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

The 1875 Ordination in the Middle District

Our journal regularly receives articles and photos from readers and subscribers. We are grateful for each contribution to our historical understanding of Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley.

Clint Coakley researched and wrote an excellent article about an ordination by lot in 1875. As Coakley shows, the ordination of John S. Coffman and Solomon Beery out of a group of thirteen candidates was a turning point among Virginia Mennonites. Solomon Beery was Coakley's great-great-great-grandfather.

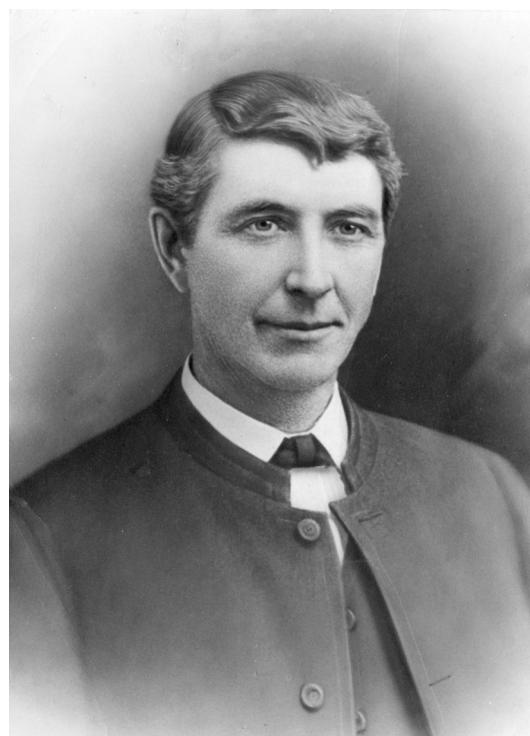
Sharon Shenk, a member of the Historians from Augusta County, Virginia, has written an article about Springdale Mennonite Church, which she attends. Springdale recognizes its bicentennial in 2025.

Warren Knicely shared an 1867 photo of his ancestors, David K. Knicely and Martha Jane Coakley, one of the earliest photos of Mennonites in Virginia.

Thank you, Clint, Sharon, and Warren, for your contributions. They are appreciated.

Elwood Yoder, editor

Bank Mennonite Church (above), Dayton, Va., mid-twentieth century, from Harry A. Brunk's collection.
VMC Archives



John S. Coffman (1848-1899) was ordained at Bank Mennonite Church in 1875.

J. S. Coffman Portrait. Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference Photograph Collection. HM4-136, Box 1, Folder 22. Mennonite Church USA Archives, Elkhart, Indiana.

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THE 1875 ORDINATION IN THE MIDDLE DISTRICT

By Clint W. Coakley

This summer marks the sesquicentennial anniversary of a momentous ordination in the Virginia Mennonite Conference. This ordination, which took place at Bank Mennonite Church on Sunday, 18 July 1875, had far-reaching consequences for Virginia Mennonites and across the broader Mennonite church. It has been called “the beginning of a new era for the Mennonite Church in America.”¹

THE SETTING

From 1837, when the Virginia Mennonite Conference was divided into three districts, throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, leaders were ordained to serve a district, not a particular congregation. These were not salaried ministers, but men who maintained an occupation to provide for their families’ needs even as they were called by God and by the church to a special role as ordained leaders. Most of them were farmers to one extent or another, but some plied other trades or sideline work. Bishop John Geil of the Lower District was a blacksmith. Preacher Gabriel D. Heatwole grafted apple trees.² Preacher David H. Landes sold sewing machines.³ At least two ministers were usually present at each worship service: one to preach the main sermon and

one to give the shorter sermon or testimony.

Of the three districts in the mid-1800s, the Middle District had the largest number of members. The three established congregations, Pike, Weavers, and Bank, were joined by Mt. Clinton, where a new meetinghouse was erected during 1874 and the first worship service was held on 3 January 1875. With the new preaching point at Mt. Clinton, the regular monthly schedule for worship services in 1875 was as follows: first Sunday of the month at Mt. Clinton, second Sunday at Pike, third Sunday at Bank, and fourth Sunday at Weavers. In addition to these meetinghouses, various preaching appointments were held in other places such as the Franklin Schoolhouse near Clover Hill, the Hoover Schoolhouse near Brocks Gap,⁴ and a number of mission outposts in West Virginia.

THE NEED

During the Civil War, the Virginia Mennonite churches were reduced to less than 250 members.⁵ During the postbellum period, the churches became reestablished through rebuilding, natural population growth, and immigration of Mennonites from other areas. By 1884, the membership of the conference had grown to at least 600.⁶ In 1875, the membership of the Middle District itself was likely around 250.

John Evers, who had been ordained for the Middle District in 1859, moved to Kansas in

1. Byard Shank, “John S. Coffman – A Short Sketch of His Life,” in *Centennial Memorial of J. S. Coffman*, Scottdale Pa.: Herald Press, 1949, 7.

2. Harry A Brunk, *David Heatwole and His Descendants* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: E. Heatwole, 1987), 422.

3. Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia 1727-1900*, vol. 1 (Harrisonburg, Virginia: H. A. Brunk, 1959), 422.

4. Brunk, vol. 1, 1959, 318.

5. Jonas S. Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History* (Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), chapter 8, “The Virginia Conference,” by L. J. Heatwole, 219.

6. Jonas S. Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History* (Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), chapter 8, “The Virginia Conference,” by L. J. Heatwole, 219.

1873.⁷ Henry G. Heatwole, ordained in July 1869 at age 23, died 6 Dec. 1873 at age 28, creating another void in the Middle District ministry. These losses left only six ministers for the four church houses in the Middle District, listed here with their ages in the spring of 1875: John Weaver (56), Daniel S. Heatwole (50), Jacob Driver (45), David H. Landes (41), Gabriel D. Heatwole (40), and Joseph N. Driver (30). Since deacons were not given preaching responsibilities at this time, this put a heavy load on the six ministers.

In the spring of 1875, little did anyone in the district know that by the end of 1877 two of these ministers would have passed on to their rewards. John Weaver died 8 April 1877, and Jacob Driver died 22 Nov. 1877. This would leave Daniel Heatwole and David Landes as the only ministers who had been ordained before 1870 (Gabriel D. Heatwole was ordained 5 Dec. 1870).

THE SOLUTION

The spring 1875 meeting of the Virginia Mennonite Conference was held at Weavers church in the Middle District. Conference opened at 9:00 a.m.⁸ on Friday, April 30 and continued on the next day. On Saturday afternoon, a public preaching service was held and Upper District bishop Jacob Hildebrand and visiting minister Daniel Roth from Washington Co., Maryland, preached.⁹ As bishop of the Middle District, Samuel Coffman presided over

this conference.

In the flow of life, church and family events continued with a somewhat unpredictable regularity and occasionally coincided. On the first day of conference, near Rushville,¹⁰ a few miles from Weavers Church, John S. Coffman (Samuel's son) and his wife Bettie became the parents of their fourth child, Ansel Victor.¹¹ Another major life event was imminent for John and Bettie.

During the Saturday morning session of conference, Bishop Samuel Coffman requested approval to ordain two ministers in his district. Approval was granted by the twenty-four ordained men present. Now more definite plans could be made and a date of July 18 was set for the double ordination. It was not unusual to have double ordinations at that time. Likely the difficulty in travel made it more practical to ordain two men on the same day. This would be the first ordination in the Middle District since December of 1870.

THE PREPARATION

At this time, the Virginia Mennonite churches used the method of ordination by lot to select leaders. This method is still employed dozens or perhaps hundreds of times each year in Old Order and other conservative Mennonite churches, as well as many times each year in Amish churches.

7. B. W. Bare, "Early Settlement of Mennonites in Marion and McPherson Counties, Kansas," *Herald of Truth*, vol. 15, no. 5, 1878, 88.

8. Deacon Frederick Rhodes' handwritten notes from 1875 Virginia Mennonite Conference, Rhodes folder, VMC archives, Harrisonburg Va.

9. L. J. Heatwole diary for 1 May 1875, Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives, Harrisonburg Va.

10. M. S. Steiner, *John S. Coffman: Mennonite Evangelist*, Spring Grove PA: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1903, 95.

11. Harry A. Brunk, *David Heatwole and His Descendants*, 1987, 422.

Since the new ministers were going to serve in the district, not just at one congregation, nominations would have been received at each of the district meetinghouses. At Pike on June 13, at Bank on June 20, at Weavers on June 27, and at Mt. Clinton on July 4, each member was given the privilege to submit the name of a brother he felt was qualified to serve as minister.¹² After all the nominations were received by the bishops, the names of those who had been nominated were announced at Mt. Clinton on July 4, two weeks before the planned ordination. Anyone who received one or more nominations was considered part of the ordination class.¹³

At least thirteen names were announced at Mt. Clinton.¹⁴ Imagine the soul-searching of those who were named and who now had to wait two weeks to discover God's will at this important juncture in their lives. Only two would be called to serve as ministers, but who would they be? There was nothing to do but pray, submit the matter to God, and await the outcome.

One additional step in the preparation for the ordination was the examination, which took place on Saturday, 17 July, at Bank church. This was a time when the bishops interviewed those in the class to ensure that they were in harmony with the teachings of the church and that they were willing to fulfill the duties of a minister if they were chosen by lot. A church meeting was

Sunday. JULY 18 1875
 This morning we or I returned to the Church where I was in a lot with twelve others for two of them named for the ministry & the lots fell up on Solomon Beery & John Coffman. Come home from the Church, then walked down to see Daniel & good come home at Sun down.
 Very warm all day. a storm passed along while I was on my way home.
 Thanks be unto my dear God for his goodness.

Emanuel Suter's diary entry for July 18, 1875, which gives details of the ordination at Bank. Suter's diary is the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives.

also held at Weavers on Thursday afternoon, 15 July.¹⁵ This may have been related to the ordination and could have been part of the examination because the class for this ordination was so large.

THE ORDINATION

The use of the lot is a sacred matter. It is not

12. Dates taken from Byard Shank's article on John S. Coffman's ordination (*Centennial Memorial of J. S. Coffman*, 1949) and diaries of L. J. Heatwole and Emanuel Suter. No date was confirmed for the nomination service at the Pike church, but since the second Sunday was the normal time to have church at the Pike, it is almost certain that nominations were received there on the second Sunday of June.

13. In most ordinations by lot that are conducted at the present time, more than one nomination is required for a person to be included in the class.

14. The author has only been able to positively identify three of the men who were nominated for this ordination. One of them was Emanuel Suter, who was in the lot numerous times but was never ordained. Any readers who have information on the names of those who were in the lot for this ordination are requested to contact the editor or the author (coakley@norcell.us).

15. Emanuel Suter diary for 15 July 1875, Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives, Harrisonburg Va.

a victory for the one who is chosen and a defeat for the others. And it is certainly no accident or chance event when it is conducted carefully and according to scriptural teachings. The use of the lot is a test of submission for all involved: members who submit names, the ones who are nominated (referred to as “the class”), and the ones who are already serving as leaders who don’t know whom they will be working with after the ordination. The service in which the lot is used is a sober time of worship and awaiting the revelation of God’s will. Those who have attended ordinations where the lot is used can testify to the reverence and sacredness of the occasion. As the moment nears when the lot will be revealed, the unknown that is about to become known builds to a peak of anticipation. Such was the atmosphere at Bank Mennonite Church on that important Sunday in July 1875.

It was a very warm but cloudy day in the central Shenandoah Valley.¹⁶ The thirteen men in the class sat in the front of the church while Bishops Samuel Coffman, John Geil, and Jacob Hildebrand took their places behind the pulpit. Bishop Hildebrand preached the main sermon, using 1 Peter 2 as his text.¹⁷ After everyone joined in a solemn prayer that God would reveal His will in the choice of two men, each man selected a book from those placed on the pulpit. Bishop Coffman then examined each book in turn to see which books contained the two slips of paper indicating the call to the ministry.

As the unknown became known, Solomon Beery,¹⁸ son-in-law of Bishop John Geil, was the first man chosen and John S. Coffman, son



Sisters of John S. Coffman, daughters of Bishop Samuel and Frances Coffman, in an undated photo, probably from the 1880s. Front, Sarah and Fannie. Back, left to right, Rebecca, Mary, Lizzie, and Anna.

Photo from Barbara Campbell Showalter

of Bishop Samuel Coffman, was the second man chosen. According to his biography, John was the last one to take a book and his book was the last one to be opened.¹⁹ This suggests that he may have been the youngest one in the group.

Forty-two years old at the time of his ordination, Solomon Beery was the oldest man ordained as a minister in Virginia since the 1840s. He lived in the Cross Keys area, a bit removed from the main concentration of Mennonites in Rockingham County. Solomon was a traditionalist who faithfully served the church in Virginia

16. Suter and Heatwole diaries for 18 July 1875 and weather records of Dr. James T. Clarke at Mount Solon Va.

17. L. J. Heatwole diary for 18 July 1875.

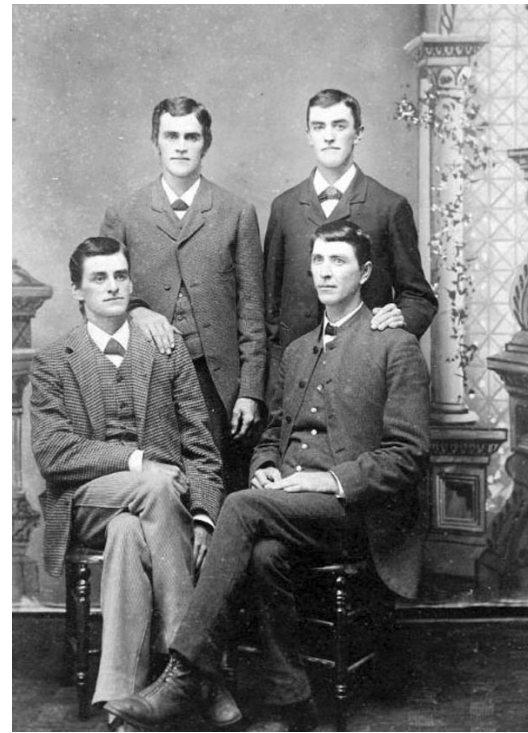
18. Solomon Beery was the author’s great-great-grandfather.

19. Barbara F. Coffman, *His Name Was John*, Scottdale Pa.: Herald Press, 1964, 84.

for about twenty-five years. His preaching style was typical of the time and he was known to preach in a sing-song style with a lot of ah's and and's, but he did use hand motions and become "agitated" in the pulpit.²⁰ Although far less well known than John S. Coffman outside of Virginia, he was much appreciated by the Virginia Mennonites. He was an upholder of the conservative cause and was, for a time, a member of the Old Order Mennonite group that formed in 1901. He returned to the Virginia Conference before his death in 1905.

John S. Coffman, in contrast to Solomon Beery, was a supporter of the new ideas that were being tested in Virginia and across the larger Mennonite church. A young married man with four boys at the time of his ordination, age twenty-six, John broke custom and made notes for his sermons, though it is by no means certain that he took them into the pulpit, at least not in the early years of his ministry. His preaching was known for its clarity and fervor. John served as minister in Virginia for almost four years before moving in June of 1879 to Goshen, Indiana, where he served the larger Mennonite church as a well-known editor, evangelist, and promoter of revival meetings, Sunday schools, and higher education. On a return visit to Virginia in December of 1888, John S. Coffman preached the first series of revival meetings at a Mennonite church in Virginia when he came to Weavers for more than a week and forty-five people made commitments.²¹

In one sense, Solomon Beery and John S. Coffman were representative of the two widely divergent groups that were growing in the Virginia Mennonite church in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As a result, their ordinations



Brothers of John S. Coffman, sons of Bishop Samuel and Frances Coffman, in an undated photo, probably from the 1880s. Front, Joseph and John (right). Back, Daniel and Joseph. John became a nationally known Mennonite evangelist.

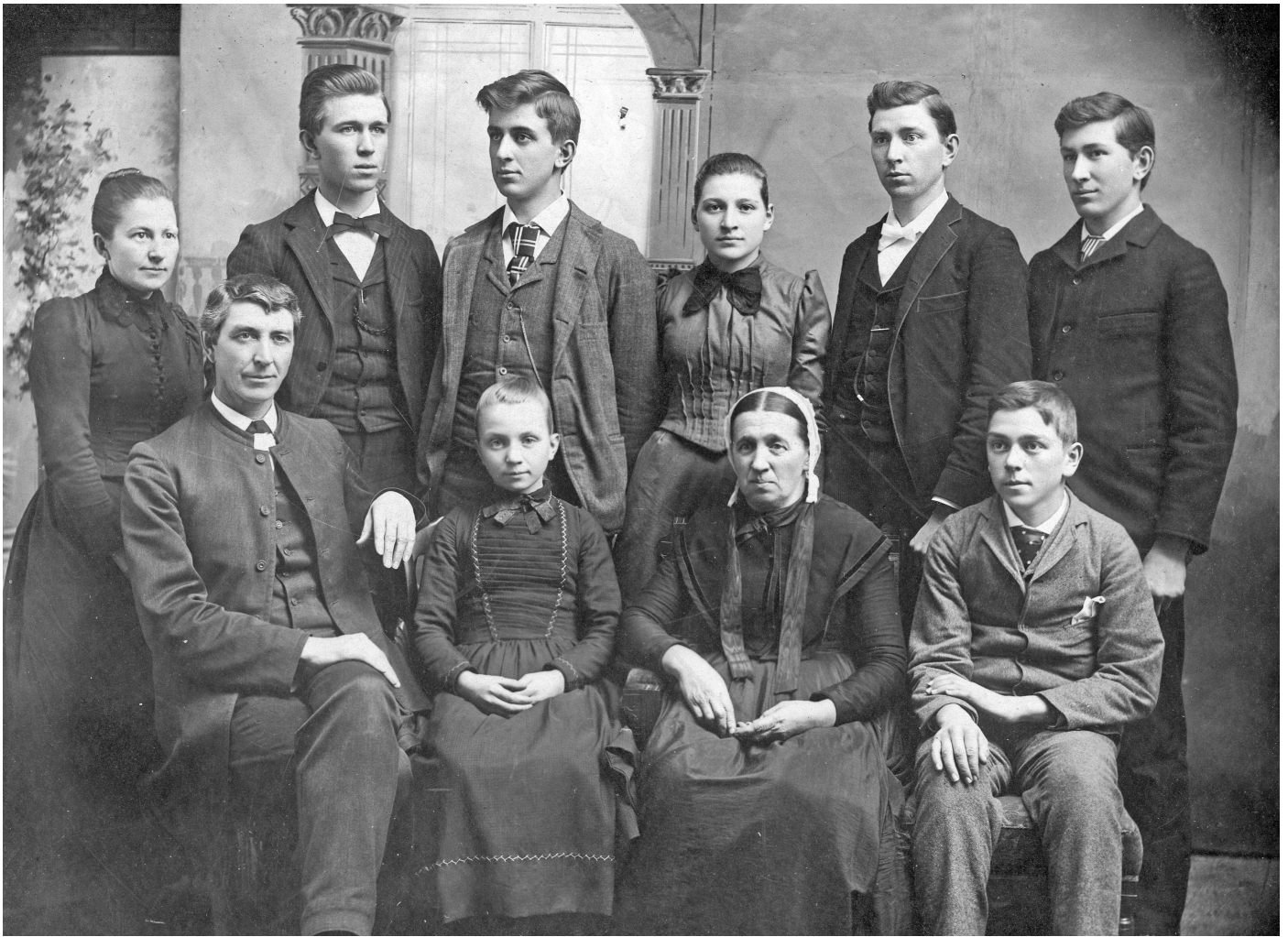
Photo from Barbara Campbell Showalter

in 1875 helped to set the stage for the "Middle District trouble" of the 1890s and the formation of the Old Order Mennonite Church at the turn of the century.

As many of the Virginia Mennonites made their way home after the momentous double ordination of 18 July 1875, a strong thunderstorm passed through the Mole Hill area. L. J. Heatwole wrote, "The wind did blow most furiously for a little while." Heatwole got caught in the rain and sought temporary shelter at the Trinity church, a Dunkard church that stood next to the Mt. Horeb United Brethren (now United Methodist) Church at Hinton. Perhaps

20. Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia 1727-1900*, vol. 1, 1959, 320.

21. Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia 1727-1900*, vol. 1, 1959, 347.



The John S. Coffman family. From Rockingham County, Virginia, John S. Coffman was the most widely known Mennonite evangelist of the late nineteenth century in the United States. Seated from left, John S., Barbara, Elizabeth (Mrs. John Coffman), Daniel. Standing from left, Anna Sowers (hired girl), Samuel, Jacob, Fannie, William, and Ansel. Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives photo

this natural storm foreshadowed the tempest that was on the horizon for the Mennonite Church in Virginia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At any rate, 18 July 1875 was a banner day for the Mennonites in Virginia and in America.

Acknowledgements: The author thanks Simone Horst for assistance locating reference materials and Zoey Mongold for accessing weather records from 1875.



Article author Clint W. Coakley (left) lives in Morrisville, Vermont. He is a member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, which includes Bridgewater Mennonite Church in Rockingham County, Va.

Springdale Mennonite Church Celebration

200th Year Anniversary
November 1 & 2, 2025
by Sharon Shenk

Although I did not attend Springdale Mennonite Church when I grew up, our family always felt a close bond with this congregation. My father, Lyle Burkholder, grew up on a farm across the road from the church and my parents attended Springdale when they first married. Shortly before I was born, my parents were asked to come help with Sunday school at Stuarts Draft Mennonite Church.



Sarah (Good) Showalter,
1870s.

Photo from Sharon Shenk

However, we attended the Southern District revival services and annual Christmas morning worship service at Springdale. I also sang in the Springdale choir which traveled and gave evening programs at local churches in the 1980s. My grandfather Perry Burkholder was ordained by lot in 1933 to serve at Spring-

dale. My great grandparents Samuel and Sarah (Good) Showalter moved from Rockingham County, Virginia in the early 1900s and began attending Springdale. When my husband and I and two young daughters moved back to the Waynesboro area in 1998, Springdale became our church home.

Springdale is in Augusta County, Virginia, about halfway between Waynesboro and Stuarts Draft. German families from Pennsylvania moved into the area in the early 1800s and settled in the rolling hills to farm and raise their families.

These families began to meet for worship in 1825 in a weatherboarded 25 x 30 foot building known as Kendig's school or chapel, which is the location of the current Springdale church. Michael Stover and John Fauber (likely ordained ministers from Pa.) were some of the first ministers at Kendig's Chapel, and Martin Kendig was noted as having attended the Virginia Conference held at Weavers Mennonite Church in 1835. During the 1860s the issue of slavery and an appropriate response to the Civil War was complex. It was noted that slave quarters were located less than a mile from the church. Many Mennonites were Union supporters and felt like Christians should not participate in war. The call for young men to assemble for the militia required difficult decisions.

By 1886, a new church building was completed, and the name was changed from Kendig's Chapel to Spring Dale. It was noted that the women's outhouse was a deluxe model with five seats. The name gradually evolved to the one-word title of Springdale. Mountain View (1900), Valley View (1920; after 1955 called Stuarts Draft), and Greenmonte (1952) were established church plants from Springdale's mission outreach.

In 1941, a new brick church was built with a basement, Sunday school rooms and electricity. Summer Bible school began at Springdale. They also provided teachers for a Bible school at the "colored" church Beulah Baptist several

miles down the road.

A notable event happened in 1943 when Etter F. Heatwole was preaching on the text of James 4:14. (Your life is a vapor that appears and then vanishes.) While speaking he collapsed and died while in the pulpit.

A parochial school was begun in 1944. In 1950, the name was changed to Augusta Mennonite School and a new building was constructed on land donated by Paul Wenger. Located on what is now Friendship Park, it is home to a summer church softball league and the site for making apple butter every September for the Virginia Mennonite Relief Sale.

In 1967, the first Virginia Mennonite Relief Sale was held on Paul Wenger's farm approximately two miles from Springdale Church. The sale netted \$6,393.96 and was attended by several thousand people.

A fire broke out in the church on Sunday February 22, 1959. During the time the building was being restored, services were held at Stuarts Draft Elementary School. An addition to the church building was begun in 1991 and in June 1993 the first service was held in the renovated sanctuary.

Harold Stoltzfus served as the first full time salaried pastor in 1968. Kevin Goertzen was the most recent. He and wife Denise completed their years of ministry in March 2024. They and several previous pastors provided pivotal leadership through some challenging times. The church is currently utilizing a pastoral team from within the congregation: Gerald Shenk (preaching) Jim Goalder (fellowship and care)

and Ranita Shenk (worship planning). Nancy Stoll has been administrative assistant for the past thirty-five years. Her organizational skills, listening ears and years of experience have helped make these transitions much easier.

In looking back, we realize that our lives were woven together with a commitment to Anabaptist values, service to others, and shared



Former Kendigs meetinghouse, (barn on left), used 1825–1885, later called Springdale.

Photo from Marion Weaver



Springdale Mennonite Church building used 1886–1941.

Photo from Marion Weaver

joys and sorrows. We are thankful for God's faithfulness and the way His Spirit led those early leaders and each one since who has ministered at Springdale. No, we didn't always get it right. By God's grace and with all humility, we look to the future and desire to continue being a light for Jesus Christ in our community.

Please plan to join in the 200th anniversary celebration for Springdale Mennonite Church and 75th year reunion for students who attended the Augusta Mennonite School on November 1–2, 2025.

Much of the information from this article is taken from *Where the River Flows: A History of Springdale Mennonite Church*, published in 1997. Author Kathryn Huber added to research begun by Roy Kiser (Southern District Bishop) before health issues prevented his completion of the work.



A Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) work team from Springdale and Staunton Mennonite Churches. From left, David Mininger, Tammy & Steve Driver, Danny Weaver, Mary Lou Brubaker, Darrell Weaver, Alan Shenk, Glen Zendt, and Nelson Driver.

Photo from David Mininger



Marion and Jean (Wenger) Weaver wedding photo, 1950. The Weavers attended Springdale Mennonite Church.

Marion Weaver photo



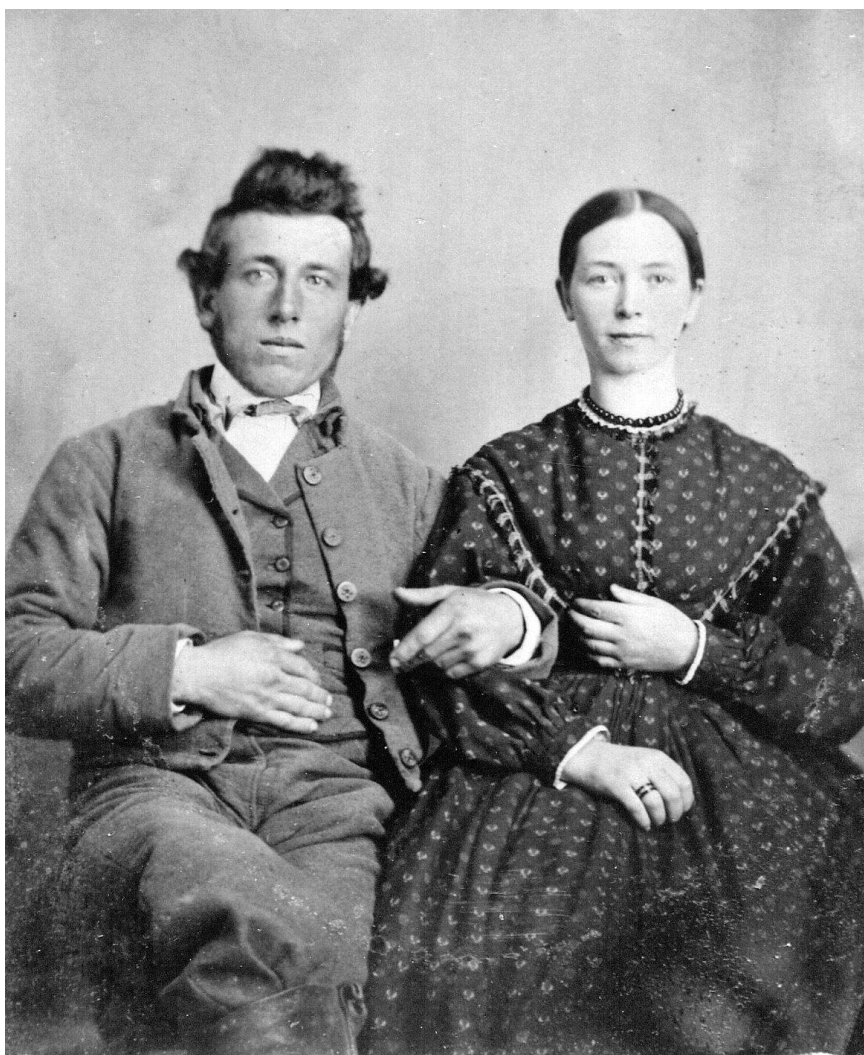
Article author Sharon Shenk's family. From right, Ranita Shenk, Alan Shenk, Sharon Shenk, Rachel Shenk Stutzman, and Andry Stutzman.

Photo from Sharon Shenk

David K. Kniceley (1842–1891) and Martha Jane Coakley (1846–1916), in a tintype photo taken February 26, 1867. David grew up in a United Brethren home and Martha had been Presbyterian, but they joined the Mennonite church, likely after they were married in November 1867.

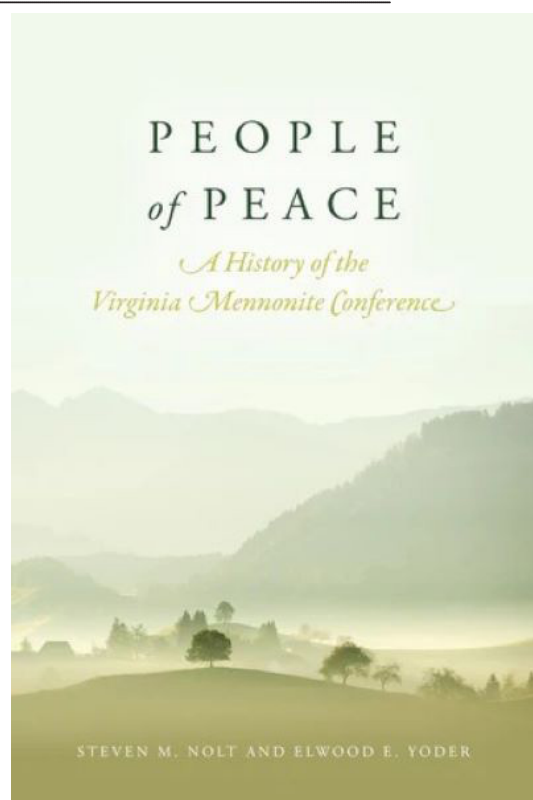
During the Civil War, David's father, Ebenezer, served as a draft substitute for Mennonite Emanuel Suter and Martha Jane's father, Daniel, was a substitute for Mennonite Peter Blosser. David Kniceley himself seems to have resisted enlistment. David and Martha Jane

Kniceley eventually became the parents of eleven children and are buried at Bank Mennonite Church, Dayton, Virginia.
Photo from Warren Kniceley



The Shenandoah Mennonite Historians and the Virginia Mennonite Conference Historical Committee are expecting that our new history book will be available August 21-23, 2025, at the VMC Assembly held at Ridgeway Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg (August 21-22) and at the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center (August 23). You are welcome to either location.

This book has taken fourteen years of planning and work. It will be a hardback book with approximately 526 pages, costing \$25. The publisher is Masthof Press, Morgantown, Pa., and it will be available for sale on Amazon.com and at Masthof.com.





Springdale Mennonite Church, Waynesboro, Virginia, 2023.

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; and Elwood E. Yoder, Editor.

The Shenandoah Mennonite Historian is published quarterly by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, established in 1993. If you have an idea for an article for the Historian, contact the Editor at elyoder@gmail.com.

Past issues of *Historian*, from 1994-2025, 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 540-434-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Circle, Lowville, NY, 13367.

Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians
5736 Brookside Circle
Lowville, NY 13367