



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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LOOKING AHEAD



Next **ROUNDTABLE** **DISCUSSION**

“Remembering the Mennonite
Hour” with host John Horst
at
Park View Mennonite Church
March 25: 9-11 a.m.

AND

Fall **ROUNDTABLE**:

“More on Life in Park View”
Not everything has been said yet
about life in Park View!

Sept. 23, 9-11 a.m. at Park View
Mennonite Church

THIS ISSUE

Major article entitled “Virginia
Mennonites Engage in Civil
Disobedience,” p. 2-6

At no other time and place has a group
of Mennonites in the U. S. engaged in
such extensive and secret disobedience
of a government under which they
lived

Review of new book just out—Volume
III of the series of books entitled
*Unionists and the Civil War Experience
in the Shenandoah Valley.*

Plus –

Announcements –

Next Roundtables

Renewing Membership

Need someone to Sketch for You?

VIRGINIA MENNONITES ENGAGE IN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

At no other time or place in United States history has a group of Mennonites engaged in disobedience so massively as happened during the Civil War.

Or was it obedience? That may depend on one's viewpoint! Along with the German Baptist Brethren, known at that time as Dunkers, and later Church of the Brethren, many took great personal risks in the 1860s to disobey the Confederate government by hiding and assisting people wanting to go North. Except for the American Revolution, many generations had not faced the question of a new government. And shortly, the Confederacy was at war with the long-standing United States government. Suddenly, the question arose, "Which government was legitimate?" Since democracy had pervaded the air for generations the vote of the majority ruled. Right?

But what if that majority rule in Rockingham and Augusta Counties and in many other Virginia counties became a majority because of verbal abuse from neighbors and severe pressure from the newspapers. In fact, numerous counties in western Virginia refused to join the Confederacy, and thereby we have the formation of the new state of West Virginia. Almost overnight many people found themselves facing a severe dilemma. Which was the legitimate government?

Many Virginia Mennonites leaned toward the U. S. government and viewed the Confederacy as a rogue government, one that was illegitimate. Civil wars have a way of turning things upside down, or downside up! Of course, to keep the peace one had to go along

with the government in power. To not do so meant breaking the scriptural injunction of Romans 13 to submit to governing authorities.

THE "UNIONIST UNDERGROUND RAILROAD"

That became the name of the secret system whereby Mennonites and many others assisted people wanting to flee North.¹ It's a name similar to the well-known "Underground Railroad," which assisted many slaves to leave the southern states and make it to freedom in the North.

The Unionist Underground Railroad assisted many young men of conscience who did not want to enter the Confederate military or who left the service after briefly serving in the army. However, this "railroad" also included many travelers who were not originally people of conscience. Some were soldiers disenchanted with fighting for the Confederacy and who had left their regiments. To be a deserter was so serious that at times in both the South and North a deserter, if he was caught, faced a firing squad. Sometimes the railroad had several people at once; occasionally even families traveled the "rails."

¹ The multi-volume series of books now being published gives us a great deal of specific detail. David Rodes and Norman Wenger did the research in the National Archives and Emmert Bittinger serves as editor of the series called *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*. Vol. III has just been released and it contains a larger amount of activity (than the first two volumes) by Mennonites as they disobeyed the Confederate government. See review of Vol. III in this issue.

Mennonites have historically emphasized obedience to government, so how could they become so involved in this activity? Was it really disobedience to provide hiding places, feed these people, serve as "postmasters" for the exchange of letters, furnish guides who led them to safety, and provide whatever services the people needed? Legally, of course, it was civil disobedience.

Long after the war was over many Mennonites and Dunkers and others applied to the Federal government to be reimbursed for losses sustained during the war as many troops traveled the Shenandoah Valley and they were caught in the crossfire of war. To even stand a chance of recovering losses they had to make a strong case that they were Unionist in their leanings and their activities. Thus many details emerge of their activities to show loyalty to the U. S. government.

SHALL WE VOTE FOR OR AGAINST?

Of course, not all Mennonites agreed with each other on which government to support. Many in Rockingham County testified to loyalty to the Union. For them May of 1861 became a confusing, even a terrifying time. On May 23 a general plebiscite was held to decide whether Virginia would stay with the Union or go with the Confederacy. It wasn't only Mennonites who thought it was a time of extreme stress. Even Col. Algernon S. Grey, Marshall for the Western District of Virginia, candidly admitted that it was a time of "perfect reign of terror," a time in which people "had to do as they could and not as they would."²

Were many Mennonites really as Unionist as they later declared? These government records from the National Archives would seem to indicate that. Quite a few said so in their claims made to the Southern Claims

Commission, where they indicated that voting or not voting on May 23, 1861, brought severe pressure. It is believed that Mennonite men tended to vote in those days, but this was an unusual vote. Quite a few claimed that they endured dire threats such as hanging, or death, and destruction of property if they didn't vote in favor of Virginia seceding from the Union. At that time all voting was verbal at the polling stations. Obviously, any interested bystanders knew immediately how a person voted. Confederacy fever was so high by this time that many polling places wanted to have a "perfect" 100% record favoring the Confederacy.

Interesting patterns emerge from their testimonies later to the Southern Claims Commission. Most insisted they were against secession and wished to vote against it, but the pressures were so extreme that at the last moment they voted in favor. Years later a number of them admitted they had voted "yes." Most likely they thought it would help to keep things peaceful. But they didn't realize that years later they would be trying to make a case that they were strong Unionist. Almost to a man, those who voted for the Confederacy later also failed to collect any reimbursement from the U. S. government. And there were some Mennonites who, at personal risk, actually did vote against secession. Others deliberately stayed away from the polls that day but that didn't necessarily free them from criticism.

Bishop Jacob Hildebrand of Augusta County simply noted in his diary that he went to vote for secession that day. We aren't told how severe the pressure was but the Augusta County papers sounded much the same as the Rockingham County ones. The good bishop favored the Union personally, we learn elsewhere. Actually, he became a most interesting study in changing loyalties. Early in 1861, when President James Buchanan called for a day of prayer, Hildebrand called his church together for that purpose. In June 1861 he

²Unionists, Vol II., p. 876. Grey's comment appeared in a deposition in which he verified that Mennonite deacon Jacob Geil and most of his "society" (church) were Unionist in outlook.

noted in his diary that the president called for a day of prayer. But it wasn't Lincoln who called for that day of prayer. Hildebrand's president now was Jefferson Davis! In November of that year he tells us that he went to the polls and voted for Davis.³

CALAMITIES OF WAR

Men of conscience found themselves forced into the army because there was no legal provision recognizing their conscience. From Rockingham many were sent to Winchester. There are numerous stories, some written, some oral. Occasionally, another one turns up that was not well known. One such is that of Samuel Brunk's experience.⁴ He did not relish the marching, the whistling of bullets nearby during a battle, the hardships of army. He was pleased to become a teamster near the end of his nine-month stint. He was convinced by a friend to desert army service. But he knew he was in danger. So his father went to town and hired a substitute to go in Samuel's place. Unfortunately, the substitute soon "slipped away and went north." Later, when it was possible to be excused by paying a \$500 fine, his father paid that. As some other young men had done, they joined the church at age 17 so that the \$500 fine could be used to excuse them.

Numerous Mennonites, after a short time in the army, did not return after they had been furloughed. Thus it meant—flee to Union territory or hide. Hiding became a fairly popular activity. Thus an important reason for the Unionist Underground Railroad to develop was to protect young men of conscience. But Mennonites and Dunkers were concerned also about helping others who came along on their

³Jacob Hildebrand Diary, in the archives of Virginia Mennonite Conference.

⁴Unionists, Vol III, 939-53.

way north. So they freely but secretly shared food and hiding places.

THE BUSY UNIONIST RAILROAD

From all three volumes of this significant series of publication of documents, we have illustrations of how Mennonites and others engaged in civil disobedience. Abraham D. and Magdalenah (Rodes) Heatwole of Pleasant Valley (Vol. I, 171, 173) ran "a sort of head quarters" for this activity. Magdalenah, in her deposition, declared that they "kept at our house a great many refugees and helped them to escape. We were in constant danger from having so many coming to our place for concealment and refuge while getting ready to go north."

A neighbor, Henry L. Rodes, backed up the testimony that Abraham and Magdalenah "did a great deal in harboring and feeding refugees and conscripts." Rodes himself also admitted that he "kept a deserter from the rebel army a week or more." (p. 273) Another Rodes of the area was John (Vol. I, 282, 298), son of Mennonite minister Frederick, and John's wife Fannie Bowman (of Dunker background). They actively sheltered and assisted "refugees and draftees" to flee to the mountains. In fact, Fannie testified to "Secesh" threatening their son—that they would blow his "G_d D_mn brains out" and also charging that members of the family "were lower than niggers."

Jacob and Hannah (Brenneman) Wenger of the Greenmount area (Vol. II, 262, 269, 271) northwest of Harrisonburg, allowed their home to be a "depot" of the Railroad. He received threats of hanging because he was one of 11 men at Greenmount who dared to vote against secession. Jacob said he voted that way "to show them I was a freeman and would vote as I pleased."⁵ Mennonite deacon Jacob Geil

⁵Jacob and Hannah were the parents of A. D. Wenger, second president of Eastern Mennonite School at Harrisonburg.

(ordained 1860) of that same general area and his wife Mary Wenger (Vol. II, 334, 342, 348) eventually learned that their home was accused of being known as a "union hole." Mary testified that they helped "a great many refugees" whom they "kept and fed and harbored until the guides would come and take them to the mountains." Included were several families going north. Deacon Geil was the one who got Col. Grey, Marshall for the Western District, to testify that Geil and his wife were Unionists and that many of Geil's church favored the northern cause.

Isaac Wenger (Vol. II, 432, 448, 459), a well-to-do Mennonite north of Edom was described as cheerfully feeding Union soldiers and sheltering them. A. D. Brunk claimed that Wenger sent his hired hands to vote against secession. Wenger said that he advised and assisted people to "get out of the country."

East of Dayton lived Michael Shenk who declared he had harbored refugees (Vol. III, 531, 537). "On one occasion a rebel soldier came to my house with a union soldier as prisoner." The Confederate soldier left the Union man with Shenk and returned to his regiment. Shenk promptly told the Union man which route to take to escape North!

On one occasion military men came and apprehended Shenk, taking him in his shirt sleeves and dirty clothes and forcibly putting him on a wagon (he refused to go voluntarily) and hauling him off to Winchester. After about six months he "ran away, came home and kept concealed" until the \$500 fine law was passed, which he paid to be exempted. Shenk claimed that his "sympathies were altogether with the north from first to last." He declared that he was "willing to do anything that my religion would allow me to." He may have spoken for others that there was a general consensus for Mennonites to disobey the Confederate government. Shenk's wife, Lydia, insisted that she had heard Michael speak against secession and the war "hundreds of times."

A "HAVEN OF REFUGE" or a "HORNETS NEST?"

To the west of Harrisonburg and the general area of Mole Hill, there was a veritable hornets nest (from the Confederate viewpoint), or a haven of refuge (from the Union viewpoint) of Mennonites who engaged significantly in the Unionist Railroad. Daniel P. Good, who lived four miles west of Harrisonburg, testified (Vol. III, 645, 647) that he "frequently harbored and kept refugees" until they could escape. Sometimes that meant hiding them two or three weeks. His house was also a "depot." Simon P. Burkholder, in substantiating Good's request, said he knew the Good home was headquarters for refugees and deserters from the rebel army and that none were afraid of being betrayed by him. Burkholder had been conscripted into the army but he "ran away" and was concealed at Good's home a number of days.

Another one was Peter Wenger who knew that Good kept people until guides could come and take another group of people to escape through the mountains. Wenger had stayed at Goods a week. Catherine Good (wife of Daniel) said that they were "always" concealing Union men. She guessed that they had helped "as many as 75 or 100 men."

The Goods and David Hartmans, a mile from them, worked together in holding people until guides would come for them. David Hartman, in his claim (Vol. III, 658, 662-63, 666) agreed that they had helped a "great many." Living within a two-mile radius of the Hartmans were Union men Jacob Shank, John Brunk, John B. Wenger, Emanuel Suter and Daniel P. Good. Hartman, one day, was threatened with prison and property destruction, and even threatened with death if he didn't stop helping refugees. He claimed he knew "hundreds" of men in his general area who voted for secession "through fear."

Hartman's son Peter heard his father "talk a thousand times" on war subjects. Peter served as a pilot and he guessed that his parents had "entertained" as many as a hundred. Later in life, Peter often gave speeches about Civil War times to the young Eastern Mennonite School students at Harrisonburg.

John B. Wenger, a Dunker, in his deposition to support David Hartman made it clear that the Hartmans belonged to a church that was "intensely a loyal organization." If any member of the church voluntarily joined the "rebel army" they were "expelled from the church."

John Brunk, a neighbor to the Hartmans, knew that Hartman "was a very resolute person" and they often discussed "the war and kindred subjects." He knew that Hartman harbored many refugees. In fact, Brunk could be very helpful in that process too. He was the sexton of the Weavers Mennonite Church west of Harrisonburg. Modestly he proclaimed "I used to conceal them in one of our churches near by that I kept the keys of." No one knows how many were safely locked inside the church and fed and helped on their way eventually. He further confirmed that "our church was intensely a loyal church."

THE FEARLESS MARGARET H. RHODES

Margaret was a courageous woman. Her husband was an invalid until he died in July 1864 (Vol. III, 693, 703, 708, 712). Not only did she look after her husband and five children (the oldest being 13). Her home was not far from Weavers Church and she allowed it to "become a center or depot for the gathering of refugees and conscripts, coming not only singly but in groups of five or six at a time." She must have prepared hundreds of meals. She had a good hiding place under the house. The trap door to enter the place was in her bedroom and was covered with a carpet. One person,

Henry Brunk,⁶ she kept for nearly a year so he could keep in touch with his family nearby.

She also became one of the postmasters of the railroad. Guides would bring her letters to deliver. At least once she went a distance of six miles "myself to deliver letters" while she left her children with her mother-in-law. "What I did for the refugees and deserters, I did to help the Union Cause," she declared to the Commissioner of Claims. Samuel Coffman, bishop at Weavers Church and that district, gave strong testimony and blessing to Margaret's activities. So did another minister, Daniel S. Heatwole.

She was spunky enough that when her first application for reimbursement was badly handled, she applied a second time and won at least partially, receiving \$519.25.

Jacob Shank and second wife Magdalena Stauffer (this was a mixed marriage, one Mennonite and one Dunker) also had their house serve as a depot. (Vol. III, 716) There the travelers would wait "for the pilot's trip" across the mountains. Jacob would take them to the appointed place. And there are more. The potter businessman Emanuel Suter and his wife Elizabeth, kept persons trying to escape and he helped pay the fines of poor members to keep them from the Army. John Brunk (mentioned above) also filed a claim as did Daniel J. and Maria (Heatwole) Good. The home of the Goods also served as a depot. (Vol. III, 731, 812-13, 834)

Only the Lord knows how many people were assisted in their trek away from the Confederacy, but it must have been hundreds of them. With that much movement on this Unionist Railroad, one wonders how Mennonites and Dunkers managed to engage in all this illegal activity without getting into trouble with local officials. One can only imagine the many meals served, the secret trysts, and traffic at night with mountain pilots.

⁶Father of George R. Brunk I.

If You Haven't Paid \$49.95 For a Book Before This, Here's One Worth Every Penny!

Surely, I must be kidding, I hear you saying. But, if you have only a speck of interest in Virginia Mennonite history, this new book of 1,004 pages is one you should get. Even if it means giving up something like a couple restaurant meals, or some nice clothes you think you need, or whatever. Oh, I know Social Security income is low or that you have many other demands on your finances. Think of it, less than five cents a page!

You may be of a mind to dispose books, not buy more. But, once in a while, one comes along that is a MUST. This is one of those!

The Book

UNIONISTS AND THE CIVIL WAR EXPERIENCE IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY, Vol. III, Bridgewater, Dayton and Surrounding Area, Rockingham County. (And a "nest" of Mennonites near the Weavers Church). Researched and Compiled by David S. Rodes and Norman R. Wenger. Editing and Introduction by Emmert F. Bittinger, PhD. Valley Research Associates and The Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center, 2005. Illustrated. 1004 pages. \$49.95

By now you are familiar that this series of books publishes documents from the National Archives that throw much new light on the experiences of Mennonites, Dunkers (Church of the Brethren) and a few others.

After the war, when numerous local people applied to the Southern Claims Commission to be reimbursed for some of their losses during the terrible war that Valley people experienced, they reveal fascinating details of what they went through. This volume carries more Mennonite claims than the previous two volumes. Here one finds what happened to the families of:

Gabriel D. Heatwole	Peter Blosser	David Hartman
John G. Heatwole	Rebecca Burkholder	Margaret H. Rhodes
Michael Shank	(wife of Bishop Martin)	Jacob Shank
Benjamin Wenger	Samuel Coffman (bishop)	Emanuel Suter
Noah C. Wenger	Jacob Driver	Benjamin S. Bierly
John Brunk	Daniel P. Good	Henry Burkholder

Need I say more? You've heard of a number of these ancestors before. Buy your copies at a number of local bookstores. (See the previous article on "Civil Disobedience" in this issue for a taste of things contained in this volume. The article mentions some of the above.

MENNO ROUND TABLE

Talking, Listening and Laughter

All these occurred as 33 persons remembered Park View history at a roundtable discussion held November 12, 2005. Topics included the naming of Park View, the personalities and businesses, children's activities, Eastern Mennonite School as a community center, the many uses of the Martin's Store building and rat control at the Kurtzes.

The 1141 Mt. Clinton Pike building was built in 1925 by Mason Kline for a car garage/gas station. In 1928-29 Dan Hartman and Paul Good used the building to begin a trucking business and the front office was used by Elmer Martin for a meat shop.

In 1928 Dan Hartman had gas pumps out front. By 1930 Mason rented the building to Owen Andes where Owen and cousin Aldine Brenneman operated a garage from 1931-35.

Walter Hartman had a barber shop in the front part during this time. In 1937 the store was remodeled into a store run by H. D. Weaver, with clothing in the east side and groceries on the west. The store also had a snack shop.

In 1944 Leroy and Elizabeth Pellman operated a store for two years. Then in 1945 Lewis Martin purchased the store and opened the Martin's Store used by many for years.

Jim Rush

Next Roundtables

"Remembering the Mennonite Hour" hosted by John Horst on March 25, from 9-11 a.m. at the Park View Mennonite Church.

Another Roundtable on September 23 from 9-11 a.m., again at the Park View Mennonite Church. More stories on the village of Park View! Hosted by Harold D. Lehman and Jim Rush. **MARK YOUR CALENDARS!**

Have You Renewed Your Membership for 2006?

Please send \$6.00 for an individual or \$10 per couple, to Jim Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22802 rush@emhs.net

Need a Great Sketch?

See Jonathan Gehman at Red Barn Studio, (540)271-2824.

SHENANDOAH MENNONITE HISTORIAN

Editor: James O. Lehman
Sketches: Jonathan Gehman

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians
780 Parkwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22802

Elwood Yoder
1181 Sharon Lane
Harrisonburg, VA 22802