



## PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Harriet Sider Bicksler

Editor

Devin Manzullo-Thomas

Contributing Editor

"History Matters" is published three times a year by the Brethren in Christ Historical Society. No subscription charge. Comments, ideas, article suggestions, and letters about "History Matters" may be directed to the Editor:

Harriet Sider Bicksler  
127 Holly Drive  
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055

## CONTACT

717 795 9151

info@bic-history.org

www.bic-history.org



facebook.com/bichistory

## President's Report for 2022

by John Yeatts

This was a good year for the Historical Society. We welcomed two new members to our governing board: David Weaver-Zercher, professor at Messiah University, and David Downey, senior pastor of the Meeting House, Dillsburg, Pennsylvania. We try to keep a balance between scholars and ministers. We regret the retirement of our secretary, Beth Mark, whose good ideas and skill with words will be missed.

Our Heritage Service this year focused on the work of the Spirit, with a presentation by Rob Douglass. We assisted with a tour of historic Brethren in Christ sites during the General Assembly in Salina, Kansas, this past July. The Historical Society contributed \$500 for that event.

Our next Heritage Service at the Ringgold Meetinghouse will be on June 4, 2023, possibly a joint meeting with our historic brothers and sisters from the Old Order River Brethren and the United Zion. Our board includes representatives from both groups and we regularly hear from them.

The features in the journal, *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, have shifted somewhat to balance between stories from our tradition and critical research. The stories have included those who have not been church leaders but have faithfully served without notice. The critical research has focused on being a resource for Brethren in Christ leaders.



The August 2022 edition is an excellent example of this balance with the story of Bertha Heisey, a well-researched analysis of one year in the life of Frances Davidson, qualitative research on our core values, and the printed version of the Schrag Lecture at Messiah University in March about the western wheat harvest featuring the Wolgemuth family from the Cross Roads Brethren in Christ Church.

We continue our formal covenant with Zambia Christian University working with Dwight Thomas. Our relationship with the Theological Study Group—a grassroots group that meets quarterly to discuss theology and other issues—has become stronger; the materials produced are now archived in the Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives. We post each edition of the journal on our website where it is accessible to members, and we have a significant inventory of books and past editions of the journal available for sale (contact the editor).

We have several book projects in the works, although it will be several years until they are completed. Devin Manzullo-Thomas is working on two books—a biography of E. Morris and Leone Sider and a history of the Brethren in Christ Church in the twentieth century—and Daryl Climenhaga is writing a history of Brethren in Christ missions. Other research projects and memoirs that will be printed in the journal are also in progress.

We are grateful for those who serve the Historical Society in so many ways. Pray for us as we work to accomplish our goals.



In addition to the president's report, the recent annual meeting of the Historical Society featured a preview of a project to create a digital replica of the Ringgold Meetinghouse. In this photo, Steve Long, a land surveyor and member of the Fairview Avenue Brethren in Christ Church in Waynesboro, PA, is describing the process which creates a "digital twin" of the meetinghouse that would make it possible to reproduce the building exactly. We anticipate that the digital build-  
ing will be available online in the coming months and we will publish the link on our website.

## Another Brethren in Christ Civil War Letter Found (Almost)!

by Jonathan R. Stayer\*

As students of Brethren in Christ history know, contemporary documentation of the church's activities during the American Civil War is rather rare, particularly concerning its response to the Union draft. Even though conscription allegedly served as the impetus for changing the denomination's name from "River Brethren" to "Brethren in Christ," no evidence from the war period has been uncovered to support that legend.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, every document from the 1860s pertaining to the Brethren and their relationship to the war and the draft is invaluable in developing an accurate understanding of the church's peace history.

On a recent foray into the Pennsylvania Civil War draft records at the National Archives at Philadelphia, a previously unknown reference to the Brethren's response to the draft was discovered. The register of letters received by the Acting Assistant Provost Marshal General (AAPMG) for the Western Division of Pennsylvania, headquartered at Harrisburg, PA, shows the following entry for August 10, 1864: *Returned to Gov. A. G. Curtin, Letter of Abraham Mellinger, dated near Siddonsburg, Aug 8, 1864, asking information about the present Enrolment [sic] and Draft laws, relating to such as have conscientious scruples against bearing arms, with endorsement from this office.*<sup>2</sup>

The endorsements book contains a copy of the endorsement mentioned in the letter register: *Harrisburg Aug 10th/64 – Respectfully returned to His Excellency Gov. A. G. Curtin – Sec 17 of the amendatory enrolment [sic] act, approved Feb 24th/64 provides for members of religious denominations. The persons referred to in this section, when drafted, have to report to the Enrolment [sic] Boards like other drafted men and will be dealt with according to the provisions of the law. Richd I Dodge Capt 8th US Infy A.a. P.M Gen'l.*<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, Abraham Mellinger, a Brethren in Christ minister, sent a letter dated August 8, 1864, to Pennsylvania Governor Andrew G. Curtin inquiring about exemptions from the draft for those having conscientious scruples against bearing arms. Shortly thereafter, the Governor's office forwarded the letter to AAPMG Capt. Richard I. Dodge at the headquarters of the federal draft bureaucracy in the Commonwealth, also located in Harrisburg, the state's capital. Because conscription was a federal process at that time, Curtin's office must have determined that Dodge was

the more appropriate person to handle Mellinger's inquiry. Dodge did not deem the letter worthy of a lengthy reply. On August 10, his office simply penned the abbreviated response on the reverse of the letter, which was recorded in the endorsement book, and returned it to the Governor. Unfortunately, the original letter has not been located in state, federal or church archives, so we do not know its actual contents. These entries, however, demonstrate that the Brethren were concerned about the impact of conscription on their members and were astute enough to direct those concerns to government officials.

Who was Abraham Mellinger? According to Asa Climenhaga's *History of the Brethren in Christ Church*, he resided in Monaghan Township, York County, Pennsylvania, and served as a minister in the "Cumberland district."<sup>4</sup> The 1860 Shearer and Lake map of York County placed his home at the abrupt bend of a road about halfway between the villages of Siddonsburg and Andersontown.<sup>5</sup> Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Climenhaga noted that "the old historical Mellinger barn" could be visited "on the second sharp turn of the road a few miles from Bowmansdale." Additionally, he commented that "this large, typical Pennsylvania barn served well as a place for the love feast occasions."<sup>6</sup> Today, only part of the barn's foundation wall remains on the property of Countryside Animal Clinic ([www.krusevet.com](http://www.krusevet.com)).

Although the specific matters addressed in Abraham Mellinger's letter remain unknown, it illustrates the apprehension that the Brethren in Christ and other Peace Churches had that the Union draft bureaucracy would continue to extend the privilege of paying the \$300.00 commutation fee to their members for exemption from military service. The Conscription Act of 1863 provided that any man could pay commutation to escape service. As the federal government implemented the draft process, many men chose this means of exemption, causing Congress to severely limit commutation in a February 24, 1864 amendment to the Conscription Act.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, that amendment included specific language for conscientious objectors in Section 17 mentioned by Capt. Dodge: *... members of religious denominations, who shall by oath or affirmation declare that they are conscientiously opposed to the bearing of arms, and who are prohibited from doing so by the rules and*

\*Jonathan Stayer is a graduate of Messiah College (now University) and archivist emeritus at the Pennsylvania State Archives. Research for this article was funded in part by a Kreider Fellowship from the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA.

1 Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 27, 33.

2 Register of Letters Received, 1863-1866, Vol. 2, p. 593, Entry #3137, PH-5136, NAID 4913143, Western Division, Pennsylvania, Record Group 110, Records of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau, National Archives, Philadelphia.

3 Endorsements, 1864-1866, Vol. 3, p. 49, Entry #3144, PH-5143, NAID 4913146, Western Division, Pennsylvania, Record Group 110, Records of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau, National Archives, Philadelphia.

4 Asa W. Climenhaga, *History of the Brethren in Christ Church* (Nappanee, IN: E.V. Publishing House, 1942), 77-78.

5 Shearer's Map of York County Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: W.O. Shearer & D.J. Lake, 1860), Monaghan Township.

6 Climenhaga, 77.

7 For a detailed discussion of Civil War conscription in the North and the pertinent federal legislation, see James W. Geary, *We Need Men: The Union Draft in the Civil War* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991).

articles of faith and practice of said religious denominations, shall, when drafted into military service, be considered noncombatants, and shall be assigned by the Secretary of War to duty in the hospitals, or to the care of freedmen, or shall pay the sum of three hundred dollars . . . to be applied to the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers: Provided, That no person shall be entitled to the benefit of the provisions of this section unless his declaration of conscientious scruples against bearing arms shall be supported by satisfactory evidence that his department has been uniformly consistent with such declaration.<sup>8</sup>

An additional amendment passed on July 4, 1864 essentially restricted the payment of a commutation fee only to conscientious objectors.<sup>9</sup>

Since Mellinger wrote his letter in August of that year, he might have been reacting to the July amendment. His son John—also later a Brethren in Christ minister<sup>10</sup>—filed a conscientious objector deposition with the state draft officials in 1862,<sup>11</sup> and the consolidated list of enrollments for the 1863 federal draft noted that he had an “exemption on conscientious scruples.”<sup>12</sup> Possibly, Abraham was fearful that John’s exemption would not be recognized under the 1864 amendments to the Conscription Act. Of course, we would like to know if Abraham wrote on behalf of his family or of his church. Hopefully, future research will bring his letter to light or provide a fuller understanding of its contents.

8 An Act to amend an Act entitled “An Act for enrolling and calling out the National Forces, and for other Purposes,” approved March third, eighteen hundred and sixty-three, U.S. Statutes at Large, Vol. XII (1866): 9.

9 Geary, 134-138.

10 “Fallen Asleep” [obituaries], *Evangelical Visitor*, February 2, 1931, 36.

11 Deposition #1865, York County, Register of Aliens and Persons having conscientious scruples against bearing arms, 1862, p. 390, Entry #3168, PH-5167, NAID 5049412, Western Division, Pennsylvania, Record Group 110, Records of the Provost Marshal General’s Bureau, National Archives, Philadelphia.

12 Consolidated Lists of Civil War Draft Registrations, 1863-1865, Pennsylvania, 15th District, Vol. 2, p. 354, Entry #172, NAID 4213514, Record Group 110, Records of the Provost Marshal General’s Bureau, National Archives, Washington, DC, as viewed on www.Ancestry.com, 6 July 2022.



During the Brethren in Christ U.S. General Assembly in Kansas in July 2022, two busloads of attendees toured historical sites from the early days of the church in Kansas. Pictured is one of the cemeteries they visited.

## Kansas Churches

by Kenneth O. Hoke

On a sunny afternoon in July,  
Two buses and some five cars did embark.  
On a four-hour journey they did depart,  
Led by Bishop Ron Bowell and Pastor Stan Norman.

The objective was to see the sites of the early Kansas churches.  
Most of these houses of worship were no more;  
Their lumber had been used in later building more.  
But what did remain were their cemeteries.

At each stop the passengers did disembark  
To explore the headstones of the brothers and sisters there interred—  
Names such as Engle, Davidson, Norman, and more.  
Oh, the many stories these folk did store.

Stories of three hundred people on a train bound for Kansas,  
A full community of Christ-followers ready to start life in a new land.  
A bishop and pastors, with people of all trades,  
To Kansas they felt called and so they went.

In this new land they built churches,  
Many of them less than ten miles apart,  
Realizing what it would take to gather.  
And the Smoky Hill River that cut through the land.

Here in this land the people sought to follow Jesus.  
They worked to encourage and challenge the people of whom they were a part.  
At one of these churches, Bethel, our call to worldwide missions was given  
a five dollar start.  
The church building where it happened is gone, but the impact continues.

Today, most of these early church buildings are gone,  
But the people they called to Jesus remain.  
A whole new group of Kansas churches continues today  
To call us all to follow Jesus and share his love and grace.

*Kenneth O. Hoke is executive direction of the Brethren in Christ Historical Society.*





BRETHREN IN CHRIST  
**HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY**

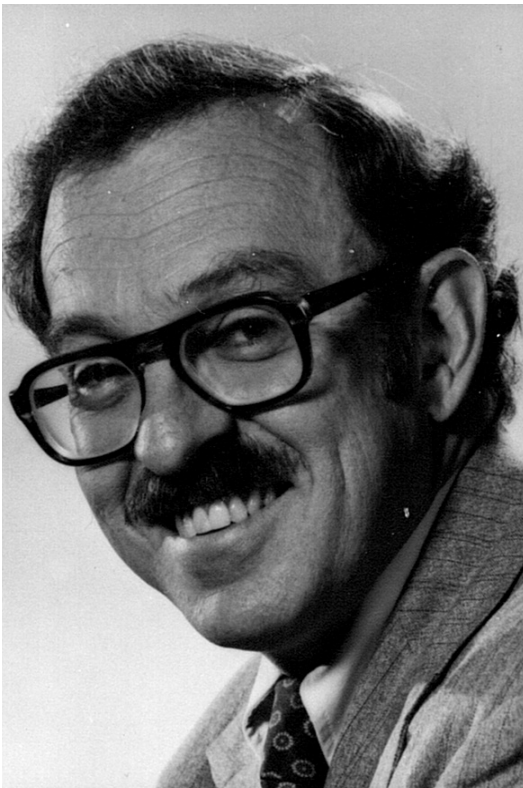
One University Ave., Suite 3002  
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055

Nonprofit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Mechanicsburg, PA  
Permit No. 130

*Address Service Requested*

## Images from the Past

*From the photograph collection of the Brethren in Christ Historical Library & Archives*



This issue's "Images from the Past" celebrates the life and legacy of Ronald J. Sider—Brethren in Christ minister, professor, and theologian—who passed away in July 2022 at the age of 82.

Born in Ontario, Canada, in 1939 and raised in the Brethren in Christ Church, Sider received ministerial credentials from the denomination but pursued a career in the academy. While earning his PhD at Yale University in the 1960s, Sider and his wife, Arbutus, moved into an impoverished and racially segregated neighborhood in New Haven, Connecticut—where they encountered poverty, racism, and economic injustice for the first time—and it transformed their faith. He would eventually teach a generation of Brethren in Christ students at Messiah College's Philadelphia Campus from 1968-1977.

Sider's groundbreaking book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, was published in 1977. The book, overflowing with biblical quotations, condemned American Christian greed, materialism, and conspicuous consumption, calling followers of Jesus to repent of their sins and embrace a lifestyle of identification with the poor and vulnerable. Sider would later claim that his Brethren in Christ heritage profoundly influenced his writing: "The church in our background . . . is a new society of people who live fundamentally differently from the rest of surrounding society. It is a new community, a new counter-culture, which refuses to live according to the accepted norms and values of the world."

For more on Sider's legacy and his influence on the Brethren in Christ Church, check out the December 2022 issue of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*.