



Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

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Confederate Civil Disobedience

In March 2024, I visited the new Civil War Trails marker located near Staunton, Virginia. Among hundreds of these Civil War markers in Virginia, this is the first that recognizes conscientious objectors. The Confederate Civil Disobedience marker describes the capture of 72 Brethren and Mennonite men who were marched 87 miles to the train station in Staunton. The Confederacy shipped the men to prison in Richmond.

When Confederate officials in Richmond learned that only two men captured all 72 men, with no resistance, this influenced the legislators to amend conscription laws in Virginia to exempt religious denominations that preached nonviolence.

Traffic flew by me on the Parkersburg Pike as I stood by the marker and pondered the meaning of the actions of these brave men. They testified to nonresistance both to officials then and to we who learn their story today.

Elwood Yoder, Editor

Vietnamese Christian Fellowship, Falls Church, Virginia, Feb. 2024, a member congregation of Virginia Mennonite Conference since 1988.

Photo by Elwood Yoder



With this table display on January 21, 2024, Mount Clinton Mennonite Church, near Harrisonburg, Virginia, recognized Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday. Among 2.13 million baptized Anabaptist believers in 86 countries, Africa has about 36% of all Anabaptists globally, while Asia and Pacific has 21%, Europe 3%, Latin America and the Caribbean 10%, and North America about 30%.

Photo by Elwood Yoder

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- *THE UNIONISTS UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, FROM UNIONISTS AND THE CIVIL WAR, VOLUME VI, BY DAVID S. RODES, NORMAN R. WENGER, AND EMMERT BITTINGER*
- *CONFEDERATE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, A NEW MARKER ON VIRGINIA CIVIL WAR TRAILS*

The Unionists Underground Railroad

From *Unionists and the Civil War experience in the Shenandoah Valley*, Volume VI, 2012 by David S. Rodes and Norman R. Wenger, and Edited by Emmert F. Bittinger, pp. 883-885. Used by permission.

The “Unionists Underground Railroad” was a highly organized system to conduct men who wanted to avoid Confederate Conscription out of the South into areas controlled by the Union. We have no direct evidence that the “Unionists Underground Railroad” was related to the Underground Railroad that developed in other places to aid escaping slaves. The system had its own role titles and terminology such as pilot, depot, terminal, postmaster, guide, refugee, etc.

A typical description of how the system worked follows: A “refugee” or deserter would be concealed by someone willing to provide them a “hiding place.” At some point they would move to “terminal” or “depot” where a group would be hiding waiting to escape to safety across the northern lines. Depending on where they started from, they may move to other depots along their escape route. The next step would be for the group to be taken by a guide to a prearranged meeting place with a pilot who for a fee would conduct the group through the mountains to safety. The most frequent destination was “New Creek” (present day Keyser, West Virginia), where they would obtain passage on the B & O Railroad to points further north.

The “railroad” in Rockingham County was obviously part of a larger system and not just a local effort. John Rodes in a deposition given

in the Abraham Heatwole Claim, stated that the “system” was a means of conducting several thousand persons out of the Confederacy.¹ Information in the Jacob H. Lindsey claim shows that Andrew L. Lindsey and his brother Jacob H. had helped to open up and establish [the Briery Branch route] route over the mountains, a route over which John Keister is said to have led 2000 refugees and deserters.²

The fleeing refugees and their pilots were in many cases in real danger if they were caught. A pilot active in the Underground Railroad, William E. Coffman, was tried for treason and sentenced to death. Because he was a civilian and was tried in a military court where jurisdiction was doubtful, the sentence was suspended. Senator John F. Lewis described the danger faced by the fleeing refugees in the Samuel Lewis Claim as follows: *A great many were taken in the effort to get across the lines. There were some four or six who made their escape and got over but others were captured by the scouts, and their orders was to shoot them. When ever a man was caught attempting to make his escape through the lines they shot him. It would not have been possible for a man to get through in the early part of the war except under an escort. Towards the end of the war men could and did make the escape in that way, but it was entirely impossible that a man could have made his escape with his family and to have left his family this would have been to have subjected them to all sorts of insults and privations.*³

It is interesting to note that the pacifist Brethren and Mennonites in the area were very active in this clandestine activity. They not only worked together but also worked with

1. Rodes, Wenger, Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience In The Shenandoah Valley* Vol. I (Penobscot Press, 2003), p. 171.

2. Rodes, Wenger, Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience In The Shenandoah Valley* Vol. III (Penobscot Press, 2003), pp. 132 - 133.

3. Rodes, Wenger, Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience In The Shenandoah Valley* Vol. V (Penobscot Press, 2003), p. 347.

others in the system who had no objection to active participation in the military.

To date in our research, we have indications of over thirty depots or terminals in Rockingham County. It is important to note that the actual physical hiding places on these “depot sites” could have been anywhere. It may have been an hiding place in the house or it could have been in the barn, another building, in the woods or anywhere else on the farm where a group or person could be concealed.

Editor’s Note: Following their essay on the Unionist Underground Railroad, Volume VI, Rodes, Wenger and Bittinger provide excerpts from claims that identify locations where depots or terminals were located. Norman R. Wenger has given permission to reprint the claims of Jacob Geil and Margaret H. (Peggy) Rhodes.

Jacob Geil

Edom Va. – *Unionists* Volume II – pp. 333-352

Deposition of Claimants Wife (1871)

My name is Mary Geil. I am 43 years old. I am the wife of the claimant and live with him where we resided during the war.

56. I was at home during the whole period of the war and my husband too. I have heard him speak about the war and on war matters



This house in Edom, Virginia, several miles north of Harrisonburg, looks about the same in 2024 as it did during the Civil War in the 1860s. The house, along Linville-Edom Road in Rockingham County, was built in 1819. During the Civil War Mennonites Jacob and Mary Wenger Geil lived in the home. The Geils operated a “depot” where they hid men fleeing the forced conscription of the Confederacy along the Unionist Underground Railroad.

Read more details about Jacob and Mary Geil’s depot in *Unionists and the Civil War Experience*, Volume 11, pp. 334-335.

Photo by Elwood Yoder, March 2024

very many times and he was uniformly in favor of the Union cause and all his expressions were strongly in the favor of the Union. He condemned the South for bringing on the war.

57. During the war we had at our house a great many refugees which my husband kept and fed and harbored until the guides would come and take them to the mountains where the guides would conduct them through to the union lines and we had care of several families of the refugees and helped them get away to the North also.

Henry Wenger and family, Anderson Hogshhead and David Sluss were some of the persons aided. We have entertained Union officers at our house....

59. I never heard of his saying or doing

anything against the Union cause. I am quite sure he was generally and well known as a Union man. Our place was called by the secessionist as a d_____d Union hole. Our whole family and connections on both sides were strongly Union people. My father who was with us did not want any disloyal persons about him. My brother, Jacob Wenger, voted against secession at Greenmount in this county. He had a claim allowed by the commissioners of claims.

Margaret (Peggy) H. Rhodes

Harrisonburg, Va. –*Unionists* Volume III-pp. 692-713

Deposition of Margaret Rhodes (1875)

1. I am 44 years old a housekeeper, live at Dale Enterprise 3 miles from Harrisonburg Rockingham Co. Va. where I have resided for 26 years.

2. I am the widow of Henry H. Rhodes, who died on the 8th of July 1864, leaving 5 children, the oldest of whom was then 13 years old.

7. & 8. Yes. I was not only willing but I did aid persons to escape from the confederacy, many times they came and staid at our place 5 or 6 together at a time and would stay sometimes several days waiting for the guides to take them through the mountains. When I would prepare their rations, and they would start off for the mountains at night. This has been done many times. Our house is in a secluded place, and very favorably situated for concealing persons. My husband was an invalid and was not troubled with the military much.

We had a place under the floor under the

house where we would conceal persons when necessary. It was entered by a trap door in my bedroom and covered with a carpet so no one would suspect anything there. He kept one man named Henry Brunk, who was captured while trying to escape, and was put into the rebel army, and ran away and came here, for nearly a year. The reason he stayed here so long was because of the condition of his wife and family who lived near our place. After his wife recovered he went north through the mountains. I can't tell what time this was there were so many parties going, and a good many went when he did. Another man named Charles Rodgers who was captured with the 70 and sent to Richmond, was put into the Rebel Army and he ran away and came and staid at our house several weeks until Gen. Fremont's Army came to Harrisonburg when he left with the army.

11. What I did for the refugees and deserters was done to aid the Union Cause. Many of those I harbored and fed, I never saw before nor since, and I know only a few of them by name. Some were named Miller, some Rhodes, one was a Coakley one was a Carrier.

18. We were not personally threatened, but the rebels would come to our place and treat us very roughly, and carry off our property because we were union people. The escaped refugees used to write back to their friends and send the letters to my care and the guides would bring them here, and I would distribute them, and would receive other letters to send back by the guides. I was one of the Postmasters of the underground R. R. Route. I distributed a good many letters in this way. I have gone a distance of 6 miles myself to deliver letters sometimes, leaving my 5 children with my mother in law.

Peggy's War Tour

- July 13, 2024
- 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM
- Quicks touring bus
- Start from Weavers Mennonite Church with lunch at the church
- Karl Rhodes, *Peggy's War* author, will narrate the tour, visiting sites described in his recent book
- \$75 a person, \$70 for Historian members. This would be a good time to become a member! Send \$80 to become a member and join the tour--see details on back page.
- Email Norman Wenger at rgac55a@aol.com or U.S. mail to Norman Wenger, 3649 Cricket Lane, Bridgewater, VA, 22812.
- Respond soon as this tour should fill up quickly



Five visitors were graciously invited to Austin and Marie Eberly's historic house (lower photo left) for a tour in December 2023. The Eberly's renovated home is located west of Harrisonburg along Cooks Creek Road. Austin showed the group a hiding place in the attic (photo right) that concealed an army deserter from Confederate scouts during the American Civil War. The Eberly family, members of the Old Order Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley, welcomed (upper photo from left) Robert E. Weaver, Evan Knappenberger, Karl Rhodes, Andrea Early, and Elwood Yoder. Called the Abraham Heatwole house, Margaret (Peggy) Heatwole Rhodes, Abraham and Margaret Heatwole's daughter and the main character in Karl Rhodes' 2023 book *Peggy's War*, grew up in the house. Photos by Elwood Yoder

This Civil War Trails interpretive marker is located at 1529 Parkersburg Turnpike, Swoope, Virginia, just west of Staunton. Among approximately 450 Civil War Trails markers in Virginia, this marker is the first to recognize conscientious objectors in the Civil War.

Photo by Elwood Yoder March 2024

CONFEDERATE CI



The Pligh

On March 19, 1862, a weary column shuffled by on the road in front of you. They were not soldiers marching to a battle, but dozens of pacifist conscientious objectors who were being herded to Staunton, and then prison.

Desperate for recruits, the Confederate government planned to draft young men into the army, but for members of the numerous Mennonite and German Baptist Brethren “Dunker” churches in the Shenandoah Valley, pacifism was a way of life. Presented with two unacceptable choices—army service or prison—members of these “peace churches” attempted to escape to the Northern state of Ohio.

As a group of 72 pacifists tried to secretly pass westward through scouts—just two—arrested the draft evaders at Petersburg, now West Virginia. Without violence, all 72 fugitives surrendered without resistance. On the 87-mile



Most of the fugitives spent a month imprisoned in Castle Thunder, Richmond. – Courtesy Library of Congress

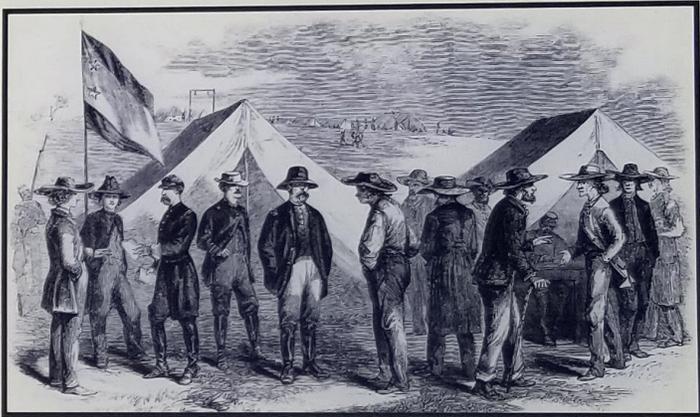
the captives proved so compliant that they were released. Most of the prisoners felt that by signing a statement promising not to escape, and they were

After passing this point, the fugitives were released. “Some, if not all of them, are simply released in this manner and being taken like

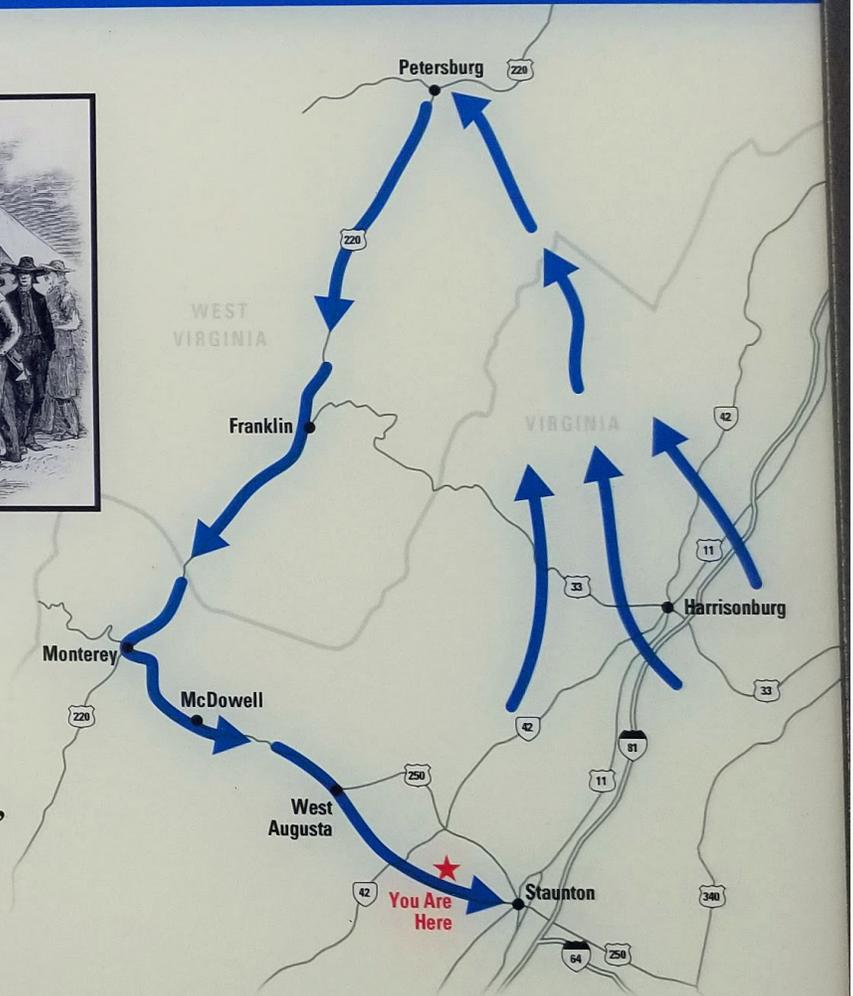
The civil disobedience of the fugitives impressed lawmakers as admirable. The release of conscientious objectors, and the Civil War denominations that preached non-

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

★★ of Pacifists



An 1864 drawing shows German Baptist farmers, aka "Dunkers," near Harrisonburg. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 29, 1864



In the mountains, two Confederate Virginia. True to their rejection of march from Petersburg to Staunton, they required only a few guards. surrendering they had tacitly kept their word.

The column of prisoners arrived in Staunton, where one citizen wrote: "ble-hearted, inoffensive people ... there is something pitiful in their fleeing like partridges on the mountains."

The pacifists had raised an important issue. Their commitment and conduct are examples of devotion to Biblical principles. Virginia passed laws protecting Confederate Congress amended conscription laws to exempt religious violence.



Civil War Trails interpretive marker located at 1529 Parkersburg Turnpike, Swoope, Va., a couple of miles west of Staunton. The 72 captive Brethren and Mennonite men walked in front of this marker on the road to Staunton and prison in Richmond in March 1862.

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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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 jamesrush@comcast.net, phone 540-421-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Circle, Lowville, NY, 13367.

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians
5736 Brookside Circle
Lowville, NY 13367