

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

A quarterly periodical dedicated to the history and culture of Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, USA

Forming the Mathias Mennonite Church

It moved me deeply when I examined a 1536 Froschauer Bible that had been part of the Strickler family of Virginia for about 450 years. Abraham Strickler brought his worn and weathered family Bible along when he migrated from Germany to Pennsylvania, and then to the Luray area of Virginia in about 1727.

If discovered, authorities in Switzerland would have taken and probably burned the family Bible. One of Abraham's Swiss ancestors was imprisoned in the 1600s and died for his Anabaptist beliefs. For the Strickler family, their Froschauer Bible was a beacon of hope and courage, used at family weddings, marriages, baptisms, and deaths. Today, it is on loan to a museum in Luray, Virginia.

At this quincentennial of Anabaptism, perhaps our greatest challenge is to continue reading and studying the Scriptures. Then, we can gather in community with others to seek the meaning of the written Word for our times today. May our year of remembering these 500 years honor and please God.

Elwood Yoder, Editor

Mathias Mennonite Church, W.Va., a member of the Virginia Mennonite Conference (photo above).

Photo by Gary Smucker



Mennonite mission in the 1950s, at Mount Hermon Mennonite Church, near Mathias, W.Va.

Photo from Grace Showalter collection, Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives

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Forming the Mathias Mennonite Church

By Gary Smucker

The Mathias Mennonite Church was formed in the 1970s when three Mennonite congregations in southeast Hardy County joined together. From the 1860s small Mennonite congregations were located in rural areas of Hardy County, West Virginia, so people could walk to the services, but by the 1970s the roads had been improved and most families had automobiles so forming a centrally located church building made sense. The Mathias Mennonite Church is along Route 259 south of Mathias, West Virginia.

Dedication of the Mathias Mennonite Church building was September 16, 1973. John F. Shank and Linden Wenger spoke in the morning. Grace Showalter, a local historian and college teacher at Eastern Mennonite College (now University), gave a history of Mennonites in the Mathias area. Showalter's mother was from Mathias. The dedication service was in the afternoon at 2:00 p.m. with David Augsburgers bringing the sermon.

The three congregations which joined together to form Mathias Mennonite Church were Cullers Run, Mt. Hermon, and Buckhorn Mennonite Church. The Cove Mennonite Church, the other congregation in the area, which met at the Whitmore School decided not to join because of the distance to the new location. Harley and Irene Good were leaders at Mathias Mennonite Church beginning in 1973 until 1990. Lewis E. McDorman served as pastor from 1990 to 1995.

Cullers Run Mennonite Church was one of the churches which joined to form the Mathias Mennonite Church. The school was used as a Mennonite meetinghouse. The services and Sunday school at Cullers Run School building were usually in the afternoons and the pastors from Buckhorn Church or Mt. Hermon Church met with that group when the group did not have a pastor.

“Cullers Run School is one of the most complete restorations of a one room school in the nation. It is chock full of authentic memorabilia: the original bell, pot-bellied stove, teacher's desk, student benches, lunch buckets, textbooks, papers, and photographs.”¹ A log school building was built in 1879. A new building was built in 1898, and the additional room was added in 1914. Ken and Ann Shifflet restored the school building and donated it to the Cullers Run School Association which maintains the school today. The school is located along Cullers Run Road south of Lost River State Park.

Mt. Hermon Mennonite Church was on a



Cullers Run Schoolhouse, along Cullers Run Road near Lost River State Park, West Virginia.
Photo by Elwood Yoder, 2022

1. *Heritage Weekend Guidebook*, Hardy County Tour and Craft Association, September 2024, 31.

hill next to Route 259 near the West Virginia-Virginia line. Church work started there in 1937. Beginning in the late 1940s the Linden Wenger family lived near the church building, and Linden was the pastor of the Church. Other pastors served the congregation over the years. After the congregation moved to the Mathias Mennonite Church, the building became a private residence and is still used as a home.



Mount Hermon Mennonite Church, Mathias, West Virginia, mid-1950s. Photo from Linden Wenger collection, Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives

Itinerant Mennonite ministers began holding services in the Buckhorn Schoolhouse in 1930 in Hardy County. During the 1930s and '40s, young adults in the Virginia Conference taught Summer Bible School in



Buckhorn Mennonite Church soon after it was built in 1949. Photo from the Linden Wenger Collection in Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives

the highlands. The congregation at Buckhorn grew through the Sunday school, summer Bible school, and revival meetings held in the schoolhouse. The Buckhorn Mennonite Church building was built with volunteer labor and dedicated in 1949. John and Katie Shank provided leadership in the early years of the congregation. The church building was located on Dove Hollow Road and the land adjoined the Lost River State Park. Today the renovated building exists as a vacation cabin.

The Whitmore School served as the Cove Mennonite Church building from 1954 to 1997. The building was on the Upper Cove Run Road. Charles and Alice Hartman gave leadership to the Sunday school. When the Mathias Mennonite Church was organized, plans were for the group from



Whitmore Schoolhouse in the 1950s. Used as the meetinghouse for the Cove Mennonite Church, Mathias, West Virginia, from 1954 to 1997.

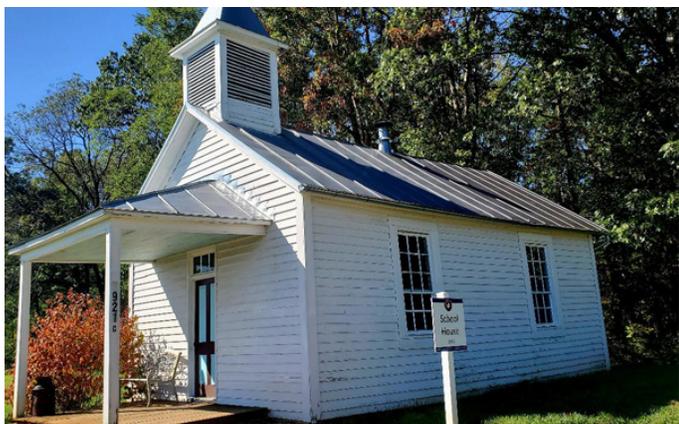
Photo from the Linden Wenger Collection, Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives

Cove Mennonite Church to join the Mathias Church. Bertha Halterman told the church

district leaders that there were people living near the church who walked to the services and would go nowhere to church if the church closed. Linden and Esther Wenger provided part time leadership after their retirement. In 1997, the Northern District of the Virginia Mennonite Conference working with the leadership of the Cove Mennonite Church decided to discontinue the program and merge with the Mathias Mennonite Church.

The old schoolhouse was an ideal representation of a building which had been used both as a school and for worship. The Board of the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center decided to move the building to the BMHC campus in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

In the summer of 2004, the bell tower, the front porch, and a rear classroom were



The former Whitmore Schoolhouse now located at the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Photo by Gary Smucker

removed by volunteers. The 20 foot by 23 foot building was sawed into three parts. In December of 2004 the building was moved to the Brethren Mennonite Heritage Center. Volunteers dug and poured a foundation on the top of the hill near the woods at the BMHC. The parts of the building were carefully reassembled, and the front porch and

bell tower were reinstalled.

Today school groups, tourists, and bus loads of visitors tour the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center to learn the local history of Mennonites and Brethren in the Shenandoah Valley and surrounding mountains and valleys. Students sit at the desks in the Whitmore School building and learn about education in a one room school. The 120-year-old classroom educates a new generation of learners. ■

Did you know?

- *That Springdale Mennonite Church, Waynesboro, Virginia, was first called Kendigs, and has a bicentennial in 2025, having been established in 1825?*
- *That it's been 150 years since Mennonite Evangelist John S. Coffman was ordained at Bank Mennonite Church, July 18, 1875?*
- *That 399 attended the January 1, 2025 Harmonia Sacra singing in person at Weavers Mennonite Church and 60 logged on for the duration of the evening?*
- *That Pike Mennonite Church, in Harrisonburg, began in 1825, two hundred years ago?*
- *That Zion Hill Mennonite Church, Singers Glen, Virginia, began 100 years ago, in 1925?*
- *That the first Minutes kept of the Virginia Mennonite Conference were from 1835 and were written in German?*

Mennonites of Russian Ancestry

Meet

By Timothy Jost

On October 20th, 2024, a group of about four dozen “Ukrainian” or “Russian” Mennonite residents from the Harrisonburg area gathered at VMRC’s Village Hall to enjoy their annual Russian Mennonite meal. This group has come together most years for at least a quarter century to share a potluck together.

Although Mennonites today are very diverse internationally and within the U.S., historically Mennonites came from two separate historical streams, both of which grew out of the 16th century Reformation. The stream that predominates in the Shenandoah Valley immigrated from Switzerland and Germany and came to the valley in the 18th and 19th centuries. Another stream, however, originated in the Netherlands, migrated to what is now Poland in the 16th century, then to what was then Russia and is now Ukraine in the 18th century, and then to the United States and Canada in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Many of this second group have migrated further to Central and South America.

Although the Swiss German ethnic group prevails in the Shenandoah Valley, there are several dozen of us here from the Dutch Russian Ukrainian group; many like myself in mixed marriages with Swiss German Mennonites. Although we have lost many of our traditions, we still enjoy the foods that our ancestors brought with them when they migrated to the United States.

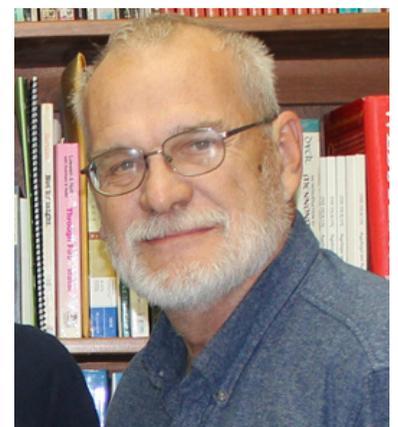
These are high calorie and cholesterol foods, featuring pork, cream, dried fruit, cabbage,

potatoes, and white flour, presented in the form of dumplings, rolls, sausages, soups, and tortes. They are predominantly foods that originated in what is now Poland and Ukraine. These foods are featured in vast quantities at MCC relief sales in the Midwestern and western United States and Canada. (MCC was founded in the early 20th century by American Mennonites to provide relief to starving Mennonites in Russia). But once a year, we get to enjoy them together here.

We gathered for food, conversation, to remember those in our group who had died during the past year, and to hear from Shauna Frantz of her experiences in Ukraine with MCC. At the end of the evening, we all decided that we would gather again next year. If you are a Ukrainian Russian Mennonite not currently on our invitation list, contact Timothy Jost at jostt@wlu.edu.

Editor’s Note: Timothy Jost’s great-grandparents migrated to Canada in 1874 with the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church in Ukraine. Timothy grew up in the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church in California. He holds dual U.S. and Canadian citizenship. Timothy’s wife, Ruth Stoltzfus Jost, is the daughter of Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, and a granddaughter of George R. Brunk I.

Watch for more about Timothy Jost’s Health Law career in the forthcoming history book about the Virginia Mennonite Conference.



Timothy Jost (2016 photo)

The Froschauer Bible

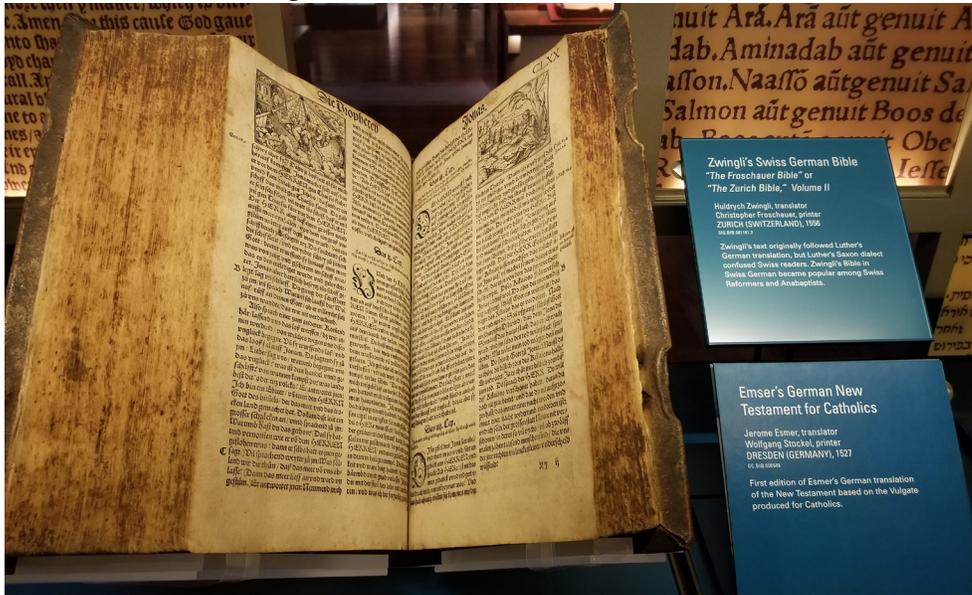
The Froschauer Bible, printed by Christopher Froschauer in Zurich Switzerland, was a favorite of Mennonite and Amish immigrants to America. German families brought approximately 170 copies of these large Bibles with them when they sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. The Mennonites and Amish liked the Froschauer Bible because the language was vernacular Swiss-German, and it was different that Martin Luther's High German translation of the Bible.

In January 2025, the Editor made a trip to the Shenandoah Heritage Village Museum, Luray, Virginia, to see Mennonite immigrant Abraham Strickler's Froschauer Bible (photo at right by Elwood Yoder). Printed in 1536 in Zurich, Switzerland, this Bible has been in the Strickler family for about 450 years.



Abraham Strickler and family migrated into what is now Page County, Virginia, in about 1727.

In 2020, the Editor took the Junior class from Eastern Mennonite High School to the Bible Museum in Washington, D.C. The Bible Museum has a 1556 Froschauer Bible, or "Zurich Bible."



Bible." (Photo at left by Elwood Yoder) The attribution next to the Bible in Washington reads: "Zwingli's text originally followed Luther's German translation, but Luther's Saxon dialect confused Swiss readers. Zwingli's Bible in Swiss German became popular among Swiss Reformers and Anabaptists." Zwingli's Bible in Swiss German became popular among Swiss Reformers and Anabaptists."

History Book Update

Lord willing, co-authors Steven Nolt and Elwood Yoder will submit their history book manuscript to Masthoff Press by the end of February, 2025. Envisioned first in 2011, this book will be titled *People of Peace: A History of the Virginia Mennonite Conference*.

The book will include the story of Mennonites in Virginia and Southeastern States where Virginia Conference established churches. For instance, in the late 1950s the John Barnhart and James Eshleman families from Rockingham County moved to Hephzibah in central Georgia. They purchased dairy farms and met in their homes for worship services. The Virginia Mission Board loaned them folding chairs. Jerry and Thelma Yoder (Elwood Yoder's aunt and uncle) and their eight children moved from Princess Anne County, in southeastern Virginia, to join the emerging Virginia Conference congregation in Georgia. The Yoders bought a dairy farm and helped to construct a new meetinghouse in Hephzibah. The church joined the Middle District of Virginia Conference.

During January and February, 2025, final edits are underway, an index is being assembled, and an appendix is being added. The hardback book will be approximately 528 pages.

Lord willing, the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians will release the book in late October or early November, 2025. We hope you will purchase a copy!

Anabaptism at 500

As a part of the quincentennial of Anabaptism in 2025, a lecture series is offered, one lecture per century. In the first lecture, on the history of the 1500s, Dr. John Roth will speak at Eastern Mennonite High School on January 30, 2025. Each lecture begins at 7:00 p.m., Eastern Time.

In the second lecture, February 6, 2025, Dr. Mary Sprunger will speak about the Dutch Mennonite story in the 1600s. EMU Professor Sprunger's lecture will be held at Weavers Mennonite Church.

In the third lecture, February 13, on the 1700s, Elwood Yoder will analyze Mennonite farmers in Poland, Prussia, Switzerland, and Germany who migrated looking for more land, toleration and religious freedom. Yoder will include a bit of his own story as his ancestors fled Switzerland because of persecution and then moved to Pennsylvania in 1742. This lecture will be at Weavers Mennonite Church.

Caleb Schrock-Hurst will lecture on the movements and migrations and mission endeavors of Mennonites in the 19th century. His lecture will be at Weavers Mennonite Church.

Dr. Andrew Suderman will speak about the twentieth century story of global Mennonites. His lecture will be given in Martin Chapel at Eastern Mennonite Seminary.

All lectures are free and will be live-streamed with links and details for the 35-45 minute lectures to be found at

mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net



In a Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center drama called “This Solid Ground,” performed in December 2024, Sallie Glick, right, (Elly Moyers) learns that her daughter, Anna (Madeline Ramsay) plans to migrate west to Missouri, and Anna has just discovered she is pregnant with her first child. Sallie is distraught at losing her daughter and family to migration. “This Solid Ground” was set in the year 1871, just after the Civil War ended, and was performed on the grounds of the Heritage Center, Harrisonburg, Va.

Photo by Elwood Yoder

Officers of the Historians: Chair, James L. Hershberger; Treasurer, Norman Wenger; Secretary, James Rush; Gary Smucker; Gerald R. Brunk; and Elwood E. Yoder, Editor.

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The *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* is published quarterly by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, established in 1993.

If you have an idea for an article for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at elyoder@gmail.com.

Past issues of *Historian*, from 1994-2024, can be found at mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net. This site includes a link to over 1,640 photos related to Mennonites in Virginia.

An annual individual membership fee for the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians is \$10.00 per year, which includes a subscription to the *Historian*. Additional family memberships are \$5 each. Send membership fees to James Rush, e-mail at jameslrush@comcast.net, phone 540-421-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Circle, Lowville, NY, 13367.