

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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Civil War Mennonite Experiences at Edom, Greenmount and Linville

Volume II of the significant series of books *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley* is now in print. Compiled and transcribed from Southern Claims Commission Records in the National Archives by Norman Wenger and David Rodes and edited by Emmert Bittinger, it was published by the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center and the Valley Research Associates. 721 pages, indexed, illustrated, and with important appendices, the book sells for \$49.95.

Fifty dollars for a new book? It must be big or good! **THIS ONE IS BOTH!** And well worth purchasing for people who live in the area or whose ancestors lived in this area. Here is documentation of losses sustained by Mennonites, Church of the Brethren and others of the area during the war. It tells us what people of that time in this area thought about the Civil War, and whether they voted for or against Virginia going with the Confederacy.

Many Mennonites of this area worshiped at that time at the Brennemans Church on Brennemans Church Road southwest of Edom. That meetinghouse was sold and taken down two decades after Lindale was built in 1898. [For a history of Brennemans Church, see *Lindale's Song* (1998), by James O. Lehman]

In this article we include information about the Northern District deacon Jacob Geil (1828-1917), who was ordained right before the war began, and his brothers Henry and John. [They were the sons of district bishop John Geil (1799-1889)]. Included also in our review is the well-to-do Isaac Wenger who lived north of Lindale on Rt. 42 and who had a large mill. (He was the great-grandfather of Lindalians, Linden and Edith Wenger and Mildred Plank).

Also included is Jacob Wenger, father of A. D. Wenger, 2nd president of Eastern Mennonite and great-grandfather of George R. Brunk III, professor at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and his siblings, and cousins.

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This volume gives details how soldiers appeared suddenly at homes and barns to freely confiscate the winter's supply of food, grain, hay as well as meat from the smokehouse. Like many others of their faith in Rockingham County, Valley Mennonites and Brethren were loyal to the Union, so they suffered threats of violence (such as shooting and hanging), and hatred in reaction to their stand.

One of the first problems came on May 23, 1861, when Virginia residents voted whether to join the emerging new Confederacy or remain with the Union. People were threatened if they didn't go and vote, and those who went to vote discovered angry men at the polling places who threatened that they must vote for the Confederacy or face the consequences.

The local Harrisonburg newspaper reveals that most people in the Valley had been strongly in favor of Virginia staying in the Union until the war started in April 1861. Suddenly, after war began, a large majority flip-flopped and became ardent Confederates. Many Mennonites, however, saw the Confederacy as disobedience to the established government, so many remained ardent Unionists. Many Brethren and a number of others also wished to throw their support in favor of the Union.

Voting on May 23 brought severe stress. Fed by the local paper that had done a tremendous turnaround, most Rockingham people now favored the Confederacy. Courageously, a few brave souls voted against secession. Only 22 of more than 3,000 voters in Rockingham County voted against secession. Eleven of those 22 voted at Greenmount.

Jacob Wenger lived near there. He went to vote. *"They threatened to hang those that voted against secession but I was going to show them that I was a free man and would vote as I pleased,"* Jacob testified later. He got away with it.

Jacob Wenger was taken into the militia at Winchester where he refused duty. Then they stuck him into the guard house. He was released when he hired a substitute, but officials did not accept the substitute. But Jacob managed to slip on home where he stayed until the \$500 fine law was passed. He then paid that to be excused from service.

Isaac Wenger went to the polls, expecting to vote against secession, but I *"was frightened out of it,"* said Wenger. When war came he, like others, was to be forced into the military. One day a captain came to his field and threatened to tie Isaac up and carry him away on a wagon. But the captain knew Isaac was a Mennonite and *"would not fight."* However, the captain knew of a man who would go in Isaac's place—a man who could be turned into a fighting soldier. So Isaac hired Jos. McLaughlin as a substitute, but McLaughlin later ran away from the army and Isaac persuaded him to go North! So officials came again for Isaac, but he paid the \$500 fine and was thereby exempted.

Deacon Jacob Geil refused to vote either way on secession, like his father, John Geil, bishop of the Northern District. When war came, Jacob Geil faced pressure like Isaac Wenger. He was notified to appear at Harrisonburg to become a soldier, but he simply stayed home. The second notice came when two people came to forcibly take him. But they *"let me off on my promise to send some person in my place."* So Geil paid \$600 for a substitute who stayed in the army six months.

When the substitute returned home, again Geil was notified to appear at headquarters. To escape being pressed into military service the deacon quickly bought out the postmastership at Edom for \$280. Thereby, he was excused by law. A bit later the fine law was passed and Geil sold the postmastership and paid the \$500 fine. As deacon, Jacob became involved in collecting and providing funds to help pay the fines of poor members.

The value of \$600 for a substitute and \$500 for the fine law was enormous, but Deacon Geil had a simple and eloquent answer:

"I was and am a member of the Mennonite Church and we do not fight. Our principals are non-resistant. . . . I never had any sympathy for anything of a rebellious character."

Jacob Geil didn't like sending a substitute or buying the post office. He called it *"contamination with the Confederacy."*

Some local officials understood the Mennonite and Brethren position regarding involvement in the war. Of interest is the testimony of Col. Algernon S. Grey, Marshall for the Western District of Virginia and a resident of Harrisonburg. He also confirmed that it was a very stressful time.

"He [Geil] belonged to a society that were all or nearly all Union people. To find a disloyal member in his church was a very rare thing." To take the post office as Geil did "was done as a matter of conscience for keeping out of the army."

"There was [a] perfect reign of terror here at that time and people had to do as they could and not as they would. . . . Various men were everywhere in fear and dread from the general threatening and I know that scores and hundreds of good and true Union men were afraid to vote their sentiments and comparatively few had the courage to brave the threats and stay away from the polls but went and voted for secession."

It has been estimated that 1500 voters of Rockingham County stayed at home on May 23, 1861, when Virginia voted for secession.

Jacob Geil came from a large family. He had two brothers, Henry and John, who also faced being forced into the army. Ten years after the war John was ordained a minister and Harry Brunk, Virginia Mennonite historian, reports him as being one of the best Virginia preachers in the late 19th century.

Neither John or Henry voted for or against secession. Both paid for short-term substitutes early in the war, and both later got caught, along with 70 others who were apprehended at Petersburg, WV. When the fine law of \$500 per man was passed, many church members helped pay the \$500 exemption fee per man owed by the 70 some Mennonite and Brethren men who had been taken to Richmond. It is unknown how many were Mennonite and how many were Brethren.

John, in his deposition to help brother Henry, declared that the Confederates at Richmond "said

the damn Union rascals ought to be shot." John and Henry both had their claims for stolen livestock, hay and grain disallowed. Brother Jacob was allowed \$480.

Deacon Geil and his wife Mary, (a sister of Jacob Wenger) were busy during the war, helping Mennonite men and others to flee North. Mary, in her deposition to help her husband reclaim some money, spoke quite clearly and candidly!

"I was at home during the whole period of the war . . . I have heard him speak . . . on war matters very many times and he was uniformly in favor of the Union. . . . He condemned the South for bringing on the war..

During the war we had at our house a great many refugees which my husband kept and fed and harbored [on the so-called Unionist Underground Railroad] until the guides would come and take them to the mountains where the guides would conduct them through to the union lines and we had care of several families of the refugees and helped them get away to the North also.

Our place was called by the secessionist as a d__d Union hole. Our whole family and connections on both sides were strongly Union people. My father who was with us did not want any disloyal persons about him."

Other Mennonites in the volume not mentioned above, include David C. Brenneman, Jacob Shank, Jr., and Anthony Rhodes.

Volume II of *Unionists and the Civil War Experience*, like Vol. I, gives us more windows into the Civil War world and local attitudes toward it.

Jim Lehman

Dutch Mennonites Send Relief Money to Virginia Mennonites

Mennonites were among the first white settlers in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, coming from Europe via Pennsylvania perhaps as early as 1727 or earlier. The best known settlement located in Page County, near Luray.¹

They, along with others of the area, prospered materially on their farms until the French and Indian War came along in the 1750s. Before the war the Indians (Native Americans) were friendly. But during the war they left. Before long a small group returned to make destructive raids on the white settlements.

One of the most difficult times occurred in May 1758, when fifty people were killed and several hundred families fled. Among them were the families of several Mennonites. The last raid in 1764 is usually called "the Roads Massacre" when minister father, John Roads, and his wife and four sons and two daughters (of 13 children) were victims.

After the May 1758 problems, some who had fled appealed to Dutch Mennonites for help. Here is the text of the letter that was taken personally to the Dutch Mennonites by Johannes Schneyder and Martin Funk.² [Ed.]

"The grace of God and love and peace of Jesus Christ is our wish to all God-loving souls and especially to our brethren in faith in Holland or Netherlands.

Greeting:--

Today, the 7th of September, 1758. Herewith we authorize our brother and co-worker in faith Johannes Schneyder, who until now has been a

¹Harry Anthony Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1727-1900*. Vol. 1. Harrisonburg: Pub. by author, 9-13.

²Charles Fahs Kauffman, *A Genealogy and History of the Kauffman-Coffman Families*. York: Pub. by author, 548-49. Brunk also published most of the letter on p. 33-34.

good friend to the poor, and who contemplates a journey to the friends and brethren in Holland on account of the dark times in which we find ourselves at this time, owing to the tyrannical and barbarous Indians who have already killed so many people, and have taken many prisoners and carried them away; others were driven from their homes and lands, so that many people are now in great poverty and distress.

We were thirty-nine Mennonite families living together in Virginia. One family was murdered and the remaining of us and many other families were obliged to flee for our lives, leaving our all and go empty-handed.

Last May the Indians have murdered over fifty persons and more than two hundred families were driven away and made homeless.

We come, therefore, with a prayer to you, brethren and co-fellows in faith for help, by way of charitable aid, if your love will persuade you to show mercy to us, so that we may with God's help, and the aid of good friends, be guided through this Valley of Grief; the dear Lord will reward you for it, here in this life and finally in eternity for all you do for us.

Further, I do not deem it necessary to write much, as our friend and brother [Martin Funk] will give you a better report than I could in my simple and imperfect writing, for, he too had been in danger of his life, with his wife and four children and was compelled to flee and leave his all behind. He had been so situated that he could make a comfortable living. He had a nice little farm and besides he had begun the distilling of turpentine oil. He was always a good friend to the distressed in times of need.

Further we request you to remember us in your prayers, as we are likeminded toward you, we may have the comfort of good old Tobias, with which he comforted his son, when he said, 'Even tho we are poor, but if we fear God, we shall receive much good.'

P. S. This our friend desired a traveling companion from the Congregation to accompany him on his journey, as he deems it best not to go alone. Upon our advice and with our best wishes, our Minister and Elder, Martin Funk, has consented to go. Until now he was found true and honest in all things by all. He is, however, still a single man and by occupation a miller. He too was compelled to flee and leave his all behind. This man was found by the grace and help of God, and will be a true traveling companion of our brother Johannes Schneyder, on his journey to Holland.

Further, in my simple-heartedness, I do not know what more to write, only to send greetings from us all to all the brethren and congregation in Holland.

Signed by us and many others, Michael Kauffman, Jacob Borner, Samuel Bohn, Daniel Stauffer.

Written by Benedict Hirsche, one mile from Lancaster town, Mennist Minister.

From Muller's Weidertaufer page 365, we learn these two envoys arrived in Amsterdam, Holland, December 8, 1758. A letter was addressed from the Mennonites in Holland, December 27, 1758, in which they tell of sending 50 pounds English Sterling or 78 pounds, 11 shillings, and 5 pence, Pennsylvania money, which they may receive on presenting enclosed credentials to Messrs. Benjamin and Samuel Shoemaker in Philadelphia.

From Book 1763-67, page 69, etc. There are two settlements, one for Christian Haldiman, and also Jacob Haldiman from which it would appear that Jacob Haldiman was also killed. This Jacob was to get 23 pounds and 7 shillings and it was given to his representative. Michael Kauffman and wife late Barbara Haldiman get 11 pounds, 10 shillings, and 3 1/2 pence. The representatives of John Haldiman get the same amount. The date of this distribution is Apr. 8, 1762."

Interestingly enough, Michael Kauffman was thought to be the first or one of the first

Mennonite ministers in Rockingham County and he was the second adult buried in the Lindale Mennonite Church cemetery. Kauffman died on December 21, 1788.

Editor

Valley Brethren Mennonite Upcoming Events

February 4 – Annual Meeting, 7 p.m. at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren. Noted Civil War historian, John Heatwole, will speak on "The Everyday Lives of Our Ancestors." Call Steve Shenk at 438-1275 or email Steve at info@vbmhc.org for dinner reservation (\$12.50) by Jan. 28.

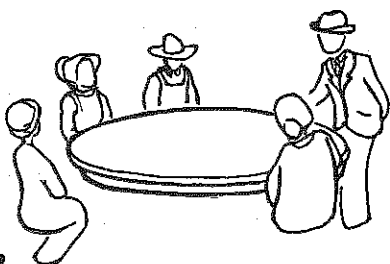
March 5 – VBMHC staff and board are sponsoring a Future Directions meeting, from 9:00-12:00 a.m. in the Berea Christian School Cafeteria, 1351 Garbers Church Rd. The public is invited to attend and respond to future plans for the Center. Hot drinks and finger foods to be served. RSVP by March 3 (438-1275).

March 27 – Easter sunrise service being planned by the CrossRoads staff and board for Sunday, March 27 at 6:00 a.m. on the hill behind the Burkholder-Myers house. Bring family and friends to the vision-expanding view of the Massanutten Range and Blue Ridge Mountains.

October 15 – CrossRoads will again sponsor a Harvest Day of "good old timey fun for everyone" on Sat. Oct. 15 from 11:00 a.m. till 4:00 p.m. The day will include a smorgasbord of activity for adults and children, including games, food, music, storytelling, and hands-on activities like crosscut log sawing, pressing apple cider, and shelling and grinding corn to feed to animals.

Allen Brubaker, The CrossRoads Center

**First
MENNO
ROUND
TABLE
Coming Up!**



*What's this Menno
Round Table
Business?*

Announced in the last issue is this idea of having a cozy meeting with interested friends to reminisce about the past.

It's an extension of services by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians to have small informal discussion about various topics to enlighten us. Several other ideas are already being talked about for later in the year.

Hosts and co-hosts are invited to choose time and locations for other meetings and offer their services. Reports of meetings may be included in future issues of *SMH*. Watch for further announcements in *SMH*, church bulletins, or email notices.

Contact Debbie Turner Joanna6@aol.com
433-7383,

or

Jim Rush rush@emhs.net 434-0792

Where? New Lindale Mennonite
Church Library

When? Saturday morning, February 26
9:00 – 11:00 a.m.

Topic? History of Lindale, its cemetery
that began 1788, and Brennemens
Church, the forerunner of Lindale

(The cemetery is believed to be the
oldest in the Valley that is located
next to a Mennonite church)

For Whom? **Anyone interested.** Bring
your questions and tidbits of
information, if you have any to offer.
Brief tour of new Lindale facility
included

Host? James O. Lehman

Membership in SVMH? Is it up-to-date? If
not, see Jim Rush at email and phone
number above, or address below. \$6 single,
\$10 per couple.

SHENANDOAH MENNONITE HISTORIAN

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