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CHAPTER 1

EARLY MENNONITE SETTLEMENTS IN VIRGINIA

“New Virginia”

The Mennonites were among the first white settlers in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, coming from Switzerland and the Palatinate by way of Pennsylvania. It is difficult to account fully for this early immigration. Probably a number of the brethren knew about the possibilities of colonization in Virginia before they came to this country.

Perhaps the Mennonites learned to know about Virginia through George Ritter, of Berne, Switzerland, who had contracted with the Swiss government to bring a number of the brethren here. He even went so far as to petition the English government, in the person of Queen Anne, for land in Virginia for them. We know that Ritter's attempt to bring the brethren here was premature and that it ended in failure, but it is likely that the Mennonites learned to know about Virginia through him and that they were conditioned and prepared for later settlement here.

Possibly the large German immigration to Pennsylvania during the first half of the eighteenth century also was an influence. The best land had been appropriated by the first settlers, and for that reason, no doubt, a number sought their fortunes in Virginia. Then, too, the Indians, usually quiet and peaceable, sent menacing excursions among the Pennsylvania frontier settlements in 1728 at about the time the first settlements were made in Virginia. One raid was made on the settlement in Falkner's Swamp, near Philadelphia. A petition known as the Colebrook Petition, calling for protection against the marauding Indians, was sent to the Governor of Pennsylvania at that time. This petition was signed by Joist Hite, Christian Neuschanger, Peter Boehm, Daniel Stauffer, and others. Several years later Joist Hite purchased land

in Virginia, and brought settlers here, among whom were Christian Neuschanger and Daniel Stauffer. Neuschanger and Stauffer were very likely Mennonites. Therefore, it is possible that a number of Mennonites came to Virginia as a result of these Indian disturbances in Pennsylvania. Another factor that entered in a great deal, no doubt, was the new land policy of Penn's sons who had full control after the death of their father, William Penn, in 1728. Their land policy was less liberal than their father's had been. Quitrents were more successfully and uniformly collected and squatters were ferreted out and denied the privilege of occupying land in the state of Pennsylvania.

Still another important reason for the actual settlement of the Shenandoah Valley was the lure of the land itself—a land of running waters, prairies, scattered forests, hills, and mountains. This happy hunting ground of the Indian had a special attraction to the Swiss Palatines for it was like their native Switzerland.

Governor Gooch of the State of Virginia, who was interested in getting settlers for the Valley for the purposes of establishing a sort of buffer state between the Indian of the west and the white man of the east, made land grants quite freely. Even though the laws of uniformity in respect to State Church were definite and well enforced in the eastern part of the state, he was not particular about the religious affiliations of the people who settled the Valley. There were laws prohibiting the settlement of Quakers east of the Blue Ridge, but Quakers and related groups were not debarred from the Valley. The final result of this liberal policy was the actual settlement of a number of Mennonites and Quakers in "New Virginia."

Land Speculators

The land agents or speculators who were anxious to get settlers for their respective grants of land, played an important role in the settlement of the Valley. Several of these knew the Mennonites, lived among them, and were able to get them to sign up for land on the frontier.

The first land agent to bring settlers here was Jacob Stover, a native of Switzerland who came to Virginia by way of Pennsylvania.

Stover's original grant consisted of two five-thousand-acre plots. He brought a number of settlers composed of Mennonites, Lutherans, and Calvinists to occupy his grants. This group, preceded a short time before by Adam Miller, the first white settler, constituted the first settlement of white people in the Valley. This settlement was made in what is now Page County, on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River and its tributaries in 1727.

Several years later another land speculator, the above-mentioned Joist Hite, became interested in land in Virginia. Hite came to this country in 1710 by way of New York. Within seven years he moved to Pennsylvania and lived first at Germantown and then in the Perkiomen community, on the Schuylkill near Valley Forge. Here he was engaged in the milling and possibly other businesses for a number of years. He was one of the signers of the 1728 petition for better protection against the marauding Indians.

About the same time Joist Hite bought land in the Valley of Virginia from a man named Van Metre. The Van Metre grant consisted of forty thousand acres in widely scattered plots. As one of the terms of the purchase, Joist Hite promised to "seat" forty families here in two years. In 1730 Hite came to the Valley to live, bringing sixteen families with him as settlers. Hite and his group likely crossed the Potomac River at the Pack Horse Ford, some distance above Harper's Ferry, the connecting link between the North and the Shenandoah Valley. From there he probably followed the Indian Trail south to a point known as Springdale or Bartonsville on the Opecon River, a tributary of the Potomac. Springdale or Bartonsville was located five miles north of the present city of Winchester. Hite himself located below the present Winchester. The people who came to the valley with Hite were Germans, and a number of them were Mennonites.

New Counties

As mentioned above, Stover's settlement was made between the Massanutten range and the Blue Ridge Mountains on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River and a tributary arising in the New Market Gap known as Massanutten Creek. In terms of pres-

ent-day geography this settlement was made near Luray, in Page County. Originally the Luray community on the South Fork was in Spotsylvania County, which certainly included all the land in Virginia west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In 1734 the Luray settlement became part of Orange County which was created out of the large Spotsylvania County. Four years later boundaries changed and Luray became part of the county of Augusta. In 1745 the northern part of Augusta County, including the Luray settlement, was taken away to help form Frederick County. In 1772 and in 1777, respectively, Shenandoah and Rockingham Counties were carved out of parts of Frederick and Augusta Counties. Finally Page County, in 1831, was created out of Shenandoah County. This means that the original settlement of Mennonites, during the first century of its history, 1727-1831, was in six counties without actually changing location. These boundary line changes meant that the official land and tax records of these first Virginia Mennonites are found in six different sets of widely scattered county records. The county history of Mennonites west of the Massanutten Mountain is almost as varied.

The original settlements east and west of the Massanutten Range did not remain self-contained units or settlements, as the county histories would indicate. They soon expanded. The Page County settlement, the largest and the one about which we know the most, overflowed west across the Massanutten Mountain, occupying territories in the vicinity of Woodstock on the North Branch of the Shenandoah River in what finally became Shenandoah County. This settlement was only twenty miles from Luray. The repetition of family names in these settlements indicates a rather close association. Primitive methods of travel did not prevent the exchange of visits between the two settlements.

Then, too, the Opecqon settlement at Springdale near Winchester in what became Frederick County overflowed to the east and south, to points including Strasburg and Woodstock. The former was laid off or planned by Peter Stauffer. The town originally was called "Stauffer-stadt." While most of the Stauffers were Mennonites, it is not likely that Peter Stauffer was one. Woodstock was settled by people from both settlements and served as a con-

necting link for Mennonites of the Valley in the eighteenth century.

Early Settlers

The first settlers of the Valley invariably came here by way of Pennsylvania. It is not known when many of these German immigrants came to Virginia, but we do know when and how they reached Philadelphia, providing they came in 1727 or later. Prior to that date no immigrant records were kept, and when no dates are given it must be inferred that they came before records were kept. In listing the possible early Mennonite settlers of the Valley, the date of the landing at Philadelphia and the name of the ship on which they came will be given whenever this information is available.

A probable list of Mennonite settlers for Page County exclusive of church leaders included: Abram Strickler, Joseph Rhodes, John Brubaker, Abraham Brubaker, Henry Sowter, Ludwig Stone, John Bomgarner, Henry Bromback, Nicholas Berry, Hans Root, and Hendricks Pomgarddiner (August 30, 1743, on ship Francis and Elizabeth). This list would also include the names of Jacob Borner, John Holman, and Daniel Stover, who were mentioned as being of the "brotherhood" by Martin Kauffman, Sr.

In addition to the above names the Page County Deed Books list: Blossers, Millers, Goods, Heistons, Algernons, Lineweavers, Thompsons, Gochenours, and, others.

For Frederick and Shenandoah Counties the list likely included: John Strickler, Jacob Funk, Christian Grove, Michael Burner, Jacob Beery, George Bowman, Abraham Hendrick, John Crabill, Christley Stover, who made "solemn affirmation" in court, Hans Huldeman (October 2, 1727, on ship Adventure Galley), Peter Hockman and Jn. Fatter, (October 16, 1727, on ship Friendship), Christian Newswanger, (August 24, 1728), Heinrich Funk (September 9, 1738, on board ship Snow Two Sisters), Peter Ebersool (September 3, 1739, on ship Robert and Alice), Johannes Franty Grove (September 7, 1748, on ship Hamshire), Anthony Spangler, who used an affirmation in court, and Francis Weaver, who, in the same court "affirmeth, she being a Mennonite." Jeremiah Eberli came on ship St. Andrews on September 23, 1752.