



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

Volume 27, No. 4
Autumn, 2019

Published by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians
Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

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

Virginia Mennonite Missions Centennial, 1919-2019

In the fall of 1919, the ministers of the Virginia Mennonite Conference took two important actions. They passed a motion to authorize the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. The first President was Samuel M. Burkholder.

Second, the forty-one ministers in attendance at Zion Mennonite Church, October 1919, acted to approve the principles set forth in the eighteen Fundamentals. Writers of the Fundamentals were George R. Brunk I, Amos D. Wenger, and Jacob B. Smith.

At the Annual Members Meeting of the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians, Saturday, November 9, 2019, 9:30 AM, Dr. Steven Nolt will speak about the religious and political context of these two actions. The Annual Meeting will take place at Village Hall, 1294 Shank Dr., Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community, Harrisonburg, Va. Secretary James Rush will be available to accept your Historian's renewal for the next year. All are welcome to the business meeting and the free lecture.

The home offices for VMissions (above), 601 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, Va. The building also hosts the offices of Virginia Mennonite Conference.
(Photo by Editor 2019)



Vivian Burkholder Coffman (1923-2011) worked in the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Conference offices in the 1960s & 1970s. Vivian was a granddaughter of the first VMBM President Samuel M. Burkholder, whose story is featured in this issue.

(Glenna Hertzler photo)

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Samuel M. Burkholder:

Missions Pioneer, 1848-1929

by Elwood Yoder

A hundred years ago, October 17, 1919, at a Virginia Mennonite Conference meeting, Samuel M. Burkholder read the names of the ministers out loud to take attendance. The Secretary, seated nearby to Burkholder, heard a response from six bishops, twenty-four ministers, and eleven deacons; their names are in the minutes. After devotions and roll call, two actions taken at the meeting were significant turning points for Virginia Mennonites and the wider Mennonite church.

Samuel M. Burkholder, a respected leader of Virginia Conference, had turned seventy-one in 1919. He had given his life in service to the church, receiving ordination for the deacon's ministry thirty years prior.

Burkholder gave most of his energies to work in the Middle District of Conference, but on the third Friday, October 1919, he traveled to Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va. He may have taken the train from Harrisonburg to the Daphna Station, and then made the short walk up the hill to the white clapboard church on the hillside. Or he may have ridden with others from Harrisonburg in a car, a recent innovation that became a part of Conference life in the nineteen-teens.

Samuel M. Burkholder certainly understood that the forty-one ministers, whose names he called aloud, had made two momentous decisions. First, they organized a Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, with a charter, and second, they adopted eighteen Fundamentals of the Faith.

Both were significant; both had an impact on future generations.

A hundred years later, Virginia Mennonite Missions still functions with staff, missionaries, and outreach programs. The Fundamentals, which Samuel M. Burkholder voted for, as did all the ministers, impacted the broader Mennonite Church for several decades, then waned in influence.



Samuel M. Burkholder, 1848-1929, served as the first President of Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions, 1919-1928.
(VMC Archives photo)

Within weeks after the meeting in the Zion Mennonite Church, where women served the men food on tables outside, Samuel M. Burkholder became the first president of Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions. He served in that role for ten years. The Conference had given lip service to a mission board as early as 1915, but only in 1919 did a formal vote of the men at Zion provide the board with its charter. Burkholder had been active in the earlier Home Mission Board of

the Middle District.

Samuel M. Burkholder (1848-1929) also served as Secretary of the newly created Virginia Property Aid Plan. He served his home church of Weavers as a trustee and deacon. He had traveled with other Virginia leaders to the church-wide conference in Indiana in 1898, the very first time it met, though Virginia Conference did not join until 1911. Samuel M. Burkholder married Mary Rhodes Burkholder in 1872, and they had five children.

It seems to this thirty-year member at Zion Mennonite Church that Samuel M. Burkholder understood the consequential decisions made at conference, held at Zion Church, in 1919. The few lines the Secretary recorded in the Minutes about setting up a Mission Board are minimal compared to over three pages that list the eighteen Fundamentals. The Mission Board's influence in Virginia and beyond, however, had the longer term impact.

Samuel M. Burkholder called the ministers' names for attendance that Friday morning October 17, 1919, at Zion. Then a few weeks later, he was elected the first Board Chair of the Virginia Mission Board. Burkholder's work and life speak to the trust, significance, and long-term impact of his ministries on Virginia Mennonite Conference. When he traveled to the conference, and then home again Saturday, Burkholder no doubt understood that the meetings had been a turning point for the Mennonite Church in the Shenandoah Valley and beyond.



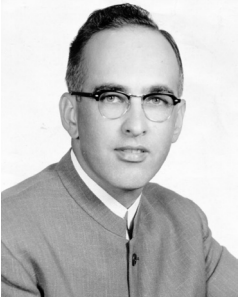
VMMissions held a Centennial celebration at Lindale Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, July 18, 2019. VMM President Aaron Kauffman (above, red tie), the fifteenth president of VMM, delivered the evening message. Virginia Mennonite Conference Executive Clyde Kratz (above left), led the worship service with Kauffman.

The centennial service included testimonies from a Latino church planter, a prison chaplain in Harrisonburg, education leaders from Albania, and missionaries from South Asia. Twenty-one new missions workers were commissioned for their work at the July 18 service. Former VMM missions workers Willard Eberly (Italy) and Richard and Margaret Keeler (Trinidad) gave testimonies from their work in missions.

The Editor worked in 2018 to find a set of history photos to help celebrate the VMM centennial. All 250 photos about VMM's history can be viewed at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mennonitearchivesofvirginia/albums>

Harold D. Lehman, 1921-2019

Harold D. Lehman, a former Coeditor of *Historian*, passed away August 25, 2019. Harold and his wife Ruth served as editors of this journal from 1998-2002. Harold was 98 at his



Harold D. Lehman
(EMU Archives Photo)

passing, and Ruth passed away in 2012.

On this Editor's desk is a handwritten letter from Harold, written only six weeks before his death. This letter is not the first time Harold wrote to the Editor. As usual, Harold began with words of affirmation for the "interesting content in the reading of the current *Historian*." Then Harold went on to give numerous additional pieces of information about the articles in the issue he had just read.

A lifetime member of the Historians, Harold wrote several articles for publication in our

periodical. In 2017 Harold wrote about the significant influence of the Daniel and Magdalene Lehman family on Eastern Mennonite School and College. In 2015 Harold wrote an excellent article about Mennonite teachers in one and two-room public schools in the Shenandoah Valley.

Harold D. Lehman served as the second Director of Eastern Mennonite High School, 1957-1962. Recently Harold served on a Centennial Planning Committee, with the Editor and others, 2015-2017, to help plan celebration events at Eastern Mennonite School. It was in that capacity that I learned to know about Harold's humor and his great institutional memory.

One needs to look elsewhere to find a complete summary of the many accomplishments of Dr. Harold D. Lehman (see the September 16, 2019 *Mennonite World Review*, for instance). In this journal we are grateful for Harold's articles and his letters to encourage and provide further information.



Comforters displayed at the VMM Centennial gathering, July 18, 2019. They were made for a Mennonite Disaster Service house, sewn by Weavers Mennonite Women (left), Lindale Mennonite Women (center), and Mt. Clinton Mennonite Women (right).
(Photo by Editor 2019)

Early Cemetery, Pleasant Valley, and Religious History

by Evan Knappenberger, with Andrea Early

Virginia Mennonite history has taken something of a back seat in the academic and religious historian worlds, sandwiched somewhere between obscure local concerns and esoteric religious identities. This article, ostensibly about a small family cemetery on the outskirts of the sleepy Virginia town -- now situated on Early Road in the Pleasant Valley area south of Harrisonburg between an auto auction and the interstate -- would promise at first glance exactly that: something of interest to a relatively small group of people -- the Rhodes, Early, Garber, Flory, Harshbarger, Sanger and Shaver families, among others -- with relatively small relevance outside of the Mennonite historian and genealogist circles. However, upon deeper inspection the Early Family Cemetery is illustrative of some important points that impact the study of both local and religious history more broadly. There are also some entertaining stories to accompany the reader throughout.

Much of the genealogical and source material in this article comes from the work of Rev. Richard K. Early and Diane Early Miller in their three volume collection on the descendants of Johannes Jacob and Maria Narr Oehrle.¹ Also, special thanks to the president of the cemetery association, Glenn Rodes, who accompanied the authors on a field trip and shared his stories with us.

A Brief Historiographical Note

Because of the development of historical interest in matters of local Mennonism, i.e. through the influence of people like Bishop Lewis Heatwole (1852-1932) and Professor Harry A. Brunk (1898-1990), the retrospective focus of local Mennonite historians has tended to pertain mainly to the story of the church and church institutions, tracing and measuring the Virginia Mennonite influence as it relates to the broader themes of



Evan Knappenberger (left), Andrea Early, and Glenn Rodes, at the Early Cemetery, Pleasant Valley Road, Harrisonburg, Va., July 18, 2019. Glenn Rodes is President of the Early Cemetery Association.

Photo by Editor, 2019

denominational development and progress. However helpful Heatwole, Brunk and others found this framework of understanding to be in developing their official narratives, it has tended to overlook some key factors including denominational fluidity, cross-pollinating educational affiliation, and the migration of families within local and denominational contexts.² It is in this way that the Early family

1. Early, Richard K, and Diane Early Miller. *Descendants of Johannes "Hans" Jacob & Maria Narr Oehrle [Early]*. 3 vols., 1990.

2. Evan Knappenberger's master's thesis on the history of Eastern Mennonite, which has been discussed in this journal previously, includes several sections on the historiological problems of nineteenth and twentieth century Mennonite history. It also footnotes themes of broader interest in the study of Eastern Mennonite, including denominational fluidity and education cross-pollination. Because of

cemetery can serve as a counter-illustration of the realities of such historical revisions.

Lutheran+Mennonite=German Baptist Brethren

In the category of denominational fluidity, we can start with the founders of the Early family in Virginia: Jacob and Magdalena Wenger Early. When the Oehrle family, Lutherans of Swiss descent, moved through the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia (on their way ultimately to Ohio) one of the sons stayed behind and struck up with the Henry Wenger family on the nearby Byerly farm. This farm was in the location where the cemetery now resides, but also stretching across the great wagon road (Route 11) and now to both sides of the interstate. The Wenger family was Mennonite, and when Jacob married Magdalena there was naturally disagreement about religious affiliation for the family moving forward.

Fortunately for the newlywed couple, at that time several German protestant groups were utilizing the same buildings, and a new denomination was attracting a slew of attention and converts around the prominently German Friedens Church. The preacher John Flory found in Jacob and Magdalena eager recruits. One of Jacob's sons even donated land for the Pleasant Run Meetinghouse (which eventually became St. James United Methodist Church). Thus began a continuing micro-affiliation between what became the Church of the Brethren, the Virginia Mennonites, and the other German Protestants in the area.

Other denominational affiliations also flourished. John Early (1828-1899) was neighbor and associate of the leader of the Evangelical United Brethren, A.P. Funkhauser, in Dayton. Also, the Flory, Sanger, and Garber descendants of Jacob Early were involved in the founding of Bridgewater College as a German Baptist Brethren school in 1880.³

But the cross-denominational fluidity was not merely genealogical or conversionary. In fact, the more important exchange was ideological and ecclesiological. This is demonstrated by another of the families buried in the Early Cemetery: that of preacher Frederick Rhodes.

Rhodes [1769-1847] was perhaps the best example in the 19th century of the religious and cultural exchange that was happening slowly on the lowest levels in Virginia Mennonite circles. It is no small part of Rhodes' interactions with his neighbors and cousins who believed relatively similar doctrines but practiced dissimilar ecclesial and cultic ritual. The complaint that split Virginia Mennonites for the better part of a decade (and was arguably foundational to the decision to establish in the 1830's an independent Virginia Mennonite Conference) centered on Rhodes' praying at a United Brethren revival service, fifty years before Mennonites reluctantly began allowing their own revivals.⁴ For this, the Blosser and Heatwole patriarchs began circulating a letter against Frederick, and even for a time forming their own schismatic denomination, excommunicating Rhodes and all his supporters for a time.

the complexities of the topic at hand, historiographical tools for such a survey have not been developed elsewhere.

3. There are a number of other interesting connections between Bridgewater College and the Virginia Mennonites. "Fifty Years of Educational Endeavor: Bridgewater College 1880-1930." John Wayland, McClure, Harrisonburg, 1930.

4. Brunk's account of this conflict seems to draw mostly on the account prepared by Bishop Heatwole, from Heatwole's investigation of the matter after the turn of the 20th century. As a side note, Brunk's citation of his sources is somewhat lacking here, causing another interesting interstitial historiographical space to open for reflection.

Civil War Pacifism and Neighborhood

Boys

Another alternative historical datum involves the extended family experience in the Civil War. While some of the family which did not settle in the South (having never been converted to the non-resistant doctrines of the Anabaptists) participated in the Union Army occupation (even one of the cousins having been wounded while fighting in the Union Army near Harrisonburg) -- several of the Oehrle descendents (including one David Early, mentioned by historian John Wayland as fleeing from conscription into the Confederate army⁵) participated to varying degrees in the confederate military apparatus. Some, like John L. Early, were “rabid abolitionists and unionists” who clashed with their neighbors and faced death threats. Some, like John C. Shaver, fought in the Confederate army.

Glenn Rodes tells the story of one cousin and neighbor, Benjamin Franklin Shaver, who was one of the men who killed Lt. John Meigs, son of the Quartermaster General of the Union Army, in a skirmish near Dayton, occasioning an order to burn down that town which was later rescinded. According to Rodes, Shaver spent the rest of his life looking over his shoulder, hunted on a bounty commissioned by a grieving father operating under a conflicting account of the skirmish in which Shaver had killed his son.

Rodes pointed out wryly the small headstone where Shaver lies buried, and showed the authors a picture of Meigs’ tomb in Arlington National Cemetery, replete with life-size bronze statue. He quipped humorously: “So the son of the Union Army Quartermaster gets a death statue and the guy on the other side who killed him is way back here in the corner without two words on his stone.”

Conclusion

Meeting any of the Rodes or the Earlys, Shavers or Florys in the Shenandoah Valley today, delving into their family histories and oral traditions, is a representative cross-section of any number of historical traditions in the valley -- notably but not limited to the Brethren and Mennonite. Even today the Early family reunion comprises everything from Old Order Mennonite to non-denominational Protestants. A brief tour of their family burial place is a walk through time with characters like Frank Shaver, Rev. Frederick Rhodes, Jacob Early and Magdalena Wenger.

After learning the complex stories behind a few of these headstones, it is clear that the official denominational histories fail to capture the complexities and nuances of their socioreligious experience in the Valley. It is for this reason that the authors assert that it is time for a revisionist history and accompanying historiography that can more fully embrace and account for on-the-ground experience of families like these.



Glenn Rodes showed Andrea Early and Evan Knappenberger the gravestone of Benjamin Franklin Shaver, one of the men who killed Lt. John Meigs, during the Civil War. Find the Early Cemetery along Pleasant Valley Road, off the driveway into Nielsen Builders, Inc.

(Photo by Editor, July 2019)

5. From the Bridgewater College book

The Carter Center for Worship and Music, Bridgewater College, East College Street, Bridgewater, Va., September, 2019. This had been the home of Bridgewater Church of the Brethren from 1914-1998. Our feature article on the Early Cemetery mentions several early leaders of Bridgewater College who are buried in the Early Cemetery.

(Photo by Editor 2019)



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

Shenandoah Mennonite Historian issues from 2001-2019 can be found at mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net. This site includes a link to over 1,600 photos related to Mennonites in Virginia, provides a way to subscribe to *Historian* online, and connects readers to the Editor's history blog.

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 540-434-0792, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 780 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, Virginia, 22802.

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

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