



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

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Peggy's War History Tour, July 2024

In 2017, I visited the Showalter farm just west of Harrisonburg, not realizing that Peggy Rhodes' house had been there. During a return tour on July 13, 2024, I learned where Peggy Rhodes' house once stood. I wrote Peggy's story in the Weavers history book in 2015 and interpreted her story from Southern Claims Commission records (*Weavers* book 38-39).

During this summer's tour, Karl Rhodes and I explored the new building addition at Weavers Church. In the lobby, copies of my Weavers history book were for sale. Karl took one and turned to a photo of the Weavers sanctuary in 1965 when men and boys sat separate from the women and girls. In the back row, little boy Karl Rhodes looked up at the balcony photographer 😊 (*Weavers* book 230).

I am privileged to have joined the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center Board in January 2024. I am learning to know the Brethren board members and digging to learn more about a sister denomination to Mennonites in the Valley. Perhaps that's why I wrote a feature essay on the Brethren. I hope you enjoy all three articles in our summer issue! *Elwood Yoder, editor*

Weavers Mennonite Church (above), a stop on the Peggy's War history tour, July 13, 2024. Editor photo



Peggy's War author Karl Rhodes at the grave marker of Henry H. Rhodes, his great-great-grandfather, in the Shank Cemetery, Harrisonburg, Virginia, July 13, 2024. Editor photo

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A Report on the *Peggy's War* and Reunion Tour

By Norman R. Wenger

On July 13, 2024, fifty-five people spent eight hours together touring sites related to Karl Rhodes' recently published book *Peggy's War*. Some were genealogically obsessed Heatwole historians. Others were interested in anything related to the Civil War. Still, others just wanted an interesting activity for an otherwise routine Saturday afternoon. Some thought they had heard everything there was to hear about *Peggy's War* and the Unionist Underground Railroad but wanted to avail themselves of the gifted knowledge and wit of the author and guide Karl Rhodes.

Okay, it was not a reunion tour, as suggested in the title. Sometimes, it just felt that way. It was at lunch where it seemed like just as much a reunion tour group interested in history as opposed to a history tour simply stopping for lunch. Setting the stage was the meal, but not a typical sandwich, apple, or cookie-boxed lunch. The Weavers Church group went all out with a full barbecue chicken meal and potato salad, coleslaw, fruit, and dessert. Smoke rose from the barbecue pit as the bus pulled into the parking lot.

A few excerpts of random conversations overheard were: "Now, which of David Heatwole's children are you descended from?"; "I used to baby-sit your kids 35-40 years ago."; "Wow, it has been

decades since I last saw you."; "What is going on at the church we used to attend together? Was that 15 or 20 years ago?"; "Tell me about your recent family history trip to Europe."; "You drove from Georgia or Pennsylvania to go on this tour?"; "You have changed a bit since we worked at the hospital together 50 years ago."; "Can you believe how skilled our bus driver is?"; "Isn't Karl Rhodes entertaining?"; "I skipped my fifty year high school reunion to go on this tour."; and so forth and so on. Hopefully, you get a sense that the group was having a good time and feeling comfortable and at ease with each other.

Of course, the tour was mostly about the history! Following is a brief summary of the stops on the tour where we got off the bus.

Weavers Mennonite Church - The tour began where Peggy Heatwole Rhodes, Henry Rhodes, and many other characters in *Peggy's*



Karl Rhodes (blue shirt) stands where Peggy Rhode's house stood in the nineteenth century. The well is uncovered for the tour. The frame of the barn on right is the original barn, which was not burned in the Civil War.

Editor photo

War were members. The current limestone church was built in the early 1940s. The original log church was built in 1827 and was located on the opposite side of Rawley Pike from where the current church is located.

Peggy's Farm - This stop in a field west of Harrisonburg near Belmont Estates was where Peggy and Henry Rhodes' home was located during the Civil War. Much of the story of *Peggy's War* took place here. Peggy ran a depot on the Unionist Underground Railroad, concealing as many as six men at a time who were waiting for a pilot or guide to take them through the mountains into what is now West Virginia, where they could cross into Union territory and escape conscription into the Confederate Army.



Sheldon "Pete" Burkholder, left, with owners of the farm where Peggy's house once stood, Chris and Laura Berkey Showalter, July 13, 2024. Editor photo

Doc Heatwole House - Gabriel "Doc" Heatwole hid his grandson, Manassas Heatwole, in a secret cellar at this location. Tour participants could enter the cellar and view the hiding place reached during the Civil War through a hidden trapdoor in a closet.

Rocktown History - Formerly known as the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society, Rocktown History is in Dayton, Virginia. Featured was a Civil War gallery called "Harvest of Flames," a day-by-day account of General Philip Sheridan's burning of the Valley. Tour participants unfamiliar with what Rocktown History has to offer were amazed at the various galleries and items in the museum and the bookstore.

Abraham Heatwole House - This is the home where Peggy grew up. Her parents, Abraham Heatwole and Margaret (Showalter) Heatwole purchased this farm in 1831 and lived there for the rest of their lives. The current owners, Austin and Marie Eberly, have completely renovated the house and preserved many of its historical features.

Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center - This outdoor history museum, located at 1921 Heritage Center Way, Harrisonburg, is a "must-see" for anyone interested in learning more about the Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley. Tour participants rotated between the Burkholder-Myers Home, the restored log Weaver-Brunk house, and the reconstructed David Heatwole shoemaker shop.

The restored log Weaver-Brunk home originally stood where Mountain View Elementary School is currently located. John Brunk hid men from the Confederate conscription scouts here as well as in Weavers Mennonite Church.

The reconstructed David Heatwole shoemaker shop was originally built by Peggy's grandfather, David Heatwole (1767-1842). David migrated to Rockingham County from Pennsylvania in the mid-1790s.

Shank Cemetery or “Old Weavers Church Cemetery” - Peggy’s husband, Henry H. Rhodes, who died during the Civil War, is buried here. His original tombstone was missing for many years and wasn’t found until 1982. In the meantime, his grandchildren erected another memorial stone for Henry. Thus, there are two tombstones for Henry.

Weavers Mennonite Church Cemetery - This is the site of Peggy’s grave. Peggy’s second husband after Henry died was Michael Shank. An interesting inscription on her tombstone reads, in part, “Our Mother Margaret Wife of Michael Shank, formerly the wife of Henry Rhodes.”

Other sites pointed out as the bus drove by were the Dale Enterprise Post Office, where Peggy gave her depositions before the Southern Claims Commission, and the homes of Reuben Swope, Bishop Samuel Coffman, David A. Heatwole (Peggy’s bother) and the John B. Wenger/Jacob Shank home.

By the time this article is in print, a second bus tour planned for November 2 will certainly be sold out. While it would be inappropriate to show up unexpectedly at the private homes visited on this tour, so much can be learned by visiting the Rocktown History Center in Dayton or the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center. Both locations do an outstanding job of preserving the culture and history of our area. Be sure to allow plenty of time when you do visit. There



Heatwole cousins and descendants of Gabriel “Doc” Heatwole, Dayton, Va., July 13, 2024. From left, Karen, Eileen, Edwin, and Leo Heatwole. Editor photo



During the Civil War, at Gabriel “Doc” Heatwole’s house, this cellar was the primary hiding place for Manassas Heatwole, as well as Peter S. Heatwole and Samuel A. Rhodes. Manassas Heatwole was eighteen when the Civil War began, captured among the 72 men near Petersburg, WV, and taken to Castle Thunder in Richmond. This secret cellar, with photo taken inside the hiding place, was accessed only by a small trapdoor during the Civil War and opened up with a doorway in the 1960s. Editor photo



Twins Joseph and Mary Alice (Mollie) Coffman were born in 1857 and experienced the Civil War. In the 1873 tintype photo above, the twins are 15 or 16 years old. Almost certainly they knew Peggy Heatwole Rhodes (1830-1892). Joseph and Mary attended the Weavers log and wood frame meetinghouses. Their parents were Bishop Samuel and Frances Coffman. Joseph W. Coffman (left) lived until 1933 and Mollie married Lewis J. Heatwole, and she lived until 1926. Tintype from Robert E. Weaver collection



is so much more than can be experienced in a forty-five-minute to an hour-long tour bus stop.

An objective of the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians is to increase awareness and understanding of Mennonite history and culture in Virginia. Hopefully, this tour helped with that objective.

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, take the main VMRC entrance, turn right on Heritage Drive, cross over Shank Drive, and Village Hall will be on your left. Limited parking is available at the Hall.

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. Elwood Yoder will give an update on the new Mennonite history book that he and Steve Nolt are writing.

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

Did you know?

- *It's been 160 years since Mennonite Evangelist John S. Coffman's baptism at the Bank Mennonite Church, Dayton, Virginia, July 4, 1864;*
- *Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community celebrated 70 years since its founding in 1954;*
- *It's been 25 years since the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center was created in 1999;*
- *There will be an evening of remembrance of the 500th year of Anabaptism at the Park View Mennonite Church, January 21, 2025, 7:00 PM. All are welcome.*

Brethren and the “Underground Railroad”

by Elwood Yoder

A renewed interest in the Unionist Underground Railroad has emerged in the Shenandoah Valley. Two publications have sparked an awareness of the extensive secret network of homes and farms in Rockingham County that protected and helped men escape Confederate conscription. The six-volume book series *Unionists and the Civil War Experiences In the Shenandoah Valley*, published 2003-2012, uses federal Southern Claims Commission records from the 1870s and documents twenty-four hiding places and thirty depots from the claims of Brethren, Mennonites, and others in Rockingham County.¹ Thirteen depots were located on Brethren farms. Depots, as those who lived through the Civil War called them, operated where a group of men hid and waited for a guide to lead them on an escape route through the mountains out of Virginia and into a Union state in the north. A second publication that has sparked interest in the clandestine “Underground Railroad” is the 2023 fact-based historical novel *Peggy’s War*.² The historically based account of Peggy Rhodes’ depot near Harrisonburg illustrates action in Rockingham County and beyond.

In this article, we focus on the historiography and accounts of Dunkers, or Brethren, who ran depots and hiding places for conscripted men who, for reasons of conscience, sought to avoid Confederate conscription. During the Civil War, 1861-1865, both Brethren and Mennonites were apolitical, striving to remain outside the influence of the secular realm. However, the Civil War brought Union and Confederate violence to their farms and homes. The wartime responses of Brethren and Mennonites were primarily religious, seeking to remain nonresistant, separate, and faithful to their convictions. The War did not allow complete separatism. The Brethren, who were more apolitical than Mennonites, found ways to help their young men avoid conscription by operating depots and hiding places through a network of resisters that assisted hundreds of Brethren, Mennonites, Confederate soldiers, and draft-age men without any affiliation to hide and then flee.³

Brethren Family Stories

Daniel F. and Susannah Wampler Flory, farmers near Cross Keys, Rockingham County, Virginia, and members at the nearby Mill Creek Brethren congregation, ran a depot during the Civil War.⁴ Men hid and gathered at the Flory farm before going to a secretly prearranged meeting place where a guide led them out of the Confederacy through the mountains.⁵ Daniel and Susannah Flory were the parents of John S. Flory, who later became president of Bridgewater College. Susannah was an aunt to the Brethren businessman, Charles W. Wampler Sr., the first to incubate turkey eggs, becoming the founder of the modern turkey industry.

1. Rodes, David S., Norman R. Wenger, and Emmert F. Bittinger. *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, vol. 6 (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center, 2012), 884-949.

2. Karl Rhodes, *Peggy’s War* (Richmond, Virginia: Dale Enterprise Literary Society, 2023).

3. Nicholas Patler, “Escaping the Civil War: The Brethren-Mennonite Underground Railroad in the Upper Shenandoah Valley,” *Augusta Historical Bulletin* 58 (July 1, 2023): 2.

4. David S. Rodes, Norman R. Wenger, and Emmert F. Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, vol. 1 (Harrisonburg, Virginia: 2003), 477-502.

5. David S. Rodes, Norman R. Wenger, and Emmert F. Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, vol. 6 (Harrisonburg, Virginia: 2012), 890-891.

Daniel F. Flory's first cousin, Samuel F. Sanger, was twelve when the Civil War began in 1861. Samuel remembered that his people turned no one away and fed soldiers of either army. Samuel wrote that the Brethren were not active in politics; however, "many of them were opposed to seceding from the Union."⁶ Samuel's older brother David fled north to avoid conscription with seventy-two Brethren and Mennonite men in March 1862 but were caught and sent to prison in Richmond, Virginia. However, David escaped and returned home to Rockingham County. Samuel watched when Confederate soldiers camped on his family's farm for six weeks in 1864. About forty years after the War ended, Samuel wrote that "a number of brethren were arrested, and their lives threatened for aiding those who were attempting to escape to the Northern States."⁷

Another of Daniel F. Flory's first cousins, Brethren minister John M. Flory from the Bridgewater-Dayton area, fed Union soldiers but also operated a hiding place for those seeking escape from Confederate conscription, "secreting and sheltering as many as fifteen men and horses at a time."⁸ During Union General Sheridan's burning campaign of 1864, soldiers torched every building on John M. Flory's farm, shooting his livestock, with most left to rot in the fields.⁹ In 1864, with four children, John M. (thirty-two) and Frances Flory (twenty-seven), pregnant with their fifth child, rode north with Union General Sheridan's beleaguered wagon train carrying desperate Rockingham County refugees to Union states. Estimates were that the horse-drawn wagon convoy was sixteen miles long, with 1,600 wagons, 400 of which carried refugees.¹⁰

During a sworn deposition, Joel Garber, John M. Flory's brother-in-law, stated to Claims Commissioner O. Ferris that he had "helped put hundreds of conscripts through the union lines, and I came near losing my life two or three times by it; I was shot at several times."¹¹ Commissioner Ferris, appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant, allowed Joel Garber two-thirds of his claims for losses during the War, writing in his government summary that Garber "belonged to an organization to aid union men and deserters to get out of the Confederacy...the Confederates threatened to hang him."¹²

David H. Zigler, a Brethren minister from Linville Creek Brethren congregation in Broadway, Virginia, married Mennonite Sarah Shank in 1885. Sarah's father, a Mennonite minister, did not want her to marry outside the Mennonite faith; nevertheless, Sarah joined Linville Creek with her husband, David.¹³ In 1908, Zigler wrote about Brethren who fled west through the mountains, often assisted by locals.¹⁴ Elder David H. Zigler, age four when the War began, concluded that the Brethren "suffered so much" because of their opposition to slavery, their uncompromising stand for the Bible

6. Sanger, Samuel F., and Daniel Hays. 1907, 1997. *The Olive Branch of Peace and Good Will to Men: Anti-War History of the Brethren and Mennonites, the Peace People of the South, during the Civil War, 1861-1865*: Linville Creek Church of the Brethren, 85.

7. Sanger, Samuel F., and Daniel Hays. 1907, 1997. *The Olive Branch of Peace and Good Will to Men*, 85.

8. David S. Rodes, Norman R. Wenger, and Emmert F. Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, vol. 3 (Harrisonburg, VA: 2005), 386, 394.

9. Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War*, vol. 3, 2005, 386. John M. Flory's farm was near the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren, Bridgewater, Virginia.

10. John L. Heatwole, *The Burning: Sheridan's Devastation of the Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, Va.: Rockbridge Publishing, 1998) 95, 130.

11. Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War*, vol. 1, 130.

12. Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War*, vol. 1, 143.

13. Elwood E. Yoder, *We're Marching to Zion: A History of Zion Mennonite Church*, Broadway, Virginia, 1885-2010 (Zion Mennonite Church, 2010), 13.

14. David H. Zigler, *History of the Brethren in Virginia* (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Pub. House, 1908, 1914), 103.

teaching on nonresistance, and the lack of a stable government.¹⁵

Historiography

Initially, Norman R. Wenger and David S. Rodes wanted to learn more about their ancestors, but the project became much more extensive. Wenger and Rodes combed the indexes in the National Archives and found 298 claims filed from Rockingham County, Virginia, handwritten in the 1870s, on more than 12,000 documents. Wenger and Rodes found that about two-thirds of the claims came from the Brethren and Mennonites.¹⁶ Dr. Emmert Bittinger, Professor Emeritus at Bridgewater College and Board member at the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, became the Editor and prepared the transcribed documents for publication. Bittinger, Rodes, and Wenger worked to find out more about the claimants, their genealogical connections, and where they lived. Dr. Bittinger wrote a summary of each claim. For Norman Wenger, the enjoyable local historical detective work offset the sometimes monotonous job of transcribing thousands of pages from the archives.

The claims reveal hiding places and depots and the dangers associated with secreting Brethren, Mennonites, and others who sought to avoid the clutches of Southern conscription.¹⁷ While writers have filled many books with Civil War battles and strategies, the *Unionists* book series provides detailed insights about lives under duress, spoken during sworn deposition (or affirmed) just a few years after the War ended.

One of the first historians to use Southern Claims Commission records was Professor Harry A. Brunk.¹⁸ Following Brunk's research and writing in the 1950s, Dr. Samuel L. Horst cited claims from the National Archives in his landmark 1967 book *Mennonites in the Confederacy*.¹⁹ Brethren historian Roger E. Sappington, in his 1973 volume *The Brethren in Virginia*, makes no mention of the Unionist Underground Railroad. However, Sappington wrote that Dunkers fled Rockingham County for Union states.²⁰ Carl F. Bowman's 1995 *Brethren Society* states that Dunkers would not permit men who joined the army during the Civil War to remain church members.²¹ Bowman's insertion of a famous photo showing the badly damaged Dunker church building at the Antietam



The *Unionists and the Civil War Experience* six volume book series was edited by Brethren Professor Emeritus Emmert F. Bittinger (left), and compiled and transcribed by Mennonites Norman R. Wenger (center) and David S. Rodes. The books, of over 5,300 pages total, were published by the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center from 2003 to 2012 and can be purchased at the Heritage Center or from the Heritage Center website.

Daily News-Record photo--used by permission

15. David H. Zigler, *History of the Brethren in Virginia* (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Pub. House, 1914), 147-148.

16. Peter Carlson, "In the Valley of Secrets," *American History* 49, no. 3 (August 2014): 62-69.

17. Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War*, vol. 6, 883-923.

18. Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia 1727-1900*, vol. 1 (Harrisonburg, Virginia: H.A. Brunk, 1959), 172-177.

19. Samuel L. Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy: A Study in Civil War Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967).

20. Roger E. Sappington, *The Brethren in Virginia* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Committee for Brethren History in Virginia, 1973), 72.

21. Carl Desportes Bowman, *Brethren Society: The Cultural Transformation of a "Peculiar People"* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 38.

battlefield, caught in the crossfire of the deadliest Civil War conflict, reminds readers about the stark realities of Civil War violence for nonresistant church groups.²²

Donald F. Durnbaugh, a leading authority on Brethren life and history, used the Southern Claims Commission records in his 1997 book, *Fruit of the Vine*.²³ Durnbaugh wrote of hiding places, depots, postmasters, and guides, also called pilots, who conducted the fleeing men through the lines “as a kind of Underground Railroad.”²⁴ In 2002, Bridgewater College History Professor Stephen L. Longenecker used nine claims from federal records in *Shenandoah Religion*, his book about Brethren, Mennonites, and Methodists in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Shenandoah Valley.²⁵ Longenecker shows that during the Civil War, there were three times the number of Brethren churches compared to the number of Mennonite congregations in the Shenandoah Valley.²⁶

More work needs to be done to link Rockingham County with networks in other regions, such as the “Quaker Belt” in North Carolina. In fifteen counties of North Carolina, Quakers, Moravians, Wesleyans, abolitionists, and others organized to avoid or escape serving in the Confederate Army.²⁷ The Brethren were the largest denomination in Floyd County, Virginia, located in the mountainous southwestern part of the state. They opposed slavery, secession, the War, and abolition. In Floyd County, Brethren came under brutal attack, with threats to burn their churches and hang their ministers.²⁸ The rugged mountains enabled nonresistants to hide in remote regions for months without detection. At one point, the Brethren fed 150 deserters a week in the hollows of Floyd County. By the end of the War, the Brethren had established a structured operation that led men to Ohio.²⁹ All the approved Southern Claims Commissions in Floyd County came from the Brethren.³⁰

The publication of the six-volume *Unionists* series and its use by writers such as Karl Rhodes in *Peggy’s War* has strengthened our understanding of the complex challenges faced by Brethren during the Civil War. Some Southern Claims Commission records are available in digitized format through the National Archives but are challenging to read and understand. For instance, the claim of Daniel F. and Susannah Wampler Flory is available online but must be viewed in seventeen handwritten and unorganized images.³¹ We are fortunate to have the *Unionists* book series. The historian seeks primary sources, and the Southern Claims Commission provides extensive details and insights into life during the Civil War, including reliable documentation about a network of hiding places, depots, pilots, and resisters who sought to live out their faith and beliefs in a four-year conflict that was different than any other era during the Brethren and Mennonite sojourn in the United States.

22. Carl Desportes Bowman, *Brethren Society*, 1995, 120.

23. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *Fruit of the Vine: A History of the Brethren, 1708-1995* (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Press, 1997).

24. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *Fruit of the Vine*, 1997, 277.

25. Stephen L. Longenecker, *Shenandoah Religion: Outsiders and the Mainstream, 1716-1865* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2002), 179, 221-222.

26. Stephen L. Longenecker, *Shenandoah Religion*, 2002, 67-68. While there are no concrete numbers tabulated of Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley during the 1850s or 1860s, the writer of this article estimates there were around 500-600 Mennonites.

27. William T. Auman, “North Carolina’s Conscientious Objectors. America’s Civil War,” vol. 27, Leesburg: Weider History Group, Inc, 2014, 68-72.

28. Sheilah Elwardani, “Traitors in the Service of the Lord: The Role of the Church and Clergy in Appalachia’s Civil War,” Masters Thesis, Liberty University, December 2018, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/masters/554/>, 5.

29. Sheilah Elwardani, “Traitors in the Service of the Lord,” 2018, 90.

30. Sheilah Elwardani, “Traitors in the Service of the Lord,” 2018, 51.

31. National Archives Catalog at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/59890140>. Compare the online images with *Unionists*, vol. 1, 477-502.

Helping to Change Rural America

By Gary Smucker

The third-grade students at Park School were excited one school day in April of 1954. They were going on a field trip to the Valley Creamery in Harrisonburg, Virginia. They saw how the milk was pasteurized and put into glass bottles. They saw how ice cream was made, and the staff passed out delicious samples of the ice cream for the students to enjoy.

The learning continued when the students returned to Park School. Each student wrote a letter to the Valley Creamery to thank the company for the visit, the help from the employees, and the ice cream. Students wrote articles about the trip, and the articles were edited and typed by Elsie Lehman, the teacher, and placed in a newspaper to share with Valley Creamery staff and their parents.

I was one of the students on the field trip, and imagine my surprise when recently Winston Weaver Jr. handed me a copy of my letter to the Valley Creamery and the 'newspaper' about the field trip from seventy years ago. Winston was one of the students on the field trip, but he was also the grandson of the owner of the Valley Creamery, and he had access to the many files saved from the company founded by his grandfather, Marion Weaver.



Valley Creamery was rebuilt in the late 1940s by Rockingham Construction after fire destroyed the original structure.

The Valley Creamery was the first company Marion Weaver managed, but he developed a number of enterprises in the Shenandoah Valley and beyond. The story about the field trip illustrates several facts about Marion Weaver's businesses. Extensive files and careful records were kept for any company Weaver was involved in. The letters and other information about the school visit were saved and available seventy years later. The projects Weaver was involved in always served the community in addition to the business of the company's work. The workers at the creamery took the time to take care of the children visiting the plant on a school trip.

The Valley Creamery was Marion Weaver's first business, but Rockingham Construction Co., Inc. was his largest and most important enterprise. In 2023, a book was published which tells the story of this important company. *"Getting the Job Done," The Story of Rockingham Construction Co., Inc., 1937-1987*, tells the history of the company Marion Weaver established, which helped transform rural America with electrification and other construction projects. The company expanded far beyond Rockingham County, and the book details the rewards and challenges of that expansion.

When the Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative was founded in 1937, Marion Weaver saw the business opportunity and bought used equipment to help build the power lines needed to bring electricity to the farms and rural areas of Rockingham County, and Rockingham Construction was established.

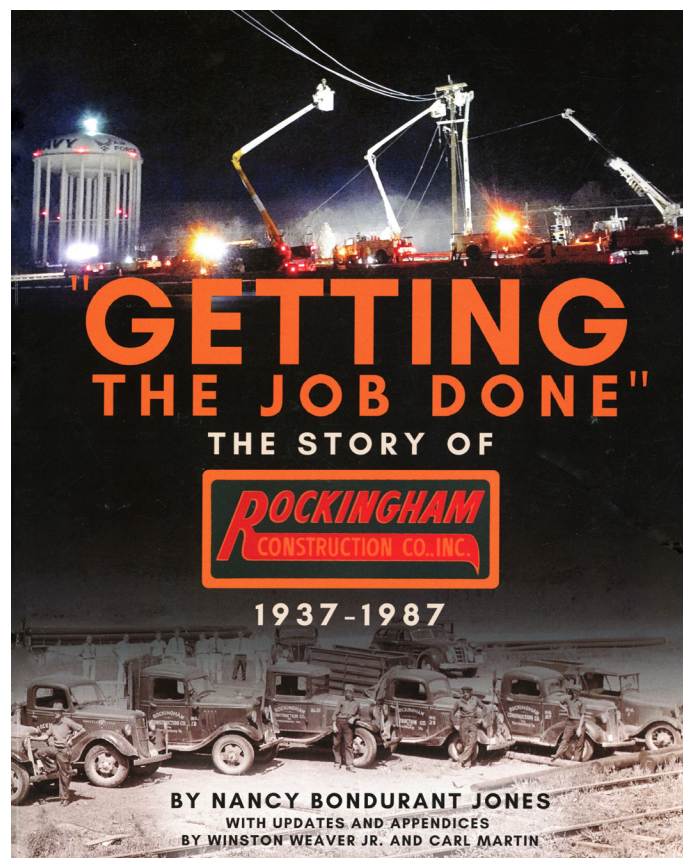
Nancy Bondurant Jones was a local history storyteller for the central Shenandoah Valley. In the late 1980s, Jones was commissioned by the Weaver family to write a history of Rockingham Construction. She had already written a history of the

matriarch of the Weaver family. *Annie of Mole Hill*, published in 1986, was about Annie Shank Weaver, the wife of Marion Weaver.¹ Jones's book about Rockingham Construction was not published in the 1980s because, as Winston Weaver Jr. said in an interview in the *Daily News Record*, "The Weaver family felt it focused too much on them and not enough on the people who worked in the field."²

The family decided that the book Nancy Jones wrote, with updates added, should be published for the commemoration of the 85th anniversary of Rockingham Construction Company. Winston Weaver Jr., retired CEO, and Carl Martin, the former CFO, worked from the extensive files stored in the attic at the company office to add photographs and company documents that show the contributions of the many employees over the years. Weaver said, "These guys are hardworking, salt-of-the-earth people. A lot of the innovation that happened in our industry, in my opinion, came from the guys in the field."³ Martin added, "Everybody that's worked here has worked dangerously, has been exposed to high risk, has worked tirelessly."⁴

Nancy B. Jones is known as a skillful writer and a careful historian. The history she weaves includes the setting of national events, the technical aspects of the company, the changes in personnel, and the changes in engineering over the years. After reading about how the electric line poles were placed in the ground, a reader will probably always look at those poles differently. Marion Weaver, unlike other companies taking shortcuts, insisted that a pole could not be cut to make it fit a difficult hole. The pole had to be regulation length. Jones makes the details of a construction company's work a fascinating read.

Jones builds the company's history chronologically, but what stands out throughout the book is the ethics of the managers of Rockingham Construction and the care and concern they had for their employees. Marion



Weaver and his descendants, who worked for the companies he established, demonstrate how a Mennonite family built a business that stayed true to their ethical standards and served the church and community.

"Getting the Job Done" The Story of Rockingham Construction Co., Inc., 1937-1987, by Nancy Bondurant Jones with updates by Winston Weaver Jr. and Carl Martin is available at Rocktown History, 382 High St., Dayton, Virginia.

1. Winston Weaver Jr., conversation with Gary Smucker, May 27, 2024.

2. Jillian Lynch, "Staying Power: Rockingham Construction Company Turns 85," *Daily News-Record*, e-Edition, March 10, 2024.

3. Jillian Lynch, "Staying Power: Rockingham Construction Company Turns 85," *Daily News-Record*, e-Edition, March 10, 2024.

4. Lynch, "Staying Power," *Daily News-Record*, e-Edition, March 10, 2024.



Mount Clinton Mennonite Church (above) celebrates 150 years with a Harmonia Sacra singing on Sept. 8, 2024, 7:00 p.m., and a morning and afternoon celebration on Sept. 29. Elwood Yoder will speak about the history of Mt. Clinton during Sunday school, 9:30-10:15 a.m., Sept. 29, followed by a song service. All are welcome. 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.

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 1,650 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 jamesrush@comcast.net, phone 540-434-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Circle, Lowville, NY, 13367.

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