

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Vol. 18, No. 1 Quarterly Publication of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians Winter 2011

PETER BLOSSER "THE MENNONITE"

From an earlier century we note a Mennonite bishop whom John W. Wayland, the famous local historian, called "the Mennonite." Alta Yoder Bauman, a descendant of Blosser, picked up on this and wrote about him in the Oct. 1989 Mennonite Family History. However, her sources needed checking with regard to her emphasis on "the Mennonite!"

It turns out that Wayland was simply listing one important leader for each of a number of denominations. So Blosser was simply "the Mennonite" as Francis Asbury was "the Methodist" and James Ireland "the Baptist," and so on! Peter Blosser was 60 years old and lived in Pennsylvania. He was a 1739 immigrant from France and formerly from Switzerland.

In the early 1700s Mennonites found their way south from PA to VA, settling near Luray in Page County. Alta indicates that Mennonites had moved from a state that was tolerant of religion (PA) to VA that had a strongly-established Church of England "state religion" that worked hard to keep churches west of the Blue Ridge mountains as members of their denomination.

Thus, says Alta, "Quakers, Baptists and Mennonites were considered second class citizens and were not permitted to build meetinghouses. Their births and marriages were not recorded, although they were required to pay taxes." Therefore, they had to remain "low key," says Mrs. Bauman.

What was the result of this status? "Wrestling with wilderness problems, lack of progressive leadership, difficulties in transportation, and the displeasure of authorities, all led towards a stagnant church life," Bauman concludes. She cites a 1748 itinerant Moravian evangelist who reported that the "Menists were lacking in religious fervor and zeal. New Light ministers, converts of George Whitefield, reported also that the Mennonites knew little of conversion."

When the Baptists arrived in 1760, says Alta, they preached with a fervor unknown to Mennonites. Baptists were also politically and militarily minded. This resulted in religious ferment by the time of the Revolutionary War in the 1770s. Hence, concerned brethren were sent to Pennsylvania for help!

Who came to help? Peter Blosser, Lancaster Conference bishop (born 1717 at Blazen, Switzerland) was one of several that came. Quoting S. H. Blosser, he was "eminently" fitted for the role of bishop since he "had once been a singer and jester for a nobleman in Switzerland."

In further description of Blosser, she says he was the father of six daughters and four sons. Quoting S. H. Blosser¹ she indicates that when wife Barbara died Peter felt his sons to be “unmanageable, so he decided to find them a cross stepmother.” Sure enough, he accomplished that by marrying a “Miss Knicely” The Blosser children reportedly did find it difficult to live with her and they left the parental roof when they became of age. She also caused Peter Blosser to lose his ministry, says Blosser.

Oldest son, Peter II, packed his bags and headed for Page County. His marriage to Magdalena, daughter of Blasius Bear in 1776 “was said to be one of the first Mennonite weddings in Page County, but there is no record,” says Bauman.

The elder Peter Blosser, received the call from Page County to “boost the sagging, scattered brotherhood” in that county. He answered the call, came to Virginia, and Page County Mennonites welcomed him and gave him “full reign to preach nonresistance. He debated with the Baptists and others, and strengthened the brethren.”

Bauman quotes a source from the papers of Twyman Williams,² who declares that Peter’s preaching and influence “brought down on him the ire of the military.” A Captain Bender “vowed that he would never rest until he captured this influential man who was dubbed ‘The Mennonite.’” Peter, however, had his hiding places to avoid capture.

Furthermore, he seemed to have influence enough be called “The Mennonite.” Also, “An historian says that Blosser may have kept as many men from the army (during Revolutionary War days) as the famous Colonel Muhlenburg from nearby induced to join the military.”³

¹S. H. Blosser, *Genealogical History of the Blosser Family in America*.

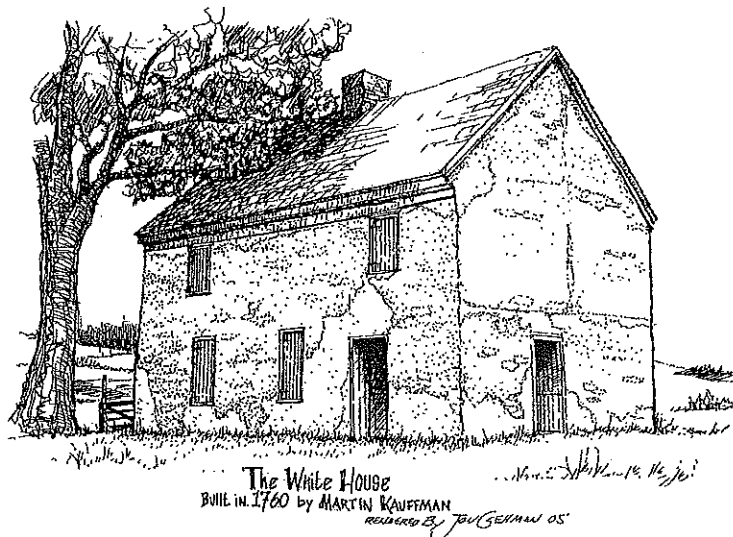
²Twyman Williams, *Papers of*.

³Colonel and Pastor Muhlenburg, indeed, was famous for his efforts to induce men to go fight in the War. He was known as a minister who took off his clerical robes after a

Captain Bender never did catch up with Peter Blosser, who returned to Pennsylvania, having left a “distinctive influence on the pioneer community in Page County.” Though the Page County settlement disintegrated eventually, and the faith “lived on in the children and brethren who moved elsewhere, chiefly to Rockingham County near Harrisonburg,” where there was more space, good land and “no threat from Indian attack.”

Hence, says, Mrs. Bauman, Virginia Mennonites owe “a big debt of gratitude to this doughty hero of the faith—Peter Blosser.” Information about Blosser back in Pennsylvania is sketchy. It seems he “made his mark in secular Virginia history.”

Virginia does have descendants of this Peter Blosser as Alta Yoder Bauman claimed to be. Other Blossers would make that claim, as does Joyce Blosser Showalter of Harrisonburg, who also claims him as an ancestor. Below is a sketch of the White House, a meeting place in Page County, done the same year as some activity developed regarding the ownership of the White House and the surrounding land (see next article).



(Sketch used by permission of artist.)

Sunday sermon to show off his soldier’s uniform, and then advising that the men go fight in the American Revolution.

“White House purchase raises concerns”

Thus appeared the headline in an Aug. 25, 2005 Page County newspaper, *Page News and Courier*. The story is about the historic Mennonite home sketched on the previous page. The stone-walled building covered with mortar was used for a time as a meeting place for Page County Mennonites.

Built in 1760 on the bank of the South Fork of the Shenandoah River following the Indian “excursions” it was the home of the minister Martin Kauffman. Harry A. Brunk says a new church was established in this house. Kauffman was a Mennonite minister, but as the Baptists came and took over the church he became a Baptist minister. The church became known as a “Mennonist Baptist Church.” Now to some snatches of the newspaper article.

“The view is that of a vintage picture postcard. The historic structure—known locally as the White House—is situated near the foot of the Massanutten Mountain off U. S. 211” It rests on 272 acres of rolling hills and meadows. It had been for sale for more than a decade.

In the spring of 2005 a developer from Northern Virginia purchased the acreage, the White House and the farm for \$2.7 million dollars. Now that a developer owns it, many are concerned about the future of the historic farm.

A member of the Page County Heritage Association says it has significant Civil War history. General Stonewall Jackson ordered his troops to burn the bridge near the White House. This was the last time Jackson was in this part of the Valley. The House was used as a residence until the early 1900s, says Gary Bauserman. It has stood vacant since then.

In 1924 flood waters reached the second story since it stands so close to the river. “The floor joists are rotted out and an arched cellar underneath is full of debris.” The House,

however, is listed on the Virginia Registry for Historic Places. That may provide some protection when and if housing developments go up in the area. Still, local history buffs are concerned. Says Bauserman, “It’s very important that we keep this structure. It’s worthy of preservation. It’s a fabulous structure. It’s one of the oldest structures in Page County.”

The 272-acre parcel has been surveyed and split into 16 separate tracts for future development. Where the White House “sits is part of an 87-acre parcel situated around the large farm house” To the knowledge of this writer, no development has occurred thus far.

Many Mennonites would likely be pleased also to see the historic house with Mennonite roots be preserved. It does stand at a vulnerable place on the banks of the river that occasionally can flood the building too easily. Apparently in colonial days the builders were willing to place it so close to the river and on a flood plain. Perhaps that is why they built it so substantially of stone, so it would withstand an occasional flood.

Page County Mennonites eventually disappeared for a long time until the mid-twentieth century when Big Spring Mennonite Church developed and is now active. Their historic church building, stands at another location. As for the preservation and renovation of the White House as a historic Mennonite landmark, no action has been forthcoming. Page County should not be forgotten, however, as the place where the earliest Mennonites came.

Some Page County Mennonites, among them the early Mennonite minister in the EDOM area, Michael Kauffman (1714-87), eventually came to Rockingham County. He was buried in 1787 at the cemetery now known as the Lindale cemetery. He may have been the second adult to be buried after Abraham Breneman buried his first wife and child in 1787, after she died from childbirth complications and he set aside a half acre for the community cemetery.

Editor

Shenandoah Refugees: October 1864

By Rebecca Suter Lindsay

Each labored step bears us farther from our home.
We wagon north, fleeing famine, that grave
Aftermath of war's destructive fire.
The wheels creak; the graveled road
Chews at the boot, destroys its sole.
Our hearts are sore for want of peace.

Ahead are generals; John Meig's body, now at peace;
Caissons, cannon, cattle; infantry far from home;
Four hundred wagons of us wandering souls;
Supplies and sutlers' stores; ambulances grave;
All strung twelve miles along the Valley Road
Behind us comes the crack of rifle fire.

From east to west, the Valley is on fire:
Sheridan's design of violence to speed peace.
We dare not speculate beyond the road
Which smoky column might be our home,
Or if the barn lies ashes in its grave.
To think of it destroys my soul.

Faced with decision, we would not sell our soul.
Conscripted, we would not fire
Our guns, or else aimed high. In grave
Times of war, someone must stand for peace.
While others fly to fight for country and for home,
Nonviolence is the harder road.

Do not turn, Elizabeth, my love; stay the road.
Or else the sight will sear your soul
to salt. Block tender thoughts of home,
Of roses by the door, the bush afire,
Of church yard walled, that place of peace,
Where two tiny daughters lie within the grave.

We chose to heed the general's grave
Warning of charred remains where soldiers rode
With flaming torch to create peace,
Or so he claimed. To strengthen soul
At night, close gathered round the fire,
We do not hang our harps, but sing of home.

On this side of the grave, thus is our road:
A fire burns deep within our soul.
We long for peace; we search for our true home.

Rebecca Suter Lindsay of Crestview Hills, KY and two friends visited the VA Conference Archives on Jan. 5, to do research on Emanuel Suter diaries. Rebecca, great-granddaughter of Emanuel Suter, a local potter, wrote this Sestina poem about the fleeing of the Emanuel Suter family northward with General Sheridan's army during "The Burning" of 1864.

It won the "Green River Grande" prize for poetry in the 2009 literary contest sponsored by the Green River Writers, a group in the Louisville, KY area. She is a member of the Monday Morning Writers' Group in Cincinnati, Ohio. She currently serves as President of the Kentucky State Poetry Society. Mrs. Rebecca S. Lindsay gave permission to publish her Sestina poem.

What, you may ask, is a Sestina poem? This one is built on six words: home, grave, fire, rode/road, sole/soul, and peace, says Rebecca. The Sestina Verse Form is a French form that appeared in France in the twelfth century, initially in the work of Arnaut Daniel, one of the troubadours or court poets and singers in the service of French nobles.

A traditional Sestina has "lines grouped into six sestets and a concluding tercet and consists of 39 lines. The six words that end each of the lines of the first stanza are repeated in a different order at the end of lines in each of the subsequent five stanzas. The repeated words are unrhymed." (from Internet and found by Google. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology Poetic Forms*, of edited by Mark Strand and Evan Boland.)

The Emanuel Suter family wagon, along with an estimated 400 wagons, fled the desperate time when General Sheridan's Federal troops, came through to burn out the Shenandoah Valley, considered a breadbasket of the Confederacy. It was a fearsome time. Many stories relate to it.¹ Barns, mills and some houses were set afire (though General Grant specifically ordered that houses not be burned!) However, some were.

Editor

¹See John L. Heatwole, *The Burning*. Charlottesville: Rockbridge Publishing, 1998.

A Church is Born . . . Then Dies

30 Years Later

Everyone knows that Virginia Mennonite Conference has a number of congregations in North Carolina. Not all the attempts at church-building have succeeded. Wonderful dreams were born for a church in Winston-Salem, NC. Regrettably, 30 years later the dreams died for the Vest Mill / Oak Hill congregation.

Here is a brief history given upon the occasion of the closing of Oak Hill on May 23, 1999. Ivan and Rachel Friesen were co-pastors at the time. They may have been the authors of this history.

Winston-Salem Mennonite Fellowship, 1968-73

The idea for more Mennonite churches in North Carolina came from Roy Kiser when he was stranded by a snowstorm at the Greensboro airport in 1965. He was the Home Missions Secretary for the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions, and it was through his work that Dave and Merna Kindy went to Winston-Salem in 1968.

For over a year, the Kindys and the Ross Mast family met for Friday evening fellowship. In July of 1969 they began having Sunday morning services in the Kindy living room on Fenimore Street in Ardmore. A Mennonite Voluntary Service Unit was begun in August 1969 in order to help with the church.

Vest Mill Mennonite Church, 1973-1985

The first permanent location came in 1973 when land was purchased on Vest Mill Road. The first building there was an office trailer which had one large room and one small room. Seventy one persons attended the dedication service.

Even though space was small, the church program included Sunday morning and evening services, Wednesday evening Bible Study, special services and Vacation Bible School in the

summer. Tents and a camper provided extra space for Bible School. In 1977 the A-frame Vest Mill Mennonite Church was built with lots of volunteer help from Virginia Mennonite Conference and other interested persons. Church programs continued with help from the VS unit through the summer of 1980.

A special campaign in 1983 freed the church of the debt accrued in the building program. This was also the year that the planning of Interstate 40 was being finalized, and the church was in the preferred pathway. Another search for land resulted in the purchase on Gyro Drive.

Oak Hill Mennonite Church, 1985-1999

The church hired a contractor to erect the building. This was a tough year for the church, this being the second building in less than ten years. There was a location change, a name change, and the pastor and overseer both resigned.

Marlin Yoder came to be the new pastor in 1986. In 1992, he and his wife Joni left for a term of service with Mennonite Central Committee in Jamaica. The church was without a pastor for nearly a year. In 1993 Ivan and Rachel Friesen came as co-pastors for the church. Though many who attended felt affirmed and loved, growth was not realized.

Mennonite Church, Winston-Salem, 1999 ff

The dream continues for a Mennonite Church in Winston-Salem. As the church agonized over the decision of closing, the members were reminded that unless a kernel of seed died, it cannot grow and produce more seeds (John 12:24). Even through the closing of the church, the faithfulness and love of God have been evident. Whatever happens is dependent on His timing, and in His time it will be rewarded.

(Near closing time Merna Kindy, with tears, reflected on the birth, life and near death. Now in July 1998, the church was sick, possibly unto death. What medicine does one prescribe for a church that is dying? wondered Merna.

Editor

JOURNEYING WITH VERA

On a warm late September day in 2010, a group of 50 relatives and interested persons made a "journey" around parts of Rockingham County to learn more about Vera Early Heatwole. The recently published and acclaimed book *Vera's Journey*, on the life story of Vera, provided the motivation of the bus trip sponsored by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians. Jim Rush and Willard Heatwole organized the tour.

Vera Early and Ralph Heatwole married in 1926 and lived together nearly 60 years. Twelve children were born to them. A most significant event of her life was when she contracted the mumps at age 38, which resulted in total deafness. She lived to be 102 years old.

Several of Vera's children and Glendon Blosser provided narration on various places and life events. Homesteads, farms, schools and churches the Heatwoles and related families were involved in were noted. The Bank Mennonite Church stands on land donated by the Heatwole family.

A few "rabbit trails" (local spots) such as the Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church and the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction (where we bought our lunches) were included. Then we observed locations in the Rushville area school and other schools such as Oakland View School to which Vera walked three miles to attend.

We visited the Myers farm which Ralph's father helped them purchase. This became the "homeplace" where all 12 children were born. We observed the house on the hill built by Ralph and Vera, where the youngest daughter Vera Rose and husband Eldwin Campbell live, and where Vera lived out her last years.

After refreshments, we had brief stops at Peake Mennonite Church and Cooks Creek where Vera was baptized at age 18. We came home with much respect for

the matriarch of the family clan of 400 members, who gave "a witness of a heart that had asked and had received an abundant life"

Jim Good

"Emerging Churches" Through Virginia Mennonite Missions and Conference since 2003

There has been almost an "explosion" of new churches planted in Virginia and North Carolina since 2003 as the following dates on a brochure from VMM and VMC indicate:

- 2003 - Hickory Hmong Mennonite Church, Hickory, NC
- 2004 - Manantial de Vida (Fountain of Life) Harrisonburg, VA
- 2006 - Stephens City Korean Community Church Stephens City, but recently moved to Park View Mennonite, Harrisonburg
- 2006 - Signs of Life Church, Staunton (at Shenandoah Valley Club of the Deaf)
- 2007 - The Table, Harrisonburg
- 2007 - Early Church, Harrisonburg
- 2007 - Outlet 10.27, Greensboro, NC
- 2008 - New Song Fellowship, Harrisonburg
- 2008 - Anabaptist Fellowship of Charlotte—an Inter-Cultural Organic Fellowship, Charlotte, NC
- 2009 - New church in James City County, VA
- 2009 - Iglesia Discipular Ababautista (IDA), meets at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church
- 2010 - Eastside Church, Harrisonburg

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