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# The Delaware Mennonite Historical Society Newsletter

June 2002

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## First Annual Banquet September 7, 2002

The Delaware Mennonite Historical Society is happy to announce its first Annual Banquet, scheduled for September 7, 2002. The banquet will be held at The Greenwood Mennonite School from 6:30 to 9:30 on Saturday evening.

Our purpose is to help you gain a concept of what DMHS is all about; to understand something of the importance of preserving the history of our community; and to inspire the people of the Delaware Mennonite Churches to support the organization by becoming members.

Our guest speaker, Varden Leasa, is an avid genealogist and an amateur historian from Chester County, Pa. He is an interesting speaker and will be talking to us about the need, and the reasons, for the recording of our history. The front-page article was written by Varden. He comes from a long line of Mennonites and has some indirect and direct connections to Delaware and the Greenwood Mennonite Church.

History is being made! Don't miss this 'first' in Delaware! Join us for a delicious meal put on by Donna Yoder and Wava Swartzentruber. There will be good music and a time of fellowship. Come expecting a great evening. You will not be disappointed.

## Who Was the First Mennonite In Delaware? by Varden Leasa

In 1913-1914 brothers-in-law Valentine Bender and William Tressler moved from Garret County, MD, to start an Amish-Mennonite community near Greenwood, in Sussex County, DE. These 20th century Anabaptists probably thought they were the first Mennonites to settle in Sussex County. Bender and Tressler were almost surely unaware that exactly 250 years earlier, just thirty miles to the southeast, a Dutch Mennonite named Pieter Cornelisen Plockhoy had established a Christian, cooperative colony. The date was July 1663. The place was somewhere along a creek known as the Whorekill, perhaps on the very site of the present-day town of Lewes. Little more than a year later, in September 1664, the colony was attacked by a shipload of British marines who attacked so violently that, in the words of one report, the settlement was "destroyed to a very naile".

(Continued on page 2)

## Name this Newsletter

The DMHS newsletter needs a name. It should reflect a sense of history while reminding everyone of the uniqueness of Delaware. Perhaps you have the perfect name to give that sense of history. Send your suggestions or e-mail to [revzehr@mac.com](mailto:revzehr@mac.com)

The story of Plockhoy's settlement at the Whorekill has long been a standard feature of chapter one in American Mennonite history books. It's often called the first Mennonite community in the New World. The story includes Pieter Cornelisen Plockhoy's Mennonite origins, his philosophical and reforming activities in Europe, his plan for a utopian non-denominational, egalitarian, democratic colony in America, the ocean voyage with a rather small number of fellow-pioneers, the brief (and largely undocumented) life of the community on the primeval Delaware coast and its destruction by the British in 1664. Most accounts claim that after 1664 there is little or no record of Plockhoy's colony except for one last, rather quaint, event. Thirty years later, in 1694, the old and blind Pieter Plockhoy and his wife made their way north to Germantown where they were taken in and cared for by that (partly Mennonite) community.

It's a nice story, but some of its key elements are false. A genealogist named Peter Stebbins Craig recently published the results of a lifetime of research on the early families of southern Delaware. Craig's book and articles on the 1671 Census of the Delaware provides new knowledge on Pieter Plockhoy and his Delaware settlement.

Most Mennonite historians and Plockhoy scholars seem to have missed this new material. So here, in the first issue of the first Mennonite historical publication issued in the first state, you can read for the first time what

really happened to the first Mennonite to settle in Delaware.

Pieter Cornelisen Plockhoy was born about 1625 in Zierikzee, in the province of Zeeland about 60 miles southwest of Amsterdam. His family was Mennonite. Along with a friend, Galenus Abrahams de Haan, whose father was the local Mennonite pastor, young Pieter headed for Amsterdam. Here both Plockhoy and de Haan threw themselves into the intellectual and spiritual life of what was then the largest city in Holland and the heart of the

Dutch Mennonite world. DeHaan became the pastor of the Lamists, the more liberal of Amsterdam's Mennonites and Plockhoy became a crusading reformer with a plan for an ecumenical socialist community.

For 17 years, without much success,

Plockhoy wrote pamphlets and lobbied governments in England and Holland to put into action his social, economic and religious reforms. Finally, in 1662, he received the support and backing of the Amsterdam City Council to plant a colony of about 40 people on the south coast of New Netherland's South River. (Today we call it the Delaware.) Sailing from Amsterdam in May 1663, the ship, St. Jacob arrived at New Amstel (today's New Castle), on July 28th after having left "41 souls with their baggage and farm utensils at the Horekill" (near present-day Lewes, Delaware).

We don't know much about this experimental community, because it so quickly became a casualty of war between the Dutch and British for the control of North America. In August

**So here, in the first issue of the first Mennonite historical publication issued in the first state, you can read for the first time what really happened to the first Mennonite to settle in Delaware**

1664, after Dutch New York was defeated, a British naval force was sent to the lands along the Delaware to subjugate the Dutch forts and settlements there. In early September this force appeared at the Whorekill and, as the Sheriff of New Castle put it later in a report to Europe, plundered and destroyed "what belonged to the Quaking society of Plockhoy to a very naile". Plockhoy historian, Leland Harder wrote: "There remains no record of the fate of the members of the colony save Plockhoy himself" (referring to his appearance in Germantown 30 years later).

Peter Craig's new research forces a revision of these last statements. The 1671 Census of the Delaware (which Craig discovered among old records in New York City) is proof that the settlement founded by Pieter Plockhoy was NOT completely destroyed by the British in 1664, but lived on, under the leadership of Pieter's brother-in-law, Helmanus Wiltbanck. The 1671 Census, taken only eight years after the founding of the Plockhoy colony, shows that Plockhoy's own close relatives constituted the core of his village. [None of Plockhoy's fellow pioneers had been previously identified .] Craig's genealogical analysis of the census and other documents indicates that Pieter Plockhoy himself was probably killed in the 1664 British attack. (His widow had remarried well before 1671.) The colony's utopian vision must have died with Plockhoy. (There never was anything distinctively Mennonite about the group and seven years after its leader's death, there were no socialist or utopian aspects, either.) In 1893 historian Samuel W. Pennypacker (later a governor of PA.) had discovered the 1694 Plockhoy episode in the Germantown City Council Records. Pennypacker misinterpreted the records as referring to the colony founder Pieter Plockhoy (even though the name is clearly written, Cornelis, in the records!). Dr. Craig corrects Pennypacker's oft-repeated error by reporting that it was a

blind Cornelis Plockhoy, the son of Pieter, who in 1694 arrived in Germantown with his wife and was taken in by that community.

[This is a condensed version of an article expected to appear later this year in the Mennonite Historical Bulletin.]



*Breakwater Lighthouse - Lewes, Delaware*

## Board Report

The Board has had productive meetings since its establishment nearly two years ago. Listed below are some of our short term and long-term goals.

First we have established an endowment fund to provide continuing resources for the upkeep of the Bender House and current expenses.

A second priority is to build a membership who values the recording and preservation of history.

A third goal has already been met. We have received word that our application for tax deductible status {501(c) (3)} has been approved.

Fourth. We have the vision of a center for recording, displaying and preservation of Delaware related historical documents and artifacts.

## DMHS Board Members

Vernon Zehr, President  
Paul Bender, Vice President  
Rachel Schlabach, Secretary/Treasurer  
Truman Schrock, Legal  
Dean Swartzentruber, Public Relations  
Harold Huber, Consultant  
Harvey Mast, Artifacts  
Millard Benner, Board Advisor

## Surprise

A surprise feature at the banquet will give you an opportunity to test your knowledge of people and events in the past 40 years among Mennonites in the Delaware Churches. Put your guess in the hat and be considered for a cherished and highly valued door prize!

## Board Committees

The various committees listed below include members of the community who are not members of the Board but who have been willing to work on a specific task to further the purpose of the Delaware Mennonite Historical Society.

Legal Agent  
Truman Schrock  
Property  
Paul Bender,  
Titus Schlabach  
By-laws  
Rachel Schlabach,  
Harvey Mast  
Membership  
Rachel Schlabach  
Finance and Fund Raising  
Vernon Zehr  
Rachel Schlabach  
John Embleton  
Public Relations  
Dean Swartzentruber  
Historical Records & Artifacts  
Harold Huber  
Harvey Mast  
Activities / Programs Coordinator  
Rachel Schlabach

## DMHS Contribution Schedule

**Founder** \$1,000.00 (Endowment Fund)  
Life time membership and inscripted plaque.  
**Benefactor** \$500.00 Lifetime membership.  
**Supporter** \$100.00 Pays annual dues  
**Membership** \$15.00 Recieves Newsletter  
**Memorial** A good way to remember loved ones.  
An inscripted plaque for a \$1,000.00 donation.  
Any amount welcome. All receive a certificate.

A broad membership is vital to the ongoing success of DMHS. Won't you join with us?  
Let us hear from you soon.

## Church Members Volunteer As History Contacts

Each of the present participating Mennonite churches in Delaware has a contact person of record to assist in the task of coordinating the efforts of DMHS in the collection and preservation of materials.

Greenwood.....	Fred Slabaugh
Tressler.....	Treva Zook
Dover.....	Ivan Yoder
Cannon.....	Harvey Mast
Laws.....	Jesse Bontrager

## Contributions Needed

Put on your thinking cap! Write that family story! We need your input for the newsletter, which will be issued periodically. We're counting on you to help us make this newsletter interesting and informative. Submit your article to any member of the Board.

## Materials Needed for DMHS Archives

As The Delaware Mennonite Historical Society moves forward, it is important that attention is given to the past. One vital goal of DMHS is to collect and preserve the history of the Mennonite communities in Delaware. In order to do this it is necessary to preserve stories of years gone by. This includes historical accounts of family and church.

In addition to the stories, we hope to collect historical documents such as letters, newspapers, old deeds and pictures. While we are not yet prepared to collect large items or large quantities, we are working to provide a place to store and display a collection of important items of historical interest to the community. At this time we have rented two safety deposit boxes to store items in our care. We hope soon to have a suitable place to store and display them.

Right now, we encourage you to think of your family history. Consider donating or loaning your old letters, books and other artifacts to DMHS, in order to preserve them while sharing them with others both in and outside our community.

## THEN...



*Laban Swartzentruber and Nanna Bender in 1918. Their words: "We had an 'understanding' about our future".*

## AND NOW...



*One feature of the DMHS's "October Days Frolic" held last year at the Bender House, was an old fashioned Corn Husking. As Millard and Lura Benner participate, they remember the corn huskings of the 40s, a major fall social event for the young folks of that time.*

**This Newsletter** is being sent to everyone on our mailing list. If you wish to receive future copies – please let us hear from you

**Annual Banquet**

Although you will need to get tickets, the good news is that they are free. The cost of the meal is being paid by local businesses. An offering will be taken, however, to help support the work of DMHS.

Please call Wava Swartzentruber at 302-349-4629 by the end of August to register for tickets. (You may leave a message.)

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