



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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## THE MENNONITES

[Continuation of June 14, 1895 issue of *Rockingham Register* ]

Written by an unidentified "A Mennonite" whom we guess to be young bishop L. J. Heatwole

"Of the family names then most prevalent [late 1700s in Virginia] were the Allebaughs, Burkholders, Beerys, Branners, Brennemans, Brunks, Drivers (or Treibers), Fultzes, Fusks, Fulks, Goods, Geils, Hoovers (or Hulers), Kisers, Kauffmans (now Coffmans), Minnichs, Pennybackers, Roadcaps, Reubushes, Rhodes, Showalters, Swanks (or Schwenks, Shanks (or Schenks, and Wengers.

"The first Mennonite ministers known to have preached in Rockingham county was Michael Kauffman, the great grandfather of Sam. and Herbert Coffman, of Harrisonburg. The only record of his life left to the present generation is found on the headstone of his grave in the old family cemetery on the premises of Jacob Wenger, near Edom.

"The inscription, which is in German characters, shows that he was born June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1714, and died Dec. 21<sup>st</sup>, 1788. [Today it is called the Lindale Mennonite cemetery.] The tradition has been handed down from father to son through several generations that he was a regular ordained minister of the Gospel in the Mennonite church.

"Another of the pioneer ministers who carried the fortunes of the church through many years of trial was Henry Funk, who resided near Turleytown, but who came to Rockingham direct from Pennsylvania just previous or during the Revolutionary War. We have been unable to obtain any record of his life, but he is spoken of by the oldest members of the church now living, as having been one of the most vigorous defenders of Mennonite principles that the church ever had. He was the grandfather of Esquire John Funk and Revs. Timothy and Benj. Funk of Singers Glen.

"With the establishment of the county-seat at Harrisonburg in 1780, a number of the Mennonite families residing on the North Fork of the Shenandoah and in the section above Turleytown disposed of their property and located in the sections immediately west and south of Harrisonburg.

(continue on page 2)

“Among these were Burkholders, Showalters, Shanks, Kisers, Fultzes, Goods, Roadcaps, Rhodes, Wenger, &c., when by the closing years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century various other families arrived in the same section from Pennsylvania. Among these were the Blossers, Heatwoles (or Huetwohls, Swopes, Niswanders, Weavers, Coffmans, Hartmans, Landises, Laymans, Swartzes, &c.

“Previous to this time there had been no buildings erected for holding public worship with the Mennonites, but services were being held at private houses once every two weeks. The first meeting-house built by this denomination in Rockingham county, and in all probability in the state of Virginia, was at Trissels, about three miles west of Broadway.

“This was erected in the year 1822 and again re-built in 1859. It was here in the lower Linville’s creek valley and the section lying directly west known as “The Brush” that the membership was largest, and for a quarter of a century or more this locality was regarded as the Mennonite stronghold in the Valley. It was in this vicinity that Henry Shank, the first Bishop who served in the Virginia church resided. Henry Rhodes, another Bishop, who lived near Cowan’s Station, appears to have labored contemporaneously with him.

“ At about this time, 1825, a grievous dis-sension broke out which appears to have affected the entire body of Mennonites in both Rockingham and Augusta counties, which for a period of from 4 to 6 years had divided them into two factions of about equal numbers on a side. However, with the assistance of some ministers who came from the Mother church in Pennsylvania, harmony was restored and the church in due time once more became a unit. With the conclusion of this truce the church entered upon an era of prosperity.

“The membership became greatly enlarged by many of the younger people being admitted who stood aloof from the church during the troublous

times of the years previous. Private residences being no longer sufficient to accommodate the crowd that now assembled for worship, the church at the pike was built in the year 1825, and was first known as Meyer’s Meeting-house. The next house of worship was established at Breneman’s, near Greenmount where a church was built in 1826.

“The one at Weaver’s on the Rawley Pike west of Harrisonburg, was first built in the year 1827, and was long known as the Burkholder Church. It was again re-built and greatly enlarged in the year 1881. The one at the Bank Church, near Rushville, was built in 1849 and also re-built and enlarged in 1893. The four large chandelier lamps used for lighting the audience room of this church were donated by Mr. James L. Avis, of Harrisonburg, and the large pulpit Bible is the gift of Mrs. Avis. Other large church edifices were subsequently erected by the Mennonites at various points in Rockingham and Augusta counties.

“In the years prior to the Civil War the body of the church in Rockingham county was divided into two separate districts, each to be distinct from the other in organization, but both to be subject to the rulings of a General Conference, which was composed of bishops, ministers, and deacons from both the districts, along with those of Augusta county, which is also under a separate organization distinct from the two.

“This body of Ministers, Deacons, &c., compose what has ever since been known as the Virginia Conference of Mennonites. This body meets semi-annually in May and October of each year, when such Acts and Resolutions are adopted as are thought conducive to the general welfare of the church. All such Regulations are subsequently made subject to ratification of the body of the church in each district at special meetings called for that purpose. The total number of ministers that have been ordained and labored in this Conference is 61. Of this list 34

have died and gone to their reward. Of the 12 bishops that have been on duty in this Conference only 4 survive. Two of these reside in Augusta county and the other two in the Rockingham districts.

*[To be Continued]*

[Editor - Now we go to the July 26, 1895 continuation of "THE MENNONITES A Historical Sketch Continued From the "Register" of June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1895."

"In our former treatise the reader's mind was directed to matters of historical interest with respect to the origin, growth and final establishment of the Mennonite Church in America, but with this chapter it is the writer's desire to dwell more particularly upon that part of its history as is connected with Rockingham county.

"Along this line reference may be made to the primitive habits, customs and occupations of the Mennonites, as well as to their leading principle of faith, form of doctrine, and the religious discipline that has been observed by them during the hundred years or more of their establishment within the county.

"As is stated in the closing paragraph of our former article, that part of Rockingham county lying immediately south and west of Harrisonburg appears to have been first entered and occupied by Mennonites in the year 1780.

"Though they found the entire section named still made up of extensive woodlands, heavily timbered with pine, oak, hickory and walnut, and along the bottoms lying adjacent to the streams existed the densest of laurel, cottonwood and hazel thickets, it had, notwithstanding these conditions, for many years previous already been occupied by a sparse population of cabin-dwellers, whose humble homes were found mainly along the banks of the various streams that form the Cook's Creek basin.

mainly along the banks of the various streams that form the Cook's Creek basin.

"As a rule these primitive settlers were soil-tillers by profession, but were generally given to hunting, fishing, and pastoral pursuits as a means for a livelihood. They appear to have come here by way of the original settlements that had been made at and around Staunton, and hence were by parentage East Virginians, by nationality English or Scotch-Irish and by common faith Presbyterians.

"It is related upon good traditional authority, that the large boundary of land comprising most of southwest Rockingham, and now including the towns of Mt. Crawford, Bridgewater, Pleasant Valley, Dayton, Rushville, Hinton, Mt. Clinton, Stempheytown, Coakleytown and Dale Enterprise, had originally been secured by a number of English noblemen by formal grant of King George of England, through the Virginia Colonial government, and was designed by them for colonization by a large body of Scotch-Irish peasants.

"But for reasons unknown to the writer only a small number of the expected colonists reached the region designed for their final settlement. Of those that came a few found abiding places along the banks of the main branch of Cook's Creek, in the neighborhood of Mt. Crawford, Dayton and Dale Enterprise. Others located different points along the Muddy Creek Valley, from Bridgewater to Mt. Clinton, and when it is said that on an average no man's next-door was nearer than five miles away, the reader may form some idea of the sparseness of the population.

"Each of these different families in course of time had marked out and established boundaries to large bodies of land, comprising from 600 to 1000 acres each, and to this day most of the patent corners, as well as the old boundary lines to these original surveys, can still be traced, and of the records and indentures respecting them we have seen some that bear as late a date as the year 1747.

“Thus when it is seen how for the first 25 years the Mennonites had pushed their settlements into the county from the north, and how that the Presbyterians during the same period were entering the county from the south; that right along the great divide extending westward from Harrisonburg, and which is now generally marked by the Hopkins’ Mill road, there came a meeting of two great tides of emigration, the one initial wave having started with the settlement of Jamestown, Va., by the English in 1620, while the other received its first impulse at Germantown, Pa., by the Mennonites and Germans in general, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1683.

“With the organization of the county in 1778, and the establishing of the county seat at Harrisonburg in 1780, the Mennonites found themselves on the border, and a long distance from what now promised to be a good market for their products. With an eye to locating to better advantage, and being very naturally attracted by the large and unoccupied sections lying immediately south and west of Harrisonburg, they are said to have made frequent tours of inspection on horseback across the divide, and in riding over these densely wooded areas the rule was that whenever the horse’s hoofs ceased to clatter against the stones and resounded only from a firm and generous soil, they made a halt, when one or more of the party sought out the owner of the land with the view of making a purchase.

“As intimated before, the owners of these lands were holding on with the hope of having them eventually occupied only by people of their own faith (Presbyterian). Hence it was for a long time quite a difficult matter for one of different faith or nationality to negotiate a land purchase in this part of the county. Owing to continued persistence on the part of many Mennonites to occupy the section, in course of time considerable animosity and general bad feeling had sprung up between the two classes and the epithets, “Dutch,” and “Irish,” became corresponding terms of the bitterest reproach.

“But as the Mennonite farmer seldom cared to purchase and occupy more than from 150 to 200 acres, and as the most tempting offers were made for their land, these original holders gradually overcame their scruples and in time saw their large landed estates cut up into numerous small farms and occupied in many cases by people of Mennonite instead of Calvinist faith.

“It is most gratifying to observe at the present time, how these very two opposing elements that a century ago clashed together here with such force as to bring about relations so strained that many learned to hate each other’s profession of faith with the most cruel hatred; that both have continued to grow and prosper side by side, and that these animosities of the past could so completely die out with the lapse of time, that ministers and congregations representing each faction could long since assemble on funeral occasions to hold services, jointly and “magnify the Lord together.”

“A celebrated traveler who is said to have visited the Shenandoah Valley at the time of the incoming of the Mennonites, says, in giving account of their settlements near Harrisonburg:

“I could not but reflect with pleasure on the situation of these people, and think, if there is such a thing as happiness in this life, they enjoy it. Far from the bustle of the world, they live in the most delightful climate and the richest soil imaginable. They are everywhere surrounded with beautiful prospects and sylvan scenes; lofty mountains, transparent streams, rich valleys and majestic woods, the whole interspersed with an infinite variety of flowering shrubs, constitutes the landscape view around them. They are subject to few diseases—are generally robust, and live in perfect liberty. They know no wants and are acquainted with but few vices. Their inexperience of the elegancies of life precludes any regret that they have not the means of enjoying them, and with all they possess what many princes would give half their dominions for—health, contentment, and an unbounded tranquility of mind.”

[One wonders what “celebrated traveler”, with such “heaven on earth language” is being quoted! Ed.]

## The 1919 Mennonite General Conference

The 10<sup>th</sup> Mennonite General Conference had been scheduled to meet at Harrisonburg, VA., in 1917 at the location of the newly opening Eastern Mennonite School in Assembly Park. However a local epidemic of infantile paralysis (polio) caused the meetings to move to Goshen, Indiana that year.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Mennonite General Conference (1919) turned out to be the last big gathering at Assembly Park, formerly a major attraction in the Harrisonburg area for physical activity, cultural enrichment, spiritual nurture and philosophical discourse. But by the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the public events of this Chautauqua program had ceased. In January 1917, the Mennonite School Committee bought the Park and all its buildings for \$14,500. Eastern Mennonite School officially opened in the fall of 1917.

Approximately 1,100-1,200 visitors attending the Mennonite General Conference came by train or by automobile. If by train they alighted at Mennonite Station a flag-stop just east of the Park. One thousand local attendees drove in for Conference activities. One local observer "there were no horses in the parking lot!"

Lodging for the Conference meetings was in local homes from Bridgewater to Broadway. Some Brethren homes also showed hospitality, returning the favor shown by Mennonite families who helped host their 1909 conference at Assembly Park. Some host families need to make two trips each way to accommodate both family and guest attendees.

For visitors, food was served in the dining hall of Assembly Park Building, known variously as the While House, Hotel, or Old Park Building. It was reported that "during Conference over 1,100 people ate dinner in or outside the Park Building, not including local people who brought their food with them or those who returned to their host homes for meals."

Conference sessions were held in the large open tabernacle capable of seating 1,500 people. The tabernacle had been repaired for the 1919 conference, the benches cleaned and wood shavings brought in for the tabernacle. Eugene Suter was responsible for the tabernacle condition, while women of the community cleaned the Park Building for occupancy and for the use of committee meetings.

During the week prior to Conference, several church-wide committees met in local homes and evening public worship services were held at Zion Church. The Mennonite Publishing Board met at the Lewis Shank home for two days, as did the General Sunday School Committee at the home of Noah Holsinger. Incidentally, Mattie Shank, wife of Bishop Lewis, was the only woman (noted for her hospitality) mentioned in the record of the 1919 General Conference.

On Sunday afternoon these leaders left the Broadway area to move to Harrisonburg. Further meetings were held either at Weavers Church or at the tabernacle in Assembly Park. On Saturday evening, J. B. Smith, first principal at Eastern Mennonite School, convened a Conference on Fundamentals at Weavers Church.

On Monday evening an inspirational missionary meeting was held at the tabernacle, featuring the Mennonite mission work in India and South America. Tuesday afternoon and evening featured the Sunday school. Meanwhile, the

Committee on Arrangements was receiving reports from thirteen standing committees and scheduling their presentations to the public sessions. The General Conference began officially on Wednesday morning, August 27, 1919, with the conference sermon by D. H. Bender on Acts 20:28. It was an appeal to church leaders "to exercise vigilant oversight that the flock under their charge might grow in the fullest sense." Two Virginians among the six chosen to give testimony to the sermon were Lewis Shank and A. P. Heatwole.

Prominent concerns at the 1919 Conference were "war and peace" and "fundamentals of faith." The first issue was conditioned by the past carnage in World War I and the second by an intuitive feeling about changes in society and the church to come in the 1920's.

Meanwhile Conference was receiving and discussing reports from the thirteen standing committees. The General Mission Board proposed establishing a general hospital somewhere in the United States under church control. After extended discussion "it was decided to appoint a committee to make a special study of the problem and report at the next meeting."

Mennonite General Conference in 1919 received greeting from our missionaries in India and South America. Relief workers in Syria and Armenia communicated as "per Orie Miller." It was the relief workers in France who sent an appeal urging Conference to testify against universal military training for young men. The Peace and War Committee prepared a statement send to President Woodrow Wilson with a prayer that "peace may return soon" and a statement on the doctrine of peace. One afternoon, S. E.

Allgyer reported on his trip to visit the work of Mennonite relief in France, and a journey made possible by the American Friends Relief Committee. The Fundamentals Committee worked diligently on preparing a statement on our fundamental beliefs (ways to safeguard the church against the onslaught of liberalism). The committee asked for more time to complete their final report. This document, with minor revisions, became "the Eighteen Fundamentals" adopted by Mennonite General Conference in the 1921 meeting at Garden City, Missouri.

The last session of Conference on Friday morning was taken up by committee reports. Noted were the need for a new hymnbook and a handbook on church history. The report of the 1919 General Conference listed the officials present: 54 bishops, 132 ministers, 41 deacons. Conference regulations "provided a vote on the part of bishops and appointed delegates from ministers or deacons to make a voting force of 90"

The official reports of the 1919 Conference were very positive regarding the business accomplished, the cool and bracing weather, the spirited singing, the adequate facilities and the Southern hospitality" shown by the brotherhood in the Valley."

Finally there was recognition of the interest "so dear to the heart of our Virginia brethren: the new Eastern Mennonite School being erected on the hill." John L. Horst, a young attendee to General Conference from Chambersburg, PA, described in a *Gospel Herald* article, the walk many took up the hill on Friday afternoon to see the almost-completed building, set to open by January, 1920. A conference appeal noted the need for several thousand dollars to meet incoming bills. "if you want to make our brethren in the Valley glad, as well as to make your contribution to a good cause, send a

shower of checks to Bro. H. N. Troyer (business manager), Harrisonburg, VA.

Harold D. Lehman, April 2013

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**NOTE:**

Steve Nolt is coming to Harrisonburg for the Kennel Charles Anabaptist Lecture, September 23, at 7:00 p.m, in the EMHS Auditorium. He will speak about "Virginia's Unique Place in the North American Mennonite Mosaic."

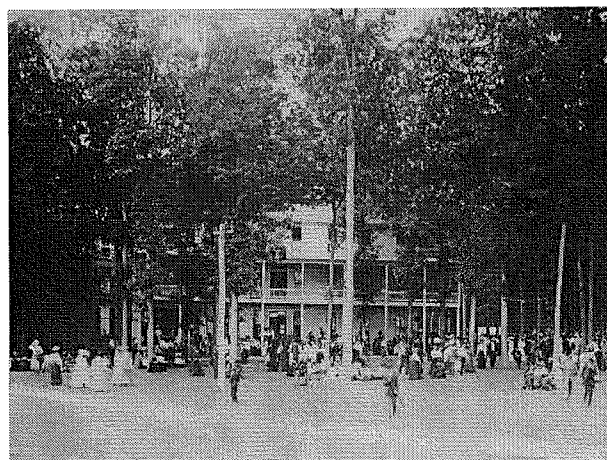
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Regarding the 1919 Mennonite General Conference meeting – the following buildings were crucial – ASSEMBLY PARK BUILDINGS – the tabernacle which could seat large audiences, and the "White House" to help house people (undated, unknown crowd, not Mennonite)

Tabernacle



White House



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