

# Magdalena and John E. Brubacher

Magdalena Brubacher was a Mennonite pioneer who had fourteen children in a home made from fieldstone, on a farm in northwest Waterloo. The large home, built in 1850 by her husband John E. Brubacher, still stands, and has become a museum known as the Brubacher House.



While documents reveal little of the woman who nurtured this historic family, accounts from her many children give impressions of her daily life: there were mince meat pies stored in the attic, and spinning wheels that made linen from flax grown on the farm. Clothing was handmade, and “the weekly washing for a large family was heavy work and the daily cooking for a family of thirteen children and two adults must have been accomplished through organization and good management.”

Magdalena Musselman married John E. Brubacher in 1846. Her children’s birth dates reveal that she gave birth every year or two from the time she was nineteen until she was 42-years-old. There are no details about the one child who apparently died in infancy.

There was a creek on the 254-acre property where the boys fished, and an orchard that was the pride of John Brubacher. The fish were salted and kept in barrels and there were peacocks and “all kinds of fowl.” There was a fireplace in the kitchen where Brubacher would have prepared meals, and a bedroom where she and her husband and the “very small children” slept. There was a dinner bell to alert the men working in the fields.

The land they farmed was part of Lot 25 of the German Company Tract, which was purchased by German Mennonite families living in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in the early nineteenth century. Brubacher’s father, also named John, bought land in 1842, and in 1863 John E. Brubacher took over possession of the land from his father.

It is written that “every youngster had their little chores at an early age and were kept in line by their older sisters. This system really worked and it took a great deal of pressure from the parents.” In the basement was a utility fireplace where food was prepared in the hot summer months, and where soap was boiled and lard rendered. It would also have been the place where water was boiled for laundry done in large wooden tubs.

There is one story often told of a hired man named Adam who had difficulty getting up for a hard day’s work on the Brubacher farm. One morning John went to his room to waken him. Adam reportedly replied from the “depths of a feather tick, - I am here, but I am naked and ashamed.”

In September 1867, John and Magdalena took a three-day train trip from Preston to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, leaving the children to manage the farm while the couple visited their American cousins. “Old friendships were renewed; the hospitality of the

Brubacher and Musselman cousins made the trip most enjoyable and always to be remembered.”

At some point the health of Magdalena began to fail, and in 1877 it was decided that she should have an operation. Her kitchen was turned into an operating room and she was given chloroform to dull the pain and render her unconscious. The large kitchen table where she had shared meals, prepared food, sewn quilts and overseen homework, became the operating table for her surgery.

Unfortunately, within two weeks of the operation, Magdalena Brubacher died on July 5, 1877 at the age of forty-nine. It was a great shock to her family, especially the youngest daughter Harriet who was only seven years old.

It is written that life in the Brubacher home was never the same after Magdalena's death. John E. Brubacher was remarried to his late wife's sister Esther when Harriet was twelve years old. Harriet Brubacher never married, and after her father died in 1902, she became an accomplished seamstress and lived at the homes of her brothers and sisters.