffer between themselves and the British, and they needed it immediately!

The Gun Factory Moves to Hummelstown

By October 1, 1777, the Pennsylvania Council of Safety was meeting in Lancaster, some eighty-five miles from their former seat in Philadelphia. Lancaster was a county seat and a primary inland center for munitions for the Continental Army. One of their first orders of business, on Friday, October 3, documents the establishment of a new revolutionary gun factory: "Mr. Peter DeHaven attended and asked the direction of Council as to the place the Gun Factory should be established. On consideration, Resolved, that the Gun Factory be established at Hummel's Town, in Derry Twp., in this county for the present."⁹ Derry Township as well as the Paxton and Harris' Ferry region were all part of Lancaster County until the formation of Dauphin County in 1785.

Several factors contributed to the reason why Hummelstown was chosen as the place to erect Pennsylvania's secret arms factory. The location was further inland from Lancaster, quiet and sparsely inhabited. It was located on the Swatara Creek which provided ample water power for a mill. Iron was forged nearby and hardwood was available from the land. Also, if needed, several men in the region had knowledge of gunsmithing, and it is not unlikely that they were associates of Peter DeHaven in some capacity.

Furthermore, many of the predominately Scotch-Irish and German settlers of the region were staunchly patriotic. It is relevant that the first call to arms in all of Lancaster County came from the frontiersmen of the outer townships, land contiguous to Hummelstown. "Resolved from Hanover Township, Lancaster County, June 4, 1774; that in the event of Great Britain attempting to force unjust laws upon us by strength of arms, our cause we leave to heaven and to our rifles."¹⁰ What better place to put a clandestine factory of war? It was quiet and off the beaten path . . . a day's ride deeper into the woods from Lancaster . . . but not that far away from the areas of pressing need; and best of all, it was a place where people could be trusted to keep a patriotic secret.

No remains of the old gun factory exist, but it has been established that the factory stood south of Second Street between N. Railroad St., John St., and Walnut (now North) Alley. This is across Second Street from where the old landmark National Hotel once stood.¹¹ A mill race channeling water from the nearby Swatara Creek provided the necessary power for a boring mill and gun factory at this location.

The standard implement of war in those days was the musket, a smoothbore firearm intended for close quarters, formation fighting. The combatants regularly pointed their muskets and fired in volleys. The Council refers specifically to muskets on numerous occasions, not only with Dehaven but with others such as William Henry of Lancaster and John Tyler of Allentown.¹² Yet, as is apparent from the following correspondence, the Council was also in the business of ordering, paying for and distributing rifled

guns. The rifled gun, what we know today as the longrifle, was a different firearm with a different purpose. It had a barrel with spiral grooves cut into the interior. These grooves imparted a spinning motion to the bullet which dramatically improved accuracy. Somewhat like a spinning football, the projectile could reach out far beyond musket range, making the rifle a superior piece for long distance shooting. Rifles were somewhat slimmer than muskets and built for precise, aimed marksmanship. Military reports of the Revolution well document their long-range effectiveness in the hands of trained riflemen drawn primarily from Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Exactly what was manufactured at the Hummelstown gun factory is not known, as there are no extant specimens; however, the present report documents that both flintlock rifles and muskets were produced at the facility. If captured by the enemy, the penalty for manufacturing firearms would have been immediate execution, so war materiel rarely carried the name of the maker. Moreover, the whole idea was to keep the location of the factory a secret. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that anyone will ever come up with an authentic colonial military arm marked "Hummelstown."

Any muskets made here most likely were produced in what is known as "Committee of Safety" pattern, and were probably devoid of markings, other than perhaps the letter "P" which was the pre-1799 military proof mark. The rifles made here were most likely plain arms without carved and engraved embellishments. They may have had a simple two-piece patch box similar to the standard martial pattern followed by private contractors in Lancaster and other production centers.¹³

How large the factory was and how many men were employed there is also uncertain; however, it is reasonable to assume that many of the nineteen workers at French Creek, as well as some of those at the lock factory in Philadelphia, accompanied Dehaven to Hummelstown. Correspondence in Council, November 1, 1777, reads, "*The petition of diverse Gunstockers, employed in the state factory, praying an increase of their wages was read. Ordered that Mr. Benjamin Rittenhouse and Peter Dehaven take the case of the petitioners into their consideration, & allow them such reasonable pay as the alteration of times shall appear to render just and necessary, they being fully capable of this business.*"¹⁴ Another entry, dated November 7, expands the details of the gunsmiths' pay and moving expenses. *Ordered, that the removal of the families of the said workmen be a public expense;*

and that (the following) prices be paid: stocking a musket, 15 shillings; splicing a stock, 3 shillings, 9 pence; dressing mounting, 3 shillings, 9 pence; shaving stocks, 1 shilling, 3 pence. And that the said workmen be allowed 7 shillings and 6 pence per day, from the time they left off working at Philadelphia."¹⁵ If the majority of

the Philadelphia gunsmiths accompanied Dehaven it would have made the Hummelstown factory a relatively large operation.

No time was wasted getting to Hummelstown. Dehaven reported to Council on October 23 that he was unable to furnish the gun factory with provisions, "*there being none to be purchased in that neighborhood.*"¹⁶ Council directly ordered Col. Joshua Elder, military commander at Paxton, to obtain the necessary provisions immediately and "*seize them, if necessary.*"¹⁷ The Council of Safety assumed the authority to confiscate personal property for the war effort, and this was simply one example of their willingness to do so.

The *Colonial Records* furnish occasional reports over the next year establishing that production of guns at Hummelstown took place with some regularity. The entries reflect a picture of priority and urgency. Expectations of delivery were immediate. On November 5, Council "*Ordered that Peter Dehaven*

deliver to Col. Galbraith what arms are now in his hands fit for service."¹⁸ On December 1, "*An order was drawn on David Rittenhouse, Treasurer of the State, in favor of Mr. Peter Dehaven, for 500 pounds, for which he is to account.*"¹⁹ Also on this day to Mr. Dehaven, "*Council requests that you will make return of the number of rifled guns now in your hands which are fit for*

service, or may be made so in the course of a few days, as an order will issue for delivery of as many as you can have ready. You will endeavor to have as great a number in good order as possible."²⁰ Dehaven replied the following day, "*To President of Executive Council, December 2, 1777, Hummelstown, PA. By letter of yesterday I am informed that Council is desirous to know the number of rifled guns now at this place fit for service. By inquiring of Mr. Rittenhouse, I find there is about twenty eight which may be fit by Monday or Tuesday next.*"²¹ At the exact time that

George Washington and the Continental Army struggled to survive the harsh winter at Valley Forge, the state's

gunsmiths were hard at work on the Swatara providing the troops with the necessary tools of war.

Throughout the first half of 1778 the gun factory at Hummelstown produced many of the firearms that helped win the War for Independence. Dehaven reported to Council frequently,

Council To Peter De Haven, &c., 1778.

In Council,
Lancaster, April 28th, 1778.

Sir,

It is necessary that Council receive the earliest information of the number of arms in and belonging to this state, as well such as are in the hands of private people, as those in possession of the Lieutenants of Counties, and in the publick Works. I therefore request you to inform me immediately what number of Muskets well fitted you have now in your possession, and how many more, you can completely finish by the 20th of May, be particular in the return you make and let your information be upon sure ground,* I mean that you are to include old arms properly repaired as well as new. A dilligent attention to this business and a speedy answer will oblige your Country & Sir,

Your very Hum^l Scrvt.

Directed,

To Mr. Peter De Haven, Hummels Town.

From Pennsylvania Archives 1778

Hummelstown, Dec^r 2nd, 1777.

Hon Sir,

By your letter of Yesterday I am unformed that Council is desirous to know the number of Riffled Guns now at this place fit for service or that may be made so in a few days. By Enquiring of Mr. Rittenhouse I find there is about twenty-Eight, which may be made fit by Monday or Tuesday next.

For Peter DeHaven,

From Your Hum^l Scrvt,

H. DE HAVEN.

Directed,

For The Hon^{ble} Thos. Wharton, Jr, Presid^t &c., in Lancaster.

From Pennsylvania Archives 1777

and one of the first orders of business in the new year dealt with the status and production of the clandestine gun factory. On January 2, in Council, Lancaster: *"An order was drawn on Peter Dehaven and George Fry, directing them to deliver to Colo. John Shields, of Westmoreland County, thirty six rifle guns, or such number as are in their possession, to be delivered to Colo. Arch'd Lochry, and also an order was drawn on William Henry of this borough, for all rifles in his possession."*²² Then, a letter sent to Dehaven at Hummelstown dated April 28 specifically calls for muskets. *"It is necessary that Council receive the earliest information of the number of arms in and belonging to this state . . . I therefore request you inform me immediately what number of muskets well fitted you have in your possession, and how many more you can completely finish by the 20th of May . . ."*²³ Interestingly, the next response from Dehaven, dated May 4, is a request for a pay raise for his service as factory superintendent.²⁴

Time to Move Again

By mid-1778 the focus of battle had changed. Washington had survived the winter and the French were assisting the Patriots. Their combined forces were having some success on the battlefields of New York and New Jersey, due in no small part to their willingness to wage both conventional warfare with muskets as well as unconventional sniper attacks with the rifled guns. But things were not as quiet as they had been around the gun factory. Now the invasion was coming from the frontier to the north.

On July 3, 1778, a group of colonial militiamen met an invading army of British soldiers, sympathizers, and Indians in the Wyoming valley near modern Exeter south of Scranton. The militia was routed and driven into a disorganized retreat, and the Indians scalped all soldiers that could be found. Civilians, crops, and livestock were destroyed. The news of the massacre immediately spread south along the Susquehanna River with the fleeing survivors. Hundreds of settlers followed them as they came down the river in an exodus now known as the "Great Runaway."²⁵

The terror that befell the inhabitants of central Pennsylvania was overwhelming. The atmosphere is captured in a letter sent from Paxtang to Council Vice President Bryan, July 12, 1778, by Colonel Matthew Smith, an experienced soldier. *"Sir, I am this moment arrived at Mr. Harris Ferry, & just now behold the greatest scenes of distress I ever saw, the numerous poor ran away from their habitations & left their all, & several families have lost part, kill'd & scalp'd; on the retreat the most cruel butcheries ever known is practiced, wounded and others thrown into fires while yet living . . . Northumberland County is evacuated, not more than one hundred men with Col. Hunter, at Sunbury; the Blue Mountains is now the frontier, & I am afraid Lancaster County will shortly follow the example of the other county; the stores at Carlisle is something very considerable; I doubt not their object is to destroy that place . . . This party is large, have Col. Butler at their head, 100 regular troops at first, about the same number of Tories, but is increasing to two or three times that number, several hundred Indians all armed in a most formidable manner every one of them, exclusive of guns and tomahawks, as usual, each one hath a large spontoon, and as soon as engag'd rushes on in a most dreadful manner; it is said they have field pieces or swivels, & a number of light horse. . . Send an order for what arms is ready at Lancaster and Hummelstown, also for ammunition . . . I am your most obedient serv't., Matthew Smith"*²⁶

Dehaven was clearly aware of the impending threat to the gun making facility. On July 12, he, too, penned an urgent letter to Council Secretary Col. Timothy Matlack. Writing from Hummelstown he told of his awareness of the threatening conditions, and said that he had just attended Mr. Elder's militia meeting (at Paxton) where they agreed to call out the battalions.

*"They applied to me for some arms, which I promised to let them have 50 or 60 with out your consent, as it was so distressing, & you were so far off, that I could not get an order from you. I should be glad to know, the first opportunity, if you don't think it will be prudent to move the factory to French Creek or to Philad'a, or to some other place where you may think more safe."*²⁷ This significant entry identifies Dehaven as a direct associator with the Paxton militia and accounts for a substantial wagonload of arms which Dehaven took the risk of dispensing directly to the local defenders. Two days later Council ordered that Cumberland and York counties were to have arms supplied from Carlisle by the Board of War, *"and if this supply is not sufficient, application must be made to Mr. Rittenhouse and Mr. Dehaven at Hummelstown."*²⁸

A massive onslaught never occurred in Paxton or Derry, though skirmishes are well recorded. After this critical period, reports between Council and the factory are less frequent. The seat of government had returned to Philadelphia by mid-summer, and on October 10, 1778, Council discussed discontinuing operations at the manufactory. By all accounts, December marked the end of the state's gun making endeavor at Hummelstown. On December 11, Rittenhouse and Dehaven offered to form a partnership to buy the facility *"provided that the Council allow us the materials now on hand at the first cost."*²⁹ After further negotiation, it appears that the men settled the accounts of the factory early in 1779 and divided up the tools, machines and small inventory that remained.

Regarding guns for the Continental Army, what happened next? Dehaven and Rittenhouse both returned home to Philadelphia where they continued administrative work for the revolutionary cause. Both muskets and rifles continued to be built by skilled men in the gunmaking centers of Lancaster, York, and Philadelphia, as well as at more rural locations. Most of the arms were built in small shops by private contractors in what was somewhat of a regional "cottage industry," and longrifles are often identified by their county characteristics. Coordinators would collect the arms and deliver them to Council and to the army, then do their best to see that the builders got paid.³⁰ While gunsmiths throughout the southeast quadrant of Pennsylvania continued to supply the revolutionary cause with arms, the hammers fell silent on the Swatara.

Local Talent

By the year 1820 over 100 gunsmiths could be found in the city of Lancaster alone, and dozens plied their trade in the Harrisburg region. But in 1778 the situation was quite different in the area around Hummelstown. Did the few gun builders who were available locally assist Dehaven and his workers? It is purely speculation, but they could have helped out physically at the Hummelstown facility, or they could have made components at their own shops and brought the parts to Hummelstown to expedite the assembly of arms there.

Specifically, if we limit our inquiry to those gunsmiths known to have been working within 2 hours' horse ride from the factory in 1788, we end up with a short list. Looking at only those for whom there is primary documentation in official court, tax, church or estate inventories, we are left with only a half dozen possible suspects. The most likely two are John P. Beck (1751–1811) of Lebanon and Martin Shell (1737–1796) of Hanover Township. Both of these men are viewed today as grand masters of Pennsylvania gun building and both are documented as having repaired revolutionary firearms.³¹ The best products of these expert craftsmen are prized by collectors today. They turned out not only utilitarian firearms, but also works of beauty with woodcarving as fine as that on any Chippendale chair. Beck was influential not only for his fine

products, but also for the impact that he had on other regional builders. Shell was the patriarch of several generations of gunsmiths in Dauphin County including Daniel and John Shell, both active in the 19th century around Paxton and Hanover Townships.

Four other names surface as nearby gunsmiths during the Revolutionary War, yet little is known about them. Phillip Fishburn (1737–1796), one of the first inhabitants of Derry Township, was known to have repaired arms during the Revolution.³² Adam Baum (d. 1785), also of Derry, reportedly was active at the time and he would have lived probably no further than three miles from the gun factory. Adam also had two sons in their teens, Daniel and John, both listed as gunsmiths. They could have apprenticed at the factory.³³ Michael Poorman was listed as a gunsmith in 1772 in Heidelberg Township, later to become part of Dauphin County. Rifle scholar Joe Kindig believed that Poorman was closely associated with Shell.³⁴ The final possibility was one Benedict Imhoff (1758–1800), a relatively obscure man, but listed in the records of both Heidelberg Township and Middletown. It certainly appears that he was in the immediate area and he had the necessary capabilities to be of assistance.³⁵

Again, the relationship of these six gunsmiths to the factory is purely speculation. They may or may not have been associated with the gun plant; it is reasonable to think that there was some connection and perhaps one day documentation will surface that provides some answers. What we do know is that there was, for a brief but critical time in our country's history, a gun factory at Hummelstown wherein both muskets and longrifles were built for the revolutionary cause.

Notes

1. *Pennsylvania Archives*, First Series, Vol. V, Harrisburg, 1853, p. 255.
2. *Colonial Records*, Vol. X, Harrisburg, 1852, p. 506.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 426.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 466.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 533.
6. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Vol. V, p. 155.
7. *Colonial Records*, Vol. XI, p. 111.
8. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Vol. V, p. 607.
9. *Colonial Records*, Vol. XI, p. 314.
10. J. W. Heckert and Donald Vaughn. *The Pennsylvania-Kentucky Rifle; A Lancaster Legend*. Ephrata, PA: The Science

Press, 1992, p. 65. (Provides a summary of the Hanover Resolves and a review early gunmaking at Lancaster.)

11. Gail Laucks Kulp. "The Gun Factory," *The Sun (Hummelstown)*, September 1, 2001, p.3.

12. Primarily found in *Colonial Records*, Vol. XI.

13. Henry J. Kauffman. *The Pennsylvania-Kentucky Rifle*. Harrisburg, PA: The Stackpole Press, 1960. (Plates on pp. 14 & 209 show two early guns of the suspected style, though Hummelstown guns would not have been decoratively carved.)

14. *Colonial Records*, Vol. XI, pp. 363–364.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 337.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 363.

19. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Vol. XI, p. 379.

20. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Vol. VI, p. 52.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

22. *Colonial Records*, Vol. XI, p. 394.

23. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Vol. VI, p. 453.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 475.

25. William Baillie. "The Wyoming Massacre and Columbia County." Bloomsburg, PA: Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society, 2004, p.1.

26. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Vol. VI, p. 632.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 633.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 640.

29. *Pennsylvania Archives*, Vol. VII, p. 133.

30. Kauffman, pp. 8–89.

31. Joe Kindig. *Thoughts on the Kentucky Rifle in its Golden Age*, Second Edition. York, PA: George Shumway, Publisher, 1983, pp. 242–249 & 274–278.

32. Frank Sellers. *American Gunsmiths*. Highland Park, NJ: The Gun Room Press, 1983, p. 102. Also see "The Gunsmiths of Dauphin County, Pennsylvania". York, PA: George Shumway, Publisher, 1972, p.1. (Unpublished List)

33. George Shumway. *Rifles of Colonial America*. Vol. II. York, PA: George Shumway, Publisher, 1980, p. 380. The Baums also appear on Shumway's "Gunsmiths of Dauphin County," p. 1.

34. Kindig, pp. 279–280.

35. Shumway, "Gunsmiths of Dauphin County," p. 2. Also see Sellers, p. 157.

BUY, SELL, TRADE

In answer to a number of requests from our members we have added this BUY, SELL, TRADE column to our bulletin. Until the volume of these items becomes a problem, we will include them free of charge. This column can not accept ads for items you would not be allowed to display or trade at our Annual Meeting.

WANTED—Writer/publisher looking for photos (or opportunity to photograph) Berks County, Pa rifles/pistols and related material and information to be included in up-coming book . . . BERKS COUNTY GUNSMITHS, 1700 – 1900. Contact KRA member, Patrick Hornberger at 410–476–4445 or eastwind@hughes.net to discuss and make arrangements.

WANTED—Rifles by Morgan James working in Utica, N.Y. Call Tim Hodges 540–662–5438 or thodges@comcast.net.

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WANTED—Interested in purchasing a rifle marked G. LEE or N. MOLL. Please contact Richard Wade KRA at 610–346–9416.

WANTED TO BUY—Kentucky rifle made by Alexandria McGilvary of Harrisonburg, VA. Contact Sam Koontz. E-mail tjhs63@verizon.net or phone 540-828-2971.

FOR SALE—Kentucky Rifle gun cases both sock type and zip cases. Also have Kentucky rifle bore lites. Contact Sam Koontz.

FOR SALE—Longrifles by Andrew Kopp and George Kopp, some plain and some fancy and carved. Will trade for fine Kentucky pistols or other interesting things. David or Barbara Lyman. 715-634-2081.