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Elwood Yoder

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Ernest Gehman vs. Goliath

Ernest Gehman probably never voted in his life, but in the 1960s, Mennonite minister Gehman threw himself into relentlessly opposing a proposed Brocks Gap Dam. His many speeches, letters in the newspaper, his 18-page publication, and his trip to Washington to speak against the dam in front of the Army's Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors all seemed political.

Andrew Jenner, a former high school student of the Editor at EMHS, wrote our feature article that reveals how Gehman led the charge to stop a dam that would have flooded about 4000 acres and reconfigured the geography of northwestern Rockingham County, Va.

Professor Gehman was ordained in the Virginia Mennonite Conference in 1938 and served churches for 50 years, most of them at Morning View Mennonite Church in Singers Glen, Va. Gehman was associated with *The Sword and Trumpet*, a conservative Mennonite periodical, for almost 60 years and drew editorial cartoons for the publication.

Elwood Yoder, Editor



Hebron Mennonite Church building, photographed in 1993 (above). The proposed 1960s Brocks Gap Dam would have flooded and submerged this Fulks Run meetinghouse. In 1993, Hebron had 65 members, with ministers Donald Bare and Larry Graber. The photo below shows the Hebron frame meetinghouse still standing in 2012, but by 2026, the congregation met in their new brick building, and the old building had been removed.
Photos by Elwood Yoder



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Gehman vs. Goliath: "No" to flooding part of the Valley for a dam

By Andrew Jenner

Andrew Jenner, a Harrisonburg journalist, wrote this for the Eastern Mennonite University *Crossroads* journal in 2014, vol. 94 no. 3. This article is reprinted by permission.

In 1963, the United States Army Corps of Engineers published plans to build 16 large dams along the Potomac River and its tributaries, including one at Brocks Gap on the North Fork of the Shenandoah River, about 15 miles north of Harrisonburg. The Army Corps' goals were noble enough: to spare Washington D.C. from the destructive flooding that had periodically drowned the National Mall, secure the city's water supply for decades to come, and create 16 new lakes' worth of recreational opportunity for the American public.

Of course, there were some pesky details to all of this. The 150-foot high dam proposed at Brocks Gap would have buried the community of Fulks Run beneath 122,000 acre-feet of water, displacing more than 300 families and inundating, among other things, nearly 4,000 acres of productive farmland, a brand-new elementary school and at least 17 places of businesses.



Ernest G. Gehman, 1901-1988.
EMU Archives photo

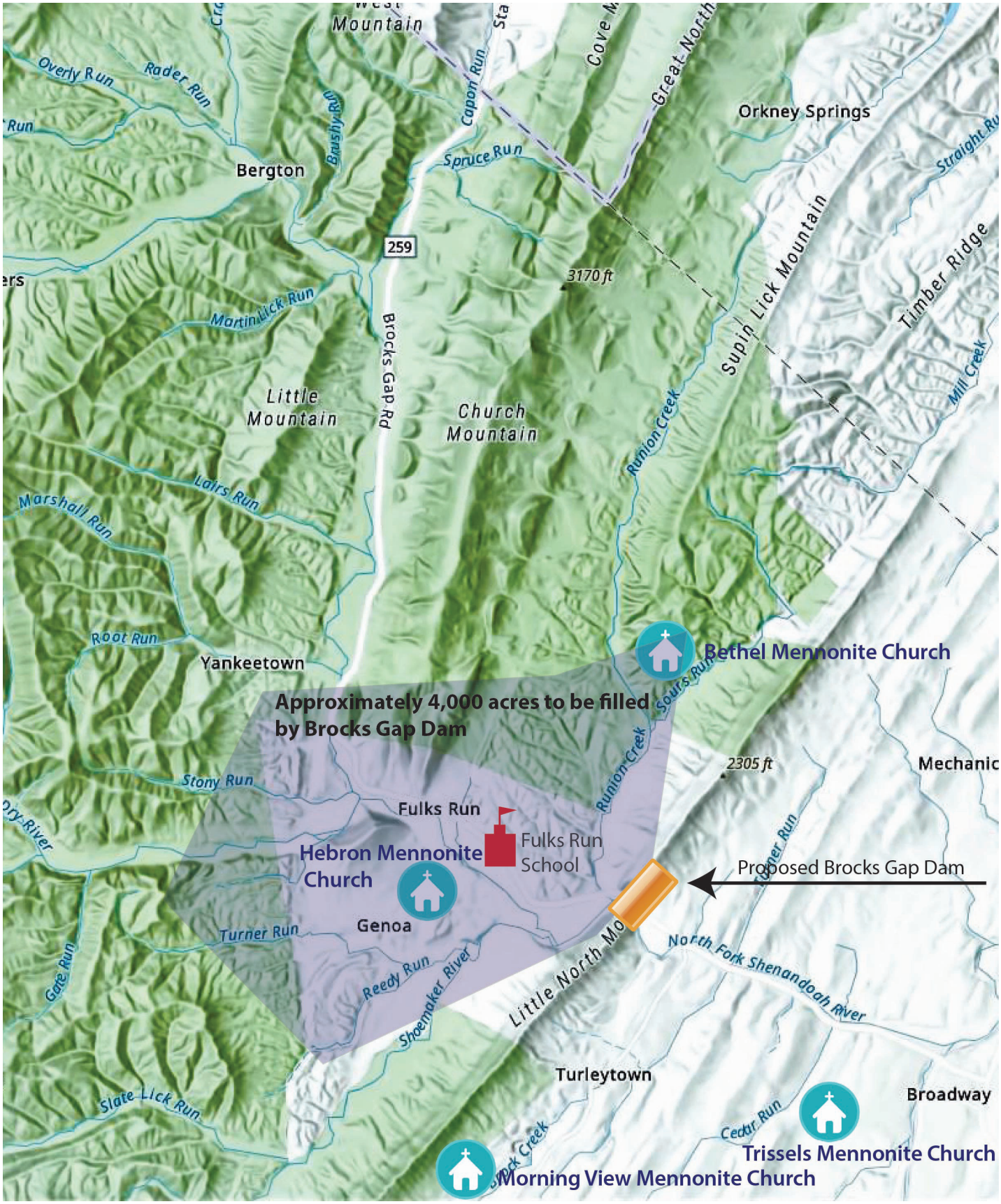
It was, obviously, an upsetting plan to the people of Fulks Run, as was it upsetting to Ernest Gehman, then a professor of German at Eastern Mennonite College and a minister in the Virginia Mennonite Conference. Gehman had come to know and love Fulks Run through the preaching circuit that took him to congregations in the area, and the fact that two Mennonite churches – Hebron and Bethel – were to disappear beneath the many waters of the Brocks Gap Reservoir truly raised his ire. (In all, seven or eight churches in Fulks Run would have been flooded.)

"He knew a lot of people who would have been affected by the flooding of the valley," said James Metzler (EMU class of '62), Gehman's son-in-law, who is married to Rachel Gehman Metzler (EMU class of '54). "He was concerned for the livelihoods, the disruption of congregations, as I recall."

Gehman made his feelings on the matter plain in a May 1963 letter he wrote to Harrisonburg's *Daily News-Record* (using language remarkably similar to certain strains of contemporary political discourse): "It is the sort of trampling on human rights that one might expect to find in atheistic Russia, but hardly in our so-called free and so-called Christian America."

The situation in Fulks Run felt dire, recalls Garnett Turner, the owner of a then-threatened country store famous for its sugar-cured Turner hams. Turner recalls the officer leading the Army Corps' plans as being "right emphatic that it was going to happen" – the security of the nation's capital was said to be at stake.

Gehman knew the best way to block the Army Corps' plan was to suggest an alternative; his counter-proposal involved the construction of smaller dams along the entire length of the Shenandoah River. Built every five to 10 miles within the channel of the river (and thus known as "channel dams"), these were to have kept the water no higher than flood stage, essentially



Proposed Brocks Gap Dam
Map created by Elwood Yoder

turning the Shenandoah into a series of long, narrow lakes.

The idea was inspired by channel dams that Gehman had seen in the late 1940s in Germany while completing his doctorate at the University of Heidelberg, and a decade later during a year he spent teaching in Austria under the Fulbright exchange program. The Neckar River, which flows past Heidelberg, was a particular inspiration.

Gehman argued that the channel dams would serve the Army Corps' water supply and flood control goals without destroying the community behind Brocks Gap. He also played up the economic development angle, as the addition of locks at each dam could open the Shenandoah River to commercial navigation.

Like most conservative Mennonites of his era, Gehman frowned on participation in politics and never voted in his life, according to his son John Gehman (EMU class of '59). That didn't stop him, though, from diving into the bureaucratic and political fray surrounding the Army Corps' scheme.

"He was bold," recalls John, who was in medical school in Richmond while his father took on the Army Corps of Engineers. "He didn't hesitate to speak up about his thoughts and feelings."

In September 1963, Gehman went to Washington to present a rationale for his channel dam proposal at a public hearing held by the Army's Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors. (Also there that day was Garnett Turner and nearly 200 others who'd come from Fulks Run in five chartered Greyhound buses to make their displeasure known.)

He began writing to the newspapers, local officials, state legislators and Virginia's Congressional delegation. Responses, ranging from tepid to fairly enthusiastic, came back from Virginia's two senators at the time – Harry F. Byrd Sr. and Willis Robertson – as well as Governor Albertis Harrison and West Virginia Governor William Barron. Gehman's greatest ally in Washington, though, soon became Rep.



Ernest and Margaret Martin Gehman. After Ernest's first wife Gertrude Nissley passed away, Ernest married Margaret Martin in 1967. Ernest taught on the Eastern Mennonite University faculty from 1924 to 1973. Margaret Martin Gehman taught at Eastern Mennonite University for nearly 50 years.

Ernest was pastor at Morning View Mennonite Church 1938-1941 and 1946-1975. He also served at other churches in the Northern District of the Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Photo from Sara Kreider and Thelma Showalter collection

John O. Marsh of Virginia's 7th District.

In one of the many letters the two exchanged over a several-year period, Marsh wrote: "The time you have given to this problem is a most valuable contribution to the public interest."

John Gehman, now a general practice physician who lives in Crewe, Va., remembers that his father "just kept drumming away at it," despite a growing sense of frustration when the channel dam plan seemed to be going nowhere.

Gehman also struck up correspondence with the German Embassy in Washington, and in the spring of 1964, organized a meeting between high-ranking American officials and a German engineer named Gerhard Krause who was an expert on Germany's channel dams.

With the help of Krause and other contacts in Germany, Gehman then compiled an 18-page brochure that examined the German channel dams in considerable detail and fleshed out his plans for similar dams on the Shenandoah River. In May 1965, the Broadway-Timberville Chamber of Commerce funded the printing of 2,000 copies, which Gehman and his allies began distributing widely. Later that summer, Marsh wrote to request more copies, as the brochure was "attracting considerable interest" in Washington D.C. In June, it reached the hands of Lady Bird Johnson – the First Lady of the United States, who wrote in a letter to the Broadway-Timberville Chamber of Commerce:

Professor Gehman's study of channel dams in the Potomac tributaries interests me very much, and I am sending it to Secretary [of the Interior Stewart] Udall so that he and his professional staff can give it full and immediate consideration in their plans.



Bethel Mennonite Church, Runions Creek Road, Broadway, Virginia, August 2026. Bethel would have been flooded by the proposed dam.

Photo by Elwood Yoder

In August, another 1,000 copies of the brochure came off the press, and by year's end, Gehman had spoken about his idea to around two dozen civic groups in the Valley.

(The plan wasn't without its drawbacks. A state game official wrote that construction of the channel dams would destroy the Shenandoah's smallmouth bass fishery, considered one of the finest in the country. The Izaak Walton League, a private wildlife and habitat conservation organization, formally opposed the Gehman plan for the same reason.)



Fulks Run Grocery, in Fulks Run, Virginia, September 2026. "Turner Hams" would have been flooded by the proposed Brocks Gap Dam.

Photo by Elwood Yoder

By mid-decade, though, significant resistance was mounting to the Army Corps' original plan for Brocks Gap, which seems to have been quietly pigeonholed. The historical record (and the Army Corps' own archives) is remarkably silent on the specifics of how, exactly, this transpired, and the details escape the memory even of people like Garnett Turner who fought to save his own home and business. The Army Corps plan was there, until suddenly it wasn't.

Regardless, once plans for the Brocks Gap Dam dissolved, Gehman also shelved his channel dam plan that had consumed an enormous amount of his time and energy of over a several-year period.

In 1973, Gehman officially retired from EMU, after teaching for 47 years. Over the next decade or so, he continued to teach a few German classes until his health began to fail him, and in the summer of 1988, he died at the age of 86.

The Turner Store is still in the family and still sells its fine Virginia hams. The Fulks Run Elementary School recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. Fertile farmland still covers the valley west of Brocks Gap and surrounds the still-intact Hebron Mennonite Church. And Runions Creek still runs past Bethel Mennonite Church before reaching the North Fork of the Shenandoah, which then flows unencumbered through Brocks Gap and down the Valley towards Washington D.C., as it did since before Ernest Gehman and the Army Corps of Engineers devised competing plans for its future.



Brocks Gap, Va., where an 860-foot-wide by 150-foot-high dam was proposed in the 1960s. The farm where this photo was taken, just west of the Gap, would have been flooded by the proposed dam. Photo by Elwood Yoder, 2026

Historians Annual Meeting

Plan to attend the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians annual meeting, Saturday, November 7, 2026, at 9:30 a.m.

The meeting will take place at Village Hall on the VMRC campus in Harrisonburg. From Route 42, enter at the main VMRC entrance, turn right on Heritage Drive, go straight across Shank Drive, and Village Hall will be on your left.

The annual meeting will include a business meeting with Secretary and Treasurer's reports, and an election of officers. Current officers are listed on the back of this issue.

A special event this year is the announcement of a new website called Shenandoah Valley Anabaptist History Trail (see logo below).

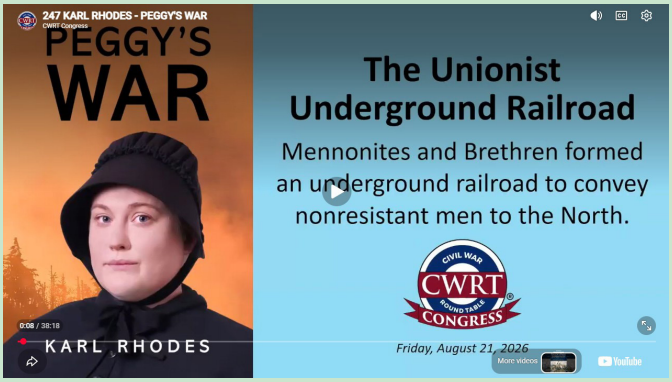
Please come, meet other members, and support the activities of the Shenandoah Mennonite Historians, now in our 33rd year.

SHENANDOAH VALLEY Anabaptist HISTORY TRAIL

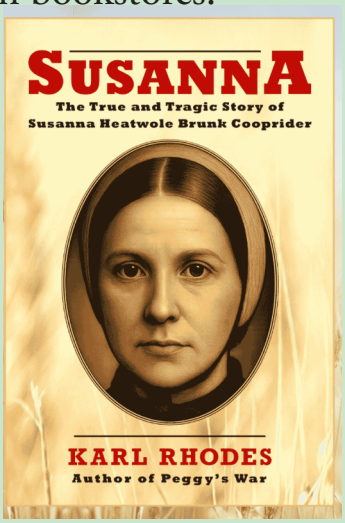
Karl Rhodes

On August 21, 2026 Karl Rhodes spoke to the Civil War Round Table Congress, a national organization that promotes the study of the Civil War era.

Karl spoke about his book *Peggy's War,* and outlined the Unionist Underground Railroad. I (Elwood Yoder) watched Karl's presentation and recommend you view the video. Navigate to YouTube.com, then search for "Peggy's War on Civil War Round Table."



A new book by Karl Rhodes is now available in bookstores.





Chimney Rock (above) about 5 miles west of Broadway, Virginia, is near Brocks Gap in Rockingham County, along Brocks Gap Road (Route 259).
Photo by Elwood Yoder

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

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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*, 1994-2026, 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 jameslrush@comcast.net, phone 540-421-7890, or U.S. mail to James Rush, 5736 Brookside Circle, Lowville, NY, 13367.