

# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian



Weavers Church (1827-1881)



Weavers Church, 1881-1943

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## WEAVERS MENNONITE CHURCH AND L. J.

### HEATWOLE

One of the most outstanding old-line Mennonite churches in this area of the Shenandoah Valley has been Weavers Church, now on the western end of Harrisonburg along Rawley Pike (Rt. 33).

In this district, long called the Middle District, the early and major churches often spoken of were Weavers, Bank and Pike, all formed before 1850. Of the three, Weavers has most often been mentioned in Virginia Mennonite history.

Perhaps part of the reason is because of its famous minister, bishop, writer, historian, and almanac keeper, Lewis James Heatwole, usually known simply by L. J. Heatwole. His fantastically detailed journal, church record books and hundreds [perhaps thousands] of newspaper columns and magazine articles have been saved and are now found in the Virginia Mennonite Archives.

He was probably the most voluminous writer of any Mennonite Virginian. His romantic, wordy

pieces with the inimitable Heatwole flourish touched almost any imaginable [and unimaginable] subject one could think of. It would take a small booklet just to list all the pieces he wrote. He was the faithful local newspaper columnist from Dale Enterprise and inveterate writer who kept writing from wherever he traveled. His curiosity took him into all kinds of places and topics.

Because both the historian Harry A. Brunk and minister-bishop L. J. Heatwole usually attended Weavers, a massive accumulation of information touches upon Weavers activity. Of course, it was for over a century a major congregation in the district, but since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when pastors were assigned to congregations, each congregation became more independent of district activity.

The congregation merits a major history that would pull the pieces together into an organized history that would highlight Weavers significant role in district and Virginia Conference history.

There is such a volume of records that distillation is needed to sort through what are the most important ways in which Weavers, a large, strong and vibrant congregation, experienced the workings of God throughout its history.

## “Weavers Church Passes Its 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday as House of Worship”

*That is the headline of the article dated Jan. 7, [1927] found in the local paper, regarding Weavers having a celebration of its centennial of a house of worship. Of course, the congregation was established years earlier and had met in homes until the first meetinghouse was built in 1826-7.*

*Weavers' highly experienced bishop and writer, L. J. Heatwole, wrote this piece. Two days earlier he had written his usual regular column to the paper and elaborated more on the Weavers Mennonite Church celebration. We reproduce portions of both.<sup>1</sup>*

“Since it is recalled that the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Weavers Church on the last Sunday of the year 1926, at which time the county records were produced showing that it was in 1826 that a house of worship was erected here and constructed of pine, oak and walnut logs in size of about eighteen by twenty-eight feet.<sup>2</sup>

The first sanctuary is said to have stood for fifty-five years on the same site now occupied by the present edifice that was built in 1881 in which year the old house was removed and is now standing practically intact as the residence home of Benj. Deavers on the Mt. Clinton road, two miles northeast.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Both clippings are found side by side in Scrapbook #3 that L. J. Heatwole put together. Heatwole's very large collection of records are found in the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives.

<sup>2</sup>The first Weavers Church building date has usually been given as 1827. No doubt, it was under construction by late 1826 and the congregation celebrated its centennial in conjunction with the then famous annual New Years Harmonia Sacra all-day singing.

<sup>3</sup>Many years ago Grace Showalter, the expert local Virginia historian, told me it was the house at the intersection of Mt. Clinton Pike and Switchboard Road.

Besides having for a whole century been the center of great religious activity, the Weavers Church has been a place, where sacred song has been practiced and cultivated for generations.”

*[Now from Heatwole's weekly newspaper column from Dale Enterprise, a long quote with spelling, capitalization and punctuation intact:]*

“Among the closing events of the year 1926 was the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Mennonite congregation at Weavers Church located near this place. Along with the regular service on the last Sunday of the year, the all-day meeting on Dec. 29<sup>th</sup> and the Old Folk's Song Service on New Year's Day, proved to be a culmination of events that will be long remembered by the multitude of people who attended.

Among the throngs of people who were present were visitors from North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Kansas, Texas and from far-off Alberta in the Canadian northwest. On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary day a sermon was preached by Bish. S. H. Rhodes who dwelt on the founding, the growth and subsequent advancement of the congregation from a few families to what is now the largest body of Mennonite worshippers in the state of Virginia. He mentioned the fact that there are two of its members who are now 90 years old and past, six who are 80, and ten who are 75 years of age and past.

To the venerable personality of these patriarchs of the faith the speaker attributed much of the stability and development of the younger and much larger group of people who now worship here. Other speakers dwelt in the simple forms of worship practiced by those who worshipped here in generations gone by, how in times of Civil War the old Church was used for indefinite periods as

a commissary for storing army supplies and the grounds about the place were occupied by whole battalions of soldiers and how it was impossible at such times to conduct public worship in a sanctuary so profaned. Ever after that the surface of the long pulpit desk of the first church bore the marks of scrapings and scratchings of soldier's spurs while using it as one of their sleeping bunks. The first church is said to have stood for 55 years, while the large building that now occupies the same site, has stood for 45 years.

Some of the musty, dust-covered German Hymn Books and the old German Bible that had lain unused and hidden from sight for a generation or more in the old pulpit desk, were brought to light—from which quotations were made and a German hymn sung in which some old people and a few young college graduates who were present, joined.

The Old-Folks' Song Service is an annual jubilee for this place at which time the old and young fill the Church which holds from 800 to 1,000 people, when all heartily join to sing the songs of 80 and 95 years ago at which time only the song book "The Harmonia Sacra," published by Joseph Funk, in 1832, since which it has run through eighteen editions.

**Its grand old anthems and sacred hymns when sung by the 800 or 1,000 voices on New Year's Day, produce a wave of harmony and a rhapsody of volume that seems to call down silvery tinklings from above and to animate the earth and cause all its joy-bells to ring."**

## A Public School at Weavers?

Here's two clippings from the L. J. Heatwole Scrapbook #3. Bishop Heatwole was the writer.

The headline in the local paper clipping simply says, "Weaver's School Honor Roll" and it was published in the spring of 1904.

"The following is a list of names of pupils attending Weavers Public School during the term beginning Oct. 19, 1903 and ending March 11, 1904." Students listed include: Sophrona Hays, Lizzie Heatwole, Hattie Hays, Annie Heatwole, Gurnie Showalter, Claude Shank, Claude Brunk, Minnie Myers, Sallie Hays, John Hays, Annie Weaver, Ada Showalter, Ward Weaver, Jacob Liskey, Dick Lineweaver, Arthur Showalter, Frank Liskey, Clifford Shank, Peter Blosser, Beulah Showalter, Wade Weaver, Elwood Foster, Mabel Showalter, Michael Liskey, Teressa Gowl, Abram Lineweaver, Clarence Barton.

Apart from the daily routine of school work, these boys and girls have answered correctly 500 question [sic] in written review; have asked of one another and their teacher from 1,200 to 1,500 written queries some of which had to be sent to Boston, Mass., for the correct answer.

Aside from the daily class drills, most of them learned to repeat from memory all the books, the number of chapters and prominent passages of the Bible. They can also name 50 points of good character and right living, either by precept or memory gem."

Underneath the above clipping is another small one regarding their esteem for the teacher. "The closing session of the public school at Weaver's church Friday afternoon was marked by an incident that was creditable to the pupils and must have been gratifying to their teacher Rev. L. J. Heatwole. When the latter resumed his place at the teacher's desk for the last time, after the noon recess, he found upon it a number of handsome gifts, . . . These were tendered as a mark of appreciation and esteem on the part of the pupils . . ." for Mr. Heatwole "during the school term just closed."

*Who can explain the above news stories? Does anyone spot an ancestor in the names above? Let the editor hear from you!*

## L. J. Heatwole Era

That's what Harry A. Brunk, Virginia historian called the time period 1900-32 for Middle District. Lewis James was born Dec. 4, 1852, the oldest son of David A. and Catherine Driver Heatwole. He attended Bridgewater College then chose two professions, teaching and almanac calculating. He married Mary, the daughter of Bishop Samuel Coffman, who was one of the outstanding bishops of Virginia Conference.

He went through the lot several times. Finally, to his dismay, he was chosen as a minister, on June 26, 1887. He never became an eloquent speaker. Preaching went hard for him and he had an interest in moving westward. This they did in 1890 when they sold their possessions in Virginia and moved to Cass County, Missouri. On May 2, 1892, he was ordained bishop in Missouri. But he couldn't forget his Virginia home, so in 1893, for health and other reasons they moved back to Virginia.

Then the question arose whether Virginia would accept him as bishop. They did. When his father-in-law, Samuel Coffman, died in 1894, the mantle of leadership in Middle District fell upon L. J. He was "tried by fire," as it were, between 1895-1900 as he struggled severely and made some mistakes in the first major division among Virginia Mennonites in 1901, when 69 members refused to go along with Virginia Conference policies and were declared to no longer be members.<sup>1</sup> They soon became known as Old Order Mennonites, L. J. died Dec. 26, 1932.

There was good reason to call it the **Heatwole Era**, for L. J. became a well-known almanac calculator, weather observer, teacher, preacher, writer and other names one might call him. He was an astute and keen observer of people and community events and wrote regularly and profusely as a newspaper correspondent. He wrote often to national Mennonite magazines such as *Herald of Truth*, *Gospel Witness*, *Gospel Herald*, *Christian Monitor*, and others. His name became a household name throughout the Mennonite Church. While in Missouri he began receiving the *Budget* from Sugarcreek, Ohio. After his return to Virginia he became a regular correspondent to that well-known newspaper.

His writing of history, community events, people, weather, the heavens, and many other topics became legendary. For the historian he saved a great deal in the scrapbooks he made and in the detailed church records. He unmistakably put Virginia events on the Mennonite map.

Here, briefly, we sample his tremendous range of interests from his scrapbooks of clippings:

Church events [almost a blow-by-blow account from his perspective of the major church problems he struggled through when the Virginia division of 1900-01 occurred] obituaries, the stars, weather phenomena, various educational topics, literary works of Virginians, an enormous amount of early and local people and valley history, travel commentator [and he traveled extensively], local roads, local families, local flora and fauna, caverns, geology, birds, geography, sacred singing [annually writing about the wonderful Harmonia Sacra singings at Weavers on New Years Day] diseases, accidents, and local legends. The list could go on and on. We've only scratched the surface of topics he wrote about!

<sup>1</sup>H. A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1727-1900*. Vol. I., 342, 443-518 and Vol. II, 1900-1960, 85.

He was a “pack rat” in saving things. Hundreds of newspaper columns and other writings of his and other authors, he pasted onto half a dozen large old county record books, which must have become available. One does wonder about the wisdom of covering over old taxation record books, reassessment records and listings of “persons, property and other things,” and whether he was covering over significant local government records! But he also saved at least 15 large land tax, land books, and taxation books intact with original handwritten records

He could make mistakes too. He wrote about the beginning of Virginia Conference and he has the date as 1834, one year too early. It appears that he was sometimes given to exaggeration. In 1909 and other times he had 1,000 people present at the “Old Folks Singing” at the Weavers Church! [begun in 1901, he tells us elsewhere] Many of his observations tended to be generally accurate. His records provide a rarity that is unequalled, at least among well-known Virginia leadership.

In 1904 he preached a sermon at the Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church from the Song of Solomon on a text from chapter six, verse ten. “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.” Someone recorded his thoughts and did a column in the local paper.

He noted that that book was perhaps the least read or appreciated by “searchers of divine truth.” He wondered about the wisdom of young people even reading the book! He thought Solomon might only have been 17 when he became king. He saw in the text the unfolding of a plant and flower; he noted the innocence of a child “and then to the shaping of that form into the highest type of womanhood.” Men were coarse-featured, but he saw “reference to the lines and hues of beauty, and to that symmetry of form found in perfect womanhood.” He thought of it as a perfect picture of the Church. He saw the elimination of sin, warfare and the slaying of many men

Solomon’s vision was “of the final triumph of the church as personified in womanhood as an emblem. Using the perfect woman we find the highest type of purity, grace and beauty known to earth, and in her,” we find the “connecting link that joins the human to the divine” and we find ourselves ready to testify “this is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.”

## **SELLING SLAVES ON CT. SQUARE RECALLED**

### **L. J. Heatwole Wonders What Became of Boy Sold for \$1,000**

*Like many clippings this one was undated, but it appears to have been written in the late twenties when L. J. was aged.*

He remarked that slave selling near Court Square of Harrisonburg was common in slavery days. Though the unforgettable event he witnessed had happened 70 years earlier he recalled it vividly. It occurred “on the inside grounds of the Court House Square.” A large store box was set up in the middle of a “great crowd.” [Usually the coming of the stagecoach drawn by four or six horses attracted a crowd of spectators to observe the lady passengers come out of the coach while the men sat on top by the driver.]

At these slave auctions each slave in turn mounted on the box and was sold. “The qualities of each one were loudly proclaimed by the crier. An old cook and house ‘Mammy’ brought more than an old man of the same age, who was auctioned off at but little more than \$100. A stout-looking 17 year old boy, after some lively bidding, was knocked off at \$1,000.

We saw this young man seated on horseback behind his purchaser as he rode out North Main street carrying under his arm a supply of extra clothing tied up in a bandanna handkerchief.”

Again and again since that event [L. J. was born in 1852; he must have been a very young lad when he saw this event] he has mused and wondered if this boy, “once a slave,” was still living or “whether after the Emancipation Proclamation made him free, he has made good in the things of this life, and for the life to come”

L. J. Heatwole had a number of siblings. Two brothers made their way into high society and advanced education. On Dr. Timothy O. Heatwole’s death notice we are told that he served for some years as dean of the school of dentistry at the University of Maryland. In 1905 he was elected to the Maryland legislature from Baltimore and was “widely known” in medical circles in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia. He was a Presbyterian.

He was one of the original eight members of the famous “Fence Corner Council” who organized a “society for mutual improvement,” later the Dale Enterprise Literary Society [see *SMH*, Vol. 10, #4, front page story on the Mole Hill Fence Corner Council]. Three of L. J.’s brothers, Aldine, Timothy and Cornelius, were in that group. Timothy was the first president of the literary society.

L. J.’s brother, Dr. Cornelius J. Heatwole, became famous in the field of education and served as editor of the *Virginia Journal of Education*. As for L. J., his claim to fame came as a Virginia church leader and his establishment of the Dale Enterprise Weather Station in 1884, which is still being operated by a granddaughter and husband, Virginia and Richard Weaver.

JOL

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James Rush  
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780 Parkwood Drive  
Harrisonburg, VA 22802

[jameslrush@comcast.net](mailto:jameslrush@comcast.net)

Phone: 540-434-0792

*Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*

Editor: James O. Lehman

[lehmanj@myvmrc.net](mailto:lehmanj@myvmrc.net)

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians  
780 Parkwood Drive  
Harrisonburg, VA 22802

Elwood Yoder  
1181 Sharon Lane  
Harrisonburg, VA 22802