

# The Chocolate Easter Egg in South Central Pennsylvania: Cracking a Seasonal Tradition

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**Abstract:** Each February, South Central Pennsylvania residents see signs for chocolate Easter eggs sold by local churches. An old recipe, the chocolate Easter egg became a widespread community tradition in the mid-to-late twentieth century in response to dwindling church attendance and revenues. This locally invented regional Easter egg tradition became so successful, it has literally built churches. In this research note, we report on results from fieldwork in the Middletown area that led us to consider the production of chocolate Easter eggs as a food event. We apply Camp's multi-activity, multi-themed food event concept to the church productions' physical manifestations, social organization, use of occasion, and strategies. We see the church-made chocolate Easter egg as an emergent Dauphin County confectionary tradition whose importance exceeds mere consumption, creating a sense of *communitas* in participating congregations and communities, orienting them to the calendar year, and providing opportunities for Christian outreach and fundraising.

**Keywords:** chocolate, egg, church fundraiser, Easter, spring customs, Pennsylvania

Months before Easter in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, jewel-colored treasure troves of foil-wrapped, chocolate-covered, peanut butter eggs, and their humbler cousins in wax paper packets, appear beside cash registers at gas stations, card shops, and pizza joints. Beyond the region, the Reese's Peanut Butter Egg and the Cadbury Crème Egg dominate the Easter season, but in this corner of South Central Pennsylvania, chocolate eggs hand-dipped by retirees at local churches are coveted Easter basket fare (See Photos 1-3). Growing up in Middletown, Pennsylvania, in the 1990s, co-author Mira Johnson has enjoyed church-made chocolate Easter eggs as long as she can remember. Arriving in Middletown in 2010, co-author David J. Puglia immediately embraced the community's chocolate Easter egg custom. Curious about the depth and breadth of this regional foodway, we embarked on library research, fieldwork, and interviews to understand and document the traditional behavior surrounding the South Central Pennsylvania church-made chocolate egg.

Our first stop was the definitive works on Pennsylvania Dutch<sup>1</sup> culture by leading Pennsylvania folklorists (Bronner and Brown 2017; Glassie 1969; Shoemaker 2000; Weaver 1997, 2002, 2013, and 2016; Yoder 2000), followed by the likeliest regional culture journals, none of which produced any results for chocolate eggs.<sup>2</sup> In his authoritative *Eastertide in Pennsylvania*, folklorist Alfred Shoemaker wrote extensively on the egg as symbol in Pennsylvania Easter traditions, including egg trees and scratch-carved Easter eggs (2000 [1960]: 49-70), but never mentioned the chocolate Easter egg specifically. British folklorist Venetia Newall also wrote extensively on the symbolism of the egg at Easter, but did not mention chocolate eggs (1971). We also searched the Archives of Pennsylvania Folklife and Ethnography and the Mac Barrick Collection of

Folklife and Regional History, which yielded results on other South Central Pennsylvania Easter customs, but nothing on the chocolate Easter egg.



Photo 1. Chambers Hill United Methodist Church's milk chocolate and dark chocolate peanut butter egg in foil wrapper. Middletown, March 12, 2016.  
Photo: Mira Johnson.

In our review of local cookbooks,<sup>3</sup> we found home confectionary recipes that may have anticipated the chocolate egg tradition such as bonbons, Buckeye candy, chocolate balls, peanut butter balls, peanut butter cups, peanut butter patties, chocolate potato candy, and Belgian pralines. All of these candies shared at least two of three characteristics with the chocolate peanut butter egg: a soft peanut butter center, a chocolate coating, or a hand rolled production process.

We discovered the best representation of this confection in local news media: brief, annual pieces on church-made chocolate Easter eggs penned by journalists. Drawing local journalistic attention since at least 2009, *The Patriot News*, the newspaper of record for the Capital Region of the state, has covered the chocolate peanut butter egg each winter in at least one story, if not more (e.g., Gleiter 2009). Often the stories are full-page features, with multiple photographs showcasing a particular regional church and its chocolate egg production. If Pennsylvania folklorists had not yet realized that the eggs were a regional seasonal event, local journalists certainly had.

As Simon J. Bronner has noted, historically American folklorists have demonstrated a preference for traditions originating in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (1998: 9-72), thus comparatively overlooking emergent twentieth century traditions. We hypothesize that the gap in the scholarly literature is due to the chocolate Easter egg being an emergent, twentieth century tradition in South Central Pennsylvania. In order to further our research, we decided to enter the field and pursue our questions through interviews and ethnographic data.



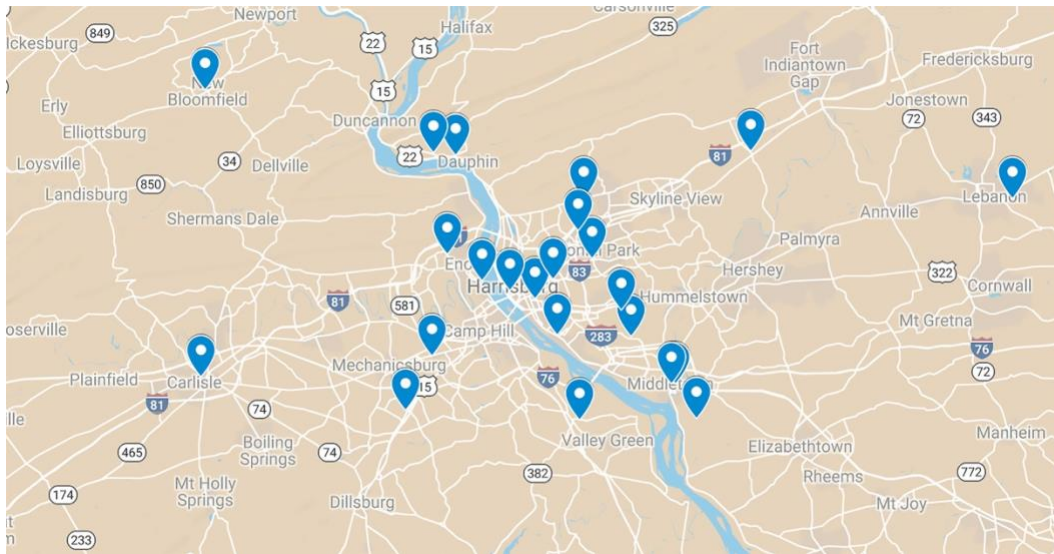
Photo 2. Ebenezer United Methodist Church's milk chocolate peanut butter egg in plastic wrapper. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.



Photo 3. Geyers United Method Church's peppermint patty and dark chocolate peanut butter egg in parchment paper wrapper. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.

Although we first encountered the chocolate egg tradition in Middletown, Pennsylvania, we realized that chocolate eggs were also a church tradition across Dauphin County and neighboring York, Lebanon, Cumberland, and Lancaster counties in the South Central Pennsylvania region.<sup>4</sup> We chose to focus our fieldwork on Middletown, Pennsylvania, however, because we have an intimate knowledge of

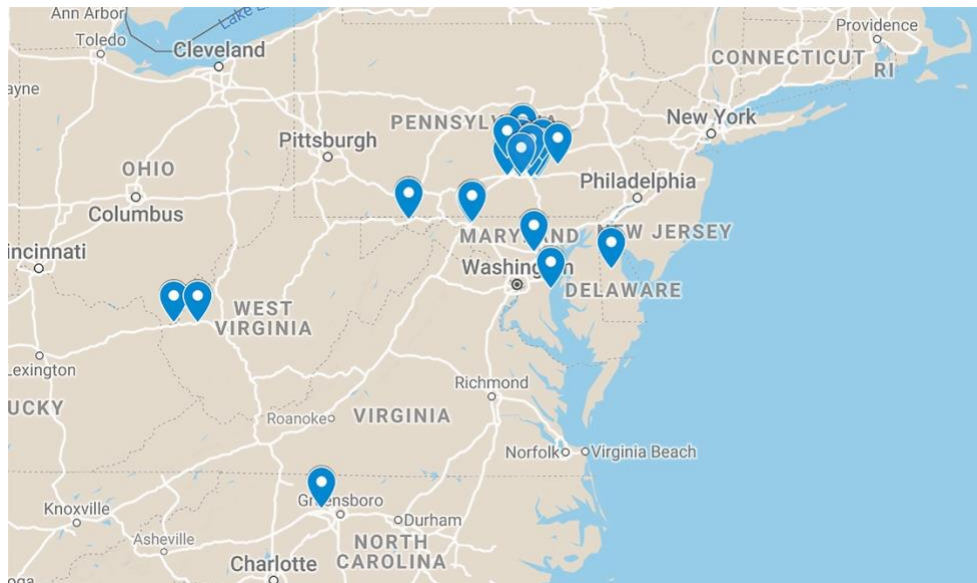
the location, having lived there for a combined eighteen years. Although chocolate Easter eggs can be found beyond Pennsylvania, South Central Pennsylvania has an especially large number of participating churches, and Middletown has a high concentration of the egg-producing churches (four) in a single town (see Maps 1 and 2). Based on our mapping of churches that actively participate in the chocolate egg tradition in South Central Pennsylvania, the greater metropolitan area immediately surrounding Harrisburg has the highest concentration. In addition, a legend circulates that one Middletown church, interestingly one that no longer participates in the tradition, introduced the chocolate Egg to Dauphin County (Epler et al. Interview, 2016; Leisey Interview, 2016).<sup>5</sup>



Map 1. Pins on this Google map indicate known active chocolate Easter egg churches across Dauphin County and the surrounding counties in South Central Pennsylvania. Capitol Region of Pennsylvania, 2018. Image: Mira Johnson using Google map base.

Our first contact was Nancy Swartz, lifelong resident of Middletown, active local church member, and longtime consumer of chocolate eggs. She proved a gateway to contacts at other local churches that led us ultimately to work with three: Geyers United Methodist Church, Middletown Presbyterian Congregation, and Ebenezer United Methodist Church. While all three churches have Middletown postal addresses, they provide a diverse sample, with Middletown Presbyterian located in the heart of downtown Middletown, and Ebenezer and Geyers each located four miles outside of town amid farmland and suburban homes on the north and south ends of town, respectively.





Map 2. Although church-made chocolate Easter eggs can be found across the United States, there are an especially high concentration of egg-producing churches in South Central Pennsylvania. Eastern United States, 2018. Image: Mira Johnson, using Google map base.

In this Research Note, we report on the results of this fieldwork, which led us to propose that the chocolate Easter egg is an example of a “multi-activity, multi-themed” food event (Camp 1989: 74). As Charles Camp explains, the significance of observing food events is “that by examining the intricate, varied, and often surprising ways in which food presents itself as part of our social proceedings, we can appreciate the full symbolic range and power of food in American life” (55). We use Camp’s concept of the “food event” (55-81) to examine these churches’ chocolate egg productions’ physical manifestations, social organization, use of occasion, and strategies (58-59). Camp’s concepts enhanced our understanding of what Jack Santino calls the “material culture of the holiday” (1996: 29) and thus the human behavior associated with it. With these insights, we hope to show how this emergent Dauphin County confectionary tradition’s importance exceeds its mere consumption: the chocolate egg tradition orients South Central Pennsylvanians to the calendar year, creates a sense of *communitas* in the participating congregations and beyond, provides an opportunity for Christian outreach, and offers tremendous fundraising opportunities for local churches.

### Physical Manifestations

We began our field study by examining the “physical manifestations” (see Photo 4)—foodstuffs and cooking processes—of the food event (Camp 1989: 58). As a foodstuff, the decadent chocolate treat has many names: “chocolate eggs,” “chocolate Easter eggs,” “candy Easter eggs,” “peanut butter eggs,” “church eggs,” “surprise eggs,” “Philadelphia cream cheese eggs,” and, sometimes, just “eggs.”<sup>6</sup>



Photo 4. Comparison of five peanut butter chocolate eggs. Clockwise from left, Presbyterian Congregation of Middletown, Geyers United Methodist Church, Ebenezer United Methodist Church, Chambers Hill United Methodist Church, and Seven Sorrows Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.

One might ask why parishioners choose to make chocolate Easter treats in the form of an egg. Other symbols evoke the Easter season—bunnies, chicks, or flowers—and other shapes hold chocolate and filling—chocolate cups, chocolate balls, chocolate bars, or chocolate patties. In Pennsylvania’s chocolate Easter egg tradition, we find the foodway’s form follows function (Greenough 1958) in some respects—its oval shape is easier to fashion by hand than most other shapes and it most easily supports the chocolate covering. Yet the oval shape also conveniently resembles an egg, a longstanding symbol of Easter and the spring season. A traditional Easter icon laden with a myriad of Christian and pre-Christian symbolic layers, the egg typically represents fertility, material wealth, rebirth, resurrection, and the Eucharist (Newall 1971, see also Santino 1994: 102-111). An ideal Easter symbol, the egg shape is easy to teach to volunteers, including children and the elderly, and forms rapidly through rolling and dipping. The egg form is also economical. As a geometric ovoid, the egg shape boasts one of the best surface area-to-volume ratios of any geometric shape, allowing for a generous-looking surface that actually uses the least amount of the most expensive ingredient, chocolate, relying on the cheaper filling to make up the bulk of the product.

Some churches have experimented with other candy, such as chocolate-covered lollipops, but those designs proved cumbersome because removing lollipops from molds without breaking them required additional skill and time (Leisey Interview, 2016). The egg recipe allows a wide variety of filling flavors, broadening customer reach and popularity. Churches can try novel flavor combinations, and fads do emerge. Dark chocolate covered peanut butter has surged in popularity, due to positive press for dark

chocolate's health benefits, and white chocolate covered peanut butter has also found a following (Leisey Interview, 2016).

In our review of the chocolate egg's basic ingredients and variation, we found all participating Pennsylvania churches offer the basic peanut butter chocolate egg, and each church has expanded into additional chocolate types and fillings. Some churches prefer to specialize in a few flavors, such as Ebenezer United Methodist Church, which limits its product line to milk chocolate with peanut butter, coconut cream, or buttercream. Others, such as Middletown Presbyterian and Seven Sorrows Catholic Church, expanded to include white chocolate peanut butter and dark chocolate variations on peanut butter, buttercream, coconut cream, and mint. Some new flavors prove more popular than others, and failures do happen. For example, Geyers Church piloted a fruit and nut chocolate egg, but abandoned it after poor sales (Epler et al. Interview, 2016). Each church covets its own "secret" recipe, but the basic ingredient lists are all very similar. The recipe for the classic milk chocolate peanut butter egg, for example, is 10X or 6X sugar (also called powdered or confectioner's sugar), margarine or butter, milk, cream cheese, chocolate, and peanut butter. Because the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's regulations require churches to list all ingredients on the packaging, the amounts and sources of the ingredients and the production process are the recipe's secret.

While the chocolate eggs are homemade, the chocolate is not. The Middletown churches procure many tons of chocolate, notably from a single local chocolate company. The two most mentioned chocolate companies in our interviews were Wilbur Chocolate and the Hershey Company, both South Central Pennsylvanian institutions. Only Wilbur receives church business today. In fact, every church willing to disclose their chocolate distributor told us Wilbur was their chocolate of choice (Blaydon, Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016; Sue Gleiter 2015b). Geyers Church, for example, had originally selected Hershey as their chocolate vendor because one of its parishioners was a Hershey employee. But decades ago Hershey discontinued small-scale chocolate distribution, and Geyers switched to Wilbur, which manufactures in nearby Lititz, Pennsylvania (Epler et al. Interview, 2016). Every church group we spoke to expressed pride in the quality and purity of their chocolate. Although we never learned the culprit, each church also expressed disdain for churches that increase profit margins by substituting chocolate paraffin wafers for pure chocolate bars, a choice that some say inflicts an unappealing waxy taste.

While every church relies on the same types of ingredients, each has its own "cooking process" (Camp 1989: 58)—which includes recipes, proportions, and production processes—that makes its chocolate eggs unique. As Diana Shugart of St. Paul Evangelical Church in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, explained, "what makes [our] eggs special from others out there is not just the recipe, but the process and the effort the volunteers put into making each one" (Madison 2014). Similarly, Jay Epler, the senior mixer for Geyers Church, told us that mixing requires an intuition born of experience—"a little bit of this, a little bit of that"—until the filling reaches the desired consistency (Interview, 2016). Consequently, even Jay does not know his exact recipe, but rather feels his way to it.

Geyers Church actually has a written chocolate egg recipe, but their parishioners disagree over how secret the recipe is. Some told us it was locked in the church vault, while others said it was tacked to the kitchen wall for anyone to see. But even if a secret recipe was held under lock and key, the Geyers chocolate egg's essence is bound to an "active tradition bearer" like Jay Epler (von Sydow 1999 [1927]). The intuitive aspect of the recipe is why it is important for traditional practitioners like Jay to share their methods with apprentices, as Jay now does with two younger church members. Otherwise, the secret of Geyers' eggs would disappear when Jay retires from leading the mixing.

During egg-production season, the churches work on tight, efficient schedules, and while each church operates independently, the cooking process is similar (Blaydon, Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016). Churches hold their first chocolate egg meeting in December or January, and production begins six to ten weeks before Easter, depending on the church's ambition (Dan Gleiter 2014, Sue Gleiter 2018b, Madison 2014). As with the Christmas shopping season, some churches complain the start date creeps earlier each year due to competition (see Santino 1994: 6, 176-177). The church crews work hard for one and a half to two and a half months, but all agree egg production ceases during Holy Week, the final week before Easter. Volunteers can be found in the kitchen mixing, rolling, dipping, trimming, and wrapping two to three days a week, often Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, although this schedule varies by the size of the operation. Retirees dominate the chocolate egg crews (Blaydon, Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016; Madison 2014). Participants who work day jobs often limit themselves to one day per week, while retired and elderly volunteers subject themselves to a rigorous schedule, working late into the night one day and rising early to begin again at 8 a.m. the following day. While local stores sell the churches' chocolate eggs daily (for example, see Photo 5), churches do bulk distribution on Saturdays. When the grueling egg season ends, churches celebrate with a potluck. Ironically, chocolate eggs are usually not found at the feast.<sup>7</sup>

The "organization of tasks" (Camp 1989: 58) in chocolate egg production assigns particular jobs to church members, and these identities stick. Volunteers have a sense of their best skills and proficiencies, and memories of past mistakes linger. Participants are split into Mixers, Rollers (the "holy rollers"<sup>8</sup>), Dippers, Trimmers, and Wrappers (Blaydon, Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016; Klaus 2011; Sauro 2014; Sue Gleiter 2015b and 2018b).

Mixing is considered the most masculine job, as it requires strength to lift large bags of ingredients. Mixing is also highly respected, as it requires an intuition gained through years of practice for adding ingredients and achieving consistency. Dipping, perhaps unexpectedly, is considered the most exacting job. Dippers require precision and an instinctive "feel" for the art of dipping. A poorly dipped egg will look messy, and an over-dipped egg, in addition to wasting chocolate, will not fit in its wrapper. Wrapping is for the very old and very young, or those who are less able to take on the more physically demanding jobs. That is not to say wrapping is not strenuous. It requires tedious repetition of small movements for hours on end.





Photo 5. Middletown Pharmacy & Gifts seasonal display of chocolate eggs. The top four rows are Seven Sorrows. The middle row is Presbyterian Congregation of Middletown. The bottom three rows are Ebenezer United Methodist Church. Each bin holds a different variety of chocolate egg. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.

Once the egg is dipped, trimmed, and wrapped, the most onerous job remains: sales. The sales directors cold call local businesses and encourage them to sell their chocolate eggs, often at cost, and at times in competition with other churches' eggs already on their counters. In addition, they keep track of hundreds of bulk orders, with nothing but

a volunteer workforce and, in most cases, hand-written account books. We noted that, in the churches we researched, while the volunteers mostly consisted of a mixed group of retired men and women, all sales directors were women (Blaydon, Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016).

### Social Organization

Examining the “social organization” (Camp 1989: 58) of this tradition revealed women’s significant role in the church chocolate egg event. As Santino notes, women have long played a role in coordinating holiday celebrations, particularly through foodways (Santino 1994: 25). Bake sales and culinary philanthropy have been grounded in the realm of women’s work in America, dating back at least to the nineteenth century (see Gifford 2016; Women’s Philanthropy Institute 2010). At that time, women were actively discouraged from participating in the public sphere, but they did work on behalf of causes they were passionate about. Fundraisers such as bake sales, fairs, variety shows, and cookbook sales were deemed within the domestic sphere, allowing women to step covertly into commerce—establishing bank accounts, finding suppliers and outlets, and ultimately managing the use of funds raised. While no longer facing the same restrictions as in the past, American women have carried these traditions in philanthropy into the present day.

Women in Middletown churches follow this trend, and there is a local tradition of church women’s groups raising funds through food, such as the Queen Esthers of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church. The Queen Esthers were the female counterpart to the church’s male Bible study group, the Arthur King Bible Class. Both groups served at gender-segregated gatherings for Bible study, socializing and fundraising. It was the Queen Esthers who oversaw the fundraising projects of the church, including bake sales, church and community dinners, and Fastnacht (doughnut) sales on Fat Tuesday before the season of Lent. Similarly, other Middletown churches had their own women’s groups, for instance, the Dorcas class at the Riverside Chapel Methodist Church (Swartz Interview, 2016).

The male-female binary is an emic categorization recognized by these churches and the participants we interviewed (Blaydon, Epler et al., Leisey, and Swartz Interviews, 2016). Over the past several decades the gendering of these fundraising responsibilities has become less distinct as most of the separate men’s and women’s groups have combined for joint Bible study and fundraising efforts. However, this history has left its mark on food-based fundraising events such as the chocolate egg, where women still oversee most aspects of production and finances and are more represented among the volunteers (Epler et al. and Leisey Interviews, 2016). Notably, while men and women take part in all aspects of egg production in the churches we researched, we found that there still remain ideas of certain tasks being gendered “male” or “female.” For instance, a common theme in our interviews was that “Mixer,” the job where volunteers work with industrial-sized standing mixers to combine ingredients, is masculine, because workers need to be strong enough to lift the large bags of ingredients (Blaydon, Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016; Sue Gleiter 2015b; Klaus 2011). Yet the concept of normative gender roles expressed in this distinction is directly contradicted by evidence, as we learned from each church that both men and women take part in all aspects of the egg

process, from mixing to rolling to dipping to wrapping, and all aspects of sales, from marketing to delivery.

Our interviewees speculated that women began as leaders in these food-fundraising endeavors because they were more likely to be at home, more likely to have culinary skills, and more likely to have broad social networks for connecting with local businesses (Blaydon, Epler et al., Leisey, and Swartz Interviews, 2016). In subsequent generations, they explained, more women entered the workforce, leaving less time to devote to volunteer church work. Consequently, chocolate egg leadership roles shifted from stay-at-home mothers to retired parishioners, an important chocolate egg volunteer demographic today. This shift has led to concern over who will assume leadership positions in the tradition, as the current crop of retirees becomes too old to participate (Epler et al. Interview, 2016).

Beyond its historic importance as a leadership opportunity for women, chocolate Easter egg production also offers a sense of *communitas* for all volunteers by fostering a heightened sense of group cohesion (cf. Humphrey 1988). A recurring theme for chocolate egg volunteers in our interviews was the joy of making the eggs every year. Central Pennsylvanian winters can be harsh and isolating. Chocolate egg production gets volunteers out of the house and back to having fun as a group during winter's bleakest stretch. As Diana Shugart of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church explained, "the peanut butter egg production not only helps the church make some extra funds for the community, but also helps to keep some of the older members busy and moving" (Madison 2014). Volunteers claim the camaraderie and fellowship felt during egg production are unmatched the rest of the year (Epler et al. Interview, 2016; see also Sue Gleiter 2015b).<sup>9</sup> In fact, chocolate egg production is so beloved that the legend of one particularly persistent octogenarian has become a permanent part of Geyers Church lore. One winter morning, the elderly woman was so excited by the thought of making chocolate eggs that she left her house without her car keys or house keys. When she realized she was locked out of her car and her house, she drove her riding lawn mower two miles down the road to make eggs (Epler et al. Interview, 2016). Perhaps less dramatic but equally committed, full-time employees will take days off just to participate. Tim Stein, one of Geyers Church's volunteer coordinators, estimates more people volunteer to help with chocolate egg production than actually attend Geyers Church (Epler et al. Interview, 2016). This heightened sense of community that the participants feel is demonstrated annually by the volunteers' commitment to attending and participating in the chocolate egg-making event.

Just as the egg tradition has deep social significance for the producers, it also proves to be socially meaningful to its consumers, who experience a sense of *communitas* through the purchase and consumption of chocolate Easter eggs. The heightened sense of community is potent enough to reach beyond the churches' kitchens to people who do not identify as formal members of the church, but do identify as part of the broader Middletown community that holds this egg tradition. For South Central Pennsylvanian residents, there is an observable shared sense of anticipation and excitement as egg season rolls around each year (see Photos 6-8). Once Fat Tuesday has passed and locals have gorged themselves on Fastnachts, Pączki, and King Cake, residents begin the lookout for chocolate eggs to appear at local registers. Finding the first eggs of the

season is an exciting moment suggesting that Easter and spring are on the horizon. While some are happy to buy their eggs haphazardly, whenever and wherever they feel a craving, there are many who profess an allegiance to certain church eggs, traveling out of their way to buy their favorite “brand” (Swartz Interview, 2016, see also Sue Gleiter 2015b, 2018a). The comment section of the regular “Best Chocolate Easter Egg” poll in *PennLive*, the shared online platform for regional newspapers, is perhaps the best example of consumers’ passionate commitment to their favorite church eggs and provides an opportunity to perform their identities as members of a particular church community, a broader Christian community, or a town or regional community (for example, see Sue Gleiter 2015b).



Photo 6. Ebenezer United Methodist Church electronic scrolling billboard displaying chocolate egg varieties and the phone number to order. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.

This confectionary tradition sticks with Pennsylvanians as they move beyond the Keystone State’s borders. As Pennsylvania’s emigrants cannot easily find “authentic” chocolate eggs elsewhere—and would be otherwise forced to settle for mass-made substitutes—customers phone in orders from across the United States. In addition, local Pennsylvanians send chocolate eggs to all parts of the world. For example, Geyers Church’s Tim Stein mentioned families shipping chocolate eggs to Pennsylvania troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan (Epler et al. Interview, 2016; see also Sauro 2014). Sales Director Susie Epler in 2016 shipped chocolate eggs to California, Idaho, Florida, Michigan, and Georgia. As she took phone orders, she learned most customers were former Pennsylvanians with family connections to Pennsylvania, some specifically to the area immediately surrounding Geyers Church (Epler et al. Interview, 2016).





Photo 7. A Geyers Church road sign announcing “Candy Easter Eggs” with phone number and bulk discount information. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.



Photo 8. A sign announcing the chocolate egg season outside Middletown Pharmacy & Gift Shop at 436 East Main Street. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.



## Occasion

In his schema of a food event, Camp suggests examining the frequency and significance of an “occasion” to understand its role in the seasonal celebrations of a community (Camp 1989: 58). As one of Dauphin County’s regular food event occasions, the chocolate egg’s “frequency” is both annual and seasonal. Like holidays in general, the chocolate Easter egg orients the community to the calendar year. As Santino explains, holidays, like the seasons, are “deliberately cyclical”—“the cycle repeats and the year goes around, always connected to the past, always moving toward the future” (Santino 1994: 111). Holidays provide a “symbolic syntax of the year” (Santino 1994: 17), preparing us for the turn from one season to the next, from winter into spring, reminding us of our passage through time, through the year, and through life. The egg tradition is one that occurs in the winter, but is forward-looking, preparing for the coming of Easter and spring.

Much like Halloween candy corn or Christmas candy canes, chocolate eggs are a seasonal treat. In fact, *The Patriot News* has come to refer to this time of year as “peanut butter egg season” (Sue Gleiter 2018a). While a few Pennsylvanians mentioned freezing chocolate eggs for later, the passion for their consumption clusters from February through Easter. The chocolate egg is a cold-weather candy, one whose temperamental key ingredient, chocolate, would be more difficult to handle, distribute, and consume during warmer times of the year. A rich, decadent winter delight, the chocolate egg appears in many ways the opposite of another seasonal Pennsylvania treat, the Fastnacht (Shoemaker 2000 [1960]: 1-8). In the Fastnacht, practical Pennsylvanians put their excess lard to efficient and tasty use, creating homemade doughnuts before the skimpy weeks of Lent begin. Chocolate eggs, on the other hand, are decadent and sugary treats sold and eaten *during* the Lenten season. Considering the unveiling of the seasons, Santino notes, “People are as concerned with a changing of the seasons as they are with the season they are in at any given moment” (Santino 1994: 7). A few interviewees remembered chocolate eggs as originally destined for children’s Easter baskets (Blaydon and Swartz Interviews, 2016, see also Sue Gleiter 2009). Whether or not that was the case, profits and desirability have made offering and consuming chocolate eggs commonplace weeks and even months before Easter. Interviewees less concerned with this irony point out that Protestants, whose churches originated the tradition in the area, do not practice the ascetic Catholic Lent (Leisey and Swartz Interviews, 2016), in which “the faithful are asked to make personal sacrifices in remembrance of the sacrifice Christ made on the cross” (Santino 1996: 103). Pennsylvanians have made these eggs a regular indulgence during the supposedly abstemious period of Lent.

(In)frequency also plays a role in the demand for chocolate eggs, since selling is limited to a couple months per year, which keeps supply low and demand high. For these fortunate South Central Pennsylvania churches, demand during Lent for the chocolate eggs is such that customers will scour multiple shops hunting for their favorite flavors or “brands” (Sauro 2014, Dan Gleiter 2014, Sue Gleiter 2015a, 2015b, 2018a, 2018b), and churches can expect their stock to sell out by Easter, if not a week or two before (Sue Gleiter 2009, Leisey and Swartz Interviews, 2016). For example, in Geyers Church, we

found men and women arriving at 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning, picking up huge batch orders of chocolate eggs (see Photo 9).



Photo 9. Wilma Epler, Jay Epler, and Tim Stein distribute bulk orders early Saturday morning for Geyers United Methodist Church. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.

The chocolate egg's "significance" is religious and regional, although its religious significance appears secondary to its regional significance. As noted earlier, ecclesiastically, the egg is a traditional Christian symbol of Easter and the resurrection (Newall 1971, Santino 1994: 102-111) and notably it is the churches that sustain the annual chocolate egg tradition. One might expect this annual tradition to spread farther, as it generates between \$10,000 to \$200,000 (tax-free) per church over a ten-week span. But the success requires a local enthusiasm difficult to emulate. Equally as important as the churches' tradition of making the eggs is the local community's tradition of yearning for, buying, and consuming the eggs each Lenten season (for example, see Sue Gleiter 2012, 2015b, 2018a). Santino examines how the candy industry changes packaging sequentially for marketing its products according to the seasons (Santino 1996: 31-34). Similarly, the churches have tapped into regional foodways serialization, which relies on an anticipated regional foodway to help demarcate the seasons of the year. Locals agree. For example, Sue Gleiter, the Food Editor for *PennLive*, recently declared "no candy signifies Easter in central Pennsylvania more than peanut butter eggs" (2015b).

## Strategies

Chocolate Easter eggs are not only sweet seasonal treats, but from production to consumption, the chocolate egg is also used as a "strategy" (Camp 1989: 58) in the Middletown community to accomplish religious and economic goals. Santino

acknowledges commercial holiday enterprises have a profound economic impact in the United States, but cautions folklorists not to dismiss them for that reason alone. Rather, he argues we should view this profound economic activity and this vast material output as evidence of American holidays' great cultural importance (Santino 1996: 30). The seasonal chocolate egg event combines the strategic church activities of fundraising and Christian outreach.<sup>10</sup>

Locals credit Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church on Spruce Street in Middletown, Pennsylvania, as the chocolate egg fundraiser originator in the 1960s. The idea then spread to other local churches (Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016). For example, in the 1970s, Geyers United Methodist Church's Susie Epler, then a young stay-at-home mother, brought the chocolate egg idea to her congregation as a strategy to fund an urgently needed new church building. She and another parishioner, Wilma Epler, toured the Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church's egg-making operation, borrowed a chocolate egg recipe from one of their own parishioners, and began their own egg-making venture in Susie's kitchen. Their early humble sales increased annually, reaching 162,000 eggs sold in 1978, the church's most lucrative year on record. In 1983, ten years after constructing their new church building, the congregation had paid its loan in full, largely funded by what Geyers Church historical records call "the Easter egg project." The Egg Project is so central to the church that it is included in the church's official history.<sup>11</sup> Chocolate Easter egg sales had literally built the new Geyers Church. Chocolate Easter egg fundraisers continued to spread through the South Central Pennsylvania church community in the 1970s and 1980s.

Some customers buy eggs to support specific churches, while others are happy to support the local Christian community in general, and still others just enjoy chocolate eggs. To support the churches, some businesses will sell the chocolate eggs at cost, taking no profits for themselves and donating all proceeds to the churches. Others will gladly sell the eggs at a mark up—from a nominal 10¢ to a considerable 50¢—earning for both the church and themselves. Fundraising can also be contentious among local church communities. Some non-participating churches in the South Central Pennsylvania region shun the chocolate egg tradition as a forbidden form of fundraising (Epler et al., Leisey, and Swartz Interviews, 2016). While churches require funds to operate, the dissenting churches' expectations are that sustaining donations should come from church members, not from peddling products.

This sales model raises questions about the relationship between churches and capitalism. While the churches are legally nonprofit organizations, the chocolate egg endeavors, nonetheless, can earn sizeable profits that will help carry them through leaner times of the year. Like savvy business operations, the churches heed customer preferences. For example, Geyers Church responded to customer complaints about how their intense mint filling overpowered the thin chocolate shell (Epler et al. Interview, 2016). The congregation tweaked the recipe, shifting from an egg to a patty shape, thereby increasing the chocolate to mint ratio. Now these mint patties are a popular contender with the chocolate peanut butter egg. Other churches have experimented with other Easter candies—for example Middletown Presbyterian tried chocolate lollipops molded into Easter shapes but discontinued them after finding them more difficult to make and slower to sell (Leisey Interview, 2016). Seven Sorrows Catholic Church

combines egg sales with a second fundraiser, a fish fry every Friday of Lent, a popular local event even among non-Catholics: while diners wait for their fish, the parishioners do a brisk trade in chocolate eggs.

The question of whether churches consider themselves to be in competition receives sly grins. Some say no; others admit to a friendly rivalry. None are willing to admit cut-throat competition, even with hundreds of thousands of dollars at stake (Blaydon, Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016).<sup>12</sup> The egg project proceeds contribute to various charitable causes, including mission work (Dan Gleiter 2012, Sue Gleiter 2012), youth groups (Sauro 2014), scholarships (Sue Gleiter 2015b), church-run schools (Sue Gleiter 2018b), community organizations (Madison 2014), and the churches' general funds (Sue Gleiter 2018b, Madison 2014). While the profits could be crucial to saving a church building or adding accessibility features to retain and grow membership,<sup>13</sup> the entire venture is seen as "for a good cause" so stomping out competition would be frowned upon.

The churches engage in limited advertising in local papers and the occasional friendly write up. In 2016, one church caused a stir by running a local radio commercial (Leisey Interview, 2016). On the other hand, churches do not concern themselves with slippage and debts. Sales directors learn to expect chocolate eggs to "grow legs and walk off" and to accept occasional accounting peculiarities, like a \$90 return on one hundred \$1 eggs (Leisey Interview, 2016).

The chocolate Easter egg project is run *as* a business, but should not be mistaken for a for-profit business, a distinction the churches are careful to point out. While the sales representatives, the lingo, and the paperwork are reminiscent of the business world, these are retired nurses and schoolteachers, farmers and homemakers, learning on the fly, hoping to help the church, and realizing that the operation must run efficiently if they hope to be successful in this bustling and competitive church industry. It is important for the church to maintain that these activities are not a business, but strictly a fundraiser for charity and church expenses, for legal reasons. Interviewees told us that in recent years church fundraisers have increasingly come under the scrutiny of the state, and they suspect that the growing number of churches in the region that participate in egg fundraisers are becoming an attractive potential source of tax revenue (Epler et al., and Leisey Interviews, 2016).

The chocolate egg fundraisers can also act as a form of Christian evangelism. Geyers Church's sales director Susie Epler's outreach strategy is to encourage anyone who purchases chocolate eggs also to visit the church and help make eggs. Geyers has noticed that those involved with chocolate eggs in any way, whether dipping them or picking up a box, are more likely to participate in other church activities. In this way, the chocolate egg is an accessible entry point to the church. Unique to Geyers, the church includes its service information on the packaging (see Photo 10). In addition, the chocolate eggs highlight the Christian community during the holiest time of the Christian calendar by their symbolic placement beside registers in local shops, making them more visible. This network of involvement expands throughout the community to include egg-making volunteers, shopkeepers, and customers, connecting and including all participants to the churches, even if they are otherwise not a part of Middletown's Christian community.

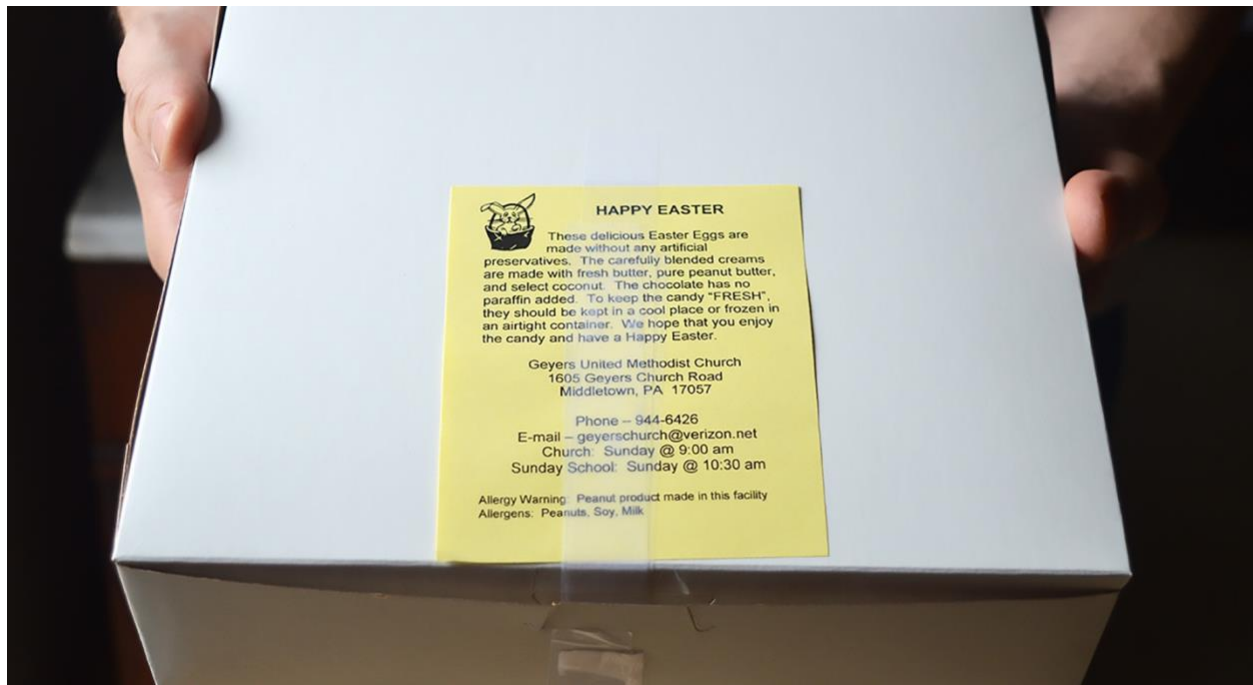


Photo 10. Geyers United Methodist Church's message affixed to the top of every box (20 eggs) order. Middletown, March 12, 2016. Photo: Mira Johnson.

## Conclusion: The Yolk of Tradition

Chocolate Easter eggs are a local tradition in South Central Pennsylvania, which we have documented specifically in the Middletown area of southern Dauphin County. Local interest far exceeds scholarly attention at the moment. We argued that the scholarly oversight of chocolate eggs was likely due to its status as an emergent tradition, arising later than the nineteenth century, and becoming more robust since the 1960s. Upon closer inspection, chocolate eggs proved to be not just a candy but an entire food event, one even more important to the community than we originally hypothesized, branching into a variety of community-building functions. While it was originally the chocolate egg itself that caught our attention, by necessity our interest quickly expanded to include the production process, sales, marketing, and competition that occurs annually behind a cordial veil of Christian charity. We are interested in hearing others' experiences with church-made and homemade, filled chocolate eggs in other parts of the United States and would gladly welcome more access to church cookbooks, home cookbooks, church records, or any sources that include chocolate eggs or church food preparation practices for fundraising.

The repetition and variation apparent in the tradition demonstrates the folkloric nature of this confection, yet there are forces at work that are more representative of the American capitalistic system that integrates aspects of "the traditional" with the American entrepreneurial spirit. Large-scale production, churches, local businesses, and commerce meld with traditional practitioners, home recipes, and local taste to form a notable Dauphin County food event. Our findings add to the large existing literature of



Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Dutch foodways, putting the chocolate Easter egg in its rightful place beside the Fastnacht, Shoofly Pie, and Pork and Sauerkraut. In the future, we would like to deduce the exact parameters of this phenomenon. We see three pathways for future chocolate egg research. First, more research is needed on the development of the chocolate Easter egg recipe from its purported predecessors (such as opera fudge and fondant eggs), and its relationship to its commercial cousin, the Reese's Peanut Butter Easter Egg.<sup>14</sup> Which came first—the Reese's or the church egg? Second, this research revealed to us that there is a wealth of data waiting to be mined on the complex networks that local churches construct to tie communities together, many of which are created and fostered through food. From monthly church dinners, to seasonal foodways fundraisers, to food banks to communion bread bakers and bakeries, these networks stretch to surprising places. Third, more research should be undertaken on how the chocolate egg ties into church fundraising events, church volunteerism and productions, and monastery "commercial" food production, in Pennsylvania and beyond. In addition to the folkloric findings, we hope this research demonstrates the hard work and dedication that these huge undertakings require from committed volunteers and the impact they have on their communities. These little eggs can hatch big schemes!

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term "Pennsylvania Dutch" to refer to a hybridized New World cultural group of shared heritage immigrants mainly from the Rhineland area arriving in the United States in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, distinct from other waves of immigration from other parts of Germany. At the time of immigration, what we now refer to as Germany was a complex of small, divided territories known as the Holy Roman Empire, including parts of modern-day Germany, Switzerland, and France. We use the term Pennsylvania Dutch, as opposed to Pennsylvania German, because this was the emic term used by the descendants of early immigrants to refer to themselves (Bronner and Brown 2017: ix-x).

<sup>2</sup> Folklore scholars have long devoted attention to Pennsylvania traditions, especially as practiced by Pennsylvania Dutch. Publication venues abound in the region for such idiosyncratic studies, including *Pennsylvania Dutchman*, *Pennsylvania Folklife*, and

the many publications of the Pennsylvania German Society. But unlike the extensive coverage of Fastnachts, Shoofly Pie, and Pork and Sauerkraut in these publications, chocolate eggs have not yet made it between these covers. Similarly William Woys Weaver, the doyen of Pennsylvania foodways, never mentions the chocolate egg tradition in his *Pennsylvania Dutch Country Cooking* (1997), *Sauerkraut Yankees: Pennsylvania Dutch Foods & Foodways* (2002), *As American as Shoofly Pie* (2013), and *Dutch Treats* (2016). Nor does the topic receive consideration in Yoder's *Discovering American Folklife: Essays on Folk Culture & the Pennsylvania Dutch* or Bronner and Brown's *Pennsylvania Germans: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* (2017).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, we found several recipes in local church cookbooks from the 1940s and 1960s for opera fudge and peanut butter candy, which interviewees suggested were antecedents of the chocolate egg recipe (Presbyterian Women's Association, c. 1960s: 31; St. Peter's Lutheran Church, c. 1943). A few women told us they continued to make chocolate eggs at home, although it is less common because it is a difficult and time-consuming confection to make in small batches. Geyers Church's Susie Epler, for example, makes a homemade chocolate egg with marshmallow fluff filling. Our search of more recent local church cookbooks found that several chocolate egg recipes and similar fudge recipes continue in parishioners' kitchens (Middletown Presbyterian Congregation, 2006: 83, The Frey Village Cookbook, c. 1980s: 138). These local cookbooks had more chocolate egg-related materials than did the well-known, more widely-circulated Pennsylvania cookbooks (Groff and Stonback 2001, Redcay 1960).

<sup>4</sup> Numerous churches in areas bordering South Central Pennsylvania also seem to be cultivating a church-made chocolate Easter egg tradition, such as Altoona First Grace Brethren Church, (Altoona, PA), Bethesda United Methodist Church (Philadelphia), Trinity United Methodist Church (Catonsville, MD), and Centenary United Methodist Church (Shady Side, MD).

<sup>5</sup> The legend relates to Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 10 Spruce Street, Middletown, PA.

<sup>6</sup> One reason this tradition is overlooked may be the ambiguity of the name. Despite the many descriptive names mentioned earlier, most of these still require the Pennsylvanian customer to be familiar with the tradition. An "Easter egg" could mean a hen's egg or a chocolate egg. A "chocolate egg" could be mass-produced. A "peanut butter egg" describes the most popular variation rather than the product itself. A "candy Easter egg" ignores the fact these creations are made of chocolate rather than a sugar-coated candy shell. A "church egg" would be poor marketing as those unfamiliar might think the church is selling hens' eggs, a product that many Pennsylvanians do, in fact, sell.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Leisey, Middletown Presbyterian egg sales director, equates this to local legends about Hershey factory workers (Interview, 2016). As one of the largest historical employers in Dauphin County, legends of life at work in the Hershey factories are common among residents. One story is that, told they could eat as much chocolate as they desired, by their third day, Hershey employees report never wanting to eat chocolate again. On the other hand, Jay Epler, a Geyers Church mixer, got a hankering and downed a chocolate egg during our interview.



<sup>8</sup> Sue Gleiter (2018b) also mentions the “Holy Roller” pun. “We’re the ‘holy rollers,’ joked Judy Schaffner, one of the volunteers, as she rolled filling for the eggs.” Variations of this Christian wordplay arose repeatedly in our interviews.

<sup>9</sup> Susie Epler (Epler et al. Interview, 2016), chair of her church’s social committee, emphasized that people *believe* this to be true but also pointed out that the belief is patently false. There are many events year round that provide equal opportunities for fellowship and camaraderie.

<sup>10</sup> According to Giving USA, church contributions are down 50% since 1990 (Tugend 2008). Similarly, according to a research study by Empty Tomb, the percentage of a congregant’s income donated to a church has declined from 3.1% in 1968 to 2.4% in 2010 to 2.3% in 2011 (Burgess 2013). See also “The Egg Church” 2011 for a story about chocolate eggs specifically as a response to declining revenue.

<sup>11</sup> The church’s official history reads:

The Church began making Easter Eggs in 1970 as a fundraising project for the building program. When the new church building was built there was a debt of \$145,000 in 1973. In 1983 the loan was completely paid, greatly assisted by the Easter Egg project which began in various homes the first year, moved to the parsonage basement, then to the basement of the old Geyers Church. The biggest year on record was 1978 when 162,000 eggs were make [sic] using over three tons of sugar. The Egg Project continues to this day. (Geyers United Methodist Church)

<sup>12</sup> In 2016, Presbyterian Congregation of Middletown self-reported producing 22,588 chocolate eggs (Leisey Interview, 2016). Ebenezer self-reported making approximately 33,000 chocolate eggs (Blaydon Interview, 2016). Seven Sorrows reported making 64,000 chocolate eggs, intentionally overproducing to be able to donate 1,000 chocolate eggs to the local food bank (Fun Egg Facts, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Geyers Church, for example, hopes to install an accessible restroom and an elevator with its chocolate egg profits (Epler et al. Interview, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Most people will be familiar with the mass-produced and ubiquitous Reese’s Peanut Butter Egg, and it is tempting to assume that the church-made peanut butter egg is simply a homemade version of the commercial variety because they share ingredients, form, and name. Indeed, church egg production and local chocolate manufacturers have been connected from the beginning. In addition to distributing chocolate to churches, Hershey’s subsidiary, Reese’s, developed the best-known, mass-produced peanut butter chocolate egg, the Reese’s Peanut Butter Egg, in 1967 (see Liebig 2013). In that year, Reese’s released its new creation to a limited Pennsylvania test audience. Following overwhelming success, it released its peanut butter egg nationally the following year. Hershey published the announcement in a trade magazine in 1967. See Liebig (2013) for a facsimile of the original announcement. According to local legend, the “popular” Reese’s chocolate egg derives from the “folk” Pennsylvania chocolate Easter egg made in

Pennsylvania home cooks' kitchens for generations (Swartz, and Epler et al. Interviews, 2016; see also Klaus 2011). Some speculate Hershey took the idea after observing the success of the church chocolate egg production process. Wilma Epler, one of the early participants of the Pennsylvania church chocolate egg tradition in Middletown, remembered two mysterious men visiting Geyers Church to watch her dip chocolate eggs. She later asked who the men were, and found out they were Reese's employees. Whether they were there to check on the competition or spy on the recipe or production process is uncertain. Wilma does remember as they left, they said, "Well, she's doing it right" (Epler et al. Interview, 2016). To the participants who we interviewed, the originator of the tradition is immaterial. There is no perceived competition between the commercial and church-made variety. Only the latter is seen as an important regional foodway, one that is cherished by the community, eagerly anticipated annually, and gleefully announced each year by local media (for example, see Sue Gleiter 2009, 2012, 2015b, and 2018a; Klaus 2011).