



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Winter 2001

Volume 8, Number 1 Quarterly publication of the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians

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One Hundred Seventy-Five Years at the Pike

This is a year 2000 revision of a talk given by the author at the Pike Sesquicentennial on September 6, 1975.

The Past

It was in the early years of the eighteenth century, probably about 1727, that white settlers first moved into the Valley of the Shenandoah. It is interesting to note that several families of Mennonites were among the early settlers. Abram Strickler, Michael Kaufman and John Rhodes purchased land on the South Fork of the Shenandoah in what is now Page County, about 1730.

Other settlements were being formed to the west along the North Fork of the Shenandoah. These settlements gradually spread southward into central Rockingham County, and still later, into Augusta County. Early acquisition of the fertile farmland was no doubt a large factor in both the settling and spread of our people in the Shenandoah Valley.

Among those moving to the new settlement were representatives of the Burkholder, Coffman, Good, Shank, Blosser, Rhodes, Swartz, Long, Showalter, Brunk, Nisewanger, Beery, and Wenger families. Nearly all of these are still represented in our local Mennonite churches today. Mennonite leaders coming to the new settlement were Peter Burkholder, Jr., Abraham Nisewanger and Frederick Rhodes. The latter were those to whom the Pike Church was deeded in 1829.

In these early years of settlement there were no church houses built. Largely following long-standing tradition, worship services were held in the spacious homes of the settlers. This tradition carried for well on toward one hundred years.

Growth of the membership, and some attendant problems, however, gradually made meeting in homes unsatisfactory. Within five years, between 1822 and 1827, four churches were built.

The first was Trissels in 1822 or '23; the second, Pike, in 1825; third, Brennemens, near Edom in 1826; and then Weavers in 1827. These four churches, located as they were near the centers of Mennonite population, put a church within five miles of most Valley Mennonite families of the time.

The Pike

The Pike Mennonite Church was established in the year 1825. This church, located on U.S. Route 11, the Stage Road, five miles south of Harrisonburg, Virginia, was the first Mennonite Church to be built in the Middle District of the Virginia Conference. It was located in the heart of the early Mennonite settlement to the south of Harrisonburg on two plots of land, totaling about one and one-half acres, purchased for the price of twenty dollars.

This land, purchased from Joseph Wenger, John and Mary Landes, Elizabeth and Susannah Wenger of Rockingham County, was not deeded until 1829. Following the customary practice of the time to deed

church property to officials, the land was deeded to preachers Abraham Nisewanger and Frederick Rhodes. This land bordered that of Peter Moyers, who was likely one of the leaders in the building of the church. This is also the reason, no doubt, why the church was called Moyers Church for some time.

The trees for this small, rectangular log church, the second to be built by the Virginia Mennonites, were felled on the farm of S.M. Burkholder near Dale Enterprise. This first meeting house stood on the approximate site of the former frame church and, although smaller, resembled it closely in structure. As one of the pre-Civil War churches in the Middle District, the Pike continued after the war and came to be known as one of the home-base churches, along with Weavers, Bank, and Mt. Clinton.

As time went on, and the Mennonite population of the area increased, the Pike Church became inadequate in size to handle the crowds. Therefore, in 1878, after 53 years use, the church was rebuilt and enlarged, the work being done by Martin Blosser, son of Abraham Blosser the printer. This 40x50 foot weather-boarded building was the basic part of the church.

A west-end addition was built onto the church in 1948-49, and an entrance on the east in 1956. These additions provided much-needed Sunday-school rooms, furnace room and rest room facilities. The long pulpit in the new church was placed along the west end, flanked on both sides by an amen corner. The seating plan consisted of four tiers of simple benches with only two main aisles leading from front to back. The two center tiers were separated by a solid wooden partition a little higher than the tops of the benches.

The heating system for this building consisted of a large, coal burning stove on each side of the auditorium connected by long overhead pipes to a barrel-like outlet in the center of the ceiling. This system continued in use until the 1948-49 addition was built onto the west end of the church and a furnace installed to provide central heating. The lighting system for the church consisted of lamps suspended from the ceiling. These were replaced with electric lights in the 1920's. More adequate fluorescent lighting was installed in the spring of 1973.

In the early 1980's a new brick church was built at the Pike. The first service was held in the present building on May 23, 1981.

For some reason a cemetery was not started at the Pike until 1897. Up until that time, Pike people were likely buried in the Early Cemetery to the east of the Pike. In February 1897, Emory A. Layman, nine-year-old son of Martin A. and Kate Lahman, was buried here.

Up to 1840 Mennonite preaching and singing were exclusively in German in Rockingham County. However, due to the influence of English-speaking friends and neighbors, the continuing use of German, their mother tongue and considered by some to be sacred, was in danger of being lost. In order to combat this trend and to provide basic instruction for their children, it became the practice of the Valley Mennonites to build a schoolhouse in connection with their churches. The main books used in these schools were the German New Testament, a speller/reader combination published at New Market, and Joseph Funk's German songbook, Choral Music.

In keeping with this practice a small schoolhouse was built here at the Pike church. About 15x20 feet, this school stood approximately fifty feet northwest of the church building. Records are not available as to when it was built, how long it was used, or who taught there.

We can assume that the shift in languages took place in the twenty-year period between 1840 and 1860.

In the early days of the Middle District, organization was on the district rather than congregational level. Services and meetings for all of the churches in the district were planned by one committee. Church services were not held at every place every Sunday but rotated between the district churches. The third Sunday of every month was the schedule for the service at the Pike. This system of alternating services was followed, with some changes, until 1948 when regular services were being held at the Pike every first, third, and fifth Sunday mornings. On the first of October 1948 services were begun to be held at the Pike every Sunday morning. This resulted in a lowering of attendance as people began to settle down to regular attendance at a church home instead

of alternating between two or three churches a month. This move did, however, permit more of an aspect of congregational organization than was possible before.

Regarding the beginning of Sunday school at the Pike we are at somewhat of a loss to fix an exact date due to an absence of records. For some reason a Sunday school was not organized at Pike before 1900. There is, however, a Sunday school record book which dates back to the year 1913. Here again we can assume with a reasonable degree of certainty that Sunday school began at the Pike somewhere within this thirteen year period, 1900-1913.

During the first several years for which we have records, Sunday School was held at varying times, sometimes at nine or ten o'clock in the morning, and sometimes at three o'clock in the afternoon. By 1918, however, it was held regularly at ten o'clock. In 1913, the average attendance was forty eight, and by 1915 it had advanced to fifty. By 1927 Sunday School was being held at the Pike on every first, third, and fifth Sunday morning.

Due to the district type of organization up until 1948, it is difficult to assign ministers to a specific church, since they were ordained simply to serve in the district. Both Abraham Nisewanger and Frederick Rhodes, along with Peter Burkholder, had lived and were ordained in the Northern District before moving to the Middle District area. These men were all influential until their deaths in the mid 1840's.

Another of the well-remembered ministers, connected with the Pike in more recent times, was Abraham Burkholder (1850-1941). Since he lived near the Pike Church he preached there rather frequently, particularly in his older age. He is also remembered by some for his post-sermon talks, "bearing testimony" to the message brought by another minister. Another minister serving about the same time was William Brubaker, who lived just northwest of the church. He was the father of Daniel A. Brubaker, later a pastor at Pike. He is buried in the Pike cemetery.

Brother James T. Shank also served from this period to the mid 1940's. The brethren Warren A. Kratz and Aldine B. Brenneman were serving when the Pike went to an every-Sunday schedule in 1948. They

were influential in establishing the resulting congregational pattern of organization.

In 1951 the first mid-week meeting was organized on Thursday evening, mostly for the youth. This service, Prayer and Praise, was held in the various homes of the congregation and consisted of an evening of singing and a devotional talk. This service is still in existence today but has been changed to the second and fourth Wednesday evenings to conform to the other mid-week meetings on the alternating Wednesday evenings.

On alternating Wednesday evenings a Bible Study is held at the church. This meeting was begun in 1955 and provides classes for everyone from children to adults.

There are also other special meetings held at the Pike from time to time. For a number of years a communion service was held on the first Sunday of every October. L.J. Heatwole writes that in October 1880 there were a "goodly number of folks assembled to partake of the emblems of the broken body and shed blood of Christ." These were referred to as the "big meetings." In 1961 communion services began to be held twice each year, on the first Sunday of April.

The sewing circle, begun in 1949 in cooperation with the ladies of the Bank Church, met on the first Tuesday of each month at Jacob Brubaker's; later at the Bank Schoolhouse. In 1972 the time and place of meeting were changed to the first Wednesday at Hickory Hollow Schoolhouse. At that time the name Valley Sewing Circle was adopted.

Since their organization in 1952, the youth group has played an active role in the program of the Pike Church. They have had various programs and projects which they plan for and carry out under the direction of pastors and youth sponsors. In 1952 the Willing Workers group was formed where the young folks met once a month and prepared "The Way" and Gospel tracts for mailing. This work grew to where there were over one thousand names on the mailing list, going to half a dozen states. This work, supported by free will offerings from the congregation, was terminated about 1966.

In November 1972 a recording ministry project was begun to provide church services via cassette tape to the aged and infirm members of the congregation. This project provided church services at home for a number of our members and has been used some in outreach beyond our congregation.

In 1974 an additional acre of land bordering the church to the south was purchased for 250 times the price of the original plot.

It is evident from the past that the Pike has always been interested in progress of the proper sort. The coming of Sunday School, Bible School, organized youth activities and other church programs bear testimony to this fact. From its early days it has shown its interest in the work of the church at large by supplying ministers for the various mission preaching posts. Countless others have gone out to help with church and Sunday school work at various places. In a period of two years in the early 1960's twenty-two went out from the Pike, some to serve locally, some in other states. In 1967 another twenty workers and families left to assist in the reopened program at the Peake Church.

Conclusion

This year marks the 475th year since the founding of the Anabaptist movement. The Pike Church has been here for fully one-third of our total Anabaptist history, and for all but 50 years of the history of our country. Through these years there have been many changes both in the world at large and in the church. We are here today only because of the grace of God and the efforts of our fathers. The best recognition we can give our noble forefathers, then, is a faithful passing on of the spiritual and moral heritage they have left us.

Our forefathers likely did not realize they were writing history. They simply went about their daily activities with a deep dependence on God and the assurance of His direction. It is heartening to note, however, as one reads the record of the past, of the concern for deeper spirituality and for consistent expression of the same in all areas of life, by the shepherds of the flock in bygone years. May their concern and example motivate us today in the one-hundred-75th year of our congregation, to "earnestly contend for the faith...once delivered unto the

saints," and to commit the same "to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

The history of the Pike Church is not all written. As time continues the Pike Church can yet fill a vital role in the redemptive work of the Master. The task today is in our hands. What we do today largely determines the future history of this church. May God grant his enabling grace for living (in our generation) the faith our fathers espoused and held so dear.

--David L. Burkholder
Reprinted from Life Lines,
Sept-Oct. 1975, p. 52-56.

The Virginia Mennonite

"It takes a long time to make a Virginian," a well-known Virginian once said. If a Virginia Mennonite is at least 50 years of age, he understands the statement because he knows about the Virginia that was prior to the influx of Mennonites from other states. After about 1900, and especially after the advent of Eastern Mennonite School in 1917, Virginia no longer stood isolated from other Mennonite communities. A new Virginia Mennonite began to emerge as people from other areas began to move in, or evangelists from out-of-state came, bringing with them their own culture and set of religious teachings.

What was the nature of the old Virginia and what were the circumstances and influences that shaped the old Virginia personality?

In many ways the Virginia Conference was on the frontier—not West, but of the South. In Virginia the German culture met head-on with the English; while the Shenandoah Valley population was predominantly German, the English influence was strongly present. Many of the prestigious, prosperous, and leading non-Mennonite families were English and Scotch-Irish.

Virginia was one of the few states where Mennonites lived and worked with an actively slave-holding society. The problem of hiring slaves and trading labor with slave-holding neighbors led to an action by Virginia Conference in 1864:

Inasmuch as it is against our creed and discipline to own or traffic slaves; so it is also forbidden for a brother to hire a slave unless such slave be entitled to receive the pay for such labor by the consent of his owner. But where neighbors exchange labor, the labor of slaves may be received.

The Virginia Mennonites suffered the shock of seeing their home ground become a battlefield. Both Union and Confederate soldiers robbed them of their goods. They lived through the final stages of the War, when they had to witness their barns and sometimes their homes being consumed by the Northern flames. Perhaps the War and the long tedious reconstruction drew the people together in an unusual way. The same experiences caused them to be Southern in sympathy, even though they were Northern in their belief.

Because they were sparsely populated, the Virginia Mennonites did not join field to field and farm to farm as was the case in many other states. The average Mennonite family had several non-Mennonite neighbors.

What did all this do to the Virginia Mennonite? What type of person did he become? Both good and undesirable things happened.

On the negative side, there was a great loss of young people to the church. On the positive side, the people did not become culturally ingrown. They took some of the culture of their English neighbors. For example: titles of respect such as "Aunt" and "Uncle" or "Mr." and "Mrs." for older persons were taught to the young. It was considered rude to address your elders on a first name basis. Other subtle refinements of the English became evident among the people.

In Virginia the German language and its culturally protective arms were cast aside early. In 1837 The Confession of Faith was printed in English for Mennonite use; in 1847 the first Mennonite English hymnbook was published by authority of the Virginia Conference.

With the language barrier gone, the Mennonites could interact even more freely with their neighbors—both giving and receiving.

One thing they shared outside their own denomination was their faith. This they did by sending ministers into the rural and highland areas. By 1920 they had about 20 preaching points. This extension outreach was a new thing in Mennonite history. Historian Harry Brunk called this "School House Evangelism." This perhaps more than anything else shaped the Virginia Mennonite outlook. The Mennonites learned that they needed to be flexible and relax some of their culturally rooted practices, and they learned to accommodate themselves to changes which did not affect principles. New surnames began to appear on membership lists and the vision of the church was broadened. Adding members from another culture broadened the basis of brotherhood, love, and respect.

The Virginia Church was a singing church. Joseph Funk, his sons, and grandsons began a singing school and music publishing tradition. Their influence can never be fully measured. The religious songs of Funk's choosing certainly affected the faith and life of the people.

It is significant that Eastern Mennonite College had its birth in Virginia, one of the states with a comparatively small Mennonite population. By 1930 it was not at all unusual for Virginia Mennonite youth to get a high school education. Some had normal school training.

True to the South, the Virginia Mennonites were hospitable and friendly.

What were the spiritual characteristics of the Mennonites of Virginia? Perhaps early newcomers to the state wondered at both the religiously liberal and culturally conventional nature of the people. They found in Virginians a spiritual reserve not to be mistaken for coldness. Spiritual growth was not a thing to be flaunted, nor was it measured by quick emotional "highs." Unfortunately, as elsewhere in the Mennonite Church, some did not believe they could presume on the mercy of God; to them salvation was a hope, not a certainty. Others had a faith and serenity that was reflected in their quiet testimony. Perhaps more than anything else, it was the Southern conventionality, not a religious conservatism, that made the old-line Virginians slow to take on new programs and express themselves freely in public

meetings. Also, deference to age caused the younger to wait on their elders.

The newcomers to Virginia today may be puzzled by the older Virginia Mennonites. How can such undemonstrative persons show such beautiful spiritual serenity? There is nothing strange about it. They are just reflecting a Mennonite culture that grew in a different setting.

--Grace Showalter

Reprinted from Missionary Light,
July-August 1976, p. 2-3

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The Deacon's Wife

She hath washed the saints' feet:

By grapes crushed in her hot kitchen

In the shaped loaves of altar bread her
deft hands kneaded for the saints'
communion,

Through the folded towels, newly
clean, from yesterday's late communion—
her weariness almost forgotten in
pleasure of the scented sun-dried cloth.

She hurries her family's evening
meal, for she must keep death's watch
this night in neighbor Whitmore's
nearby cottage.

--Grace Showalter

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