

The Strange Case of the Kelpius Hermits

Right off of Henry Avenue, near Manayunk at the southern end of the Wissahickon valley, there's a little street called Hermit Lane which offers a great point of ingress to one Fairmount Park's most exhilarating spans of woods and trails. But more than that, Hermit Lane offers an initial clue to the curious passerby about the unique history of this immediate area. It is a history that is as old as Philadelphia itself. It is the story of a Transylvanian emigrant leading a small band of religious mystics into the woods to dwell, where they would pray and await the impending apocalypse, which they were sure would occur in their lifetime. It is the story of Johannes Kelpius.

Kelpius was born in Transylvania in 1673 to a wealthy family and went to university garnering knowledge in mathematics, astronomy, and fluency in five languages including his native German. He was a learned man and devoutly religious, evidenced by such publications as *A Short, Easy, and Comprehensive Method of Prayer*. Kelpius lived as the dawning of the Enlightenment spread throughout Europe, where new thinking challenged some of the embedded establishments that marked political and social life at the time. Kelpius was involved in a religious sect, the Pietists, who also believed the end of days were at hand. Kelpius' mentor, Johann Jakob Zimmerman predicted the world to end in the year 1694 and sought to lead a band of followers to the New World in order to prepare for this. But Zimmerman wouldn't live to see those final days as he died just before the trip of illness, thrusting Kelpius into the role of leading this group, at the age of twenty-one.

The intrigue begins as you pass by a stately old house known, conspicuously, as The Hermitage. This mansion was built in 1848 and stands on the grounds that Kelpius and his hermits likely settled. Heading down a trail that zigzags into a small valley, the Hermitage looms atop with a spectral quality as the thick cover of trees begins to obscure its view. A trickling stream of water cuts through a low swath of plants bearing blooms of yellow flowers along the path. So it was on June 24th, 1694 Kelpius and his constituents arrived in Germantown, gathering supplies and meeting locals before sauntering to the southern end of the Wissahickon Valley, near modern day Manayunk. While this band of mystics numbered 40 (a sacred number to them) upon arrival, at this point the number dwindled substantially to a little over a dozen. Some died en route; some couldn't resist the thrill of exploring America and the opportunities within. But this didn't stop Johannes Kelpius from his staunch involvement in meditation, astrological interpretation, botany, and alchemy; yes, the art of turning basic metals into gold.

The hum of Henry Avenue traffic is a noticeable and strange juxtaposition from the harmonious order of the dirt paths one traverses and the trees that tower overhead. And as such thoughts wander, quite suddenly a slab of stone comes into view as the trail makes another turn. At this crossing of three trails stands the so-called Cave of Kelpius, memorialized by the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, known more commonly as the Rosicrucians, of which Kelpius was a member. The entrance to the cave is a doorway with evidence of hinges for a door that probably covered it at some point. This "cave" is shagged by a tangle of weedy shrubs that would make it hard to notice from any angle besides a straightaway view.

While records are unclear, it seemed that besides being academic, religious, and a bit of a Renaissance man, Kelpius seemed to be a shrewd businessman as well. While 1694 came and went with nary an apocalypse to be found, between his arrival to Pennsylvania and his death in 1708, Kelpius appeared to be involved in a number of land transactions, namely a deal with Frankford Land Company that brought his group 200 acres in return for attorney services provided by Kelpius to the Company. It is these 200 acres that are most likely to have been these hermits' stomping ground, where a small monastery (40'x 40' dimensions), barn and stable would have stood, if paperwork regarding the transaction with Frankford Land was correct. So there was a lot more to it than just a simple cave after all.

To complicate this hazy history, though, is the fact that no obvious remains of such a compound can be seen today. Historical estimates do place the geography of Kelpius' dwellings where the Hermitage Mansion stands, but the only way to know for sure is some sort of archaeological evaluation. While a cave of some sort might have been used for meditational purposes, it would only be a piece of the puzzle.

The proximity of Kelpius' "cave" to the Hermitage, and the similarity of it to other structures located around Wissahickon Valley, indicate that it is much more likely to have served as a 19th century icehouse than a late 17th

Image title

Entrance to the "Cave"



century dwelling. Stepping inside the stone and mortar structure, the temperature drops significantly, especially on an unseasonably summery April afternoon. It is a neat effect, but serves to reinforce the notion that salted meat and other perishables, not mystical hermits awaiting the end of days, were likely the residents of this structure. When Johannes Kelpius died in 1708 of illness, his small gang of devotees parted ways, content that the day of reckoning would not be happening anytime soon. If nothing else this showed the clout Kelpius sustained, as if he was the only reason these people stayed out in the woods for so long. But their story lives on to this day, and in all its peculiar details, it is a story that belongs to Fairmount Park; a park that is more than just there to be used for pleasure, but as an active reminder of the Philadelphia region's ever unfolding past.

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