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Pandemic a Hundred Years Ago and Today

A hundred years ago, in February 1920, Elizabeth Blosser Showalter, from Broadway, Va., went nearby her home to help the family of one of her children recover from the Spanish Influenza. Elizabeth, fifty-nine, contracted the virus and passed away. Her children impacted Virginia Mennonite life in the twentieth century as few other families did: son Noah D. Showalter compiled an atlas of Rockingham County in 1939; her bishop son Timothy Showalter became a widely respected and sought after speaker in Mennonite churches; son Mark C. Showalter Sr., was an outstanding businessman and church planter from Broadway, Va.; son Lewis P. Showalter was a widely used Mennonite minister, and Elizabeth's daughter Elizabeth A. Showalter had a church ministry career that impacted many here and around the world.

When I drove in northern Rockingham to see familiar Mennonite churches standing empty on Easter Sunday morning, 2020, the reality of the current era sank in. Exactly what lies ahead is uncertain, but changes will undoubtedly take place for church life here and beyond.

We can "lift up our eyes to the hills," as the Psalmist wrote, and affirm that, even during this time of significant disruption, "our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."



Linden A. Showalter, from Waynesboro, Pa., led singing from the *Harmonia Sacra* at the Sing Me High Music Festival, August 2019, at the Brethren Mennonite Heritage Center, Harrisonburg, Va. Above left, Hebron Mennonite Church, Fulks Run, Va., dates to 1870 and celebrates 150 years of being part of Virginia Mennonite Conference in 2020. Hebron's earlier wood frame buildings are pictured on the back of this issue.

(Photos by Editor)

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An Epidemic that Complicated Mennonite Church Plans a Century

Ago

by Steve Nolt

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As the global Covid-19 pandemic upends schedules and assumptions in Virginia and around the world, we remember disruption caused by a local epidemic in 1917.

“Change of Place to Hold General Conference” ran the headline across page one of the August 16, 1917, issue of *Gospel Herald*, the weekly publication of the (Old) Mennonite Church. The shift in venue for the biennial denominational conference was both startling and urgent because the first delegates were to begin gathering near Harrisonburg, Virginia, in a mere seven days.

Scattered cases of “infantile paralysis” (polio) had suddenly swollen into a Shenandoah Valley epidemic. Before the development of a vaccine against the poliovirus in the 1950s, the disease was widely feared since it could quickly leave its victims paralyzed and, in some cases, prove fatal. Just a year earlier, in 1916, polio had struck some 27,000 Americans, killing at least 6,000 of them, news that was reported in *Gospel Herald* at the time.¹

Leaders had been counting on the gathering to craft a statement on conscientious objection, since military conscription had begun earlier in the summer and young men would soon be called to army training camps as U.S.

involvement in World War I deepened. The conference would have to take place elsewhere. It could hardly be postponed.

Preparations for the general conference had been taking place for months. The (Old) Mennonite Church did not have a long tradition of national gatherings. They had been meeting every two years only since 1897. Yet over the course of those two decades, these meetings had growth in size and importance, with multiple pre-conference committee and board meetings attached to the actual two-day general conference.

The plans for 1917 had called for some committees to convene at Zion Mennonite Church, north of Harrisonburg, as early as Friday, August 24. The denominational Sunday school conference and meetings of the Mennonite Publication Board, Mennonite Board of Missions, and Mennonite Board of Education, among others, would follow. The actual general conference would be hosted by Weavers Mennonite Church on Wednesday and Thursday, August 29 and 30.

Given the expected size of the culminating gathering, the general conference would not be in the Weavers meetinghouse, but in a special all-weather “tabernacle” purchased and refurbished by Virginia Mennonites for the event.² A. P. Funkhouser, a United Brethren minister and entrepreneur, had constructed the tabernacle back in 1892 as part of his effort to develop Assembly Park into a conference and

1. Tony Gould, *A Summer Plague: Polio and Its Survivors* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 3-28. See examples, such as “Scottdale, Pa.,” *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 31, 1916, 413; Hartzler obituary, *Gospel Herald*, Sep. 28, 1916, 487; and “Items and Comments,” *Gospel Herald*, Oct. 19, 1916, 544.

2. The tabernacle is mentioned in various notices, including in L. J. Heatwole, “Final Announcements,” *Gospel Herald*, July 26, 328, which stated that the General Conference [will] assemble with the Weavers congregation ... for which occasion a tabernacle is being provided for holding larger sessions.” Harrisonburg and Weavers were first announced as the conference location in “Mennonite General Conference,” *Gospel Herald*, Jan. 18, 1917, 776.

farm exhibit venue.³ By early 1917, however, Funkhouser was in poor health and the tabernacle had fallen into disrepair, so Mennonites needed to undertake renovations after acquiring it.

Meanwhile, Elias Frey of Wauseon, Ohio, the General Conference moderator, had been issuing schedules and travel tips via *Gospel Herald*. Ministers showing their credentials could travel for half price on the B&O Railroad, for example, and buying roundtrip tickets in advance would allow attendees to add on short stop-overs in Ohio or Pennsylvania or to visit New York City after the conference.⁴ Passengers disembarking at Broadway, Virginia, were to arrange with Lewis Shank for transportation, while those going on to Harrisonburg could call Emmanuel Blosser (who had a telephone). Letters would be delivered at the conference twice a day, and conference-goers had been urged to arrange for their mail to be forwarded to Harrisonburg for the week of the conference.⁵

And then, suddenly, everything changed.

Bishop L. J. Heatwole, of the Weavers congregation, told editor Daniel Kauffman in Scottdale, Pennsylvania, that a polio epidemic had led to the sudden closure of all the churches and other public buildings in and around Harrisonburg. “We sorely regret that this change became necessary and our sympathies are with the Virginia people in their affliction,”

Gospel Herald announced. Yet, “[we] believe that those who value the safety of the people will see the advisability of the change.”⁶

Daniel Kauffman hoped the conference would be switched to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, believing it would be easier for those who had already bought train tickets to reroute their travel to Johnstown, which was a rail hub.⁷ Before he was able to make that case, however, General Conference secretary J. S. Hartzler, of Goshen, Indiana, had convinced the congregations of his area to host the denomination on a week’s notice. Preliminary meetings would be held in churches in and around Nappanee, Wakarusa, and New Paris, as well as Goshen College, and the general conference session would convene on the grounds of Yellow Creek Mennonite Church.⁸

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly given the circumstances, not everyone learned of the change in time. As Daniel Kauffman explained to a friend in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, some “brethren” had already left for Virginia before hearing of the shift in location and learned of it only upon arriving in Harrisonburg, too late to make it to Goshen.⁹

The 1917 conference did develop and approve a statement on war, thereafter popularly known as the “Yellow Creek Statement,” that set out the church’s peace position. (Not many weeks earlier, planners had expected it would be called the “Weavers Statement.”) Among

3. James Rush has compiled accounts from the *Rockingham Register* of many civic and religious events held at Assembly Park from 1892 to 1912. In 1909 the Church of the Brethren’s Annual Conference had met there; see “Recorded and Future Annual Conferences of the Church of the Brethren,” www.brethren.org/ac/recorded-conferences.html.

4. For example, “General Conference,” *Gospel Herald*, June 28, 1917, 256.

5. “Final Announcements for the General Conference,” *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 9, 1917, 368.

6. “Change of Place,” *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 16, 1917, 369.

7. Daniel Kauffman to Israel B. Good, Aug. 18, 1917, Folder 1 (Correspondence, 1917-1919), I. B. Good Papers, Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society (LMHS), Lancaster, PA.

8. “Editorial” and “Change of Place to Hold General Conference,” *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 23, 1917, 384, 400.

9. Kauffman to Good, Sept. 3, 1917, I. B. Good Papers, LMHS.

other things, it called on drafted men to inform their officers “that under no circumstances can they consent to service, either combatant or noncombatant, under the military arm of the government.” The general conference then deputized three bishops to take the statement immediately to officials in Washington, D.C.¹⁰

The eleventh-hour changes surrounding the general conference session likely contributed to the mixed messages and confused communication that hobbled (Old) Mennonite Church efforts to convey their peace conviction to federal officials that fall. Daniel Kauffman believed that a good number of potential participants, especially those from the east, were not able to arrange tickets to Indiana at the last minute. And those eastern Pennsylvanians had the best political connections, Kauffman believed.¹¹ With fewer of them able to attend the Yellow Creek gathering, the plans for speaking to Washington suffered. In the end, several different (Old) Mennonite Church groups went to the capital and their messages were not always well coordinated.¹²

By mid-October 1917, when Virginia Mennonite Conference gathered for its annual meeting, the polio epidemic had passed. Its effects received no notice in the minutes, except for one thing. The churches of the Shenandoah

Valley were still discussing how to pay all the outstanding costs from acquiring and refurbishing the tabernacle they had readied for the denomination’s gathering but then not used.¹³ Yet all was not lost. Virginia Mennonites hosted the next general conference, in August 1919, using the Assembly Park tabernacle and the structure would later host Eastern Mennonite School commencement exercises and other events for years to come.¹⁴



Funeral of Mary Virginia (Custer) Wenger, January 1919, who died as a result of the Spanish Influenza epidemic after World War I. Mary (1880-1919) was buried in the Weavers Mennonite Church cemetery, Harrisonburg, with family looking on. In the middle, under the tree, are Mary’s children, ages 16, 13, 11, and 9. The children were left as orphans as Mary’s husband Menno S. Wenger had died five years earlier. The photo was taken by Cornelia Wenger Heatwole, and the picture was given to the Editor some years ago by an anonymous contributor.

10. “Our Indiana Meetings,” *Gospel Herald*, Sep. 6, 1917, 419-21; quote from p. 421.

11. Kauffman to Good, Aug. 18, 1917, I. B. Good Papers, LMHS.

12. Steven M. Nolt, “Lancaster Mennonites and the Politics of Nonresistance during the Great War,” *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* 42 (April 2019), 32-45.

13. Minutes, Oct. 12-13, 1917, in *Minutes of the Virginia Mennonite Conference* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Virginia Mennonite Conference, 1939), 119. In the end, the Conference’s Middle District paid for half the costs related to the tabernacle’s purchase and repairs, and the Northern and Southern Districts each covered a quarter.

14. “Our Virginia Meetings,” *Gospel Herald*, Sep. 4, 1919, 417-19. The year 1919 also saw, of course, the influenza pandemic, which took many more lives but did not coincide with the general conference gathering. See, for example, Elwood E. Yoder, *We’re Marching to Zion: A History of Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Virginia, 1885-2010* (Broadway, Va.: Zion Mennonite Church, 2010), 61-63.

A wedding took place at Weavers Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va., during the coronavirus era, May 23, 2020.

Only the immediate family attended, with guests driving by in their vehicles, dropping off gifts, and honking their horns. Pictured are Alesha Melendez and Nevin Lehman, who were married by Weavers Pastor Phil Kanagy. A fall wedding reception is planned.

Photo by Editor



On Easter Sunday morning, April 12, 2020, the Editor drove around to see empty meetinghouses to the north of Harrisonburg. Pictured in middle photos are Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., and Trissels Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., whose buildings remained empty on Easter Sunday morning.

A sign in downtown Harrisonburg, Va., records the Covid-19 era, by the Harrisonburg Baptist Church on South Main Street, April 9, 2020. Many volunteers in the Shenandoah Valley made masks and first responder protective gowns, as did Joy Yoder (pictured), who made hundreds of masks and gowns at the request of Mennonite Disaster Service.

Photos by Editor

Predictions of Paul Frye's Rising from the Grave in 1960

by Elwood Yoder

On a recent drizzly and cloudy May afternoon, I pulled into an empty Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church parking lot and turned off my vehicle. Hearing that hundreds came to Rev. Paul Frye's grave five months after his death, in the Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church cemetery, led me to investigate and seek out his gravestone. Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church is about six miles west of Harrisonburg. Rev. Paul Frye passed away on November 23, 1959.

Earlier this year, I learned about Paul Frye's family's predictions of rising from the dead in 1960. At an officers meeting of the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians, Norman Wenger alerted me that a news reporter with a video camera had come to Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church on the morning of April 30, 1960, to see what would happen with the predictions of Rev. Frye's rising from the dead. The video recorder and writer came from a television station in Roanoke, Virginia.¹ Just as Norman had known, I found the one-minute video clip on the University of Virginia web site, showing events on the last morning of April 1960.

Another photographer, from the *Daily News-Record*, came to record events at the early Saturday morning spectacle. The DNR reporter estimated that 800 people gathered in the early dawn, most waiting for several hours to see what would happen.² In the video clip, the Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church can be viewed

directly across the road from the church cemetery. Even more revealing, however, is the long line of cars that snarled traffic on Mt. Clinton Pike for hours. It appears that the video reporter stood on a stepladder to get a good view of the crowd and setting. The police had difficulty untangling the traffic jam along the road, which stretched as far in the distance as the video camera could film.

Paul Frye, fifty-nine, had been pastor at the Gay Street Pentecostal Church in Harrisonburg. Frye had grown up in Rockingham County, but he and his wife had lived in Winchester for a time.³ Paul (1900-1959) and Sadie (1901-1985) Frye had five children. The family of Rev. Paul Frye spread the word that their father would rise from the grave, and hundreds came to see what would happen. Sheriff Strawderman said that most people came because they had been attracted by curiosity. According to the Roanoke reporter, when nothing happened, and Rev. Paul Frye did not rise from the dead and preach a sermon, a son of Rev. Frye "blamed it on sneering and skepticism by the crowd."⁴ Remarkably, some on-lookers arrived at the cemetery as early as 2:30 AM that morning.

In our Historian's officers meeting earlier in 2020, after we discussed the Frye incident from 1960, Lois Bowman Kreider went home and checked her diary. In her diary from April 30, 1960, Lois wrote that "about 2,000 people (2 miles of road parked solid) assembled at Mt. Clinton Mennonite cemetery for the excitement. Now I hear that they 'got the wrong

1. *Disappointed Crowd Waits for Rev. Paul Frye to Return From the Dead In Rockingham County*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Library, 1960, search.lib.virginia.edu/catalog/uva-lib:2245790.

2. "West Rockingham Cemetery," *Daily News-Record*, May 2, 1960, <https://dnronline.newspaperarchive.com/harrisonburg-daily-news-record/1960-05-02/>.

3. "The Rev. Paul F. Frye," *Daily News-Record*, November 24, 1959, <https://dnronline.newspaperarchive.com/harrisonburg-daily-news-record/1959-11-24/page-5/>.

4. "WSLS-TV News Film Collection," Anchor Script, May 2, 1960, http://fedora01.lib.virginia.edu/wsls/0087_1/0087_1.pdf.

date; he's to rise on Thanksgiving." Mary Suter's diary, from April 30, 1960, also records the details with this flourish: "how foolish can people get."⁵

After wandering through the cemetery looking for Rev. Frye's tombstone, I finally came upon it. It was in row thirty-one, according to an online index, but I had no idea on which end of the cemetery the makers of the index had started counting, so I walked through most of the graveyard. Finally, I came upon the tombstone of Rev. Paul and Sadie Frye. On this rainy day, I took a photo and pondered the meaning of this unusual event from 1960. After lingering, I walked back across the road to my vehicle. My journey into a story from Saturday morning, April 30, 1960, during the latter days of the Eisenhower administration, reaffirmed my theological convictions about the return of Christ and reinforced my beliefs that predicting when the dead in Christ will rise again is presumptive and unwise. I then drove home on nearly empty streets, the result of the Covid-19 era of 2020, sixty years after the prediction of Paul Frye's rising from the dead.



Upper photo from Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church Cemetery, Harrisonburg, Va., 2020. Lower photo was copied from first page of the online *Daily News-Record*, Harrisonburg, Va., May 2, 1960, showing the crowd at Rev. Paul Frye's tombstone the morning of April 30, 1960.

5. Mary E. Suter's diary, Menno Simons Historical Library, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va.

The Witness of the Seventy-Two

by Rebecca Suter Lindsay

Rebecca Suter Lindsay lives with her husband in Crestview Hills, Kentucky. Rebecca has a forthcoming historical fiction novel, *The Peacemakers*, to be released by Shadelandhouse Modern Press in the fall of 2020. *The Peacemakers* is the story of a young Mennonite boy living near Harrisonburg, Va., in 1861 who attempts to keep his father and uncle from being conscripted into the Confederate Army.

Mennonite men living in the Shenandoah Valley in 1861 faced a difficult choice between answering the demands of the state by joining the Confederate Army or remaining true to the nonresistance tenet of their faith. Before the war, they avoided bearing arms by paying a small fine of fifty or seventy-five cents for not attending required militia drill.¹ When the war began, however, they soon found that paying a fine would no longer protect them from conscription. That left them four options: join up, hire a substitute, go into hiding, or escape to Union territory and the West.

Those who did join the army found themselves at odds with the religious community whose leaders threatened to throw them out of the church, and sometimes did,² or demanded that they take the “no fire” oath, which meant that they could be sent into battle, but would not be able to defend themselves.

News out of Richmond in mid-February of 1862 that a bill had been passed by the Virginia Assembly requisitioning troops to fill all companies in the field to 100 men and a proclamation by the Governor of Virginia requiring all men to register with the company district in which they lived raised the level of concern among the Mennonites and Dunkards (Brethren) in Rock-

ingham and Augusta Counties and brought a number of men to seriously consider escaping to Ohio and points west.³

Thus, one night in mid-March, a group of seventy-four Mennonite and Dunkard men gathered, determined to take their chances in reaching Union territory. These men knew the trip would not be without risk. If a man was captured, he could be shot for treason, imprisoned and/or conscripted into the Confederate army, plus lose any money or property he had with him.⁴

Many tears were shed and many prayers said that night as the men departed. Encouraged by their wives, who would rather have them absent from home than serving in the military, they left behind their farms and families and struck out across the Allegheny range. Once across Shenandoah Mountain, they planned to follow the river valleys north to Maryland where they could travel westward on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.⁵

The trip went well until the group reached the town of Petersburg (now in West Virginia), which was situated along the banks of the South Branch of the Potomac River. The river at that place was fifty yards wide, and half of the men were on foot. Those who were riding horses made three trips across ferrying their fellow travelers to the other side.⁶

Here the disadvantage of such a large group came into play. So many men crossing the river became a spectacle, and the townspeople came out to watch. On the other side of the river, the

1. Samuel L. Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967), 28.

2. Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy*, 37-38.

3. *The Daily Dispatch*: Vol. Xxi — no.36 Richmond, Va. Tuesday, February 11, 1862. https://dispatch.richmond.edu/view/secondary-section-view.php?doc=D_021_036 and Vol. Xxi — no.39 Richmond, Va. Friday, February 14, 1862. https://dispatch.richmond.edu/view/secondary-section-view.php?doc=D_021_039.

4. Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy*, 62.

5. S. F. Sanger and D. Hays, *The Olive Branch* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1907), 59, 61, 66.

6. Sanger and Hays, *Olive Branch*, 66.

men continued their trip by walking in plain view through town. As a result, they attracted not only the attention of the citizens of Petersburg, but also that of Confederate scouts in the area. Just north of town, they were stopped by just two Confederate soldiers.⁷

The instinct of many people in this situation would be to run. Surely, if over seventy men were to scatter, two soldiers, even with guns, could not round up but so many of them. The men, however, remained true to the tenets of their faith, which called for them to submit to the authority of the state as long as the state did not require them to perform acts contrary to the law of God. When one of the Mennonite men asked Joseph A. Miller what he planned to do, Miller replied, “*Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.*”⁸ And when the soldiers asked the men to surrender their weapons, they pulled from their pockets copies of the New Testament or Peter Burkholder’s *Mennonite Confession of Faith*.⁹

The men had come so close to their goal, but now they found themselves guarded by a squad of soldiers and headed back the way they had come—back into Petersburg, then, over the next several days, south to Monterey and eastward over Shenandoah Mountain into Staunton, Virginia. During the day, they walked, and at night they slept on the floor in a courthouse or abandoned house. The trek from Monterey to Staunton took two days over rough territory. The line of men became stretched thin, sometimes so much so that men found themselves alone and could have easily escaped. Except for two, however, they refused to take advantage of

the situation. After all, they had given their word that they would not attempt escape and were afraid if they did, it would make things harder on those left behind. They trusted that God had a purpose in allowing them to be captured, though they did not yet understand what that purpose was.¹⁰

On Wednesday, March 19, the men arrived in Staunton, an event that is noted in Joseph Waddell’s *Annals of Augusta County, Virginia*.¹¹ A second record documenting the presence of the seventy-plus men in Staunton on that day can be found in Jacob R. Hildebrand’s daybook, “A Mennonite Journal, 1862 – 1865.” In his entry for March 20, 1862, he states, “...*was at Staunton [and] heard that five calvery [sic] men took 72 Reffugees [sic] on their way to the Yankees. They had 32 horses & \$12000 in gold and silver. They were sent to Richmond today. They are from the lower end of this county & Rockingham.*”¹²

The men spent the night of March 19 in the courthouse in Staunton and were loaded onto the train for Richmond the following morning. The rail trip lasted all day and into the night. The men had little to eat except for some “crackers” (possibly hardtack), which they were given to carry in their pockets. They spent the first night in Richmond crowded into a cramped room where they slept packed closely together—if they slept at all. The next day, they were transferred to a larger space in Castle Thunder, a former tobacco warehouse along the James River Canal, which was used by the Confederate Army as a prison for civilians. The brick building, with its barred windows and unsanitary conditions,

7. Sanger and Hays, *Olive Branch*, 68.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.* Also, Harry Anthony Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia 1727-1900*, Vol. 1, 2nd Ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Vision Publishers, 2012), 155.

10. Sanger and Hays, *Olive Branch*, 69.

11. Joseph A., Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County, Virginia from 1726 to 1871*, 2nd Ed. (Staunton, VA: C. Russell Caldwell, Publisher, 1902), 466.

12. Jacob R. Hildebrand, *A Mennonite Journal, 1862-1865: A Father's Account of the Civil War In the Shenandoah Valley* (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1996), 6.

was to be their home for the next month.¹³

Once again, the large size of the group attracted attention, this time that of the Confederate Army, the Virginia Assembly and the Confederate Congress. What was the government to do with a sizeable group of men who refused to fire a gun, even in self-defense? Almost immediately, the Mennonite and Dunkard men began to receive visitors.

Two who visited the Seventy-Two while they were incarcerated in Castle Thunder were Sydney S. Baxter and John Hopkins. The men had been at Castle Thunder only a few days when Baxter, a commissioner from the War Department in charge of investigating civilians, arrived to interview the prisoners. As men were taken from the room to be questioned, the group as a whole feared that they would be executed for desertion. Gabriel D. Heatwole found that he was resigned to his fate, at peace with what he believed was about to come. *This is the end. It will soon be over*, he thought.¹⁴

Fortunately, Gabriel was wrong. In his report, filed on March 31, 1862, Baxter was favorable to the cause of the Seventy-Two, believing them to all be members in good standing of Dunkard and Mennonite churches and seeing them as loyal citizens of the Confederacy and sincere in their belief that they should not bear arms against their fellowman. Baxter comments on their “cheerful” willingness to pay a fine to avoid serving in the army or to serve in non-combative positions such as driving a team, cooking, or caring for the sick and wounded. He recommended that they be discharged if they swore an oath of allegiance to the Confederate

States.¹⁵

John Hopkins, who represented Rockingham County in the Virginia House of Delegates, was of more immediate help to the men. Already Hopkins had received correspondence from Elder John Kline asking that he seek legislative relief for Dunkard men from conscription into the Confederate Army. Hopkins introduced a bill in the House calling for exemptions for religious reasons, which was passed on March 29 by both the House and the Senate. Men who were already members in good standing of churches that held the nonresistance tenet could be excused from military service by paying a fine of \$500 plus two percent of their assessed property value. Those who were not yet members of a church or who could not pay the fine could serve in the army as teamsters or in non-combatative positions.¹⁶

Forty-five of the group—mostly older men—qualified to pay the \$500 fine. At home in the Shenandoah Valley, the Mennonite and Dunkard communities quickly banded together to raise the funds needed to release the eligible men from prison. The churches elected men who were respected in their congregations to carry the money to Richmond. In mid-April, the freed prisoners returned to the Valley, riding the train as far as Waynesboro and then walking the rest of the way.¹⁷

But what about the twenty-seven younger men who had not yet joined a church? History credits General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson with providing a way out of prison for these men. On the day that the Seventy-Two were housed in Castle Thunder, Jackson wrote a let-

13. Sanger and Hays, *Olive Branch*, 70-71, 81.

14. Brunk, *History of Mennonites*, 156. Also: *The War of the Rebellion*, Ser. 2, Vol. 3. HathiTrust Digital Library. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/ssd?id=uc1.c055180156;seq=853>.

15. Brunk, *History of Mennonites*, 156.

16. Journal of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1861-1862, 319-320, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/vahous61/vahous61.html> Also: Journal of the Virginia Senate, 1861-1862, 286, 289-291.

17. Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy*, 72.

ter to Col. S. Bassett French, Aide-de-Camp to the Virginia governor, proposing that men from three religious groups—Mennonites, Dunkards, and Quakers—be formed into a company, with or without officers, and be used in non-combat service. His reasoning was that this would free up men who wanted to fight to serve in combat.¹⁸

Military records show that on April 20, that five of the younger men who had been incarcerated in Richmond—Manassas Heatwole, Henry M. Wenger, Jacob Suter (listed as Isaac Suter in Baxter’s report),¹⁹ Jacob Nicewander, and Jacob Wenger—enlisted in the 52nd Regiment, Virginia Infantry, Co. F, at Valley Mills, where General Edward “Allegheny” Johnson was camped west of Staunton.²⁰

It appears, however, that these five men didn’t benefit from Jackson’s proposal, the Virginia Exemption Act, or Baxter’s report. Instead of serving in non-combat service, they were assigned to a regular infantry company. Two weeks later, Jackson joined Johnson, and the two generals led their troops into battle at McDowell in Highland County, Virginia. Descendants of Jacob Suter say that their ancestor carried a gun and fought in that battle.²¹

Study of the military records of these five shows that, rather than “cheerfully serve” in the army, they spent much of the time over the next three years absent and in hiding. Manassas Heatwole and Jacob Nicewander both deserted on May 8, the day of the Battle of McDowell. Jacob

Wenger and Jacob Suter were absent without leave on May 20, one month after they enlisted. And Henry M. Wenger deserted on June 6, 1862, the day that Turner Ashby was killed on Port Republic Road near Harrisonburg.²² One might speculate that as Jackson passed through Rockingham County on his celebrated Shenandoah Valley campaign, these young men walked home and hid.

The Mennonite and Dunkard community rejoiced at the assistance that the Virginia Exemption Act brought. Joseph Miller, who had declared that he would “*stand still and see the salvation of the Lord*,” concluded in retelling the story, that the Lord “...*prepared a better way for our escape than we had marked out for ourselves.*”²³ The Lord had used their capture and imprisonment for the greater good of the whole Mennonite and Dunkard community.

Relief was short-lived, however. The ink was hardly dry on the Virginia act when the Confederate Congress passed both a conscription act,²⁴ requiring all men between the ages of 18 and 35 to enlist, and an exemption act²⁵ that was devoid of help for the religious nonresistants.

Still, the witness of the Seventy-Two stands as an example of the power of nonresistance to affect social and political change. The mechanism had been set in motion for the Anabaptist community to seek relief from military service on a national (Confederate) level, which came in October of that year.

18. David S. Rodes, Norman R. Wenger, Emmert F. Bittinger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley, 1*, Appendix I (Dayton, VA: Valley Research Associates, 2003), 716-717.

19. Rodes, Wenger, and Bittinger, *Unionists*, Vol. VI, 2012, 973.

20. Fold-3 <https://www.fold3.com/image/12509139>; <https://www.fold3.com/image/12514919>; <https://www.fold3.com/image/12516915>; <https://www.fold3.com/image/271/12510014>; <https://www.fold3.com/image/12514935>.

21. Conversation with Betty Heatwole Campbell, Donna Kay Richie, and Darleen Martin, August 3, 2016, Dayton, Virginia.

22. Fold-3, Above references.

23. Sanger and Hays, *Olive Branch*, 66.

24. Conscription Act of April 16. *The Statutes at Large of the Confederate States of America, Ch. XXXI* (Richmond: R. M. Smith Publisher to Congress, 1862), 29-32. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/statutes/statutes.html>.

25. Exemption Act of April 21. *The Statutes at Large of the Confederate States of America, Ch. LXXIV* (Richmond: R. M. Smith Publisher to Congress, 1862), 51-52. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/statutes/statutes.html>.



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

All past issues of *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*, from 1994-2020, 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.

Hebron Mennonite Church, Fulks Run, Va., a Virginia Conference congregation, celebrates 150 years in 2020. The church was established in 1870. The photo on right shows the Hebron building in 1949, and the larger photo above was taken in 1993. Hebron's brick building, on front, was built about 2012.
(Upper photo by Editor; lower photo from MC USA Archives)



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.

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