

Our Family History

Swiss and German Origins of the Mennonites of Singers Glen, VA (including resources for further reading)

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Singers Glen, VA, as viewed from the Singers Glen cemetery on the hill. (Photo by SAM, 2010)

Singers Glen, Virginia

Singers Glen is a rural community in the Shenandoah Valley of the Appalachian Mountains in western Rockingham County, Virginia. It was founded by the Mennonite Joseph Funk. Joseph was a grandson of Bishop Henry Funk, a prominent German Mennonite who had immigrated to Pennsylvania and settled in Franconia Township, Montgomery County. Other Mennonites from Pennsylvania

settled here as well. Originally, the village of Singers Glen was called Mountain Valley. However, there was another Mountain Valley in Virginia. In 1860, the name was changed to Singers Glen by the first Postmaster, Solomon Funk, to commemorate the Mennonite singing schools of his father, Joseph Funk. In 1947, a monument was erected next to Joseph Funk's house commemorating the one hundred year anniversary of his establishment of the Mennonite printing press at Singers Glen. In 1978, Singers Glen was declared an historic district by the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission and the United States Department of the Interior. It still had the markings of a nineteenth-century community with many of the residents being descendants of the first Mennonite settlers whose families had emigrated from Switzerland and Germany to Pennsylvania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A Brief History of These Mennonites:

Mennonites trace their beginnings to an Anabaptist movement led by Ulrich Zwingli which began in 1525 in Zurich, Switzerland at the time of the Protestant Reformation. These Anabaptists were Christians who believed that the sixteenth-century Reformation leaders had not gone far enough in their reforms. Anabaptists based their convictions on the New Testament of the Bible. They did not believe in infant baptism; hence the name Anabaptists. Instead, they advocated adult baptism, believing that the church should be a group of voluntary adults, baptized upon confession of faith. They also believed in separation of church and state, and that it was forbidden to go to war, to swear oaths, or to hold offices that required the use of force. Their radical beliefs put them at odds with both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant

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Reformation led by Martin Luther.

Some historians say the Mennonite movement actually had its roots in the Waldensian doctrines, named for Peter Waldo, a priest from Lyons, France who rejected a number of Roman Catholic tenets in 1150. Waldo's followers had also been called Anabaptists because of their opposition to infant baptism. Waldo had a strong following among those who had become disenchanted with the Roman Church. The number of followers grew, in spite of severe persecution from the Roman Catholic Church wherever they settled. There were soon Waldensian colonies in Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Bavaria, Bohemia, other places in Europe, and along the Mediterranean. These scattered settlements were still in existence in the sixteenth century at the time of the Protestant Reformation. They had endured four hundred years of persecution. The Anabaptists of Switzerland who surfaced in the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's held essentially the same beliefs as the Waldensians who originated in the twelfth century.

The Anabaptists were not a leaderless group, even though they stressed the priesthood of all believers. The name Mennonite came from Menno Simons, a former Roman Catholic priest who was born in 1496 in Witmarsum, Friedland, Holland. He assumed the leadership of the Anabaptists in the Netherlands during the 1530's. He soon came to be esteemed by Anabaptist groups in Switzerland and in Germany. His moderate views, leadership abilities, and prolific writings did so much to unify the scattered Anabaptists that they soon were nicknamed "Mennonites".

This new Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century spread quickly, although the beliefs of Anabaptists were exceedingly unpopular with those in power. The Anabaptists were severely persecuted by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformers led by Martin Luther. In the 1600's, so-called religious wars had resulted in the establishment of Protestant churches in many of the German states. These churches became state churches and upheld their authority by force. They had little sympathy for Anabaptist and plain-sect extremists who took an unswerving position against certain church doctrines, against the union of church and state, and against all violence. Thousands of Anabaptists suffered death by burning, drowning, and other methods of torture. What began among educated urban radicals became a rural peasant movement as the believers fled to the mountains of Switzerland and to Germany, France and the Netherlands to survive. Many Swiss Anabaptists settled in the Palatinate. This was the name given to two southern German states: the Upper Palatinate, now a part of the state of Bavaria, and the Lower Palatinate, or Rhineland Palatinate, along the Rhine River.

In 1672, these Swiss refugees petitioned Amsterdam for help: "' Beloved brethren and sisters in Holland and elsewhere and particularly our friend Hans Flamming -- We wish to report to you that our people here are driven out of Berne and came to the Palatinate where our brethren were already there to receive us; and we are staying with them, and they are supplying us with food, clothes and drink, but because there are so many of us who have nothing, and our brethren here are not well off, we are a great burden to them -- and too heavy a load for them to carry. We find ourselves compelled to write you in the Netherlands, and there are so many charitable people of our faith that we ask them to give us alms which we sorely need.'" This petition was dated January 1, 1672 and approved by some prominent men in Amsterdam, among them Valentine

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Hutewoll and Jacob Gut. (Eshleman, 118-120.)



Mennonite Meeting House in Germantown, PA, constructed in 1700. (PD; Photo by Smallbones, 2010)

Mennonite Immigration to the New World

In 1681, an English Quaker by the name of William Penn was given a land grant in America by the English King, Charles II. He was allowed to establish an American province where Quakers and people of other faiths could have religious freedom. There would be no state church. Furthermore, fertile virgin land was offered initially at 10 cents an acre. Penn personally traveled to the German states to invite settlers to Pennsylvania (Penn's Woods), as this part of the New World became known. An unbearable and seemingly

unending experience of war and religious persecution sent German peasant farmers and craftsmen flocking to America, seeking a better life. The Mennonites, in particular, responded to Penn's invitation. These Anabaptists from Switzerland and Southern Germany began coming to North America in 1683, two years after William Penn's land grant. The first permanent settlement was in Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Between 1701 and 1756, some 3,000 to 5,000 Mennonites from the Palatinate and Switzerland made the trip across the Atlantic to settle in Eastern Pennsylvania. This immigration ended in about 1756, at the start of the French and Indian War. By 1776, Germans constituted about one third of the population of Pennsylvania. Of this number, Amish and Mennonites accounted for about 10 percent. Between 1785 and 1840, a considerable number of Mennonites migrated to Maryland and Virginia.

The Mennonites possessed a profound sense of stewardship towards God's creation. They believed that work is healthy and enjoyable. These farmers from the German Rhineland produced plentiful crops in the fertile soil of Pennsylvania by investing long hours and careful planning in their farms. They were known for their plain ways of dressing, living and worshipping; for this reason they were also called the Plain People or Plain Sect by their neighbors.

The American Revolution was a difficult time for the Mennonites. These German immigrants hated oppression. Now England was threatening to impose tyrannical rule on the colonists. In spite of their religious beliefs, many Mennonites supported the Revolution by providing food and medical help. Others became soldiers and officers in Washington's army.

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Pennsylvania Dutch

This term refers to the people and their descendants who came to Pennsylvania from the German Rhineland in the 1600's and 1700's. They were called Dutch because the word *Deutch*, meaning German, was misinterpreted. They settled mainly in eastern Pennsylvania, in Berks, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lehigh, Northampton and York counties. By 1750, these Germans made up half the population of Pennsylvania. While Mennonites made up a large number of the immigrants, many of the original settlers were also Lutherans and people from the other Reformed Churches.

Pennsylvania Dutch artisans invented the Conestoga wagon and the Pennsylvania rifle, which helped America win the West. They are also known for their distinctive and colorful art motifs which they use to decorate birth certificates, furniture and furnishings, barns and other buildings. The people's love of music has resulted in beautiful church music. Characteristic dishes include sauerkraut un schpeck (sauerkraut and pork), smearcase (cottage cheese) and schnitz un knepp (dried apples and dumplings).

Immigration into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia

Life in Pennsylvania was certainly good and prosperous, when compared to the life left behind in Europe. However, as Pennsylvania began to get crowded, these people looked for other places to move where land was cheap. It appears that up to eighty percent of the migrants to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia were German-speaking people from Pennsylvania. Much of this migration took place from 1730 to 1800. These immigrants came primarily from Philadelphia and Lancaster, Lebanon, Berks, Chester and York Counties. They were the children and grandchildren of Swiss and Germans from the Palatinate. While a majority of the early settlers were Mennonite, there were also Lutherans, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, and a few Jewish settlers who migrated to the Shenandoah Valley. A small number of Scots and Irish from New Jersey and New York and English from eastern Virginia had also settled here. People usually came in Conestoga wagons, although some walked to Virginia. They had to cross rivers such as the Susquehanna and Potomac at known fords where the water was low. In the later 1700's there were ferries to cross the larger rivers.

Farming was what most of these people did best and land was cheap. The immigrants were conservative, peaceful, hardworking, religious and honest people who developed prosperous farms from the land they acquired. The first settlers in this region obtained large tracts of land (as much as 20,000 acres) by grants from the King of England through the Governor of Virginia. Sections were split off and sold, split and sold again. Even by 1785, large tracts of land could still be bought for as little as \$2 to \$4 an acre. The lowlands were settled first because the land was more fertile. Early homes were usually built near a spring.

The Mennonites who came to Singers Glen had found a good place to live, raise their families, and practice their religion without threat of persecution.

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