

The Brethren and Education: A History of Struggle in the Valley of Virginia

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Deuteronomy 11:18-19

God has called families to take specific actions concerning the next generation, making sure His words are passed on to children. The formulation for that instruction has evolved from age to age, yet the mandate to teach God's word to the young has remained unchanged. The following vignettes illustrate a diversity of struggles the denomination and individuals encountered when contemplating how to best educate children and young adults. Reflecting on the past provides fresh perspectives for the twenty-first century Church facing many of the same struggles.

Individual struggles

Certainly, the life circumstances of the older generation greatly affect where, how and what the next generation learns. An examination of the early development of educational opportunities for advanced instruction in the Valley of Western Virginia bears this out. Factors such as dual languages being spoken in the region, an emphasis on learning just the basics to manage within an agricultural community, and more importantly, the religious traditions and thoughts of the Church, all came together to influence secondary and post-secondary education. Whether instruction took place sitting at home, walking along the road or gathering with other youth in a simple, rented schoolhouse, something significant and potentially life-changing occurred. Faith was being formed.

One chapter in John Walter Wayland's 1907 Ph.D. manuscript for the University of Virginia traced German immigration into Western Virginia and charted where schools formed along the way. He noted the early creation of "common" schools, which are privately run and similar to the elementary schools of today. They taught basic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic, and were often constructed as part of homes and churches as early as the late 1700s. However, Wayland did not indicate whether children

Selected Annual Meeting Questions and Responses from the 1800s

Annual Meeting of 1831

Article 1, "Whether it was considered advisable for a member to have his son educated at a college?"

Response: "Considered not advisable, inasmuch as experience has taught that such very seldom will come back afterward to the humble ways of the Lord."

Annual Meeting of 1852

Article 22, "How is it considered by the brethren, if brethren aid and assist in building great houses for high schools, and send their children to the same?"

Response: "Considered that brethren should be very cautious, and not mind high things, but condescend to men of low estate. [Romans 12:16](#)"

Annual Meeting of 1853

Article 28: "Is it right for brethren to go to college or teach the same? Response: "Considered, that we would deem college a very unsafe place for a simple follower of Christ, inasmuch as they are calculated to lead us astray from the faith and obedience of the gospel."

Annual Meeting 1857

Article 19: "What are the views of the present Annual Council in regard to the contemplated school, that was alluded to, some time since, in the "Gospel Visitor?"

Response: "It is conforming to the world. The Apostle Paul says:, 'Knowledge puffs up, but charity edify us.'"

Annual Meeting 1858

Article 51: "We desire to know whether the Lord has commanded us to have a school other than our common schools, such as the one contemplated in the "Gospel Visitor?"

Response: "Concerning the school in the "Gospel Visitor," we think we have no right to interfere with an individual enterprise so long as there is no departure from gospel principles."

Source: The Minutes of Annual Meeting available through the Brethren Archives

of the German Baptist Brethren (forerunner of the Church of the Brethren) attended.¹

Comprised of largely agricultural families, the German Baptist Brethren (often called 'Dunkers'; here called 'Brethren') did not always view secondary and post-secondary education in a positive light. However, there were individuals in those early congregations that began to embrace the perceived potential for educational opportunities for their older children.

One of the first schools for advanced training involving "Dunkers" was in Rockingham County. Wayland explains, "The site of the school is on the east side of the Little Shenandoah River, in Rockingham County, near the Shenandoah County line, and about midway between New Market and Timberville. The

¹ John Walter Wayland, "The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley" (Charlottesville: Self-published, printed by Michie Company Printers), 20ff.

original trustees were members of the Primitive Baptist and the Dunker denominations...About half of them belong to the Dunker church, several to the Lutheran, and probably one or more to other denominations..."² From this account, it appears the earliest Brethren forays into advanced education came through the efforts of individuals working together cooperatively with people from other denominations in their community.

It should be emphasized here that English was a foreign language to the "Dunkers," as most of the immigrants still spoke German in their homes. Were these early community schools conducted exclusively in English, or were the lessons also conducted in German?³ Wayland's manuscript does not provide the details, but clearly, the struggle to learn a new language and adjust to a different culture was significant.

Struggles within the church

The Annual Meeting began addressing calls for higher education as early as 1831.⁴ Brethren responses to questions posed at their Annual Meetings revealed a hesitation to embrace education beyond the common schools.

These concerns, which were raised nearly 200 years ago, would likely be completely disregarded today, given the love so many Brethren have for higher education. Yet, their fears at that moment in time were understandable at some level. Brethren arriving in the Valley, many of them from families that had fled European--and sometimes American--religious persecution,⁵ must certainly have had painful memories. Who could blame them for being cautious about assimilating into a culture whose language and customs were radically different from theirs?

Beyond the sociological implications of past persecution, the language barrier and unfamiliar cultural norms, there were deeply held religious beliefs at the very core of their objections that caused them to question the future of higher education.⁶ Would their young people leave the simple faith? Would they eventually look down on people with less education, having been puffed up by knowledge? If God requires His word be taught to children, and sending them to college displaces their faith and understanding of God's word, what would be the remedy?

² Ibid., 155.

³ Ibid., 153-56.

⁴ *Annual Meeting Minutes*, Article 1, 1831, accessed through the Brethren Archives.

⁵ Wayland, 20-23.

⁶ *Annual Meeting Minutes*, Article 1 1831, Article 22 1852, and Article 28 1853, accessed through the Brethren Archives.

Editors of *The Gospel Visitor*, a forerunner of our current denominational publication, *The Messenger*, began to print articles in 156 advocating for advanced educational opportunities. The June 1857 edition of *The Gospel Visitor* asserts the editors, Henry Kurtz and James Quinter, are relocating to a place suitable for starting a school.⁷ Perhaps, they envisioned Brethren youth becoming trained teachers in order to instruct German-speaking children in the English language, and possibly exerting a Christian influence in public school classrooms.

By 1858, Annual Meeting delegates provided an opening for Brethren to begin exploring educational possibilities by stating, "...we think we have no right to interfere with an individual enterprise..."⁸ The linchpin for keeping the proverbial wheel on the wagon of denominational unity was the caveat, "...so long as there is no departure from gospel principles."⁹ This stipulation echoes the purpose for instructing children from the familiar verses in Deuteronomy.

Thus, the Annual Meeting statement gave educational advocates within the German Baptist Brethren Church the implied permission to move forward and create secondary schools and colleges. Elder John Kline and other leaders in the Valley wasted no time. His diary for Sat., Feb. 26, 1859 reads: "Attend a meeting which was held today, to elect directors for the establishment of an academy, to be known by the name of "Cedar Grove Academy," near my place. John J. Bowman, John Zigler and Daniel Miller are elected."¹⁰ The Valley was about to embark on several new, daunting and exhilarating adventures.

Publicly Funded Schools and the Churches during Reconstruction

After the Civil War, the U.S. set up the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands to manage various recovery projects. These agents were instrumental in setting up schools for recently freed slaves, both children and adults. Ironically, a case in Staunton shows the federal government was willing to help fund the construction of the new M.E. Church, so long as they were willing to allow space for a school to be established therein.

Source: The Valley of the Shadow at: <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/papers/B0776>

Starting from scratch: the struggle to begin

⁷ *The Gospel Visitor* VII, no.6 (1857): 189.

⁸ *Annual Meeting Minutes*, Article 51, 1858, accessed through the Brethren Archives.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John Kline, *Life and Labors of Elder John Kline, the Martyr Missionary Collated from his Diary by Benjamin Funk* (Tredition, 2012), Feb. 26, 1859.

1859 Cedar Grove Academy

Elder John Kline donated land south of Broadway (Rockingham County) for the construction of Cedar Grove Academy. James Wright was tasked with overseeing the school. In 1862, Joseph Salyards took the reins for a time. The Academy barely got off the ground before Civil War broke out in the Valley, causing financial hardship and the martyrdom of Elder Kline. Another casualty of the war was this early educational experiment by Brethren believers.¹¹

1880 The Spring Creek Normal School and Collegiate Institute for Males and Females (Virginia Normal School) (Bridgewater College)

The second attempt at establishing advanced educational opportunities for Brethren students was also located in Rockingham County, this time at Spring Creek. The Spring Creek Normal School and Collegiate Institute for Males and Females operated there for two years. Daniel C. Flory was founder, and by the spring of 1881, there were 30 names on the Board of Sponsors (Trustees). In the summer of 1882, the school relocated to rented quarters in the town of Bridgewater and adopted the name, Virginia Normal School. The name changed again and in 1891, Bridgewater College conferred its first Bachelor of Arts degree.¹²

The history of Bridgewater College is no doubt familiar to its graduates and residents in the region, many of whom are members of, or are currently serving in, the Church of the Brethren. Although not addressed in depth in these vignettes, Bridgewater was but one of five schools serving the greater Valley region. All these Brethren-founded schools had significant financial and organizational challenges.

In addition to Bridgewater, Daleville and Mountain Normal School,¹³ Blue Ridge College in Maryland,¹⁴ Prince William Academy in Nokesville and Hebron Seminary in Brentsville¹⁵ were also given amazing levels of sacrificial support from individual Brethren believers and their congregations, as well as their districts. All of these schools are out of business, save Bridgewater College.

Considering the controversies, the changes early on in leadership positions and faculty, the financial hardships, a devastating fire and the impacts of war, it is nothing short of answered prayer that Bridgewater College stands today. Too many other ventures, many featuring a combination of the exact

¹¹ Paul Haynes Bowman, *Brethren Education in the Southeast* (Bridgewater: Bridgewater College, 1955), 27-30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30-39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48-59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 197-207.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73-83.

same committed Brethren leaders affiliated with Bridgewater College, ultimately, had to close their doors. By the grace of God and the sacrifices of her faculty, leaders, alumni, supportive Brethren congregations and students, Bridgewater has operated continuously since 1880.

1882 Mountain Normal School

The Mountain Normal School was launched in Floyd County, which lies southwest of Roanoke. John B. Wrightsman was founder and principal. By 1885, financial pressures from low enrollment, coupled with previous loans, forced the school into bankruptcy.¹⁶ Its creditors retained the property and assets, eventually selling them to a former professor (Lutheran), who continued to operate a school for teachers in the summers for several years.¹⁷

The remarkable story of Mountain Normal School is not found in its short tenure, but in the degree of sacrifice Brethren made to try to establish a school in their area. The timber to build the school was donated by a Brethren minister and his family. The local church helped construct the building and loaned the school \$400, interest free, even though not all members supported education. A Brethren family opened their home as a boarding house for students attending from outside the area. Even non-Brethren members of the community were enthusiastically supportive, but in the end, it was a private venture that did not succeed financially.¹⁸ The school's supporters paid the remaining debts, some selling their last horse to do so. In the final analysis, "When asked 'is the pinnacle vision a success?,' " one promoter said, "I leave this question unanswered, with the following reflections: hundreds of boys and girls got a larger vision of life, teachers, preachers, physicians, lawyers and farmers went out from the school, better equipped to fill their respective obligations in the world."¹⁹

1890 Botetourt Normal College (Botetourt Normal) (Daleville College)

I.N.H. Beahm was teaching children in a private school in Botetourt County when he and four other former Bridgewater students and teachers incorporated, forming a new venture in higher education.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid., 41-47.

¹⁷ -, *Floyd County Virginia Heritage* (Summersville: Shirley Grose & Assoc., 2001), 56-57.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Solomon Zook Sharp, *The Educational History of the Church of the Brethren* (Elgin: Brethren Publishing House, 1923). Google Books.

²⁰ Wayland, 48-59.

The school was built on Beahm's personal property with the financial assistance of B.F. Nininger and others. The growing need for teachers in the state and the desire for everyone to have some knowledge of business provided the foundation for developing a practical course of study that attracted interest. Unfortunately, after two years, the financial outlook was too difficult for Beahm and two others to go forward. They resigned and the school continued, under different names, until an arrangement with Bridgewater College placed Daleville College in a junior college/prep school role. Eventually, competition from free public high schools forced the school to close. A dormitory on the campus of Bridgewater College bears the name Daleville to honor and remember the contributions made during its tenure.²¹

Final thoughts

It should be mentioned that girls and young women were included in the educational process, not only as students, but also as faculty in Brethren schools. This was not the norm for other schools established in the 1800s. Women were also major donors through various seasons of the development of Brethren colleges.

When the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* was rendered in 1954, Bridgewater College had never had a policy restricting entrance based on the race of the student.

There were scattered publicly funded high schools in Virginia in the late nineteenth century, so the demand for secondary education was greater at that time. As more public high schools were built and compulsory education laws became the norm after 1900, many families opted to send their youth to the free public high schools. This impacted the enrollment rates at private Brethren schools.

A great source for exploring these and other Brethren schools is Paul Haynes Bowman's *Brethren Education in the Southeast*, 1955.

Acknowledgments

The Shenandoah Journal appreciates the support of the following people who contributed resources or source ideas for this issue:

Zoe Vorndran, Brethren Historical Library and Archives Intern
Paul Roth, John Kline Homestead
Steve Longenecker, Bridgewater College
Larry Glick
Ross Hawkins

²¹ Ibid.

Brenda Sanford-Diehl, MPA
Director of Communications
Shenandoah District
Church of the Brethren
brendadiehl@shencob.org

Bibliography

-. "Valley Personal Papers: Freedmen's Bureau Records: Thomas P. Jackson to R. M. Manly, May 11, 1867." *The Valley of the Shadow*. Accessed July 24, 2019. <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/papers/B0776>.

-. *Floyd County Virginia Heritage Book 2000*. Summersville: Shirely Grose & Assoc., 2001.

-. "German Baptist Brethren Annual Meeting Minutes 1831, 1852, 1853, 1853, 1858." Accessed through the Brethren Archives.

Bowman, Paul Haynes. *Brethren Education in the Southeast*. Bridgewater: Bridgewater College, 1955.

Holton, Bob F. and Carleen Loveless. *Images of America: Bridgewater*. Charleston: Arcadia publishing, 2010.

Kline, John. *Life and Labors of Elder John Kline, the Martyr Missionary Collated from his Diary by Benjamin Funk*. Tredition, 2012. Diary entry for Feb. 26, 1859.

Kurtz, Henry and James Quinter, eds. "The Gospel Visitor." June, 1857.

Sharp, Solomon Zook. *The Educational History of the Church of the Brethren*. Elgin: Brethren Publishing House, 1923. Google Books.

Stoffer, Dale R. *Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines 1650-2015*. Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 2018.

Wayland, John Walter. *The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia*. Charlottesville: Author, 1907. Google Books.

Ziegler, Daniel H. *History of Brethren in Virginia*. Elgin: Brethren Publishing House, 1914. Google Books.