



# 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*

## Mount Clinton Mennonite Church at 150 Years

It was a privilege to speak about the history of Mount Clinton Mennonite Church during its 150th-year celebration in September 2024. Find my speech in the article I included in this issue.

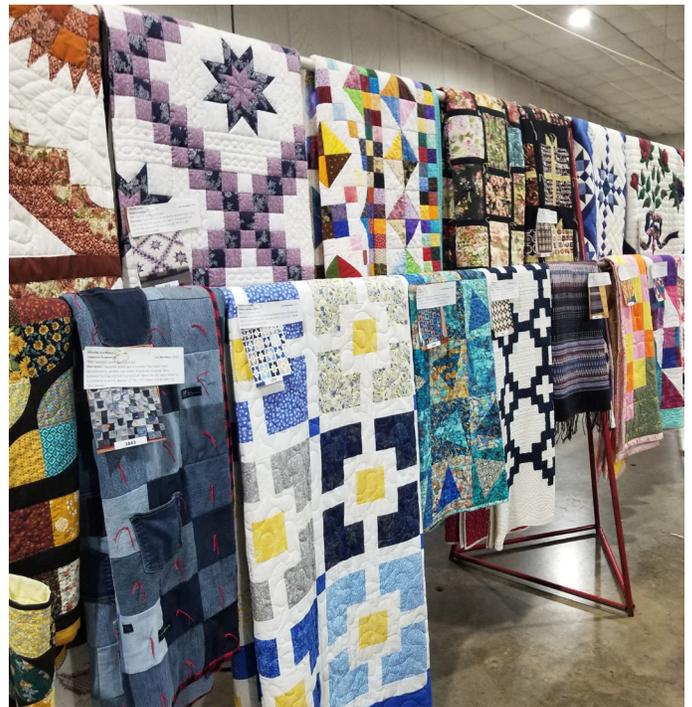
It is remarkable for any church to reach its sesquicentennial. Among Mennonite churches in Virginia, only Bank, Hebron, Pike, Trissels, and Weavers, are older than Mount Clinton Mennonite, and still open for kingdom work. Nine Mennonite congregations in West Virginia and Virginia that started prior to 1874 have since closed.<sup>1</sup>

Buried in the VMC archives I found a comment by Mary E. Suter, Mount Clinton's historian. At the church's centennial in 1974, she hoped that her church would continue to shine like a beacon on a hill. Those are good words for any era, and especially ours today. May we, in whatever church we attend, seek to shine for Christ, be a witness to peace, and invite all to a journey with the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Elwood Yoder, Editor*

**Mabel Memorial Chapel (above), Harrisonburg, Va., a member of Southeastern Mennonite Conference.**

Photo by Elwood Yoder



**Quilts ready to be auctioned at the annual Virginia Mennonite Relief Sale, held at the Rockingham County Fair grounds, Harrisonburg, Va., October 5, 2024. Donors contributed more than eighty quilts for sale at the auction, the proceeds which support Mennonite Central Committee.**

Photo by Elwood Yoder

### IN THIS ISSUE:

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- *A BEACON ON THE HILL*, BY ELWOOD YODER

1. In West Virginia, South Fork, Bethel, Roaring Run, and Cove. In Virginia, Powder Springs, Plains, Mount Pleasant, Hildebrand, and Brennemens.

## SAGA, a Resource for Family History

By Gary Smucker

“I want to find ALL of them! So far, I only have a few thousand.” (MyHeritage.com) This was written by a genealogist about finding his ancestors and their descendants. If you know someone who searches for ancestors, you know how the search seems endless. On April 20, 2024, seventy-nine people interested in genealogy met at Conestoga Mennonite Church in Morgantown, Pennsylvania. It was the annual meeting of the Swiss Anabaptist Genealogical Association (SAGA).

SAGA is an organization that maintains searchable databases with information about descendants of Swiss Anabaptist immigrants, including dates and locations. The volunteers who create the databases have spent years collecting information, which is available for researchers on the SAGA website.

For members of SAGA, there was a bus tour of Berks County, Pennsylvania, on Friday, April 19, to visit Amish and Mennonite ancestral sites, including the Jacob Hochstetler and Anna Burki home when on September 19-20, 1757, there was a raid by Native Americans. In the raid, three people were killed, and three people were taken captive. Many Amish and Mennonites can trace their lineage to Jacob and Anna Hochstetler.

The meeting on Saturday, April 20 in the Conestoga Mennonite Church included a business meeting, panel presentations about Mennonite and Amish migrations within North America, and a presentation about using DNA

information in research. At the meeting there was technical help for anyone with questions about using the SAGA website.

Joining SAGA is easy online. Many Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley will find much useful information in the SAGA databases. Membership is \$10.00 for one year and \$100.00 for a lifetime membership. Technical help is available by e-mail or telephone. The SAGA organization is run by volunteers which keeps the costs very low. Compared to some other organizations which help with ancestor searches, SAGA is a real bargain.

The SAGA Annual Meeting is a great place for networking, sharing information, and connecting with other people interested in genealogy and family history. I have wanted to attend the SAGA Meeting for many years, and it was a privilege and very rewarding to attend the Meeting in Morgantown this year.

The website for SAGA is <http://www.saga-omii.org>. There is also a website for people looking for ancestors of Dutch/Prussian/Ukraine Mennonite origins. That website is <https://grandmaonline.org/gmol-7/>



Attendees at the Swiss Anabaptist Genealogical Association in Morgantown, Pa., April 20, 2024, at Conestoga Mennonite Church. Photo from Gary Smucker

## Historians Annual Meeting

Plan to attend the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians annual meeting, Saturday, November 9, 2024, at 9:30 a.m.

The meeting will take place at Village Hall on the VMRC campus in Harrisonburg. From Route 42, enter at the main VMRC entrance, turn right on Heritage Drive, go straight across Shank Drive, and Village Hall will be on your left.

The annual meeting will include a business meeting with Secretary and Treasurer's reports, and an election of officers. Current officers are listed on the back of this issue. Co-authors Elwood Yoder and Steve Nolt will give an update on the new Mennonite history book that they are writing.

Please come, meet other members, and learn about the activities of the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians, now in our 31st year.

## Anabaptism at 500

On January 21, 2025, upon the 500th anniversary of the beginning of Anabaptism in Zurich, Switzerland, all are invited to attend an evening of remembrance.

From 7:00 to 8:30 p.m., in the Park View Mennonite Church auditorium, Harrisonburg, we will remember our baptisms, our hymns, and our history.

Singing will be led by a local quartet, with hymns chosen from five centuries which will be printed in a booklet for ease of use when singing. We will sing many hymns, so please attend on January 21, 2025. Those who attend in person can keep the song booklet at the close of the service.

The program is free for all. The Park View Mennonite Church auditorium seats 500, with room for an additional 300 in the fellowship hall. This program is planned with all Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley in mind. There will not be a sermon.

The planning committee includes those from the Old Order Mennonite community, the Southeastern Mennonite Conference, and the Virginia Mennonite Conference: Andrea Early, Phil Kniss, Norwood Shank, John Swartz, and Elwood Yoder.

If you cannot attend in person, join at [pvmchurch.org](http://pvmchurch.org) Inclement weather date is January 26, 7:00 pm. Check at [mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net](http://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net)

On Sept. 29, 2024, a boy at Mount Clinton Mennonite Church added coins to the My Coins Count project of the Virginia Mennonite Relief Sale. The money raised supports the ministries of MCC and VMM. Assisting is Ann Graber Hershberger, Executive Director of MCC U.S. Editor photo



## A Beacon on the Hill

By Elwood Yoder

At Mount Clinton Mennonite Church's centennial in 1974, Mary E. Suter (1905-1989) hoped the church would continue to be a beacon on its hill seven miles west of Harrisonburg, Virginia. A historian for Mount Clinton and the Middle District of the Virginia Mennonite Conference, Mary's collection in the archives is one of the best resources for learning the church's history. Mole Hill is located two miles south of the church, and the Little North Mountain and George Washington National Forest lie just to the west of the church. Using Biblical imagery of a beacon on a hill (Isaiah 30:17 KJV), Mary believed her church had been a light in the community, and she hoped that would continue.

### *Beginnings of Mount Clinton*

Mary E. Suter's grandfather, Emanuel Suter, had been one of the founders of the church in 1874. Located near the Muddy Creek and not far from older Middle District churches, Weavers, Bank, and Pike, enough Mennonite families lived in the Mount Clinton area to build a new wood frame meetinghouse, thirty feet wide and forty feet long. Minister Joseph N. Driver conveyed land for the new wood frame meetinghouse. On a Saturday in 1874, workers framed the new building; a strong wind blew the structure down the next day. A local person reported to one of the Mennonite leaders that "your church blew down."

In the late 1800s, worship services occurred at Mount Clinton on the first Sunday of each month, rotating around the other Middle District churches for the rest of the month.

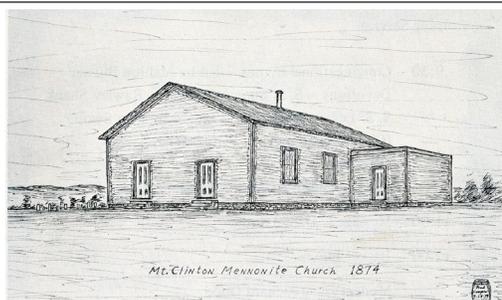
Sunday school, at first resisted, began at Mount Clinton in 1893. Samuel Shank, Jr., a good speaker from the Northern District of Virginia Conference, preached for communion at Mount Clinton in 1887.

The first Mennonite bishops at Mount Clinton were Samuel Coffman and Lewis J. Heatwole. L. J., as he was known, was Mary E. Suter's maternal grandfather. Mary knew L. J. during the last twenty-seven years of his life, when he was an active bishop at her church, 1894-1932. Bishop Heatwole convened a meeting on February 12, 1916, at which it was agreed to build a new brick church building. Some debate took place at the meeting on which side of the road to build the church, as the wood frame building stood on the south side of the road. When land was offered on the north side, it settled the issue of where to build.

Elias Brunk was the first of six deacons at Mount Clinton, ordained by lot in 1891. The last deacon to be ordained, Richard Good, in 1972, was not conducted by the lot. Two deaconesses, Mary Blosser and Nettie Pearl Suter, were ordained in the Middle District for service at Mount Clinton. Mary E. Suter knew both deaconesses and all six of the deacons.

Mary Suter grew up in the Middle District, born in the rural farm family of Eugene and Nellie (Heatwole) Suter. Mennonite families didn't have calendars on the wall or listen to the radio, so they used printed almanac booklets to mark the days of the week, months, and years and to understand the changing seasons. Lewis J. Heatwole, Mary's grandfather, worked as one of six persons in the United States who supplied calendar information to dozens of almanac publishers in the early

twentieth century. Heatwole developed a perpetual calendar that the League of Nations in



Sketch of Mount Clinton wood frame meetinghouse, 1874-1916. VMC Archives

Geneva, Switzerland, considered for a world calendar. In 1908, when Mary was three, L. J. wrote a small book of 233 pages, *Key to the Almanac and the Sidereal Heavens*. The vast difference in Mary's world as a girl at Mount Clinton is far from how we get information today. However, Mary's hope for Mount Clinton to be a beacon on a hill for good, the right, and peace in Jesus Christ remains relevant in the computer age.

### ***Mount Clinton Mennonite, 1916-1963***

Middle District churches in the Virginia Conference scheduled ministers to speak at Mount Clinton with a preaching calendar. From 1912 to 1963, deacons made the calendars, designating who would speak. Usually, the people at Mount Clinton did not know who would preach before the service began. Deacons and ministers like Elias Brunk, Henry Blosser, M.T. Brackbill, and John W. Shank were among those who made the calendars.

A 1932 calendar, probably typed by C. K. Lehman and copied on a mimeograph machine, shows who came to Mount Clinton on the first Sunday of the month. The ministers included Abraham Burkholder, L. J. Heatwole, Rhine Benner, Leonard Jones, and John L. Stauffer. Into the 1930s and 1940s, Mount Clinton met twice a month on the first

and third Sunday. In 1944, Rhine W. Benner preached twice a month at Mount Clinton. In 1958, Chester K. Lehman preached almost every Sunday, showing that Mennonite churches were increasingly assigned a single pastor or two. In 1963, the last neatly typed Middle District preaching calendar produced shows C. K. Lehman preaching almost every Sunday of the year.

Home-based churches like Mount Clinton, Weavers, Pike, and Bank began new churches in the early twentieth century and sent missionaries to distant locations. Zion Hill, Rawley Springs, began in Virginia, and Brushy Run began in West Virginia. To promote mission in West Virginia, the Home Mission Board of the Middle District Churches operated from 1892 until 1962, overlapping most of those years with VMBM. Missionaries like Henry and Bettie Keener, Warren and Mary Kratz, and numerous "missionary sisters," including Mary Suter, served in rural West Virginia, supported by the Home Mission Board.

With a large Middle District in 1963 of fifteen churches and thirteen preaching stations, the Middle District and Virginia Conference reorganized. The Harrisonburg, West Valley, and Central Districts came out of the Middle District, with Mount Clinton in the Central District.

### ***Centennial Era, 1964-1974***

Mount Clinton celebrated one hundred years in 1974. Gas prices were rising because of the OPEC oil embargo, the speed limit on interstates had been reduced to 55, and Richard Nixon was forced to resign just weeks before the centennial event here on the hill.

The church held a full day of events on October 20, 1974.

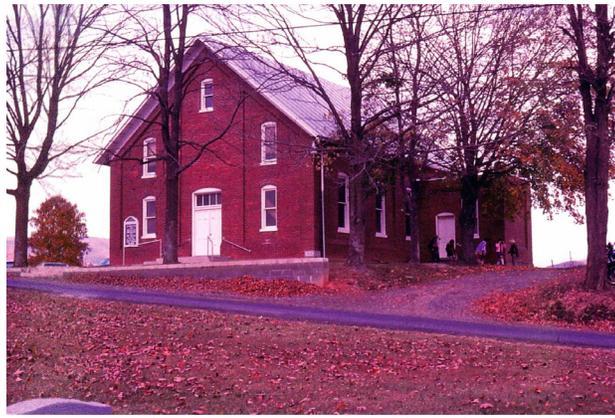
Mary Suter supplied information for the congregation's centennial. Membership in 1974 was 106. Mary Suter's pastors were C. K. Lehman and Samuel E. Miller. Samuel and Ella May Miller had served eleven years as missionaries in Argentina before coming to Mount Clinton. Ella May spoke on *Heart to Heart* for over twenty years, a popular Mennonite Broadcasts radio program.

On the centennial day, Dr. Daniel B. Suter preached. Daniel, a fourth-generation descendant of Mount Clinton founders Emanuel and Elizabeth Suter, worked as a biology professor at EMC. EMC Professors Harry A. Brunk and Chester K. Lehman spoke about the church's history, and Pastor Samuel Miller, a Spanish teacher at EMC, preached "A Challenge for the Future."

Mary Suter was the fourth generation to live in the historic Suter house along Mount Clinton Pike. After Mary's passing in 1989, the house and farm were sold and are now owned by members of the Old Order Mennonite community.

Mount Clinton's library grew from when Gordon and Elizabeth Shantz established it in 1950. Mary Suter served among seven or more librarians. In 1964, after Myron Lee Weaver died, a memorial fund bolstered and enlarged the church library.

Early on the morning of April 30, 1960,



Mount Clinton Mennonite Church, 1916-1989.

Wilmer Lehman photo

a Roanoke television reporter witnessed a widely circulated prediction that Rev. Paul Frye would rise from his grave in the cemetery across the road from the church. Family members left him food, which disappeared, so they brought more. The reporter's video showed a cemetery of about eight hundred people crowded around Paul Frye's grave and cars parked on Mount Clinton Pike, snarling traffic as far as one could see. Across the road, the reporter captured the small red-brick Mount Clinton Mennonite Church. Rev. Frye did not rise from the dead or preach a sermon that Saturday.

### ***Recent Era at Mount Clinton, 1975-2024***

Following Samuel Miller, pastors who have served at Mount Clinton include Wilmer Lehman (1977-1984), Richard Bartholomew and Kenneth Seitz Sr., Interim (1984-1985), Paul Kratz (1985- 1997), Wayne North, Interim (1997-1999), Lee Martin (2000-2017), Kara Yoder (2014-2016), Lonnie Yoder, Interim (2017-2018), and James L. Hershberger (2019- ). Richard and Wanda Good began attending Mount Clinton in the mid-1950s, and Dick served for many years as Deacon. Bishops since L. J. Heatwole have included Samuel H. Rhodes, Daniel W. Lehman, Mahlon Blosser, and Glendon Blosser. District Ministers have included Paul Kratz, Richard Bowman, Robert G. Wenger, and James Akerson.

A fire destroyed the red brick meetinghouse

at Mount Clinton in April 1989. Pastor Kratz and the congregation had to rebuild. When the congregation gathered on the grounds beside the burned-out shell two days later, Kratz spoke, and the north gable collapsed. By April 1990, a new building was ready for use at a cost of \$500,000.

From Mount Clinton, Roland Weaver led and coordinated the MCC beef canning operation in the Shenandoah Valley in the 1970s and 1980s. Born a month before Mennonites first sent relief to Russia in 1920, Roland grew up with MCC. As the owner of a plumbing business, what energized Roland Weaver was coordinating all the groups of Mennonites to can beef for relief.

Martin (Marty) Miller grew up at Mount Clinton. Marty combined his fluency in Spanish, his farming can-do skills, and his desire to serve internationally, and in the 1970s, he served as the Colonization Coordinator in San Julian, Bolivia. The colonization project, which helped move families from the highlands to the San Julian settlement, became a model in Bolivia and was recognized by the Bolivian government, the World Food Organization of the United Nations, Oxfam England, and the World Council of Churches.

In a 2015 interview, Pastor Lee Martin explained that he wanted to launch a career in forestry. But “God had a different plan” for his life. After a term of VS in Mississippi and graduation from EMU, Lee became a youth pastor at Gospel Hill Mennonite Church. Then, Lee and Peg served as camp managers at Highland Retreat for eleven years. On the first day of the new millennium, January 2, 2000, Lee became the full-time pastor at Mount

Clinton, serving for seventeen years. They then worked for seven years with MCC Appalachia Build (formerly SWAP), McDowell County, W.Va. Most recently, Lee is a carpentry instructional assistant at Massanutten Technical Center. At the end of that 2015 interview in the Mount Clinton office, Lee returned to his Bible and laptop, pondering his upcoming sermon at Mount Clinton.

Pastor Jim Hershberger met his wife, Ann Graber Hershberger, while serving on a VS assignment in Nicaragua. The 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution forced them to leave.



In 1985, Jim and Ann decided to return to serve in Nicaragua for five years. They both knew Spanish but were beginning to feel too comfortable with wealth and consumerism in Harrisonburg, and they wanted their daughter to grow up in a different environment. Upon moving to Harrisonburg, Ann taught nursing for thirty-three years at EMU, and in 2020, she became Executive Director of MCC U.S. Jim is now the Moderator of the Virginia Mennonite Conference.

May Mount Clinton Mennonite Church continue to shine for Christ like a beacon on a hill. Congratulations to the church on its milestone sesquicentennial celebration.



Mary E. Suter, pictured above, (1905-1989) was the fourth and last generation in her family to live in this house located along Mount Clinton Pike in Rockingham County, Va. Mary's historical records in the VMC archives are invaluable for understanding the history of Mount Clinton Mennonite Church. Mary wrote *Memories of yesteryear; a history of the Suter family*, 1959, and with her sister, Grace Suter Grove, who finished Mary's work, wrote *L. J. Heatwole: A Granddaughter's View*, 2001.

Photo of Mary from VMC Archives; 2024 photo of house by Elwood Yoder

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](mailto:elyoder@gmail.com).

Past issues of *Historian*, from 1994-2024, can be found at [mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net](http://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](mailto:jameslrush@comcast.net), phone 540-421-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Circle, Lowville, NY, 13367.

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

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians  
5736 Brookside Circle  
Lowville, NY 13367