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Editor:
Elwood Yoder

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Trailblazers of the Nonresistant Underground Railroad

Upon the 250th anniversary of the United States, my favorite story to tell guests at the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center is about the 1776 Bible we keep on display in the log house (right).

Christopher Sauer Jr., a Brethren printer in Philadelphia, had his shop ransacked by Patriots who demanded that he support the Revolutionary cause. The German-language Bible pictured below survived the destruction of Sauer's print shop.

In 1776 the Bible came into the Blosser family and remained with the Mennonite family until it was donated to the Heritage Center in 2006. The Bible was rescued from the Blosser homestead in Harrisonburg in 1864 when Union troops gave them 15 minutes to get out what they wanted to save before they burned the Blosser house.

I ponder how this Bible survived two American wars. Upon the semiquincentennial of the U.S., I am newly committed to the Biblical values of Anabaptism.

Elwood Yoder, Editor



Berea Christian School students, Harrisonburg, Va., joined a Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center field trip, April 23, 2026. They waited in front of the 1829 log house.
Photo by Elwood Yoder



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Trailblazers of the Nonresistant Underground Railroad

A newly discovered, first-hand account from March 1862

By Catherine Funk Will

Introduced and annotated with footnotes by Karl Rhodes

This previously unpublished manuscript was written in 1918 by Catherine Funk Will (1844–1923), a daughter of the Mennonite stone carver Abraham Funk (1807–1875), who lived near Broadway. Soon after the Shenandoah Mennonite Historian published “The Civil War Adventures of Abraham Funk,” in its fall 2025 issue, a Funk descendant discovered this amazing manuscript—a first-hand account of a small group of refugees escaping the Confederacy via the nonresistant underground railroad. This story differs from other first-hand accounts in at least three ways: 1) a woman wrote it, 2) she makes no reference to God or any religious convictions, and 3) her group departed the valley on March 8, 1862, five days ahead of previously documented groups of Anabaptist refugees. This small group of refugees appears to be the first to make it safely to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. While retyping this manuscript, I (Karl) made no attempt to correct spelling, grammar, capitalization, or punctuation, but I did fix some errors that seemed purely typographical. I also omitted the first paragraph of this manuscript because it contains second-hand Armentrout family lore that seems dubious at best. Will’s first-hand narrative begins with the persistent sadness she endured after the death of her mother, Matilda Armentrout Funk, in 1851.



Karl Rhodes lectured about the “Anabaptist Underground Railroad” at the Swiss Anabaptist Genealogical Association meeting at Lindale Mennonite Church, April 17, 2026.
photo by Elwood Yoder

Only those that are left without a mother’s care can know of the sorrow even of a child at the age of six years. It is said that childish sorrow is soon forgotten. Not so with me; many times have I envied those whose mothers were spared to care for them all along the road of life.

My childhood, my school days, were carefree and happy as any child’s could be till the year of 1860 was ushered in, when there began to be talk of war between the states. Older people could see what was coming; the younger set could not think that anything would or could come to mar their happiness. But days, weeks and months passed by, every day more news of the coming war that now seemed to be inevitable.

We had a neighbor boy hired for the summer. He was not more than 19 years old, but belonged to Brocksgap Riflemen, a volunteer company that during the war was under Stonewall Jackson. Many times I wished that I could see Billy togged out in that uniform of

Grey that was hanging in a spare room up stairs. It came all too soon. On that memorable morning, the 19th of April, 1861 Billy, the hired boy, was ordered to report at the famous Winchester town. Now all was confusion—the war was sure enough on. In less than one week there were very few young men from 17 to 25 left at home.

Sometime in May father's team was pressed into service. At the same time my older brother was ordered out with a call for more militiamen. Father requested that he go as a teamster, which was granted.¹

The 1st of August my brother was sent home on furlough with camp fever—did not recover from that till March.

There was yet another one in our home, a teacher of our school, who was to be my husband as soon as that cruel war was over. He served as a militia man for three month, then he grew tired of army life or wanted to get home to the girl he left behind him—do not know which. Anyway he took all the money he had hoarded up to start us sometime in housekeeping and hired a substitute for three months, came home and taught school three more months, which exempted him from army duty.² At the close of the school there had to be other plans made, so on Sunday morning, February 23rd, 1862 there was a little gathering of friends and neighbors in our home and I became the wife of my former teacher.³ Father planned then to send my brother and his new son-in-law to the north where he hoped to keep them out of the Army. My mind was made up in a short time to go with them, knowing full well that it was a very dangerous undertaking.⁴ If we were caught by either army our story we had to tell would more than likely not be believed. To prison or shot, might be our doom. Nothing daunted we were willing to run the risk of getting through both lines and go on



Catherine Will Funk and her husband, George Will, while they were very young—perhaps their wedding photo.
Photo from Karl Rhodes

1. This older brother was Christian Funk (1842–1909). He is the Funk son mentioned briefly in Rhodes, SMH (2025) p. 4. That reference says only that Christian “eventually escaped through the underground railroad to join his brother in Illinois.” Will’s manuscript tells the full story of his escape. Also see Colby (1928), pp. 588–589, and Colfax County biographical sketches in Andreas (1883).

2. Virginia Mennonite Churches allowed their members to hire substitutes, but the practice was frowned upon.

3. Will’s school teacher husband is George S. Will (1836–1902).

4. Catherine Will is the only woman known to go through the mountains via the nonresistant underground railroad in 1862. In the following years, a few other women, such as Rebecca Rhodes Good and Rebecca Shue Funk, also made the trip with their families. Rebecca Funk was Will’s stepmother.

to Canada if needs be. My father having gathered up some five hundred dollars in silver and gold he gave us part of it to pay our way. We began our preparations for our dangerous journey. On the night of March 8th, 1862, at 10 o'clock father, brother, brother-in-law, husband and I, with three horses, what few clothing we could take with us, mounted our faithful old family horses, took one more look at that once happy home, out through meadow and orchard.⁵ At the gate stood my youngest brother.⁶ As he extended his hand and with trembling voice said "Goodbye, Sis", there was such a twitching at my heart stings that I felt as if it was impossible to go on, for all through life he had been my chum, in childhood my companion and playmate. I had to go on; there was a brother and husband to keep out of that war and I felt it my duty to go along and do my part.

We rode on in silence past the old schoolhouse where I had spent so many happy hours, along the river where I played in childhood—in after years sat on its banks and dreamed the wild dreams of young womanhood—on past the happy homes of many chums and friends of other days, on through a gap in the north mountain, avoiding all travelled roads as much as possible, following cattle and deer trails, fording streams of all kinds.⁷ At one river my faithful pony went down stream too far by a few feet so had to do some lively swimming, but landed me on the opposite bank safe with my shoes full of cold water. Next morning I found my feet swollen so badly I had to go two days without my shoes. On the morning of the 9th of March, just at daylight, we were on top of the Pendleton mountain, and it did seem good to get out of the saddle and eat that cold breakfast. I was so tired and sleepy.⁸ After breakfast was over and we had rested a while my father pointed off to the east where the sun was just rising in all its splendor and said that we could see over in the valley from there. What a fine view it was! I took a long view up and down the valley, little thinking that the troops were being gathered for battle and before the setting of the sun more than one mother's son would be lying dead on the road side in their wild chase up and down that famous Valley Pike.⁹

After an hour's rest we mounted our horses and rode on over mountains, rivers and valleys all that day. In the evening, at sundown, we came to a comfortable farm house where we knew we would be safe for at least a few days till we could get guides to take us on to Oakland, Maryland.¹⁰ The lady of

5. The group's departure time is five days before other known groups of refugees began to leave Rockingham County. The best first-hand accounts of the other groups are in Sanger and Hays (1907) and Rhodes (1864).

6. This younger brother is George Funk (1847–1932).

7. The river she mentions is the North Fork of the Shenandoah. They are traveling through nearby Brocks Gap at this point.

8. Pendleton Mountain is another name for Shenandoah Mountain. They probably crossed the mountain where today's Overly Hollow Road joins Peru Hollow Road.

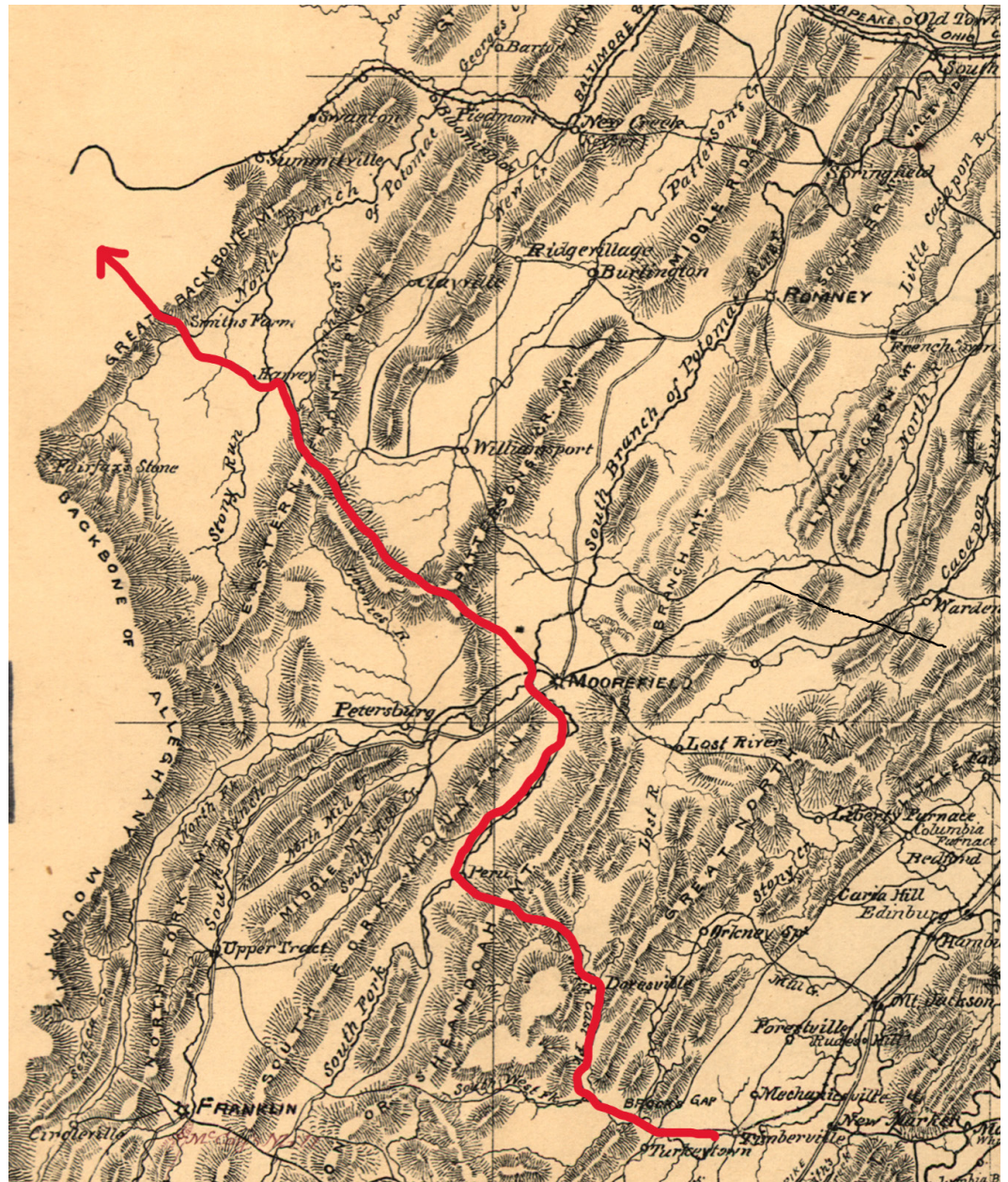
9. There was no significant fighting in the Valley on March 9, 1862. By saying "before the sun set on that day," Will might be poetically referring to the entire war as one day. Many desperate chases did take place up and down the Valley Pike during the next three years.

10. This safe house probably was near Moorefield, West Virginia.

the house took us in the spare room, drew down the blinds to the windows. Were told to stay there and not come to the other part of the house—our meals were brought to us. Stairway opened to our sleeping rooms. We spent two days and two nights there, seeing no one but the lady of the house. The country around was full of soldiers. Every stranger that came around had to give an account of himself, and that we did not care to do.

The first day at this place father and a friend went out in the mountain and hunted up two guides to take us on to Maryland; then he left us and went back home. The next night, the guides came with three horses and we started again. As we went out on the front porch the moon was shining and we saw in the west four high knobs on the mountain, which we named Mount Sambo, Mount Cristo, Mount Kato and Mount Tombo. Twenty seven years after that I was told that those mountains still bear that name.

We only had three horses so the men would change about. Our guides told us there must be no talking. I do not know what the men thought about it. I, being a woman, and used to talking, did not like it much. I soon got so sleepy and tired I did not care to talk. We rode on in silence till we came to a river that in the moonlight looked deep and angry to me. Two of the men mounted one of the horses and started across; the current was too much for them. They went down stream



Approximate route that Catherine Will and co-travelers took from Timberville, Va., north to Oakland, Md.

Map by Karl Rhodes



Catherine Funk Will.

Photo from Karl Rhodes

and came out on the same side they went in. Our guide got excited and said we had to get across here some way. So went up the river a little way, started in again and got across. Next was my turn to try it. They told me to take off my riding skirt which was very long and spread it over my saddle. I did so and was helped to the saddle again. I closed my eyes and trusted to my guide and that faithful animal to get me to the opposite bank. When all were landed safe on the other side of that swollen stream our guides told us we had to walk up that bank as it was too steep to ride up. Cannot tell you how they ever go the horses up—it was all we could do to get up and not roll back down in the river. When all were safe on top I wanted my riding skirt to put on. Was told there was no time for me to put on riding skirt as it was a ride for life now, to mount as soon as possible. I was not long in getting in that saddle. He told us in undertone if anyone passed us, white or black, that we would have to take to the woods; told the ones that were walking where to meet us next day if we were not caught by the troops. Then we started on again. Had only

gone about half a mile till a colored man on a dapple grey horse rode up and looked us in the face as well as he could and went on in a sweeping gallop. As soon as he was gone the guide said, “Now if he goes in at that gate that you see that is by those houses we will have to take to the woods and ride for life. The troops will be after us.”

A few rods ahead of us we left the Pike and went through timber and fields, over hills and valley, for miles as fast as our horses could run. We kept this up for miles, doing credit to Sheridan’s ride to Winchester town.¹¹ When our tired horses could go no longer we slowed up but kept a lookout for anything that looked like a uniformed soldier, either blue or grey coated. Our plea that we were in sympathy with either side would have amounted to nothing—they had all been deceived too many times.

About four o’clock in the morning we reached a place called Greenlands Gap.¹² There was a road bed cut down from the mountain side. On the opposite side was a deep creek. We were beginning to feel safe, so were talking to each other. My husband spoke to me, mentioning my name. Just as we entered this narrow road our guide reined in his horse and we all stopped, for there surely was

11. Here Will is clearly referring to Sheridan’s famous ride from Winchester to the Battle of Cedar Creek. She likely was familiar with the epic poem, “Sheridan’s Ride,” by Thomas Buchanan Read.

12. Greenlands Gap is about two-thirds of the way between their starting point of Broadway, Virginia, and their destination of Oakland, Maryland.

a crackling of brush close by. And what was it? We kept quiet a while, then the guide said, "I thought it might be soldiers, but I reckons it was cattle after all. So we rode on, having about two miles to go before we could stop. Our stopping place was a log cabin of the poorest kind. The family consisted of mother and son, about twelve years old. The father was off on duty as home guard. Whether they were black or white I cannot tell; if white the dirt was so thick I could not see the color of the skin. Nevertheless that did not matter. They gave us the best they had—that was the fattest of pork, the poorest of corn bread and the blackest of molasses. We got a place to lie down and take the rest we needed. It was eleven o'clock before the other guide with my brother and brother-in-law came in, so we were all together again and we were surely glad to see them.

It was daylight when they came through Greenland Gap. They found a squad of soldiers stationed there. They asked them if they saw two men and a woman pass through there that night. They said they did, and came very near shooting them too. They said they stationed themselves above the road ready to shoot, when they heard a man mention a woman's name he was talking to, so did not shoot.

After a short rest we travelled on over the mountains. Stopped with a farmer at the foot of the



Greenland Gap was the place where, according to Catherine, the soldiers were getting ready to shoot down at them until they heard George calling his wife Catherine by name, so then they knew that there was a woman in the group, and they didn't shoot. It's a very similar story to the one that R. J. Heatwole tells about the swamp dragon getting ready to shoot at his group until he saw three black men with them. Then he realized they were not McNeil's rangers, and he didn't shoot.

Photo credit: West Virginia and Regional History Center at the West Virginia University Libraries

mountain near the north branch of the Potomac river.¹³ I never saw a lovelier spot.

Early the next morning we were again on the road, but now out of danger. At five o'clock in the evening we arrived at Oak Land, Maryland, where we took the train next morning for Paxton, Ford County, Illinois, where we had a brother and some other friends.¹⁴ We arrived there late in the evening, hunted up a livery team to take us to the country to the home of a friend we knew in the south. He gave us a hearty welcome to his home. When we told him that we left the south to keep out of the war he remarked with an oath that we did not better it any by coming there. We did not know what to think of that. We thought ourselves perfectly safe way out in Illinois, so far from the battle ground. We soon found out different. The man that drove us to our friend's home went back to town and reported what our friend told us; so they got busy and got a rope and thought it best to come out and hang our friend. One man with more sense and a cooler head told them to give that job up and let him alone, that all we would ever do would be to swear and talk. He never did change his views or quit talking. More than one time after that he was threatened with the rope but never hung. After the war he was still living, and died a natural death in old Missouri. We lived in Ford County two years, and there were more than one hot time in the old town during our stay there, as the two parties were equally divided, each party armed and ready to fight.

One evening in 1863 there was to be a political speech in the court house in Paxton. Every one that could go went. We could not miss hearing a political speech so a lady living in the house with us, my husband and I went, took seats about the middle of the court room, sat there and waited sometime before the speaker came. When he came he was dressed in full blue uniform with sabre and revolvers strapped to his side. When he went to the rostrum to speak he laid his sabre and revolvers on the table in front of him. Then he began his speech with all the abuse he could think of about the South. It was not many minutes till the half of the crowd of men were on their feet with revolvers in their hands. I never saw such a rush of women, children and men to get down stairs. I was in as big a hurry as any of them. That broad stairway was jammed with men, women and children. In that great rush I lost my husband. Another woman got ahold of one arm while was clinging to the other. I lost my grip, so I was left back and they were carried out in the court yard where I found them later, very much scared, thinking that I might have been trampled to death by the crowd.

In the meantime the speaker in the court house apologized and quieted down the crowd, and made a very good speech. A few days after that he disappeared and the next we heard of him he was caught at Island No. 10 and shot. He was a Southern spy—was sent up there to see how many Southern sympathizers were in that part of the country.

13. This place is probably near today's Gorman Bridge over the North Branch of the Potomac. They still had about twelve more miles to go.

14. The refugees had traveled about 100 miles on horseback and on foot to reach the train station at Oakland.

This is the last of my Civil War stories so will close by saying that we opened the way for many that wanted to keep out of the war by coming west. After we were successful in getting through both lines many followed our trail. It was our company that opened the way.¹⁵

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15. This claim is probably true. Of the Rockingham County refugee groups that attempted to go through the mountains to reach the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in March 1862, Will's group was the only one known to succeed. Many groups took similar routes in 1863 and 1864, and nearly all of them made it to the B&O.

A HARVEST ADVENTURE

This article was submitted by Paul Kratz. It was taken from Warren Kratz's handwritten journal describing his travel and work experience in 1917 in the Midwest, titled: "Memorandum of a Trip: A Few Sketches of My Trip West." Both Warren and his son Paul Kratz were longtime ministers in the Virginia Mennonite Conference.

In the spring, when Warren Alderfer Kratz was seventeen years of age, he saw in "the daily paper" that "several thousand men were wanted to work in the harvest fields of Kansas and Oklahoma" during the summer of 1917. Since he had no specific plans for that summer, he felt drawn to this adventure—partly because he had an urge to travel and see the country—partly because big wages were promised for men who

had farming experience—and partly because he could be back again for school in the fall.

So he found a friend who shared similar ambitions, and they left on June 13,

1917, and traveled together, primarily by train, to Woodward, in southern Kansas, where they discovered the harvest was well underway. They were advised to just hang around on the corners



Warren and Esther Kratz, 1923.

Photo from Paul Kratz

of the streets in town, and farmers would come by and hire them. This was the pattern in most of the settings for the summer.

Harvesting was done with mules or horses, and in different settings, different kinds of “binders,” “barges,” and “headers” were used to harvest the grain. In one setting, they had the challenge of working with untrained horses! In another, the mules were very old and slow. In another, Warren recorded that he had a “dandy black team of horses to drive!”

So as harvesting in one area was completed, Warren and others traveled north by train to a new area, where harvesting was just getting

started. In the process, Warren and his friend got separated because in one setting, a farmer hired only one of them, and the other went alone to find work elsewhere.

Warren worked his way north through Oklahoma, into Kansas, and eventually into Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota. There were times he had to walk some miles from an isolated train station out in the country to find work. There were times he had to bathe in a river, because some houses were small and did not have running water.

In some places, the workers were fed well, and in some places they weren't. Some places

The Swiss Anabaptist Genealogical Association met at Lindale Mennonite Church, near Harrisonburg, April 17-18, 2026.

The Planning Committee consisted of Karl and Kim Rhodes, Brent Rodes, Ann Clough, Norman Wenger, Gary Smucker, Merle Christner, and Andrea Early.

Approximately 125-130 attended the event.

SAGA officers granted permission to use this photo in *Historian*, partly because the Shenandoah



1. Norman Wenger 2. Marcus Yoder 3. Steve Slagle 4. Phil Kniss 5. Eric Bradley 6. Brent Rodes 7. Manfred Nissley 12. John Jantzi 13. E Wayne Kauffman 14. Jerry Schar 15. Conrad Heatwole 16. Gary Smucker 22. Jason Alderfer 23. Michael Moeller 24. Dennis Brubaker 25. Ruth Jost 26. Ha Christner 31. Ray Shank 32. Marietta Shank 33. Jennifer Sommers 34. Sherri Hochstetler 35. W Clough 40. Mary Lou Moeller 41. Karen Martin 42. James Hershberger 43. Jewel Hertzler 44. T Helmuth 50. Duane K Miller 51. Karl Rhodes 52. James Hermesen 53. Clara Byler 54. Nolan Byler Zimmerman 59. Esther Mae Zimmerman 60. Beth Hermesen 61. Thelma Martin 62. Troye Kauf

they slept in a house, while in other settings they slept in a barn or a shed.

As the summer was coming to an end, Warren “went to a post office” and “sent some” of his earnings home. Then he traveled by train through Illinois to Detroit, Michigan, where he visited the Ford automobile factory. He recorded: “I was surprised at the immense big factory which covers over two hundred acres of floor space. Thirty-six thousand men are employed, and an average of thirty-two hundred cars a day are turned out.” He added, “I then hunted up a number of other factories, including the Studebaker, Cadillac, Maxwell,

Briscoe, Packard and several others, but for different reasons did not visit any but the Hudson Motor Car Co.”

From there, Warren got on a train, which he explained, “passed thru a long tunnel under the Detroit River and then we entered into Canada. It was so cold on the train I almost froze. Arrived at Niagara Falls the next morning at seven o’clock...”

On September 2, 1917, Warren arrived home at Lansdale, Pennsylvania, in good time to begin his final year of high school!



Mennonite Historians were the main sponsoring group of the annual SAGA meeting. Merle Christner identified the SAGA attendees in the photo (left), taken April 18, 2026, at Lindale Mennonite Church.

The photo and names can be found at the SAGA website, at <https://www.saga-omii.org/index.html>.

Next year’s SAGA meeting will be held in Sarasota Florida, Feb 26-27, 2027. The SAGA annual meeting in 2028 will likely be held in Johnstown, Pa., near Somerset County.

7. Elwood Yoder 8. Hubert Schmucker 9. James B Basinger 10. David Burkholder 11. Ervie Glick 17. Jim Beachey 18. John Herr 19. Loren Johns 20. Pete Burkholder 21.annah Lapp 27. Christine Burkholder 28. Joe Lapp 29. Sherrie Johndrow 30. Merleayne Weaver 36. Lavina Weaver 37. Larry Helmuth 38. Dorothy Moss 39. Ann Steiner 45. Paul A Yoder 46. Ann Yoder 47. James Rush 48. Beth Rush 49. Shirleyer 55. Brenda Springer-Halseth 56. Kenton Brubaker 57. Shirley Brubaker 58. Raymondman 63. Lee Gingerich 64. Mary Gingerich



Berea Christian School in Harrisonburg, Va., serves approximately 140 students from grades 1 through 12. Predecessors of Berea were Mt. Carmel Parochial School (1943-1957) and Bank School (1958-1972). Berea began in 1972 and moved in 1988 to 1351 Garbers Church Road.
Photo by Elwood Yoder

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

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Past issues of the *Historian*, from 1994-2025, 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 jameslrush@comcast.net, phone 540-421-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Circle, Lowville, NY, 13367.