

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian



COFFMAN
CEMETERY

Near Lewisburg,
West Virginia

Photo by Tom
Whanger

Vol. 13, No. 3 Quarterly Publication of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians Summer 2006

Greenbrier County, West Virginia, Home of an Early Mennonite Community and Church Where Mennonitism Failed to Survive

As Mennonites in America followed the frontier for various reasons including cheap land to farm in the 18th and 19th centuries and planted Mennonite communities and churches, they succeeded in planting many fine Mennonite communities and churches well-known to us today.

But what we are less conscious of is that numerous attempts were made at locations where churches and communities did not survive Mennonite attempts. Beginning a new community and church involves complexities. The American landscape is dotted here and there with places where Mennonite church and community attempts failed to survive. Such places readily come to mind in Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, and Texas, to name a few states. The reasons for lack of survival are many and varied and provide challenging grist for historians to grind!

This issue deals with the significant attempt made in Greenbrier County (now West Virginia, but at that time Virginia when the attempt was made, since West Virginia was formed during the Civil War). Not long after Rockingham County began to be settled by Mennonites, several families from the counties of Shenandoah and Rockingham traveled the torturous paths deep into mountainous country to settle there. However, already by the mid-1800s the small Mennonite church there was in serious decline.

That poses serious problems for writing history—the lack of written documentation—since Mennonites in the 19th century generally were not very serious about keeping written church records, and especially so at Greenbrier. That leaves a heavy reliance upon oral tradition handed down from generation to generation. In this community that weakened to the point where today many people have little idea of Mennonite ancestry. Harry A. Brunk, in his *History of Virginia Mennonites* knew little about this community. More has been discovered since, thanks to the strenuous efforts of Thomas Richard Whanger of Pittsburgh, PA, whose ancestors were from Greenbrier County. He has been enormously helpful with this project.

There are clues here and there but heavy reliance upon “connecting the dots” by assumptions easily raises questions about accuracy. So we tread lightly

Minister Isaac Kauffman and Family Move to Greenbrier County, Virginia

Ordained Mennonite minister¹ Isaac Kauffman (1741-1827) and his wife Esther (1742-1805) are believed to be the first Mennonites to settle at the so-called "Big Levels" of that county in 1787 or 1788.²

They arrived there from Shenandoah County, Virginia. It is not hard to imagine the trek to the high mountain country to have been a perilous journey of perhaps 125 miles through the Virginia counties of Rockingham, Augusta, Bath and Allegheny, probably with a Conestoga wagon. The Kauffmans originated from Manor Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania where in the 1760s they sold land.

Isaac's ordination date is not known but it occurred before the late 1760s when they moved to near Maurerstown, Virginia. After the eighth child (John) was about three years old, tradition says that Esther suggested they pick up and move to Greenbrier County. We don't know Esther's maiden name. One might guess it could have been Reiff a common name among Virginia Mennonites,³ and there were land owners and speculators named Rife or Riphe at Greenbrier County who sold land to Mennonites. But we find no evidence that these speculators were related to the Mennonites. The Rife-Riffe genealogies do not know of an Esther and Isaac Kauffman.

¹John L. Ruth, *The Earth is the Lord's*, Herald Press, 2001, 1151.

²[Nellie Coffman], "Samuel Coffman, Bishop," Undated Manuscript in Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives, I-MS-14, Samuel Coffman Collection, Box 1, says 1787; Harry A. Brunk, *History of Virginia Mennonites*, Vol. 1, says late 1787, Charles Kauffman, *A Genealogy and History of the Kauffman-Coffman Families*, 1940, 287, says December 1788.

³For example, pioneer Abraham Brenneman of the Linville area was married to Maria Reiff and the first Rockingham bishop Henry Shenk was married to Anna Rife.

In American history, as Mennonites moved westward with the frontier, one crucial element to establish a Mennonite community was to have a minister. A second element was to have a bishop or periodic visits from a bishop. Greenbrier County Mennonites had the first and periodically the second since there were close ties back to Rockingham County. Since pre-Civil War Mennonite ministers kept almost no records, little has survived except for substantial hints that a small Mennonite congregation survived for some decades. No evidence has been found of a meetinghouse. They must have worshiped in homes.

The Kauffman's first land purchase occurred in 1796, the same year as their son-in-law John G. Wenger purchased land there. Thus a foothold was established for a Mennonite community. However, in less than ten years (1805), the pioneer mother Esther Kauffman died and became the first burial in what is today the well-kept Coffman Cemetery near where the Kauffmans lived, a few miles from Lewisburg, WV.

Isaac and Esther had eight children, four each of sons and daughters. Dr. Jacob, the oldest, married Esther Rodes (daughter of Page County Mennonite minister John and Eve Rodes (who were killed by Indians in 1766)). They lived out their lives in Shenandoah County, VA. Gertrude married Joseph Hackman and they lived on Muddy Creek in Greenbrier County and he operated a mill. Michael married Mary Hockman and farmed in Greenbrier. Frances married John G. Wenger from Edom north of Harrisonburg. They settled in Greenbrier. Later we elaborate upon this family.

Elizabeth, fifth child and third daughter of Rev. Isaac and Esther, married Peter Burkholder who became the well-known Rockingham County minister and bishop who published the 1837 Mennonite Confession of Faith in English that helped turn Virginia Mennonites to English sooner than Mennonites elsewhere.

Christina, the next daughter, remained single and lived with a nephew, Jonas Coffman. The last

two children of Isaac and Esther Kauffman were boys, Christian and John, who lived in Greenbrier.

At some early point the Kauffman name was changed to Coffman and the Wenger name became Whanger. John G. Wenger became John Thomas Whanger. The story goes that he had some legal work done and the papers came through with the name spelled Whanger. He returned to the courthouse to point out the mistake. They said it would cost \$40 to change. His reply? For that amount of money, we'll just keep it Whanger!

Though it was basically one family, even if the children remained Mennonite, who would the grandchildren marry, except first cousins or neighbors or friends who grew up in homes of other denominations? To continue a Mennonite community three "L's" were needed—strong leadership, love for the Mennonite faith and loyalty to the church.

Living among Presbyterians, Methodist Episcopal and Baptists, the almost inevitable happened. Grandchildren and even several of the children of Isaac and Esther drifted from the Mennonite fold. It became a mixed picture and for a number of families it is unknown to what church they related.

Around the turn of the century to 1800 we find a Michael Coffman raising subscription money for a "meetinghouse." This may have been Isaac and Esther's son, but it is believed he was raising money for the Stone Presbyterian Church. Michael and Mary Hockman Coffman's children scattered. Son John became locally known for being a four-horse teamster to big cities—New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond and back home to Lewisburg between 1815-1830. He was a Presbyterian.

Elizabeth, third daughter of minister Isaac and Esther Kauffman of Greenbrier, married Peter Burkholder, who became the major Rockingham

County Mennonite leader. Their eight children and many descendants largely remained with the Mennonites. The Burkholder daughter Elizabeth married David Hartman, thus we have the Hartman line for a number of generations, Dwight and Curt being direct descendants. Also, Peter and Elizabeth's son Martin Burkholder succeeded his father as bishop of Middle District until he died in 1860. The Valley Heritage Center on Garbers Church Road is perpetuating his memory.

Isaac and Esther's second youngest, Christian (1780-1852), who found a Rockingham County wife, Anna Wenger (1788-1861), lived out his life with Anna in Greenbrier County. They had ten children, nine of whom stayed in Greenbrier. Nearly all of them eventually became Methodists. Son Samuel Coffman, however, as a young man, came to Rockingham to find work, find a wife and at 25 joined the Weavers Church. When they needed a minister for Middle District the lot fell on him and by Civil War times he succeeded Martin Burkholder as bishop. He became a strong champion of nonresistance and helped many Mennonite young men go north.

Samuel's siblings, except for Anna (better known as Ann) were Methodists and one source even claims that Samuel's younger brother David became a soldier in the Confederate army.⁴

Samuel's sister Ann, though a Greenbrier County resident, may be said to have remained a Mennonite long after any evidence remains of a church in Greenbrier. Virginia Conference Archives has 18 letters by Ann in several collections. Her piety and warm faith is obvious. One could almost do a small study of some of Bishop Martin Burkholder's preaching by analyzing the content of Ann's letters! Martin, her cousin, would periodically travel to Greenbrier and preach. It wasn't nearly often enough to suit Ann,

⁴Samuel S. Wenger, *The Wenger Book: A Foundation Book of American Wengers*, 1978, 226. No other confirmation has been found of that claim. David married a Hedrick and the Hedrick genealogy makes no such claim. Wenger's assertion is open to question.

but she obviously enjoyed every time he came and the conversations they could have.

Minister Isaac and Esther Kauffman's youngest, a son named John, only 20 when his mother died in 1805, went to Rockingham County to find Susanna Good for his wife. They settled in Greenbrier and farmed and had seven children. Their oldest, Frances, married Andrew Sydenstricker. Four sons served the Confederate army.

There are sources that say they had seven sons, six of whom became ministers, all Presbyterian, except one Methodist.⁵ One son became a state legislator in the 1880s. The Sydenstricker name was common in Greenbrier. Andrew and Frances (Coffman) Sydenstricker were the grandparents of the famed author Pearl Buck.

If Minister Isaac Kauffman had that many grandsons as ministers who were not Mennonite, what about Greenbrier County Mennonite ministers? Here's where things become interesting because of single sources or oral traditions. By oral tradition one grandson—David C. Whanger (1799-1861)—was the last of the Mennonite ministers in the county. He was the second child, first son of John Thomas and Frances Coffman Whanger.

The Ministry at Greenbrier

Lacking ordination records, is it possible that Minister Isaac Kauffman's son Christian served either as an ordained or lay leader of the house church at Greenbrier? The first and second editions of the published volumes of Virginia Mennonite Conference list a "Christ Coffman" from Greenbrier County" as a minister but do not list Isaac Kauffman (Coffman). However, in recent editions, Isaac Coffman is listed as a Greenbrier minister and no Christ Coffman appears. And in Rockingham County one family (Phoebe Coffman) reported to the author that

⁵For example, Samuel Amos Whanger's "Autobiography of Samuel Amos Whanger" in Wenger, *Wenger Book*, 136.

Greenbrier County Mennonites did not build a church house for worship. That statement is correct, but she said "we just knew it" that Isaac's son Christian was a minister.

For two reasons we may doubt whether son Christian (1780-1852) succeeded his father as minister. That tradition did not seem to be present at Greenbrier. And Ann Coffman Wilson, daughter of Christian, in none of her letters from 1847 till his death in 1852, mentions her father Christian as being a minister. Nor does her sad letter reporting the death of father Christian (who sometimes was also called Christopher).

Then who **DID** succeed minister Isaac Coffman? Perhaps Dominick Frey (1791-1846). The Moses Hedrick genealogy says "it is believed that Dominick Fry was a Mennonite minister."⁶ He was a native of Neustadt, Schwarzwald, Baden, Germany and moved to Greenbrier County from Shenandoah County. He married Christina, daughter of John and Frances Coffman Whanger, therefore a brother-in-law of David C. Whanger. (In 1878 the Freys had the "e" dropped from their last name.)

Dominick and Christina had ten children. Son Michael served in the Confederate army and his brother David spent time in Libby prison during the Civil War as a "Union Sympathizer." In fact, without documentation, Wenger speculates he may have been a "conscientious objector."⁷ There were several intermarriages between the Freys, Coffmans and Hedricks. It is unclear whether any Hedricks were Mennonite.

If Dominick Frey was a Mennonite minister until he died at age 54 in 1846, it is possible that David C. Whanger then picked up ministerial duties until he died in 1861. David was married to Amelia (also known as Milly or Malinda) Tipton of Rockingham County, reputedly raised by the Dr. Christian Coffmans because her parents were "massacred by Indians." Wenger relates that she was well educated and read Dutch, German and

⁶Moses Hedrick: *His Ancestors and Descendants*, 1973, 180. Moses Hedrick had four wives and 15 children. Unfortunately, childbirth caused the death of many women in those days.

⁷Wenger, *Wenger Book*, 377.

English and that she had a German Bible and other German books. Samuel Amos Whanger, a grandson, believes she remained a Mennonite all her life and Wenger calls this Greenbrier family a Mennonite family and David an ordained minister.

With only oral tradition and family genealogies as sources, the church leadership at Greenbrier would seem to have gone from Minister Isaac Coffman to Dominick Frey to David C. Whanger, whereupon the house fellowship seems to have discontinued. Tom Whanger, a descendant of David C. Whanger, reports family tradition of David being an ordained Mennonite minister.⁸ Virginia Conference records seem not to notice the continuation of Mennonite ministers in Greenbrier County beyond Isaac Coffman.

Ann Coffman Wilson Hedrick

Did a small Mennonite house fellowship continue until David C. Whanger died in 1861? Among Mennonites one does not normally ignore oral traditions handed down through a number of generations. There is usually some basis of fact even if details become somewhat obscure. The 18 "Ann Wilson" letters found in the Virginia Conference Archives provide an interesting but cloudy picture. Ann lived to reach 90 (1820-1910) and is described as remaining a Mennonite, which statement may have considerable accuracy.

When Ann was 26 and her brother Samuel 24, they rode the 100 plus miles from Greenbrier to Rockingham and had a most pleasant visit in 1846 with the Mennonite young people. Samuel returned to Rockingham the following year; Ann stayed in Greenbrier. Samuel married Frances Weaver, accepted the Lord and joined the Mennonites. His biographer says he had little opportunity to attend church services in Greenbrier except on rare occasions when Rockingham ministers traveled there to preach.⁹ Which

tradition are we to believe—the one that came down the generations in Greenbrier indicating David C. Whanger as minister or the one that came down the Bishop Samuel Coffman line in Rockingham about the lack of services? Ann Wilson's letters make no mention of a Mennonite fellowship from 1847 until the 1860's. Nor does she speak of a David Whanger as a minister.

Here is a snatch from a Feb. 25, 1849 letter of Ann's to David and Martin Burkholder. She is thankful that God has placed us in a

"land of gospel light and liberty for here we have the Scripture to read and can attend the preaching of the Gospel at almost any time but we must not think that if we only attend public worship and join a church that it will profit us any unless we become truly changed and give our whole hearts to God we must love the Lord God with our whole hearts and are neighbors as our selves but we fear that in our preasant time there is not enough of love in the different branches of the church but if we were all members of the true church of Christ we would all be as brethern . . .

In her 18 letters she does not tell us what church she attends. But she obviously has a strong faith and looks forward to her heavenly home.

Ann married George Wilson (1814-1841) on 28 July 1840 in Greenbrier County. Eventually she became pregnant, then George died 21 April 1841. To her great sorrow her baby on the day of birth, 2 Sept. 1841, died that same day. On his tombstone she had the words placed, "Buded on earth and bloomed in heaven." The infant was buried beside Ann in the Coffman cemetery and has a separate stone. Ann was a widow 21 years then married David Hedrick and helped take care of his eight children. Her tombstone says Annie Hedrick.

When her father Christian (Christopher) Coffman died in 1852 she noted that before his remains were "deposited in the cold and silent tomb, . . . there was a prayer at the house and a hymn sung at the grave" but "the funeral is not yet preacht as we lack for some of the ministers of our Church this fall. From what they said last spring it was requested to put it off until they come."¹⁰ On his stone in the Coffman cemetery the following

⁸Thomas Richard Whanger, *The Trail of Agony: The Arduous Civil War Journey of David Journey*. Pub. By author. Undated. p.9. Tom now has more doubts about traditions handed down..

⁹Coffman, "Samuel Coffman."

¹⁰Ann Wilson to Martin Burkholder, July 25, 1852.

message was inscribed, "Our father has gone to a mansion of rest, to the glorious land by the deity blest."

Ann's siblings, except Samuel, lived in Greenbrier. He was ordained to the ministry in Rockingham County on July 11, 1852, eleven days before his father passed away! Samuel may have missed going home for his father's passing.

The Whangers

Frances (1772-1839), the fourth child of Isaac and Esther Kauffman married John G. Wenger (1773-1839), the third of his father's 18 children (by two wives). John was born and raised at Edom and married there.¹¹ Then he and Frances settled in Greenbrier where he became John Thomas Whanger. On May 31, 1796, for the amazing price of "five shillings Virginia currency" John bought 207 acres from the Riphe family, Joseph, Margaret, Joseph, Abraham, John, "& their wives", John & Catrinia Tuckwilloe and Joseph & Barbara Haynes.¹²

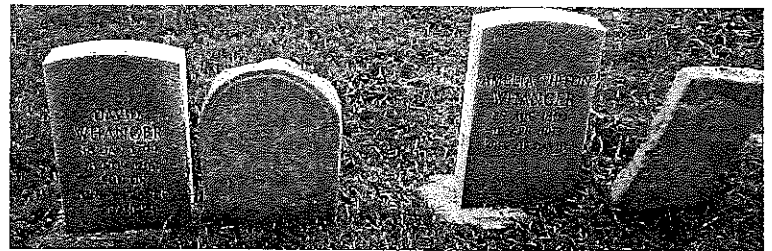
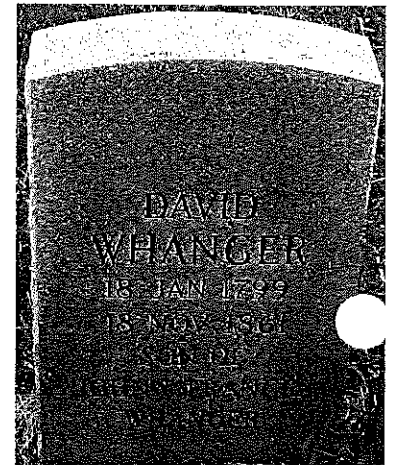
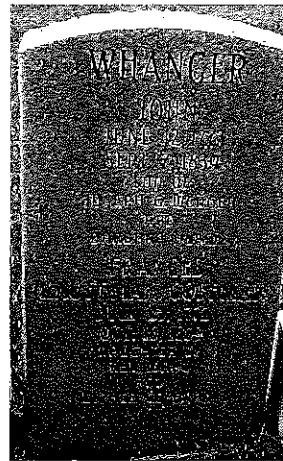
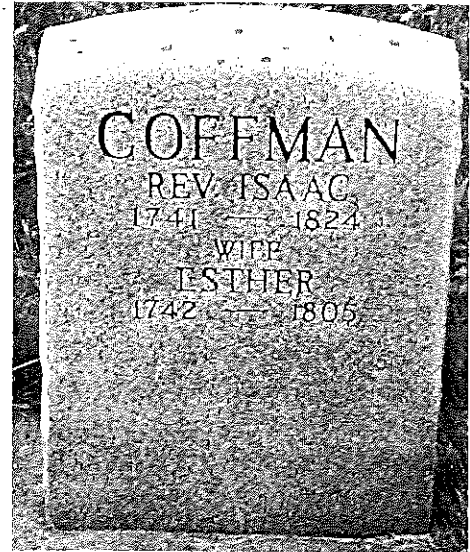
The 207 acres adjoined the land of Christly Shank and Jacob Kophman. In the surveyors records a Christian Shank and a Michael Shanks are named and several plots were owned by Peter Eversole. No evidence has been found that any of these were Mennonite. They rather seem to have been early land owners in the area.

John Thomas and Frances Coffman Whanger raised seven children—Esther, David C., Christina C., John Thomas, Frances (Fanny), Sabina and Jacob C.

Of particular interest is David C. Whanger (1799-1861) who married Amelia (also Malinda or Milly) Tipton about 1823 and they had 12 children, eight girls and four boys—Elizabeth, Samuel,

¹¹Wenger, *Wenger Book*, 181. Several times on that page a dating error puts people in Greenbrier County in 1722, long before they were born!

¹²Deed Book #1, 652. It is unknown if there is a mistake in the price or if "five shillings Virginia currency" is much more money than one would expect.



Continued on back cover

Photos of tombstones: Courtesy of Tom Whanger. Except for the Minister Isaac and Esther Kauffman tombstone, Tom has generously provided updated tombstones in the Coffman Cemetery so that future generations can read legible tombstones on the Whangers. He may be contacted at Tom R. Whanger, 716 Presque Isle Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15239, trwpgh@adelphia.net Phone: 724-325-1526

PETER BURKHOLDER PROPOSAL

By Tom Whanger and Jim Lehman

In the Kauffman/Coffman Collection of Papers at the Greenbrier Historical Historical Society in Lewisburg, West Virginia, Tom Whanger has uncovered a very significant Peter Burkholder document that helped to make a case for Burkholder to publish the most significant 1837 English Mennonite Confession of Faith that helped to turn Virginia Mennonites to English sooner than other Mennonite communities. It is called a "Proposal." In modern terminology it might be called a petition or an advertising brochure and has numerous Greenbrier names, some Mennonite, some not. It was done several years before 1837 because Burkholder had not yet secured Joseph Funk as the translator of the Confession from German to English.

Peter's wife, as we know, came from Greenbrier, and Peter carried a burden for the English speaking people of that community and other communities who could not handle the German. Here is solid evidence for Peter's introductory remarks about English friends assuming "wrong and unfavourable ideas concerning our religious professions," and that now they can change their minds to "think quite otherwise." Here is a verbatim copy. The number after each name likely indicates the number of subscribers that person obtained.

Proposal for publishing a small work; and deemed to be very interesting, entitled

The Christians' Confession of Faith who are known by the name of Mennonites,

In 33 Articles; with Short extracts from the Catechism. Translated from the German.

Together with

Nine Reflections, on different parts and passages of the Holy Scripture of the New Testament, illustrative of their Confession, faith, and practices.

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 into the English Language by _____

Terms

This little work shall be presented on good white paper, containing not less than 250 pages of an ordinary size for a work of its kind; to be presented in an elegant style, and handsomely bound and lettered, and delivered to Subscribers at fifty cents a copy. Those who present subscribers shall be reasonably compensated:

John Sydenstricker	1	Archer Edgar	1
Philip Sydenstricker	1	Wm. Argabrite	1
David Coffman	1	John Argabrite	1
James M. McVey	1	Caty Cofman	1
Andrew Sydenstricker	1	Steeny Cofman	1
Jacob Whanger	1	Moses Dwyer	1
John Coffman	1	George Lewis	1
Michael Coffman	4	William George	1
Christian Hockman	3	Wm. Griffith	1
Johan Delang Horbin	1	Hiram Scott	1
John Wenger	1		
David Wenger			

Continued from page 6

Andrew, Frances, David C., Mary, Joseph, Melvida, Christina, Esther, Rebecca and Susan. The four youngest were two sets of twin girls, three of whom tragically died of scarlet fever only five days apart. Tradition not only has it that David C. was a minister but also a farmer and a blacksmith who died shortly after Civil War Union forces removed horses from the farm about November 1861.¹

Tom Whanger, who has done the most work on researching family and community tradition finds himself less and less certain about traditions that have come down through the family. What is more certain, of course, are the government records that Tom has tapped about David C.'s two sons, David and Joseph, who enlisted (perhaps because conscription threatened?) for Confederate military service in

the fall of 1862. That is not surprising for general community feelings favored the Confederacy rather than the Union. Both became Union prisoners by Aug. and Sept. 1863, and one had the notation "Deserter from the Rebel Army," a potentially very dangerous situation if he had been caught by Confederates.

Both North and South sometimes made public spectacles of assassinating deserters. They ended up at Rock Island, Illinois, a prison so horrible for a while that men died at a tremendous pace. Both men survived and by 1864 both agreed to become "galvanized Yankees" (join the Union army). David did, but Joseph's health was too poor. They endured 416 days of imprisonment.

Eventually, both finally returned to Greenbrier, found wives, raised families and lived out their lives.

J. O. Lehman



NEXT MENNO ROUND TABLE

"Remembering Park View, Part II" – Harold Lehman and Jim Rush
Sept. 23, 9-11 a.m. at Park View Mennonite Church
Mark Your Calendars. Bring Memories and Photos
Who remembers the real old Park School?



Photos: From the Jim Rush Collection



The Model School in Assembly Park c. 1918

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian Editor: James O. Lehman Sketch above: Jonathan Gehman, Red Barn Studio, 867-5701

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