

# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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## VIRGINIA – WEST VIRGINIA MISSION WORK

(But not called “Missions” at that time!)

*Several decades before the American Mennonite Church spoke of getting involved in “mission work,” even before West Virginia was formed as a state in 1863, Virginia Mennonite ministers were crossing the mountains and preaching in schoolhouses and meetinghouses and taking preliminary steps to form churches. Of course, that was long before today’s terminology of “church planting,” or being a “missional church. From a number of sources we learn about this pioneer work.*

### THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

Long before Atlantic coast settlements had filled up, hardy and self-reliant home-seeking Germans and adventurous Scotch Irish followed the Shenandoah Valley and fanned out through the passes to occupy valleys where centuries of wind-blown leaves had built a deep soil and where game was found in abundance.

At Cumberland Gap they met the French Huguenots coming up from the Carolinas. These were people of like experiences, having tasted persecution.

They refused regimentation or to be broken by governmental tyranny. These liberty-loving individualists asked only to be left alone. To their posterity they transmitted similar characteristics.

In those days the disadvantages of mountain country were less apparent as people lived from the land and the forests. Their economy did not demand nearby markets and large level fields.

But time has a way of changing things. With the opening of the Northwest, traffic moved on the waterways, Furthermore, railways bypassed the mountains. Commercial importance of the Highlands declined sharply. On the steep hillsides the loose forest soil soon eroded away. Hard labor and small returns beset the people. Increasingly, the rugged mountains and swift-flowing streams isolated them from the throbbing life of the outside world.

Time stood still in the mountains. But the people retained their friendliness, frankness and mutual helpfulness in time of need. People took time to live and enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Hospitality became a watchword.

Highland people are naturally religious but it was difficult to foster strong churches.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Linden M. Wenger, “A New Day in the Highlands,”  
Mss. in Wenger’s papers in Virginia Conference  
Archives.

## ENTER THE MENNONITES

Already in the 1840s Bishop Peter Burkholder (who died in 1846), father of Martin, conducted funerals and did visitation in the Muddy Creek and Dry River areas in the 1840s, says Heatwole. Peter also held Sunday afternoon meetings at a place called Gospel Hill, not far from Mt. Clinton.

Soon came the formation of the Bank Church on the banks of the Dry River in 1849. That resulted in it becoming the largest Valley congregation, and it was estimated that more people of outside ancestry sought membership at Bank than any other congregation.<sup>1</sup>

The next natural step was to go over the Shenandoah Mountain and begin to relate and witness to mountain people. Bishop Martin Burkholder (son of Peter) and his co-worker Samuel Coffman crossed that mountain west of Harrisonburg as early as 1858 (before West Virginia was formed in 1863). Very early, small memberships were established at Brandywine and Shady Grove, east of Franklin in Pendleton County.

Thus Virginia Mennonites led the church in partially regaining the Anabaptist vision in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, says Harry A. Brunk and the foundations were laid for what he calls "schoolhouse evangelism."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>L. J. Heatwole, "Fifty Years of Missionary Effort in the Two Virginias," *Youth's Christian Companion* 5(May 25, 1925), 165. LJH did a series of five articles.

<sup>2</sup>Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia*, Vol. 1 (Harrisonburg: Privately published, 1959), 360-61.

The familiar story is well known of Potter John Heatwole who, carrying his Bible and a Mennonite Confession of Faith, walked backwards up the mountain to throw his pursuers off the track. He lodged with people near Seneca Rocks and helped open doors to further ministry.<sup>3</sup>

In 1865 or 66 Bishop Samuel Coffman and Preacher Christian Brunk took a trip to Upshur County, West Virginia (near Elkins), a hundred miles from Harrisonburg, where they received a man into the church. On the way home they held a well-attended meeting in Pendleton County. By 1885, thirty-four members scattered in the counties of Pendleton, Randolph and Tucker had been received into the church.<sup>4</sup>

By that time the Mennonite church at large was beginning to awaken to its missionary responsibility. They became interested in what the Virginia church was doing, and realized that here was true mission work that had been going on for a generation (though it was not called mission work).<sup>5</sup>

The pace had picked up. Within 20 years after the Civil War, Mennonite preachers monthly made the long journeys over four mountain ranges, going from 60 to 80 miles from home base and they had pushed on to the headwaters of the Cheat and Monongahela rivers.<sup>6</sup>

All three Virginia districts became involved. Spontaneously and through Christian love they pushed into the mountains. Around 1850 Mennonite families settled inside Brock's Gap west of Broadway. Eventually, they became involved in a Union Church with the United

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, Brunk thought this story has given Heatwole too much credit for beginning the witness in the mountains.

<sup>4</sup>S. M. Burkholder, "The Church in West Virginia," *Herald of Truth*. 22(Oct. 1, 1885), 298.

<sup>5</sup>Linden M. Wenger, "A Study of Rural Missions in the Mennonite Church," Master's Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 1955, 89

<sup>6</sup>LJH, YCC, June 1, 1924, 169.

Brethren. Much later the Hebron Mennonite congregation was formed. One of the earliest outposts of Virginia Mennonites was at Powder Springs. Here, in 1858, the Mennonites, Brethren and Lutherans began to share a building.

Near this same time ministers traveled 45 miles from Broadway into Hardy County, West Virginia, to a little church at Needmore, six miles west of Salem. Then followed a succession of schoolhouses in which they preached—Mine Spring schoolhouse (near the present Salem church), Vaughans, west of Lost River, Pleasant Grove near Fort Seybert in Pendleton County, the Whitmer school near the Upper and Lower Coves east of Mathias, and a school in the Bean Settlement east of Moorefield, where services were first held in a barn.

Some of this activity began because a few Mennonite families moved to these areas and the preachers followed. Not far from Whitmer school Mennonites began preaching at the Basore and Hinegardner schoolhouses. By the 1880s they were preaching in the schoolhouses near Criders, Virginia and in the Caplingers Chapel (United Brethren).<sup>7</sup> Today Valley View is a thriving congregation.

Not far from there was the Mountain Home schoolhouse which stood on the West Virginia line on top of Shenandoah Mountain. Here the preacher stood in West Virginia and his congregation sat in Virginia! Not far from Bergton was the Bennets Run school and Mountain Top school, also on top of the Shenandoah Mountain. Eventually, there was the Mt. Hermon church,<sup>8</sup> Bethel (north of Cootes Store) and Crest Hill, a frame church purchased from the Presbyterians in 1924.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Ida R. Showalter, "History of the Expansion of the Mennonite Church in Northern District of Virginia Conference," *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 12(Oct. 1951), [3].

<sup>8</sup>Linden M. Wenger served as pastor here for 10 years.

<sup>9</sup>Showalter, Northern District, [3].

And we haven't told you about Soldier's White, Topsy, or quite a few more schoolhouses. Or how consolidation occurred to build small Mennonite meetinghouses that dotted the hills of West Virginia. There are numerous stories about the difficulties, the joys, the sorrows that ministers often encountered.

An interesting phenomena was the Mennonite involvement in a number of Union churches. A number of times the Mennonites and the Brethren shared a building and took turns.

Mennonites in all three districts became involved with other denominations at various Union churches (Plains, near Timberville, 1826; Powder Springs, Orkney Springs, 1858; Newdale, not far from Broadway, 1871; Dry River, about 1880 or earlier, some miles west of the river by that name Union Chapel at Weyers Cave, 1883; Liberty at Quicksburg, 1890; Auburn at Cassanova in Fauquier County, 1903).

Near the turn of the century Augusta County preachers began work in the Blue Ridge mountains. A minister went blackberry-picking and discovered an abandoned church. Thus the Mountain View church was born, another thriving congregation today. Augusta County ministers also traveled the many miles to the preaching points of the other districts.

The map on the next page, done by L. J. Heatwole, shows the numerous preaching points served by the Middle (Central) District. In 1892 the Middle District established a "Home Mission Board.

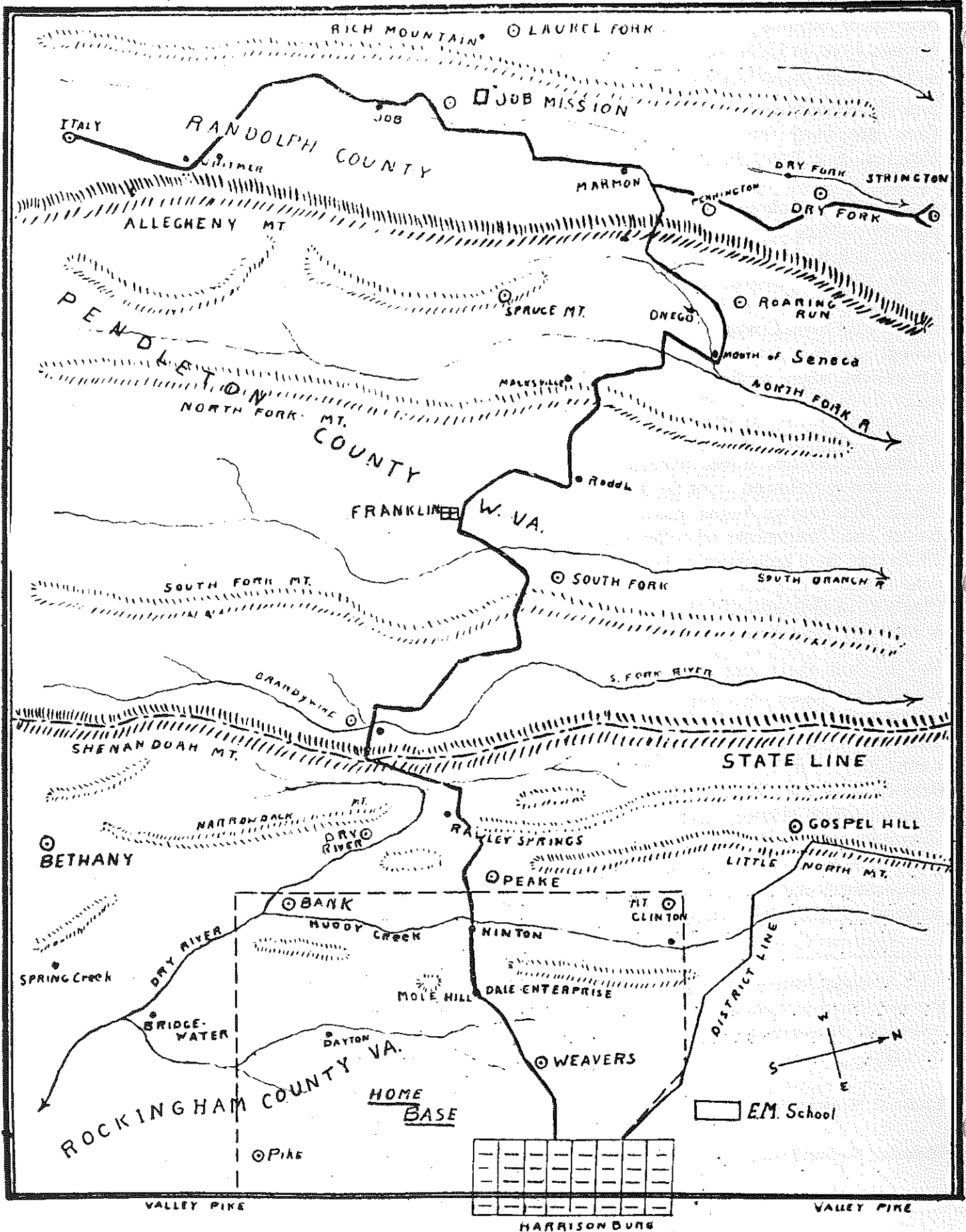
Finances were slim in early days and missionaries like the Rhine Benners had to skimp. Several times Rhine walked over all four mountain ranges to come to the Shenandoah Valley, once to preach at Weavers Church and another time to be ordained at Lindale Church.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Interview with Rhoda Benner Hertzler, July 17, 2002.

# MIDDLE DISTRICT Mission Points,

by L. J. Heatwole, YCC, May 18, 1924, 157. The dark line through the middle is Route 33.

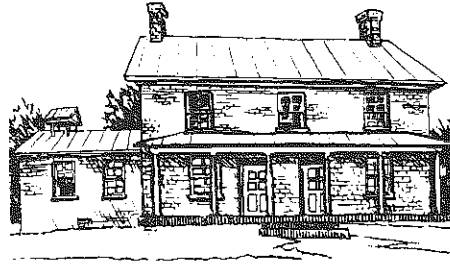


# VALLEY BRETHREN-MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTER

Before you read this the 1854 Burkholder house will have been moved to "CrossRoads," the new Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center campus on the ridge above Garbers Church Road. The house is a gift of the Daniel Myers family, who have also contributed a major gift of money to help move the house to its new location.

*[And what a move it was on July 23! It took five caterpillars and a big John Deere tractor to extricate it from its resting place. Estimates varied as to the load weight. One source estimated the house at 220 tons cradled on 30 tons of steel beams. Ed.]*

The plan is to restore the house to its 1854 vintage condition, or at least as nearly so as is possible, subject to costs and our ability to determine what such a house looked like in the 1850s. The immediate task is to construct the basement under the house and also do some external work such as landscaping and rebuilding the porch.



We also look forward to the new play by Liz Beachy, "Jordan's Stormy Banks." This is a Civil War era play set in the vicinity of Harrisonburg, with the key theme being the challenge war-time presented to the non-resistant Mennonites and Brethren and how they responded. The play will be enacted six times, August 9, 10, 11 and 16, 17, 18 at the Court Square Theater in Harrisonburg.

Tickets can be reserved by calling 438-1275, or purchased at the door. Tickets are selling briskly, so reserving them is probably a good strategy.

We have opened a booth at the Dayton Farmers Market near the cheese shop. A monitor plays the new Heritage Center video, and informative displays and various materials interpreting the Brethren and Mennonites are available there.

In a slow but sure fashion the acquisition of the Turner Mill is going forward. Currently, zoning, water and sewer issues are being worked out. By early fall we

should be able to begin the restoration of the Mill. Our goal is to return it to working operation, and being open for visitors at least several weekends per month.

I am happy to announce that we have employed Brenda Wilberger to direct our Fund Campaign. Brenda comes with broad and successful experience in the field of fund development and her leadership will be invaluable as we begin what will ultimately be a three-phase six-year effort

Our goal for the first phase is \$600,000, and we are happy to report that the Heritage Center board has pledged nearly \$100,000 in support of the campaign goal. Needless to say we are eager to talk with all of you about your contribution to this exciting new Heritage Center.

The funds for the first phase will help pay for the land, the restoration of the Burkholder house, the construction of the Visitors Reception Center, and move the gift of a one-room school/Brethren-Mennonite mission building from Mathias, WV to the Heritage Center site.

The new ten-minute video, "Journeys of Faith and Conscience," an interpretation of Brethren-Mennonite history in the valley, is available and can be purchased for \$10 by calling Al Keim at 833-4022. We especially encourage congregations to add the video to their tape libraries.

We are also in the midst of producing a brochure which will offer a thumbnail introduction to Brethren and Mennonites in the Valley. It will be made available to interested groups and congregations as well as distributed to visitors to the Heritage Center.

During the next year we will be putting out calls for volunteers from time to time for a variety of tasks as the development of the center goes forward. We hope many of you will be able to give us a helping hand.

Above all we ask for your prayers for this endeavor. We believe our people have a convincing faith story which is not only interesting, but relevant to the present. Our goal is to challenge visitors to the Center to consider Christ's call to follow Him in their lives.

Al Keim  
July 2002

## West Virginia Missions Outreach Tour Planned

Reserve September 28, 2002, for a tour to learn about the westward expansion of the Mennonite witness into West Virginia. It is also the time of year when the leaves begin to change.

The Richard's tour bus will leave EMHS's gym parking lot 8 a.m.. We will stop at various churches along our route to hear about that congregation's story. Glendon Blosser, overseer for 25 years, will travel with us to help us learn the stories.

In Harman we will hear from Dr. Samuel and Kathryn Bucher about their medical practice and ministry in Harman. Other speakers will be Robert Wenger, current pastor at Riverside, and Joe Mininger. We will eat lunch in the Canaan Valley Resort Dining Hall. Our return will be between 4 - 5 p.m.

The cost of the day's activities is \$27 for SVHM members and \$30 for non-members. This covers the tour bus, a buffet lunch, handouts and honoraria. Please pass this information about the trip to your friends.

Please send your checks and names to Jim Rush, as well as any questions and suggestions, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22802. 540-434-0792. [jjagrush@aol.com](mailto:jjagrush@aol.com)

## Annual Meeting of the Shenandoah Valley Menno- nite Historians.

September 21, 2002.

Not all details are finalized yet, but it may be a significant meeting in relation to Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center developments.

Watch for further announcement to come later. Meanwhile, mark the time in your datebook!

James Rush, Secretary and Membership.  
780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA  
22802. 540-434-0792.

**To become a member of Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians and receive copies of the newsletter, send name and address and 2002 dues (\$10 per couple, \$6 for individual memberships) to James Rush. This is the third of four newsletters per year, but copies of the Winter and Spring issues may still be available.**

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### SHENANDOAH MENNONITE HISTORIAN

Front cover: Jon Gehman's rendition of the log house now in storage for the Brethren-Mennonite Center

Editor: James O. Lehman

Sketches: Jonathan Gehman

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