



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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EARLY VIRGINIA MENNONITE HISTORY

This issue features Virginia Mennonite history of long ago.

What was it like in the days before meeting-houses were built? What impetus finally pushed Mennonites to rather suddenly begin to build church houses in the 1820s? And we note how the earliest buildings were spaced geographically so that few people needed to travel more than five miles to get to worship services.

Was everyone comfortable with the coming of places to meet for worship? Not surprisingly, we note that some tensions arose about that issue.

In Mennonite history it is not unusual to find that when major worship changes occur, there are often those who would prefer to stick to the old traditions rather than go with many others who would like to follow what is often called a progressive move.

Whether the congregations dealt with church houses, or the change from German to English, or other new things such as calling for a general conference of Mennonites, one finds that objections were raised about making changes.

Finally, two pages deal with what congregations or preaching points were listed as being in existence in 1905, a hundred years ago. Some surprises occur, not unexpectedly, as we use two different sources of information on Virginia Mennonite churches listed then. Perhaps the statistics on members and the Sundays on which worship was held may startle us a bit.

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VIRGINIA MENNONITES BUILD MEETINGHOUSES

We know that the earliest meetinghouses were built in the 1820's, but that Rockingham County had Mennonites by the 1770's and perhaps earlier.

So, what was worship like in the days before the early meetinghouses, of which Trissels was first in 1822? L. J. Heatwole, a later Middle District bishop, was a prolific writer with a vibrant interest in history. In his manuscripts in the Virginia Conference Archives, he comments on what things were like.¹

Apparently, Heatwole wrote what Hartzler and Kauffman published in 1905.² Historian Harry Brunk, in Vol. I, also picked up on the same sources, but he tended to go to L. J. Heatwole's original writings.³ There are variations in the three sources. We used all three.

Though Mennonites for the decades from 1770s until 1820's met about every two weeks for worship, some built houses with an extra large room or had moveable partitions to form a large room. This geographic area was largely timbered so many became excellent builders. Wealthier people accommodated for worship services in their homes.

Virginia Mennonites had a close association with the Lancaster Mennonite Conference in Pennsylvania, from whence many came. Back in Pennsylvania, there were no less than 42 meetinghouses, but Virginia Mennonites were slow to adopt the idea of building places of worship apart from homes.

However, from 1810-20 to 1825, congregations had grown large enough so that these private family homes were no longer large enough.

Furthermore, the Sunday worship services tended to be all-day affairs. But as the congregations grew too large the women and older members of the congregations would fill up the space even of the larger rooms. That left the children and the more "worldly-minded people" to hang around the premises outside to pass the time as best they could.

Thus, say the early historians, it became almost "the appearance of a Sunday social, where sports and games of various kinds were common, as a means of diversion for the crowd" outside the place of worship.

If the noon hour should be prolonged, "which was usually the case, the cellar, the spring house and the orchard some times suffered to such an extent" from people helping themselves to food so that hardly enough was left to feed the worshipers at the late noon hour meal.

Hence, with developing problems at homes where not everyone could attend the service, it is not surprising that Virginia Mennonites decided to build meetinghouses.

Once that pattern began, it developed quickly. Trissels was first in 1822, and Moyers (Pike) was second (1825). The following year (1826)--Brennemans, two miles southwest of Edom, followed by Burkholders (Weavers) in 1827.

The Plains Academy Church three miles northeast of Timberville was also built 1826. It seems to have been a "union" building used by other groups who lived on the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. Later, Mennonites dropped involvement in this one.

The four main ones-Trissels, Pike, Brennemans and Weavers were built close enough geographically that no one had more than five miles to go to church. In Augusta County, at the same time Mennonites began to develop places of worship. Hildebrand claimed 1825 (Jacob Hildebrand deeded land for it in 1826).

By the 1830's Mennonites reconditioned a schoolhouse for worship. Named Kendig's Chapel, it later was renamed Springdale. Some meetinghouses, such as Brennemans, Plains Academy and Kendig's also served as schoolhouses.

¹I-MS-1, Lewis J. Heatwole Collection, Box 11.1.

²J. S. Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), 201-02.

³Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia*, Vol. I (Harrisonburg: published by author, 1959), 65-70; 147.

THE SCHISM OF 1825

Virginia Mennonites developed some problems and disagreements around 1825, partly due to the building of meetinghouses and partly for other reasons. Brunk largely credits information regarding the small schism to Margaret Burkholder Blosser in her old age. She was the daughter of Bishop Peter Burkholder. L. J. Heatwole also spoke of it in his manuscripts.

There were a number of Rockingham County ministers before 1825. They included Michael Kauffman (1714-88), Henry Funk (1730-93), John Baer (1774-1848), Henry Rhodes (1748-silenced 1866), Peter Burkholder (1783-1846), Frederick Rhodes (1769-1847) and Abraham Niswander (1774-1846).¹ Henry Shank (1758-1836), ordained minister in 1784 and bishop about 1810 seems to have been the first local Mennonite bishop.

With the building of the small 25 x 30 public houses of worship, not everyone was satisfied. In fact, already before 1825 Virginia Mennonites had begun to form two camps. Some also saw the need for changes in the worship service—a more active ministry and developing interest in less strict requirements with the use of the German language.

The more conservative element continued to hold services in their homes. In fact, they went ahead and ordained several ministers—Benjamin Wenger (1781-1865) and David Burkholder (1814-55) brother of Bishop Peter Burkholder.

During this time the other party moved ahead with church building programs (Trissels, Brennemans, Pike, Weavers). Perhaps with help from Pennsylvania, Henry Rhodes was ordained bishop.

There was no open clash between the two bishops—Shank and Rhodes—until 1825. The immediate cause was the life and preaching of Frederick Rhodes, son of Bishop Henry Rhodes. Frederick had been attending revival meetings held by United Brethren churches and some

thought he preached like a United Brethren minister—“earnest and loud.”

Conservative-minded members were sufficiently offended that on April 1, 1825, they met at the home of Jacob Blosser and signed their names to a letter that “set forth their views.”² When they tried to get ministers to take the letter around to get signatures, they failed. Then Blosser and Gabriel Heatwole, both laypersons, took it around in both Rockingham and Augusta counties and got about 40 signatures.

Several ministers did side with the “Letter” party and for three years the dissension got a little heated at times. Twice, Pennsylvania leaders came to try to settle the dissension. At a Weavers Church meeting, Pennsylvania leaders “made it clear” that Frederick Rhodes was not out of line in associating with the United Brethren who were also plain people and worshiped in German.

Bishop Henry Shank for a while led the offended group until he saw it as not being helpful to the health of the church. Then he declared himself to stand by the church, making it clear which way he leaned. Meanwhile, the other bishop, Henry Rhodes, of the church building group, had died. That made reconciliation easier. Since Shank was the only bishop remaining, the contention then basically ended and the Virginia churches largely entered upon “an era of spiritual prosperity.” The trouble basically lasted five or six years



Weavers Church (1827-81), from Brunk, p. 77.

¹Register of Ministers and Bishops, *Minutes of the Virginia Mennonite Conference*, 1939 and 2003 editions.

²That letter does not survive.

AN "ERA OF SPIRITUAL PROSPERITY"

So said H. A. Brunk (and L. J. Heatwole before him). Here the two Burkholder bishops—Peter, followed by his son, Martin—become prominent. Peter was ordained in 1805 at the age of 21, a little more than a year after he had married Elizabeth Coffman, daughter of Christian Coffman of Greenbrier County, Virginia (later West Virginia)—the community featured in the summer 2006 issue of *SMH*.

Eventually, they allegedly owned 800 acres south of Weavers Church, apparently including the present site of the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center. In 1816 Peter published a German pamphlet defending Mennonite practices relating to baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In the same year he was ordained bishop (1837) he and Joseph Funk produced his most major work, the 461-page book in English commonly known as the "Burkholder Confession of Faith."³ Most likely Burkholder, Funk and the Virginia Mennonite Church all cooperated in this publication printed in Winchester in 1837. It was the first such major work in English among American Mennonites.

Virginia Mennonite Conference was formed in 1835 and by 1837, probably under Burkholder's influence, Conference was divided into three districts—Lower (Northern), Middle, and Upper (Southern). Of great significance was the formation of Virginia Mennonite Conference in April 1835 at the Weavers Church. Brief minutes indicate that they thought it "best to adhere, as

closely as practicable to the old order of things, and, if possible, bring it into more practical use."

Nowhere in these first minutes that survive, is it stated that this was the first conference, but they indicated that it was proper to receive contributions for poor and needy members at "the time of the Annual Conference." That would seem to be a hint that an annual conference was already functioning before this time? If so, we have no minutes or other evidence. Nor do we have minutes again until 1860, but there are hints that conference met during this so-called "recordless gap" time period.

Historian Brunk concluded that for some time there were annual meetings, then they became semi-annual (twice a year) at some point. In 1855-56 Bishop Jacob Hildebrand of Augusta County, in his "Church Record" mentions semi-annual conferences being held at Weavers, Trissels and Hildebrand Church, thereby clearly hinting of a pattern of semi-annual conferences.

So, it seems clear that conferences were common through that "recordless gap." One might also suspect that because Bishop Martin Burkholder strongly preached a general conference of Mennonites in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Canada—indeed an early plea for a Mennonite General Conference—that he found the Virginia conferences a model of what might be practical on a wider basis.

Further evidence of "spiritual prosperity" may be the fact that Peter Burkholder was a significant bishop until his death in December 1846. Already seven years earlier (1839) his youngest son, Martin, had been ordained a minister at the age of 32. Near the time of Peter's death, Martin was ordained to succeed his father as bishop.

Furthermore, over in Augusta County, another young minister and bishop emerged—Jacob Hildebrand. He was ordained in 1845 at age 29, and, it is believed that only a year or two later, he was ordained bishop. Thus, in the late 40s and into the early 50's, two out of three Virginia bishops were in their thirties!

Both became very outstanding leaders. Naturally, one would expect changing times, for

³*The Confession of Faith, of the Christians Known by the Name of Mennonites, in Thirty-Three Articles; With a Short Extract From Their Catechism . . . Also Nine Reflections From Different Passages of the Scriptures, Illustrative of Their Confession, Faith & Practice*; by Peter Burkholder, Pastor of the Church of the Mennonites; Written by him in the German Language, and from his manuscript translated, together with the foregoing Articles, by Joseph Funk.

Burkholder did not write the 33 Articles of Faith; they were P. J. Twisck's, a Dutch Mennonite.

both were progressive in church work. Indeed, it must have been an “era of spiritual prosperity!”

Hildebrand, along with church work, became a large landowner and well-to-do. Highly respected in the community he had the latest in threshing rigs and was known for his community outlook. Burkholder, who built the large brick house now the centerpiece of the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center, became a major American Mennonite leader in the East. He traveled widely, as his collection of letters in the archives shows.⁴

Harry Brunk called Martin Burkholder “a man of high intelligence with a commanding knowledge of both German and English.” Very likely he was extremely influential in Virginia Mennonites turning from the old beloved German to English, not an easy transition. He tried to maintain unity in the church while that process ensued. “It is said in this and other ways he did much to build up and unify the church in the faith.”

He preached the Word “fervently and with power” and was a pioneer in traveling to Pendleton County, West Virginia to preach.⁵ And, as noted in the summer issue of *SMH*, he periodically traveled to the home community of his mother, Greenbrier County, West Virginia, to preach.

By the mid-1850s Martin Burkholder was well-known in the East and Midwest. Very significantly, he promoted the idea of a general Mennonite conference “as a means for maintaining the government and discipline of the Mennonite Church” 50 years before it came to fruition in the late 1890’s. In this he met opposition, even to the point of others following his tracks to counteract his preaching and discourage the idea.⁶ Heatwole makes it much stronger yet. He saw this as a “most critical time” and as a “period of great unrest,” but he doesn’t spell out exactly what he meant.

⁴I-MS-9, Martin Burkholder Collection, Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives.

⁵Brunk, Vol. I, 101-02.

⁶L. J. Heatwole, *Mennonite Handbook of Information*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1925), 122-23

One example of a person who disagreed with Burkholder was Jacob Lehman, writing in 1856 in German. “As far as a general minister’s meeting is concerned, I am not sure that it would be wise.” If we had such, it would involve so much travel as to be costly and troublesome, “so that the old and experienced servants would perhaps stay at home” and then the “counsel would fall into the hands of the younger men,” thereby, they might become like Solomon’s son who took the counsel of the younger men and forsook the counsel of older and wiser men. Perhaps “it would chase away and scatter the flock more than it would gather them.”

If this was a rather stressful time, most likely, the extensive travel and preaching took a toll on Martin, so that his life’s work was done already in December 1860, and he died at the age of 43, on the eve of the Civil War. Thus, “one of the strongest pillars of the church” was taken away and many mourned his passing, wrote Emanuel Suter.⁸

Jacob Hildebrand lived four more decades and after a long and fruitful ministry died at age 82. We reserve the space and occasion to elaborate on his major ministry for a future issue of *SMH*.

Following the untimely death of Martin Burkholder, after some months, Samuel Coffman became the bishop to succeed Martin. His major work as a progressive minister during the Civil War and thereafter until his death in 1894 is well known.

Hence, Virginia Mennonites experienced an excellent time of spiritual leadership before the Civil War, then came heavy suffering during the war. That was followed by a long and strenuous recuperation from war stresses and damages. Regular meetings of Virginia Conference and published minutes help to elaborate the development of Virginia Mennonites after 1860.

⁷Burkholder Collection, Feb. 22, 1856. Jacob Lehman was a bishop from Lancaster, PA. Edsel Burdge, a few years ago, had this Burkholder letter translated by Peter Hoover, formerly an Old Order Mennonite, who now resides in a Hutterite Community in Tasmania (interview with Edsel Burdge, Nov. 9, 2006).

⁸Quoted in Brunk, Vol. I, 103.

Mennonite Congregations in Virginia and West Virginia in 1905

From J. S. Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History*, 222-24.

Congregation	County	First Meetinghouse	No. of Members
Trissels	Rockingham	1822	45
Pike	Rockingham	1825	95
Brennemans	Rockingham	1826	21
Weavers	Rockingham	1827	229
Springdale	Augusta	1825*	75
Hildebrand's	Augusta	1828*	13
Bank	Rockingham	**	80
Mt. Pleasant	Augusta	1870	5
Union Chapel	Augusta	1889	23
Mt. Clinton	Rockingham	1874	42
Kernstown (Winchester)	Frederick	1875	16
Zion	Rockingham	1885	35
Millers (WVA)	Pendleton	1885	20
Opal Union	Fauquier	1889	15
Lindale	Rockingham	1899***	25
Warwick River	Warwick	1899	52
Mountain View	Augusta	1900	30
White Hall	Rockingham	1875	24
Dry River	Rockingham	[Union Church with Methodist Episcopal and German Baptist]	17

*Other sources indicate Hildebrands as early as 1825 and Springdale, at first called Kendig's, in the 1830s.

**Harry Brunk says 1849.

***Lindale was built 1898.

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE DISTRICT

From *Mennonite Year-Book and Directory, A. D. 1905*. (Published by the Mennonite Board of Charitable Homes and Missions), 36-37. [All details copied verbatim - jol]

<u>Congregation</u>	<u>Located at or near</u>	<u>Services every</u>	<u>No. of Members</u>
Weavers	Dale Enterprise, Rockingham	2d & 4 th Sunday	229
Bank	Rushville, Rockingham Co.	3d & 5 th Sunday	80
Pike	Dayton, Rockingham Co.	1 st & 5 th Sunday	95
Mt. Clinton	Mt. Clinton, Rockingham	1 st S.	42
White Hall	Hopkins Gap, Rockingham	2d S.	24
Dry River	Lilly, Rockingham Co.	4 th S.	18
Mabel Memorial	Harrisonburg	3d S.	5
West Va. Mission	Job, Randolph Co., W.Va.	Sunday	140
Springdale	Waynesboro	1 st & 3d S.	75
Mountain View	Waynesboro	2d & 4 th S.	21
Hildebrands	Waynesboro	2d & 4 th S.	13
Union Chapel	Waynesboro	4 th S.	23
Mt. Pleasant	Waynesboro	2d S.	
Auburn Union	Auburn, Fauquier Co. Va.	2d S.	
Opal Union	Opal, Fauquier Co.	4 th S. [Auburn & Opal]	15
Stone House	Stone House, Va.	3d. S.	6
Trissel	Broadway, Rockingham	1 st S.	
Lindale	Linville, Rockingham	2d & 3d S.	
Zion	Caphna, Rockingham	4 th S. [these four]	170
Brennemans	Linville, Rockingham	3d S.	
Baughmans	Hanging Rock, W. Va.	2d S.	
Mission Stations	Hardy Co. W. Va.		24
Pleasant Grove	Pendleton Co. W. Va.		42
Warwick River	Mohea, Va.	Sunday	52
Mennonite	Concord, Tenn.	2 weeks	39
Winchester			

MENNO ROUND TABLE

Sept. 23, 2006 – Annual Meeting of the SVMH, 9:00 a.m. in Park View Mennonite Church Fellowship Hall. There were 33 present.

At 9:00 Norman Wenger welcomed the group and James O. Lehman led an opening prayer. Doris Berkey provided pastries and coffee. Since the treasurer was absent, no treasurer's report was given. Lois Bowman collected 2007 dues.

The slate of nominees for the 2007-08 Executive Committee was read. David Rodes will replace Debbie Turner. Elroy Kauffman was re-elected as treasurer. All other officers remain. James O. Lehman, who produces the *Newsletter*, reported that approximately 200 members receive it.

Questions to consider were: how many times a year do we want to meet? Anyone with ideas for a tour, give them to Jim Rush.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between SVMH and the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center. Should we combine? Feeling was expressed to continue as separate entities because 1) we specialize in subjects like Park View; 2) story-telling is valuable and becomes more important as we get older to keep memories alive; 3) this costs less than VBMHC; 4) 200 members indicates interest. The suggestion was made that the Executive Committee discuss this question and bring recommendations to a future meeting.

The program was a round table discussion continuing stories of growing up in Park View. A table of old photos of Park View drew much attention. A lively time of story-telling continued about life in Park View and Park School when Mennonites moved into Park View beginning 1917-18, when EMS was built on a farm owned by Eli Brunk.

Businesses such as the snack shop, laundry, hatchery, Martin's store and Aldine Brenneman's garage were discussed. People who had attended Park School told about teachers, making fire in each room every morning, the time when the school caught fire, and many other reminiscences. Dwight Hartman had books about Hartman Airport available for purchase.

Ruth L. Burkholder

FUTURE MENNO ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS?

Anyone with ideas for future round table discussions, please convey them to members of the Executive Committee.

HAVE YOU PAID YOUR 2007 SUBSCRIPTION DUES?

\$6.00 individual / \$10 a couple

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