

# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Bank Mennonite Church (1849—1893), from Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia*, Vol. 1

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## THE “DOGS OF WAR” ARE LOOSE

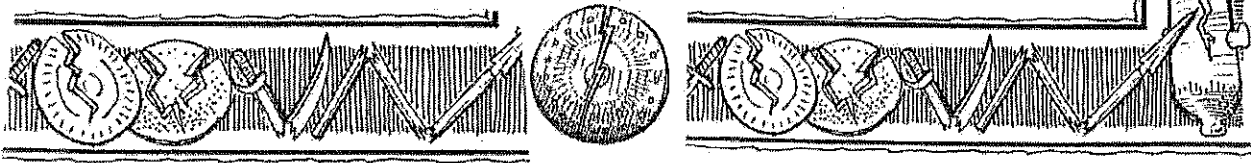
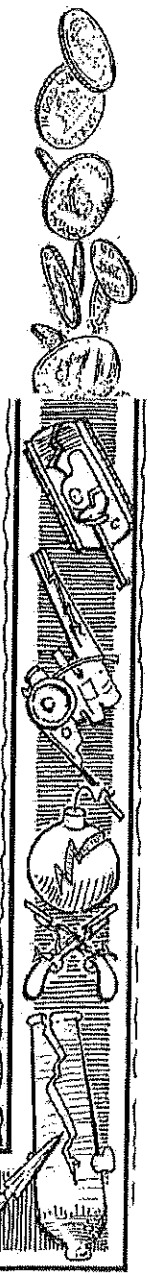
When that happens and three sets of the “dogs of war” are baying at full pitch at the moon of March and April, we become concerned. The U. S. is trying to fight three wars at once, while at the same time some people want to “celebrate” 150 years since the Civil War began—the most devastating war ever experienced in the U. S.

Can we ever “celebrate” war which often amounts to mass slaughter of human beings made in the image of God. Let’s simply say we’ll recollect the fearful time of the Civil War, often called the War Between the States by southerners. Years ago a catalog came across the editor’s desk calling it “The Late Unpleasantness.” Indeed!

But it is no joking matter when a four-year war between the states ends with at least 620,000 lives lost, many by bullet, many by disease that spread through the camps sometimes like wildfire. If the border on this cover appears dysfunctional, jagged and broken, perhaps it symbolizes what war does to people. And we remember that generals who experienced lots of war, like Dwight Eisenhower, described it simply, “War is hell.”

Somehow we live in a time and in a culture where fighting and violence are treated as a superficial necessity to settle problems. Of course, nice words are always used. We are “setting people free” or “stopping dictators from killing their own people.” One wonders if the U. S. is too preoccupied with trying to run the entire world’s affairs. Several of the current wars were never authorized by Congress and are cases of the U. S. being involved in starting a war, then having difficulty ending it.

*SMH* does this issue and will use future issues to keep us posted on what happened 150 years ago, since the Shenandoah Valley experienced so much grief and destruction from the war between the states. There are so many aspects to what led to the war and how local people in Rockingham and Augusta counties got involved in this defining event of American history. Elements of racism crop up today, reminding us of the time when Virginia participated in this cancer of the human race that is taking a long time to eradicate in American history.



# Mennonites and Slavery Before the Civil War

It has always been clear in American history that Mennonites officially stood against slavery. This was true both in the North and the South. No instance has been found of Virginia Mennonite church members owning slaves.

The first shiplot of Negroes came to Virginia in 1619. Slavery became important to Virginia and the South.<sup>1</sup> Mennonites lived among a number of slave owners. In 1860 Rockingham County had 2,387 slaves and Augusta County had 4,700.<sup>2</sup> Virginia Mennonites kept few records in those days, so references to them were scarce.

The well-known Bishop Peter Burkholder *Confession of Faith* of 1837, which Joseph Funk translated from German to English prohibited the owning and hiring of slaves. Burkholder had Funk translate the Pieter Jansz Twisck "Confession of Faith" of 1617.

In the section of "Nine Reflections," (the one on baptism) Burkholder reads as follows: "And moreover, as all are free in Christ, they must take no part in slaveholding, or in trafficking with them in any wise. Neither should any members exalt themselves above the others, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harry Anthony Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia*, Vol. 1, 1727-1900. Harrisonburg: Pub. by author, 1959, 108.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy*, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967, 16, quoting the Harrisonburg *Rockingham Register*, March 25, 1864.

<sup>3</sup>*The Confession of Faith of the Christians Known By the Name of Mennonites, . . . Also Nine Reflections . . .* by Peter Burkholder. Winchester: Robinson & Hollis, 1837, 419.

In 1845, in a letter to his daughter Mary in Missouri, Joseph Funk clearly made known where he stood with regard to slavery.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph's daughter, Hannah, married an enterprising young entrepreneur, Jacob Kurtz, who in 1845, as reported by Funk, had purchased a slave. By that time Kurtz and his wife had joined the New Erection (Cooks Creek) Presbyterian Church. The purchase of a slave infuriated Father Funk when he reported it to Mary in Missouri.

## Bank Mennonite Church and Freed Slaves

The first known illustration of a Mennonite Church having freed slaves attend was the Bank Mennonite Church. Marion L. Coakley received much of his information from his great uncle, George Coakley, who had been a soldier in the Civil War and who died in 1935.

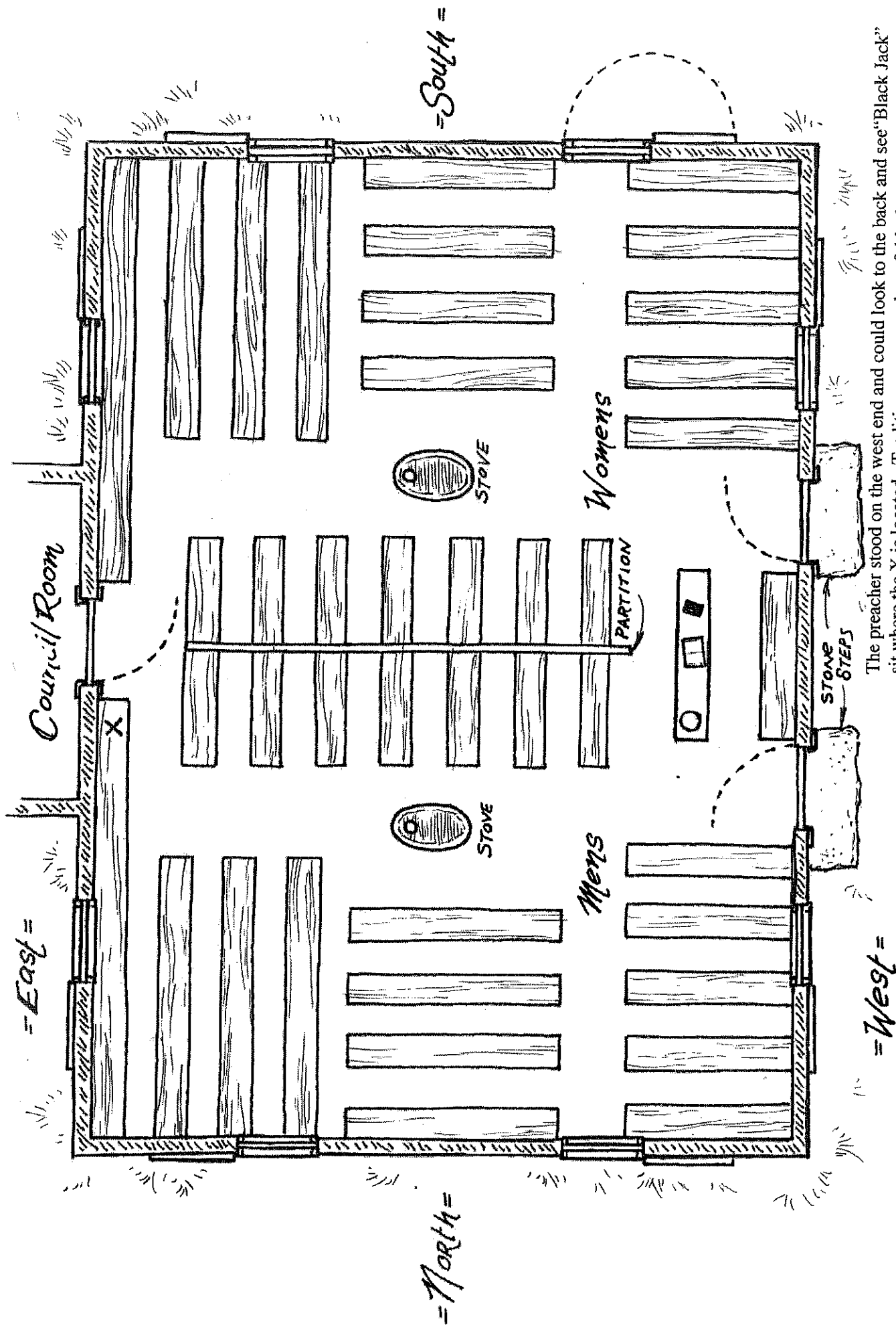
The first Bank Church was built 1849, but the congregation had formed ten years earlier and held services in a schoolhouse located on the Howard Good property near Mole Hill and not far from Va. 752. Daniel James Coakley, Jr. father of George Coakley, owned a large plantation and several slaves as did a few others west of Mole Hill. Daniel and his slaves attended Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church (which had a balcony for slaves).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Joseph Funk Collection of Letters.

<sup>5</sup>Regina M. Goering, *A History of the Bank Mennonite Church*. Dayton: Bank Mennonite Church, 1989, 20. This information comes from Appendix C, written by Regina's father, James Goering, p. 20;

Information was obtained also from Lois Coakley Cline, Dayton, VA, interviewed Feb. 24, March 22, 2011, and several other brief conversations by phone.



Jon Gehman has re-sketched one done by an anonymous adult who remembered the first Bank meetinghouse when he was almost 12 years old. The original sketch is located at Bank. The old building was 34 x 48 in size. Tradition says it sat on the bank of Dry River.

The preacher stood on the west end and could look to the back and see "Black Jack" sit where the X is located. Tradition says a number of black persons attended. Perhaps they sat on the long bench on which Jack sat.

# BANK MENNONITE CHURCH

## 1849

Lois Coakely Cline has memories of her father Marion talking about the Coakelys and slavery. The Presbyterian church in the area had a predecessor in the first building located at Silver Lake, but which was overtaken by the lake when that formed. Coakley and his slaves attended that earliest Presbyterian Church. Hence, the Presbyterians built a new building and for years called it the "New Erection" Church, until the name changed to Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church.

As the Civil War approached, the Presbyterian Church divided into North and South over the slavery issue, perhaps a reason Daniel looked for another church. Also, as he studied the scriptures, he reportedly came to believe in nonresistance. During the war he is believed to have paid the \$500 fine to avoid military service. When he look for a church with similar beliefs he found the Bank Mennonite Church. Also Coakely did not want to abandon a number of black people who relied on him, by going off to military service.

When he inquired about bringing his slaves to the Bank Church, they hesitated and told him to free his slaves. Then they were permitted to attend at Bank. This was done by Coakley before Lincoln freed the slaves in the South. Daniel Coakley and at least one slave, Jack, were presumed to be members at Bank (see the sketch on page 3 of the interior of the 1849 Bank Church as recalled by a child nearly twelve years old.)

Bank would have been attractive to them because English preaching services were held there at least ten years before the first Bank meetinghouse of 1849. Frederick Rhodes, who died 1847, preached there in English, as did son David, ordained 1841. So they were early English preachers at Bank.<sup>6</sup> Neither Coakley nor his former slaves would have understood German. At this time from the 1840s to the 60s Virginia Mennonites were changing to English.

<sup>6</sup>Goering, 20.

## Mysterious Puzzles Within Enigmas

That may be one inexact way to describe various things recalled by several sources, among them Lois Coakley Cline's recollections from her father Marion Coakely, an undated letter that Marion wrote, as well as Elizabeth Wilson Hodges, *They Came to Rockingham*. Hodges' book refers to Marion Coakely a number of times and her chapter 12 is entitled, "The Coakleys."<sup>7</sup>



*Caption: Marion L. and Ethel Swartz Coakley and two children, Linwood and Lois.*

Lois recalls a tale of a Coakley ancestor who was given a grant of land totaling 500,000 acres by the king of England in the 1600s. Elisabeth Hodges has on her book jacket a sketch found in a handbag of Caroline Coakley Kiracofe, "left behind to be rediscovered approximately 177 years after the plantation was settled." (p. 117)

Somewhat roughly the Hodges sketch approximates part of what Lois recalled her father saying about the 500,000 acre grant he got when he came with slaves in one ship (Hodges says 100 slaves) and family and tools and equipment in the

<sup>7</sup>Elisabeth Wilson Hodges, *They Came to Rockingham*. Lynchburg: Warwick House Publishers, 2004, 315-437.

other ship. Lois Coakely Cline estimated that the large Coakely land grant stretched perhaps as far west as Bank Church and followed the Bank Church road eastward to Rt. 33 and even beyond, because it included the Bear Wallow place on the north side of Rt. 33. That parcel was split up and sold to various farmers. In actuality, 500,000 acres would have been far larger, in fact a huge majority of Rockingham County! How much can one trust vague recollections, is a problem with which to deal in this whole interesting story?

Hodges seems to have done extensive and careful work to trace family lines back to the 1400s, and beyond, even to the 19<sup>th</sup> generation, and involvement with the nobility and knighthood, with the Coakely name being spelled Colclough and other variations.<sup>8</sup> Marion L. Coakely, in an undated letter to a neighbor, mentions a Kokley, born 933, an ancient King of the Britons. From this family line came a William Coakely who married a Danish prince, and had slaves and a private army. He was a grandson of Eliston G. Kokley. William the Conqueror and the Battle of Hastings of 1066 are mentioned as is the Saxon King Harold. In 1100 the youngest son of William became Henry I, King of England. Then Henry II as well as Henry VI with his "private army" are mentioned. Marion cites his source for this mysterious history as Charles Coakely of Nova Scotia.<sup>9</sup>

In his undated letter Marion mentions Daniel James Coakely with "wife and 2 small sons Benjamin E. and William" and personal possessions and tools in one sailing ship and another ship load of slaves leaving Ireland 1750 and going to Andros island southeast of Florida. There he settled on 3,000 acres and laid out

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Letter by Marion L. Coakely to "Dear Neighbor and family," in possession of Lois Coakely Cline.

Coakley Town. A few years later he left for Virginia, and settled between King George and Westmoreland counties.

Benjamin E. Coakely is described as having six children, the second son being Daniel James who married Sarah Elnora Vigar, and lived in Rockingham County on Road 732 between Hinton and Dayton. Daniel James died with eleven children who settled around the town of Coakleytown, VA. Now we return to the Coakelys attending the Cooks Creek Presbyterian Church and later the Bank Mennonite Church.

All this leads up to the understanding that the Bank Church was the first racially integrated Virginia Mennonite church, long before Broad Street, the first Virginia Mennonite Church specifically for blacks was founded in Harrisonburg.

The Bank cemetery reportedly had a number of freed blacks buried there, but it becomes difficult to pinpoint their graves. One marker on the southwest corner of the cemetery, however, is very clear. It is a flat stone and reads as follows:

Jesse James  
1820-1900  
Colored Slave

How this relates to Lois Coakely Cline's recollection of her father mentioning other burials including "Jerry James, Jimmy James, Jack James, and John James," is not clear. Also, tradition said that freed slaves were buried in the vicinity of the tall evergreen tree on the northeast portion of the cemetery. There one finds a stone that says "Frances, wife of James Black, born Feb. 22, 1808 and died, Aug. 20, 1859."

Mennonite bishop Jacob Hildebrand kept a diary in 1861 that has survived. Here is part of the January diary. Look at Friday, the 4<sup>th</sup>. Observe that on Friday, Jan. 4, the Hildebrand Mennonite Church had Preaching "as the Preasident requested to have prayer." The good bishop usually did that when the president called for it. His president at this time was James Buchanan, as Lincoln was not inaugurated until in March.

many  
letters

FRIDAY, 4th. Cloudy & windy sunrise on over  
merry had Preaching  
at the Church  
as the Preasident  
requested to have prayer

SATURDAY, 5th. Quite a fair  
day the snow melted  
Some I took 12 bus  
of wheat to mill &  
2 1/2 bushels of rye  
and got 12 bushels of  
dole out at H. Bells

Belle & Jack  
son & Doctors

TUESDAY, 8th. Clear and  
warmer the snow  
melts fast I  
at Hagersboro Rec  
75 Dollars from  
N. Harsie

WEDNESDAY, 9th. Cloudy  
and with Rain &  
mixed until mid  
of Day then cloudy  
with some sun  
was at H. Bells &  
Clock Branches &  
are full snow in

Now the question is – what happened on May 23, 1861, when Virginia voters went to the polls to decide whether to stay with the Union or go with the Confederacy? For the summer issue of SMH we will give details on May 23. Will Bishop Hildebrand stay with the Union or will he change loyalty to the Confederacy?

**Be sure your subscription to SMH is good (it's only \$6 a year for individuals), so you will get the next issue and can find out which way Hildebrand went! Send subscription monies to Jim Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22802.**

# The War Between the States Threatens in the Spring of 1861

Abraham Lincoln's election on Nov. 6, 1860, was feared by the South. Mennonites read the papers and knew the tense developments that had been building and that a storm was brewing. Bishop Martin Burkholder, before he died in December 1860, feared a Civil War might become a reality.

The David Hartman family symbolizes what it meant for Rockingham and Augusta families when Lincoln was elected. Father David sent son Peter to town for the weekly newspaper, the *Rockingham Register and Advertiser* to find out the results of the election. When Peter got home the family was waiting anxiously.

Peter then handed the paper to an older sister who usually read it aloud to the rest. "The first thing my sister read, was that Lincoln was elected" The news "made us all weak" and "almost made the blood run cold."<sup>1</sup> Virginia, as a whole, voted for John Bell of Tennessee, the Constitutional Union candidate.<sup>2</sup>

Mennonites, of course, were against slavery and against war. Virginia, with its 490,865 slaves, was the largest slave-holding state. In Rockingham County ten percent of the population were slaves.<sup>3</sup> Augusta County had 4,700 slaves. If war came, what would that mean to Mennonites and fellow believers, the Dunkers?

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<sup>1</sup>James O. Lehman and Steven M. Nolt, *Mennonites, Amish and the American Civil War*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, 1.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy*. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967, 23.

<sup>3</sup>Jeff Mellott, *Daily News Record*, Jan. 15, 2011. He is doing a series of monthly specials on the Civil War.

("Dunkers" was the common name for Church of the Brethren.) They were the larger of the two groups. The election sparked a secession crisis, with South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana seceding in December and Texas not long afterwards.

## What Would Virginia Do?

Peace-loving Mennonites and Dunkers began to fear the worst—a possible war. And the Shenandoah Valley would not be spared, with its rich agricultural wealth and being a main route between North and South. Newspapers in both counties had carried plenty of discussion if war came. Papers in both Harrisonburg and Staunton were strongly pro-Union for several months. Virginia called for a convention and both counties each had three strong pro-Union candidates. On the day Virginia voters voted for candidates for this convention, a new Confederate government was already forming in Montgomery, Alabama.

Rockingham's three candidates, John F. Lewis, Algernon Gray, and Dr. Samuel A. Coffman<sup>4</sup> were all slave owners, but strong Union men. Coffman was the youngest of the three. Already by Jan. 25, Samuel A. wrote in the *Rockingham Register* that if he's elected to serve in the Virginia Convention, his purpose would be to "save the Union." But he would also not be a "submissionist" if the Union could not be saved. In that case, to save Virginia's "honor," he would seek independence out of the Union. In other words, that meant joining the Confederacy.

The *Rockingham Register* and the *Staunton Spectator* remained strongly pro-Unionist through March, but became more

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Coffman, who lived in the house along Rt. 42 more recently known as the Isaac Wenger home, was the great-grandson of early Mennonite minister, Michael Kauffman. Michael's son David married non-Mennonite Anna Lionberger and no family members remained Mennonite. They became "rural gentry" and smacked a bit of aristocracy. Samuel L. (son of David) lived at "Mannheim" not far from Dr. Samuel A. Coffman's large brick house east of Mannheim at the intersection of Rt. 42 and Wengers Mill Rd. Slavery crept into the family around 1830. See *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*, Autumn, 2005, for more.

alarmist after Lincoln's inauguration in early March, 1861, 150 years ago. The Virginia Convention, chaired by the strong pro-Union Robert Y. Conrad of Winchester, worked valiantly to keep Virginia in the Union.<sup>5</sup>

On March 4, 1861, the U. S. Representative, John T. Harris from Harrisonburg personally met with Lincoln to plead for more time for the "crisis" to be solved without war. Lincoln told him he intended to be president of the whole country and not to make war upon the South. The *Rockingham Register* had not been happy in the first place about Lincoln becoming president, and it liked his inaugural speech even less. The *Register* interpreted Lincoln's inaugural address very negatively, even calling it a "declaration of war" against the South.<sup>6</sup>

Even as late as April 4, the Convention voted 90-45 against joining the Confederacy. Unionism was still alive, but getting a bit weaker. However, the rumors of war became persistently louder, so that by April 10 chairman Conrad thought he might "gag" the gentlemen who called for secession. But he was fast losing the battle to keep Virginia Unionist.

When Charleston, South Carolina was fired upon and Lincoln called for 75,000 troops, on April 15, everything changed dramatically. Local newspapers that had been Unionist, totally flipped overnight, as it were, and now called for Virginia to go with the Confederacy. Conrad, chairman of the Convention, on April 14, saw it coming. "My heart is very sad" viewing the prospect of "civil fratricidal war" in our young and prosperous country (page 19). What remained yet to do was to set a day for state voters to vote the Convention's recommendations up or down.

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<sup>5</sup>"The Break-Up of a Nation," *Winchester-Frederick County Historical Society Journal*, Vol. VIII, 1994-1995. In regular letters to his wife, Conrad reported how hard he worked to save Virginia for the Union, but finally the Unionists were outvoted, he sadly reported to her; pages 1-48.

<sup>6</sup>Jeff Mellott, "March 1861: One Last Bid for Peace," *DNR*, March 26, 2011.

## What About the Peace People, Mennonites and Dunkers?

The general population was quite aware of local people like the Mennonites and Dunkers and they were often spoken of as being much alike. Said the Feb. 15 *Register*, "We know these people, we have mingled with them day after day for years, and we know that a people more loyal to the Constitution and the laws cannot be found anywhere." They pay taxes and support the government that protects slave holders.<sup>7</sup>

As late as April 12, the *Register* warmly welcomed the Dunkers to hold their annual meeting locally. The government would protect them so they can worship as they please. If they are too conscientious to hold slaves, "let them not touch it" but they should also not interfere with those who do hold slaves. The South demands that "professing Christians shall not be foolish enough to meddle with an institution [slavery] of which they, the Christians, have nothing to do."

The Dunkers did hold their annual meeting after the middle of May. An estimated 3,000 people attended and the *Register* of May 24, enthusiastically welcomed them and reported on their meeting. It was held right before the May 23 state-wide vote on secession versus staying with the Union. "The finest order prevailed," despite the large number of people," And the feasting was tremendous.

Spiritually, there was a feast also. The primary meeting place was the Beaver Creek Church, which, of course, could not hold 3,000 people. Sometimes, they had three simultaneous meetings going. The services were "exceedingly simple, earnest, devout and sincere," thought the *Register* reporter. "It would be well for Christianity, and for the world too, if Christians gave the same proof of love, one for another, exhibited by these Tunker Christians."

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<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy*, 26.



Virginia Mennonite Conference also met this spring on April 27 and 28. The minutes, however, were extremely brief, as Mennonites tended to do during this time. They met at the Hildebrand Church north of Waynesboro. Two bishops, seven ministers, and three deacons were present. Virginia Conference at that time was only attended by ordained leaders. "Conference opened in the usual way with singing and prayer." Mennonites seemed to have the practice of not commenting on political situations, no matter how tense they were at this time. Doubtless, there was plenty of discussion about it, but it was not recorded.<sup>8</sup>

## Returning to the Excitement of the Day

On April 21, Dunker Elder John Kline briefly described the tenseness of the times in his diary.<sup>9</sup>

Great excitement on account of secession and war movements. The volunteers are being called out to enter the field of war and God only knows what the end will be. There is great commotion everywhere in the realm of thought and sentiment, men's hearts failing them for fear, the sea and the waves of human passion roaring.

For all practical purposes, says historian Horst, Virginia was already out of the Union. On April 25 the Confederate constitution was ratified and On May 8 Virginia was admitted into the Confederacy. However, the May 23 vote by

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<sup>8</sup> Minutes of the Virginia Mennonite Conference. Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1939, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Horst, Mennonites, 25. quoting from Benjamin Funk (ed.) Life of John Kline, Collated from His Diary. Elgin: Brethren Publishing House, 1900, p. 440.

Virginians as a whole had not yet passed. That was the day set for state voters to vote for Union or for secession.

From April 15 till May 23 the pressures became extreme even to the point of being threatened by death if one did not agree to vote for secession. In those days the vote was verbal, not by secret ballot. The *Staunton Spectator* demanded voting for secession. "Votes are now more precious than jewels, and none should be lost." The May 17 *Rockingham Register* declared that only "demagogues and traitors" would vote against secession.

The next issue of *SMH* will carry more on the significant vote of May 23, 1861. We will publish names of Mennonites who voted in favor of secession, those who voted against it, and some who did not vote that day. We have learned a good bit more how Mennonites responded when war began and how things went in the summer of 1861.

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**Ken Weaver (compiler), Review of *75 Years of Gospel witness, service ministries, and nurturing community in Harrisonburg, VA*. Published by the congregation, 2011. Illustrated, 65 pages.**

As a part of Harrisonburg Mennonite Church's 75<sup>th</sup> year celebration, a booklet was produced that tells the congregation's story in chronological order. HMC historian Ken Weaver writes that this publication includes text from earlier writings with information from the recent nine years added. These earlier writings were from various writers and included former historians Minnie Carr and Charles Burkholder.

The booklet gives the reader a good overview of this Harrisonburg Mission from its

(continued on back cover)

1936 start, located on the corner of Gay Street and Federal Street, to the Chicago Avenue location from 1936 to 1972, and on to the newly purchased 13 acres located along South High Street from 1972 to the present.

Of interest is that this congregation began as Eastern Mennonite School faculty and students reached out into Harrisonburg in the 1920s and 30s, eager to share the Gospel. Their work was with both whites and blacks in northern Harrisonburg. This booklet deals with some difficulties of working with both races in the same building on Gay Street in 1936—even though separate services were held.

This history deals with the challenges HMC has faced in more recent years with being a large multi-staffed congregation, often overcrowded. Should they hold multiple services, plant another church, or build? They have done all three. In the period of 1995-2001 HMC experienced an 11% average annual growth rate. Workers from this congregation were instrumental in starting the work in Grottoes in the 1950s, which became Mount Vernon Mennonite, and in starting Harrisonburg churches, Ridgeway Mennonite and the West Side Church.

The book helps explain that today HMC is a congregation of three parts who gather in the same building. HMC interweaves organization and structures. These three join in missions, yet maintain their very different worship styles and fellowship groups. The three are the Sanctuary Fellowship, Praise Fellowship and Christajak, a fellowship of Lao origin.

The significance of this book is in telling the story of a congregation in short very readable form. Key leaders are identified for each decade, such as Harold Eshleman. This booklet includes a list of employees over the years and enduring characteristics of the congregation. This story is especially important to persons who are not familiar with HMC's history.

James Rush

### A Bit of News . . .

James O. Lehman has retired as Virginia Mennonite Conference Archivist. Harold Huber takes his place on an interim trial basis. Lehman continues as editor of *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*.

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