

BRETHREN & MENNONITES IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY DURING & AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

A presentation by Rev. Robert E. Alley for Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center on Sunday April 10, 2005 remembering the 140th anniversary of the end of the War Between the States.

This spring and summer marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II—a conflict that continues to live within the memory of many of us, including our emotional memory. That conflict challenged Mennonites and Brethren with their time-honored nonresistance and pacifism. Some received special deferments due to agricultural work or ministerial service. Of those drafted, some chose alternative service through Civilian Public Service; some chose non-combatant military service; and many, at least among the Brethren, accepted combatant military service. Every armed conflict has presented these traditional peace churches along with the Friends defining choices in their Christian discipleship.

Yesterday, April 9, 2005, marked the 140th anniversary of the end of the War Between the States. About 10 am that morning, after making one last unsuccessful attempt to break through Union lines, General Robert E. Lee met with General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Union Army, at Appomattox Court House to surrender his Confederate Army. In that surrender, confederate soldiers were permitted to keep their side arms and horses. Among them were sons, uncles, and other relatives and neighbors of Mennonite and Brethren families in the Shenandoah Valley. They were ordered by their commander Gen. Lee to return home to their families and to begin building a new life, having fought bravely for what they considered to be right. The April 14, 1865 issue of Rockingham Register and Virginia Advertiser here in Harrisonburg carried this response to the war's end:

“The surrender of the Virginia Army darkens our future; but we still hope and trust in God, who will not desert us if we trust in Him. Our people must now be more than ever kind, and forbearing, and generous towards each other. We must stand by each other.” (volume 43, no. 26, p. 2)

This summary was not strange to Mennonites and Brethren living here. They had persisted in their trust and hope in God throughout the struggle of civil war. Neighbor was pitted against neighbor and relative against relative. Being kind, forbearing, and generous towards each other were important aspects of their religious convictions, even with those with whom they disagreed. They wanted to continue to stand by each other.

The whole war experience from beginning to end had been a trial by fire for Brethren and Mennonites in the Valley. First, there was the matter of voting for or against secession. Some simply did not vote; those who did and voted against secession were harassed and threatened by those who rallied to the southern cause. In July 1861, the Rockingham Register carried an article which commended Mennonites and Brethren “for their orderly and honest lives and for that industry and attention to their own business that contributes most to the material interests of a community.” The article then continued by attacking the nonresistant principles of these two groups.

Second was the matter of military service. According to Brunk’s Mennonites in Virginia (chapter 8), it is assumed that Mennonites, and probably Brethren, at first responded to the call to arms and went into the militia in 1861 vowing that they would not use weapons to kill other human beings. In the fall, they were allowed to return home to help put out crops. When time came for them to return to their units after crops were in, a number of those of military age refused to go back. Some went into hiding in the hills and mountains. Some did return to their units under protest or on the basis of a no-shoot pledge. A number of Brethren and Mennonites had taken this pledge and were reported refusing to shoot from battles at Kernstown and before Harpers Ferry.

In March 1862, the Virginia General Assembly passed an exemption for conscientious objectors upon payment of five hundred dollars and two percent of their taxable property. As the war moved into higher gear, conscription became a decision of the central Confederate government. It passed its first conscription law in April 1862. Little if any provision was made for conscientious objection to war. As a result, many Mennonites and Brethren went into hiding or attempted to leave the area. Some were captured and taken to prison in Richmond. Finally, through the efforts of church leaders and legislators familiar with those of nonresistant faith, the Confederate Congress granted exemption to conscientious objectors if they hired a substitute or paid \$500 into the public treasury. Two years later, though, the Confederate Congress rescinded this action. Mennonite and Brethren young men again faced a draft. Again, some went into hiding, and others attempted exodus from the area. In the North, after working with the government, Mennonites and Brethren along with Friends received a more universal recognition of conscience with the Federal Act of February 24, 1864. When drafted, those of conscientious opposition to bearing arms and prohibited from doing so by their religious denominations were assigned to noncombatant service, as in hospitals, or pay \$300.00 to be applied for the benefit for the sick and wounded. (Bowman, p. 126) By this time (1864), Brethren and Mennonites in the South had lost opportunity for such exemption.

Third came the armies—southern and northern. Battles would be fought over Mennonite and Brethren farms as at Cross Keys and Port Republic here in Rockingham County in 1862 and at Piedmont in Augusta County in 1864. In March 1864, D. P. Saylor, a Brethren leader in Maryland, received a letter from Elder John Kline here in the Shenandoah Valley. Kline requested prayers of the Brethren for “our side of the lines.” He also wrote that “starvation and nakedness stare us in the face.” (Gospel Visitor, vol. 14, April 1864, p. 123)

Fourth came the Burning in the fall of 1864. Emmert Bittinger in the first volume of Unionists and the Civil War Experience describes this devastating event.

“General Philip Sheridan’s infamous campaign of burning and destruction was the climaxing catastrophe to descend upon the residents of the Shenandoah Valley. Within a two-week period in late September and early October 1864, barns filled with the late harvest, food stores, goods, crops, domesticated animals and all supplies were systematically destroyed in the southern and middle Valley from northern Augusta to Strasburg and Cedar Creek.”

John Heatwole in The Burning (p. 231) quotes from A Youth’s History of the Great Civil War 1866 (p. 338-39) in describing these couple weeks with broad strokes:

“And now General Sheridan, with the instincts of savage warfare, determined to utterly devastate this beautiful valley. He therefore set his troops at work, and all the way from Staunton to Winchester was soon one scene of desolation. He burned every house, every barn, every mill, all the corn cribs, hay-stacks, and the entire food crops of all kinds for the year. Not only this, but he seized all the ploughs, harrows, spades, and every description of farm implement, and putting them into piles, made his soldiers burn them. He then drove off all the cows, horses, oxen, cattle, sheep, pigs, and every living animal for the use of man in all that wide valley. In fact nothing that devilish ingenuity could invent was left undone to transform the loveliest and most fertile valley in the world into a desolate and howling wilderness. Not less than ten thousand innocent women and children were by this savagery reduced to starvation, and thrown, in the fall of the year, out of comfortable homes, to perish in tents and caves by the cold of the winter.”

The winter was a most bitter one climate-wise as well as war-wise.

Bittinger continues:

“The Dayton area of Rockingham County, suffered the severe brunt of this destruction. On October 3, a young officer, Lieut. John R. Meigs, a highly regarded staff aid of Sheridan’s, was killed in a confrontation with three Confederate Scouts a mile or so north of Dayton. Sheridan, wrongly informed that Meigs was murdered by local citizens, was angered and ordered the burning of all the houses and barns within a radius of three miles from the place where Meigs fell, including the town of Dayton. Although the order for the burning of Dayton itself was later rescinded, many homes and barns were burned within the designated circle. The burning included the area between Harrisonburg and Bridgewater eastward to the vicinity or just beyond the Valley pike and westward from Dry River to Mole Hill and the Rawley Springs Turnpike. This holocaust was devastating to the people, and many fled northward with Sheridan’s refugee wagon train.” (p. 11)

The significance and the impact of the Burning is described well in John Heatwole’s book by that title (The Burning).

For the first time since coming to America, some Mennonites and Brethren from here found themselves as refugees. General Sheridan offered to “furnish one team and wagon to each Union sympathizer to transport his belongings and family beyond the boundaries of the Confederacy.’ In his report of the incident, Sheridan noted that from ‘the vicinity of Harrisonburg over four hundred wagonloads of refugees have been sent back to Martinsburg. Most of these people were Dunkers.’” (Sappington, The Brethren in the New Nation, p. 392) Sappington notes that this number of Brethren refugees from the South created some problems for Brethren in the North.

Roger Sappington in his book The Brethren in Virginia carries a summary of a special investigating commission for Rockingham County in November 1864.

“ . . . four hundred and fifty barns had been burned, one hundred thousand bushels of wheat and fifty thousand bushels of corn had been destroyed, one thousand seven hundred fifty each of cattle and of horses had been carried off (Sheridan claimed to have removed four thousand head of stock), and the total loss was estimated to have been twenty-five million dollars, although this figure was in inflated Confederate dollars.” (p. 81)

From these descriptions, one understands General Sheridan’s famous claim that “a crow flying across this valley would have to carry his own rations.”

Last came the post-war attempts to claim reparations for damages done by Union armies to those loyal to the union. Estimating damages, filing, and justifying loyalty and damages lingered on for decades for some petitioners. Valley Research Associates along with the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center through the work of Emmert Bittinger, David Rodes, and Norman Wenger have begun to document this post-war experience. Two volumes of Unionists and the Civil War Experience In The Shenandoah Valley have already been published; the third is in process; and another three to four volumes are anticipated. The effects of war did not end for the country as a whole nor for Mennonites and Brethren in the Valley with the surrender at Appomattox.

Mennonite and Brethren publications of the period carried several accounts of the devastation of the Valley. One appeared in the Herald of Truth, a Mennonite monthly, in November 1864 (vol. 1, no. 11, p. 71); it was reprinted in the Brethren monthly Gospel Visitor the following month. The Herald of Truth printed several letters of Mennonites from the Valley who were now refugees in the North: one by Michael Shank, dated November 19, 1864; another by D. H. Landis in Bremen, Fairfield County, Ohio, dated October 30, 1864 to Daniel Brenneman. The Brethren Gospel Visitor, volume xiii, published an article titled “How non-resistant people are dealt with in the South” using a letter dated August 6, 1863 from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It relates the trying account and suffering of a member of the Society of Friends from North Carolina who refused to participate in bearing arms.

In May 1865, Jacob Hildebrand, the Mennonite bishop in southern District—Augusta County—wrote from his home at Hermitage to Herald of Truth published in Chicago:

“But all seems to be quiet now and I do hope the war is over, for it is a dreadful curse upon a land. I used to think war was a great evil when I heard of it, being a distance off, but we can have no idea of it until we see it. Several times it came so near to our house, that at every discharge of the cannon the window sash would shake, and we trembled, not knowing at what hour it might come upon us; and at the same time, while cannons were roaring and muskets cracking all around us, hundreds of soldiers were crowding upon us and begging for something to eat. Oh, the horrors of war! Should this not humble the people and bring them to repentance?” (“Herald of Truth”, July 1865; volume 2, #7, p. 53)

The experience of nonresistant people, in particular Mennonites and Brethren, during the War Between the States resulted in several statements of their nonresistant principles. The March and April 1865 issues of Herald of Truth, a Mennonite publication, carried a 2-part article described as a letter from H. Grattan Guinness to a Christian brother. It was titled “The duty of Christians in the Present Crisis.” It is a most commanding article of nonresistant principles. Earlier, William C. Thurman, who was elected as a Brethren minister in 1862 at the Greenmount Church, wrote a pamphlet “Nonresistance, the Patience and the Faith of the Saints.” The pamphlet circulated among Brethren and appeared to have been instrumental in passage of the exemption act by the Confederate Congress in 1862. (The Brethren in Virginia, p. 75)

At their 1864 Annual Meeting at the Hagerstown Church in Wayne County, Indiana, Brethren received the following query:

“As our national troubles, consequent upon the rebellion now existing in our country, have caused considerable difficulty in our church, and have tried our non-resistant principles, and have caused several questions concerning the paying of bounty-money, voting, etc., to come before this council-meeting, what counsel will this Annual Meeting give upon these subjects?”

In 1861 and 1862, Annual Meeting minutes record nothing regarding the war. 1863 minutes respond to matters about the war and military service but appear reserved in their focus. However, in 1864, in response to the above query, Annual Meeting gave in a clear statement of the church’s principles:

“We exhort the brethren to steadfastness in the faith, and believe that the times in which our lots are cast strongly demand of us a strict adherence to all our principles, and especially to our non-resistant principle, a principle dear to every subject of the Prince of Peace, and a prominent doctrine of our fraternity, and to endure whatever sufferings and to make whatever sacrifice the maintaining of the principle may require, and not to encourage in any way the practice of war. And we think it more in accordance with our principles, that instead of paying bounty-money, and especially in taking an active part in raising bounty-money, to await the demands of the government, whether general, state, or local, and pay the fines and taxes required of us, as the gospel permits, and, in deed, requires. Matt.

22:21; Rom. 13:7. And lest the position we have taken upon political matters in general, and war matters in particular, should seem to make us, as a body, appear to be indifferent to our government, or in opposition thereto, in its efforts to suppress the rebellion, we hereby declare that it has our sympathies and our prayers, and that it shall have our aid in any way which does not conflict with the principles of the gospel of Christ. But since, in our Christian profession, we regard these gospel principles as superior or paramount to all others, consistency requires that we do regard them in our practices.” (Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Church of the Brethren, pp. 231-232)

One month later, Valley Brethren elder and Annual Conference moderator John Kline would be shot and killed by southern sympathizers. Within 6 months, Brethren and Mennonites in the Valley would be devastated by Sheridan’s burning. Adherence to nonresistance principles sometimes results in suffering.

One year later in 1865, the Brethren Annual Conference met in Rock River, Lee County, Illinois. That meeting received information regarding the Brethren in Virginia and Tennessee.

“Bro. Wrightsman, from Tennessee, and Bro. Mumaw, from Virginia, stated to the meeting that the brethren in those states need assistance, and that they must suffer unless they get assistance; whereupon the meeting appointed D. P. Saylor as a receiver to receive contributions for the relief of said brethren. The meeting likewise directed him to appropriate the funds now in his hands, collected for the Oregon mission, to the same purpose.” (Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Church of the Brethren, p. 245)

The next year, 1866, Annual Meeting heartily approved expanding this action to raise and distribute such relief funds to the needy irrespective of color throughout the southern states. Churches in southern Indiana had already initiated this broader response of aid.

During these 2 years, 1865 and 1866, Brethren through their churches and various individuals contributed over \$8,100 for the relief of the southern Brethren (approximately \$250,000 in 2005 value). Some of this was distributed in Tennessee, but significant amounts came to the Brethren here in the Shenandoah Valley. Research does not yet reveal Mennonite relief endeavors though it is to be assumed that congregations and individuals responded to their plights in patterns similar to the Brethren.

A majority of the refugees returned in the summer of 1865; some came later. In the summer of 1867, J. M. Shenk from Lima, Ohio visited Virginia and commented:

“The brethren in Rockingham County have lost very much of their worldly goods by war, but they have to a considerable extent recovered again from their losses. They have been blessed during the summer just past (1867) with good crops of grain and fruit so need not suffer from want.” (Mennonites in Virginia, p. 298)

While harvests saw some return to normalcy, the effects of war continued as recounted by Jonathan K. Hartzler of Belleville, Pennsylvania in his visit to Virginia in June 1867.

“The works of the war are yet plainly to be seen in the Valley. The ruins of houses, barns, bridges, fences are numerous. The loss of property, the care, anxiety, and temptation and in a few cases the persecutions which our friends have suffered cannot be fully realized by those who did not live amid the scenes of battle, destruction, waste, bloodshed, and death.” (Mennonites in Virginia, p. 299)

The return to normalcy would take many years. With that return would come renewed and increasing discussions, tensions, and decisions related to Mennonite and Brethren church life in Sunday Schools, missions, evangelistic meetings, home mission churches, nonconformity, and more. It would be another 50 years before Mennonites and Brethren in the Valley would face the onslaught of new decisions relative to military service. The twentieth century brought several occasions for those decisions. After 140 years, these pacifist denominations and others in the Valley have not yet faced another onslaught of destruction and suffering as was experienced in the War Between the States.

Samuel Horst pays significant tribute to the cooperation which Brethren and Mennonites shared in “presenting petitions for the securing of exemptions, in processing the release of prisoners, and in the operation of the escape system for deserters and refugees.” (Mennonites in the Confederacy, p. 115) These two church groups not only cooperated in these ways but also suffered similar effects of the war. Horst closes his book Mennonites in the Confederacy by writing:

“These two groups had every reason for cooperating and both have suffered from the failure to foster the further development of these attempts at cooperation of the wartime years. The postwar decades saw both groups again going their separate ways tending to accentuate their minor differences and avoiding their striking similarities.” (p. 115)

Traveling south from Hagerstown to Sharpsburg, Md., one passes through the Antietam Battlefield. Here on September 17, 1862 was fought the bloodiest battle of the Civil War. Around 23,000 casualties were suffered by southern and northern armies—in one day! Alexander Gardner, one of Matthew Brady’s photographers, immortalized this battle with a scene depicting a cannon and dead soldiers in the foreground and a white shot-riddled building in the background. That building was the Mumma meetinghouse at Antietam, part of the Manor congregation of the Dunkers. The day after the battle, local Brethren gathered to aid those still living, using the meetinghouse as a hospital.

“Although its walls were pockmarked by shells, the building was soon repaired with substantial gifts from northern Brethren, using funds collected by Elder D. P. Saylor of the Pipe Creek congregation in Maryland. He reported in February 1864 that the Manor congregation was again using the meetinghouse for worship and that funds not used for this purpose were distributed among members who

had suffered material loss. Many of their household effects had been burned, destroyed, or carried off by soldiers. Some members had not yet recovered from the nervous shock of the battle.

“The building stood for many years until it was heavily damaged by a storm in 1921 and torn down. It was rebuilt on the centennial of the battle and stands today on the Antietam National Battlefield, part of the National Park Service. Periodically, Brethren hold religious services there, stressing their peace convictions.” (Fruit of the Vine, pp. 288-289)

The Antietam meetinghouse of the Brethren stands as a symbol for who Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley sought to be during and after the War Between the States. Like that meetinghouse, they experienced personal suffering and significant destruction of property. Like the meetinghouse, they withstood the forces of war and returned to their livelihood as people of persistent faith and nonresistant principles. They used what remained to support each other in rebuilding and returning to normalcy. Through the decades of time, Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley, in often quiet very personal ways, have continued to witness to peace, service, and hope to each other, to their communities, and to the world.

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