

*Michael Shank*

*Sarah C. Miller*

# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

*Peter S. Hartman*

*Sem. S. Weaver*

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## TOUCHING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

This time we dabble in the past and the present. We received a request from the Virginia Council of Churches (via Virginia Mennonite Conference) to do a two-page "Judicatory History." "Judicatory" means "Conference" to Mennonites, as "Synod" is to Presbyterians or "Diocese" to Episcopalians.

Steve Carpenter says he has seen VMC referred to as a "middle-judicatory," group, meaning it is in the middle between the congregation and the denomination. Thus we wrote and sent a two-page capsule history of Virginia Mennonites, which we include in this issue.

We also take one more look at Deacon Michael Shank. Willard Heatwole found several significant documents that indicate Shank had progressive ideas. His will calls for a share to go to Virginia Mennonites that is equal to the share of each heir. And when he married the Brethren woman, Sarah Miller, he had an interesting pre-nuptial agreement done.

Of course, we had to give you a preview of a brand new book that should interest everyone, *Mennonites, Amish and the American Civil War*, slated to come off the press by October of this year!

## THIS ISSUE . . . . .

**Virginia Mennonite Conference:  
History and Current Size**

**Michael Shank Will**

**Pre-Nuptial Agreement Between  
Michael Shank and Sarah C. Miller**

**Sneak preview of forthcoming book,  
*Mennonites, Amish, and the American  
Civil War*. by James O. Lehman and  
Steven M. Nolt, being published by  
Johns Hopkins University Press.**

The table of contents indicates that Virginia Mennonites get major coverage, along with Mennonites in the North that were scattered from the East to as far west as Illinois/Iowa/Missouri.

## Apologies . . .

for a major goof in proof-reading on the front page of the last issue. Rather obviously, when you look at it, the date should read "What does the Michael Shank Diary of 1898-1905 Reveal to Us?"

## VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE History and Current Size

Mennonites, who look to the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement for spiritual ancestry, came to Virginia as early as 1727 from Pennsylvania. They settled in the Shenandoah Valley, first in Page County and eventually in the counties of Shenandoah, Frederick, Rockingham and Augusta. Several Page County Mennonites lost their lives in the 1760s, killed by discontented Native Americans. A small number also joined the German revival movement of the 1760-70 era. As a result they scattered from Page County. In the 1770-1790 time period permanent settlements were established in Rockingham and Augusta counties, where by 1800 they began to thrive in the general vicinity of Harrisonburg and to the east of Staunton. For worship they met in homes, until in the mid-1820s a series of simple meetinghouses were built—Trissels, Hildebrand, Brennemans, Weavers, and Pike.

The earliest extant minutes of an organized Virginia Mennonite Conference are dated 1835. However, regular but brief minutes were not kept until 1860. During the Civil War, Mennonites, many of whom favored the Union cause, underwent heavy property losses from Union and Confederate troops moving up and down the Shenandoah Valley. Many Mennonites avoided military service for conscience sake by several means—paying commutation fees, obtaining substitutes, or fleeing North. Numerous families engaged in civil disobedience by hiding young men or helping their escape to the North, as well as assisting disillusioned soldiers fleeing northward.

Mennonites in Virginia were the earliest anywhere in America (1830s to the 60s) to change from the German to the English language, aided by Joseph Funk of Singers Glen. He began singing schools and publication efforts that significantly influenced Mennonite music in America and the development of hymnbooks with notes. With numerous editions of the *Harmonia Sacra* songbook and the magazine *Musical Million* the Funk influence reached far beyond Mennonite borders and affected southern church music developments.

Before the twentieth century, along with neighboring German Baptist Brethren (today called Church of the Brethren), Mennonites tended toward simple living, plain dress, and shunning worldliness. The twentieth century saw much cultural adaptation, but Mennonites have retained a strong emphasis on adult baptism, the peace position, and helping needy and dispossessed people. Over many decades Virginia Mennonites have provided a colorful kaleidoscope of progressivism versus conservatism. After the Civil War, Virginia ministers began schoolhouse evangelism and “church planting” in West Virginia but didn’t call it mission work. John S. Coffman, the pioneer Mennonite evangelist in the 1880s and 90s, was a native of Rockingham County, Virginia. However, in his home area, series of revival meetings and the formation of Sunday schools in the churches were frowned upon by many until 1900. At that time a small number wanting to retain the older traditional style of church life formed an Old Order Mennonite group that still thrives today without the use of automobiles. However, they use modern dairying equipment as well as tractors on their farms.

A large majority of Virginia Mennonites remained involved with the Virginia Mennonite Conference. Eastern Mennonite School arose in 1917 (after two other Mennonite colleges had begun in the Midwest). Beginning in 1948, when it became Eastern Mennonite College, it was in the forefront of Virginia and southern colleges in permitting the enrollment of African Americans. In 1994 the college changed its name to Eastern Mennonite University. A number of years before that time, the college begun by Virginia Mennonite Conference, changed ownership to the larger Mennonite Church. EMU, with an enrollment of nearly 1600, continues to attract many Virginia and out-of-state students and is now one of the largest Mennonite universities in the U. S. A substantial Eastern Mennonite Seminary on campus provides several degrees. EMU offers Master's degrees in Counseling, Education, Business Administration and Conflict Transformation. The Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, with its Summer Peacebuilding Institute, is well-known internationally.

From the formation of Eastern Mennonite School in 1917, a high school, and recently an elementary school, developed and remain under the umbrella of Virginia Mennonite Conference. A few other programs begun by Virginia Mennonite Conference include: the "Mennonite Hour" and Media Ministries for the national Mennonite Church, CHOICE BOOKS program, BOOKS ABROAD and the Virginia Mennonite Home, which greatly expanded to a full-service and large Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community. Virginia Mennonites contribute heavily to MCC (Mennonite Central Committee) which is known world-wide for international relief work. Local stores—World of Good Thrift Store, Artisans Hope, and a Ten Thousand Villages outlet, as well as a new Booksavers program—all contribute significantly to MCC's world hunger and relief efforts. Members of Mennonite churches in Virginia are involved each year in beef or turkey canning and sending thousands of relief and school kits. The annual MCC Relief Sale in 2006 raised \$250,000.

In the last century and a half Virginia Mennonite Conference began numerous out of state churches, particularly in West Virginia and North Carolina. Statewide, the Virginia Mennonite "patchwork quilt" of some 12,500 members is quite varied in lifestyle and outlook. Small groups have separated from Virginia Mennonite Conference, often not so much on theological matters as on cultural understandings of handling rapid changes of life and everyday living. Old Order Mennonites (horse and buggy) number 800; other groups include Cornerstone with 900 members, Southeastern Mennonite Conference with 600, and the Mountain Valley Mennonite group of 400. Related theologically also are the Beachy Amish, who number 560. A few other Virginia groups have smaller numbers.

Virginia Mennonite Conference today, with a total membership of 8,607 counts 65 congregations of which 43 are within the state. The oldest congregation is Trissels, also the first one to build a meetinghouse. The African-American Calvary Community Church, Hampton, VA, is the largest Mennonite church (about 2500 members) in the United States. Virginia Mennonite Conference is a member of the national Mennonite Church—USA which numbers about 110,000 members. MC—USA is the largest group of persons statewide who look to Anabaptists as their spiritual ancestors.

## Michael Shank Will

Spelling, wording, punctuation and signatures appear as found in the original. One wonders who wrote it, since the handwriting does not appear to be the same as the signatures of the witnesses. Someone apparently knew what basics to include in a will, but there is not excessive legalese in the wording. Nor are all the children named. The will was drawn up one month after Michael tragically lost his first wife and two daughters, Abbie and Mattie, to poisonous fumes from a coal stove. He refers to the "uncertainty of life," which he had devastatingly experienced.

*In the name of God, Amen:*

*I, Michael Shank of the County of Rockingham in the State of Virginia, being of sound mind and disposing memory though feeble in body, and knowing the uncertainty of life even in the midst of health, do make and publish this my last Will and Testament.*

*With full faith and trust in the atonement of my Lord and Savior, and thankful to him for the many blessings and mercies conferred upon me all through life, I commit my spirit into his merciful hands and desire that at my death my mortal remains be decently interred in the bosom of their mother eath after usual form of the Mennonite Church.*

*First: I hereby constitute and appoint my son John W. Shank executor of this my last Will and Testament.*

*Second: My said executor shall pay all my just debts funeral expenses &, after which I desire that all my property real and personal be divided among my children and the Mennonite Church in the following manner to wit: To each of my seven children now living I give and bequeath such an amount as would make them all equal at the age of 21 years; that is, they shall each receive such amount as that the present worth of it at the time they were or will be 21 years of age respectively shall be the same,-- those that are over 21 years*

*of age shall be paid interest on their shares from the time at which they were 21 respectively, and should Jacob, the only one now under 21 not arrive at that age before the execution of this will, them his amount shall be such that its interest till he arrives at 21 years of age will be the same as the others less the interest from the time they were 21 respectively. To the Mennonite Church to be used as the said church may think best I give the same amount that each of my said seven children receives at the age of 21. In this distribution both to the Church and to my children I desire that my book account with each be included and made a part thereof; but interest is not to be charged on said book acct.*

*Third Should any of my children die before the execution of this Will, it is my desire that the legal heirs of such receive their share as provided above.*

*In witness whereof I have herewith set my hand and seal this 24<sup>th</sup> day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eighty four.*

*Michael Shank*

*Signed, sealed and delivered in presence of us who sign as witnesses in presence of the testator and in presence of each other.*

*Peter S. Hartman  
Sem. S. Weaver*

## Shank-Miller Pre-Nuptial Agreement

We reproduce certain portions of the legal agreement in italics. The wording and a few misspelled words are as contained in the original document.

*"THIS AGREEMENT, made and entered into this 28<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1893, by and between MICHAEL SHANK, of the first part, and SARAH C. MILLER, of the second part, both of the County of Rockingham and State of Virginia.*

WITNESSETH, that whereas a marriage is shortly to be had and solemnized between the said Michael Shank and Sarah C. Miller, and said parties owning certain real and personal estate which they desire to hold free from the marital rights of each other, and as an inducement and consideration for said marriage, it has been agreed between them amongst other things that in the event of said marriage each is to hold his or her real and personal estate that is now owned by them or that may hereafter be acquired by either of them free from the marital rights, debts and liabilities of each other and free from the control and any power of disposition of each other, and with full power by each to dispose of the same by deed or will without the concurrence of the other.

. . . the said Sarah C. Miller agrees and binds herself to release and does hereby release all right, title and interest she might be entitled to in the real and personal estate of the said Michael Shank . . . [and] the said Michael Shank shall hold his said real and personal estate as free from all rights that might have been vested in her by said marriage as though the same had never been contracted. . . .

It being the intention and meaning of this agreement that in the event of the marriage hereinbefore set forth that neither of the said contracting parties shall have any marital rights in the real and personal estate of the other during their joint lives, and in the event of the death of either of them no right of dower, or courtesy shall attach to the real estate of the decedent in favor of the survivor, nor shall the survivor have any right to participate in the distribution of the personal estate of the decedent except as hereafter provided. . . .”

The document goes on to say that if Sarah survives him she is entitled to receive out of his estate “an amount of money equal to the sum of fifty dollars per annum from the time the marriage between them was solemnized until his death.” Should Michael survive Sarah “this provision shall be null and void” unless Sarah “shall leave issue surviving her.” If she should have children from the marriage, the said amount

would be payable to her children upon his death. (not real likely as she was 38 and he 64).

Furthermore, if Sarah should survive Michael she is “entitled to receive from his estate one horse and one cow to be chosen by her, and the sewing machine now at his residence.” Nothing is said about Michael receiving anything of her estate, should he survive her. The document was signed by both parties and witnessed by J. B. Stephenson, Commissioner in Chancery for the Circuit Court of Rockingham County.

## Forth-Coming Book on Civil War

### Description:

“During the American Civil War, the Mennonites and Amish faced moral dilemmas that tested the very core of their faith. How could they oppose both slavery and the war to end it? How could they remain outside the conflict without entering the American mainstream to secure legal conscientious objector status? In the North the ethical paradox marked them as ambivalent participants to the Union cause, in the South virtually as traitors.

“A scholarly treatment of pacifism during the Civil War . . . [the authors] describe the various strategies used by religious groups who struggled to come to terms with the American mainstream without sacrificing religious values—some opted for greater political engagement, others chose apolitical withdrawal, and some individuals renounced their faith and entered the fight.

“Integrating the most recent Civil War scholarship with little-known primary sources and new information from Pennsylvania and Virginia to Illinois and Iowa, Lehman and Nolt provide a definitive account of the Anabaptist experience during the bloodiest war in American history.”

One reviewer calls it “A well researched and carefully argued treatment that reminds us that not all churches fell into lockstep support for either the Union or the Confederacy.”

George C. Rable, University of Alabama