

Solomon's Rock

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If you needed a covert location to play cards at Wittenberg College in the 1840s, away from the watchful eyes of the faculty, "Solomon's Rock" provided the place. A gang of card players discovered just that when they began to use the room created by some large cliffs at the south end of the college to "indulge their nefarious practices ad libitum."¹ The name did not come, however, from a famous student or successful card player but rather from an esteemed preacher of morality and president of the Board of Directors, Solomon Ritz.² The rock provided a natural shelter on the relatively clear campus, where Ritz had once jested that the fissure be covered over and used to accommodate the students in light of the expensive endeavor of building the first college edifice.³ The irony that this den of card playing was named for someone who spent his life preaching against such evils was not lost on his contemporaries. In fact, one observer suggested that, "if ever this place be appropriated to the students [Solomon] should be prepared with a scourge of small cords to drive these money-changers out of the temple."⁴

Few have heard of this early frontier pastor, for whom a rock was named, and even fewer know the extent of his accomplishments. Like many characters throughout history, he has been viewed as playing a smaller role in a bigger drama. Even so, for those who knew him during his lifetime it would have been difficult to push Solomon Ritz out of the limelight.

As a self-characterized evangelist, he constantly sought out new areas in which to organize congregations and form new parishes.⁵ Throughout his thirty-eight years in the ministry he served as a pastor of seventeen congregations, many of which he organized himself, as he preached in pulpits spanning five states.⁶ A hard preacher to ignore, a colleague not too fond of Solomon scoffed: "He always measured his success in preaching by the wetness of his under clothes when he was done. If they were dry he reproached himself for not having 'cried aloud'."⁷ In addition to his colorful preaching style he was known for his enthusiastic support, and advocacy for, such divisive issues in the Lutheran church as "revivals, protracted meetings, prayer-meetings, family-worship, [and] temperance."⁸

These activities made him a natural ally of the similarly minded Ezra Keller, president of Wittenberg College. As a result of their ideological similarities Solomon poured his energy into Wittenberg and greatly helped to sustain the institution during its formative years. He acted as the first agent for Wittenberg College, collecting the funds the infant institution needed to survive, and also served as a member of the Board of Directors.⁹ Through his aiding of revivals and other events at Wittenberg, Solomon's charisma and energy made him a natural favorite of the students. He also earned the respect of Keller and the rest of the Board, and when Keller died prematurely in 1848, Solomon preached the funeral sermon.¹⁰

A constant follower of the ever-expanding frontier, Solomon eventually left Ohio to seek out new and more spiritually destitute places in which to exhort the gospel. His success in organizing Lutheran congregations led him through Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. Not finding any Lutherans to organize in the furthest stretches of Iowa, he took up farming for two years, preaching on the weekends to anyone and everyone who would listen.¹¹ Solomon spent the remaining years of his life preaching, returning to Ohio and to some of the churches he had organized previously.

History has been able quietly to tuck Solomon Ritz away into the vast recesses of the past. His contemporaries, however, would have had difficulty ignoring him. Passionate, personable, and pious, Ritz dedicated himself to his work and life, building up the church and spreading the gospel wherever he went. The impressive number of Lutheran churches left in his wake offer a silent testimony to his noisy life.

Another silent testimony to Solomon's life also remains. Somewhere south of Wittenberg University lies "Solomon's Rock," waiting for a new gang of card players.



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Endnotes

- ¹ J.G.H. [J. Hamilton], Untitled, *Lutheran Observer*, 18 August 1846, p.2.
- ² *Wittenberg College Catalogs, 1845-1852*, Archives, Thomas Library, Wittenberg University.
- ³ J.G.H., Untitled, p.2.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ L.M. Kuhus, "Rev. Solomon Ritz: In Memoriam," *Lutheran Observer*, 13 February 1874, p.1.
- ⁶ Abdel Ross Wentz, *Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary: Volume Two Alumni Record* (Harrisburg, PA: The Evangelical Press, 1964).
- ⁷ John G. Morris, *Fifty Years in the Lutheran Ministry* (Baltimore, MD: James Young, 1878), 552.
- ⁸ L.M. Kuhus, "Rev. Solomon Ritz: In Memoriam," p.1.
- ⁹ Ritz served as an agent for Wittenberg College from 1845-1852, served on the board from 1845-1852, and served as President of the Board in 1848. *Wittenberg College Catalogs*.
- ¹⁰ Michael Diehl, *Biography of Rev. Ezra Keller: Founder and First President of Wittenberg College* (Springfield, OH: Ruralist Publishing Co, 1859), 352.
- ¹¹ L.M. Kuhus, "Rev. Solomon Ritz: In Memoriam," p.1.
- ¹² Solomon Ritz circa 1850, Lutheran Collection, Thomas Library, Wittenberg University.