

# MHC Quarterly

Mennonite Heritage Center

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Rockhill Mennonite Meetinghouse, West Rockhill Township, photo by Warren Wenger, circa 1958.  
Mennonite Heritage Center Collection.

This issue features stories from the Rockhill congregation, which recently united with Ridgeline Community Church, a Baptist congregation. Together, they continue to worship in the old Mennonite-style meetinghouse.

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### Museum & Library Hours

Tuesday - Friday  
10 am to 5 pm  
Saturday, 10 am to 2 pm

Our mission is to educate, inspire and witness to the church and community by collecting, preserving and sharing the Anabaptist/Mennonite story.

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## WHACK & ROLL is on the way! May 29 and 30

Join us for a fun time of friendly croquet competitions, camaraderie, and cash prizes for nonprofits.

The weekend kicks off Friday night with youth groups vying in a fast-paced competition for prize money for service/mission trips. On Saturday, teams compete for prizes for local nonprofits. Player registration required. Spectators welcome!

Register at [mhep.org](http://mhep.org) to play in the tournament.



## From the Executive Director



The crowd awaiting Harleysville Hank (left) and Joel announcing crowd numbers.

*Photos by  
Harry Anselmo.*

Harleysville Hank predicted an early spring at the Fifth Annual Harleysville Hank Groundhog Day Extravaganza on Saturday, Feb. 1. Approximately 275 people showed up at daybreak at the barn on our campus and enjoyed fresh scrapple out of the kettle, hot chocolate, coffee, and baked goodies. This lighthearted event is a good antidote to the dreary, gray winter we have been having. Thank you to the Indian Valley Chamber of Commerce for hosting Hank's community visits, the Barnyard Singers and our food sponsors: Blooming Glen Pork & Catering, Franconia Café, Henning's Market, Landis Markets, One Village Coffee, and Sue's Springerle.

Another good break from the winter season is the "Quilt as Art: Creating Movement and Depth" exhibit that is a solo exhibit of Rachel Derstine's quilted art work. The colors and fabric are stunning and Rachel is a talented artist. The exhibit runs until March 14 and is followed by Perkiomen Art Center Members Show, open Tuesday, March 24 to Saturday, April 25 and "Faces and Places: Photography by Sally Gwyn Heffentrager" (see page 11). These shows are additional reasons to stop by the MHC and enjoy the work of local artists. You are also invited to register for the various Saturday Traditional Arts Workshops and learn arts such as grain painting frames or creating paper cuttings (see [mhep.org](http://mhep.org)).

Looking ahead to spring, please plan to join us for the Annual Heritage Banquet. We are excited to partner with Mennonite Central Committee East Coast in this joint fundraising event that will be held Friday evening, May 1 at 6 pm at Blooming Glen Mennonite Church. MCC has extended relief assistance in the name of Christ around the world for the past one hundred years. It is appropriate to have the event at Blooming Glen, home to native son Clayton Kratz who disappeared on a relief mission to the Ukraine in 1920.

The dinner will feature a menu inspired by the *More with Less* and *Extending the Table* cookbooks and include a program of stories told by Ken Sensenig, MCC, and Joel Alderfer, MHC. Tickets to the joint fundraiser are \$100 and preregistration is required. See [mhep.org](http://mhep.org) to register or call 215-256-3020. Proceeds will be divided between MCC East Coast and the Mennonite Heritage Center. We hope to see you there!

Sarah Heffner

Acting Executive Director

# Rockhill Mennonite Church:

## Some Themes from the Congregation's 275+ Years

by Joel D. Alderfer

This article is adapted from an illustrated presentation I gave on June 24, 2018 at the former Rockhill Mennonite Church, Telford, PA, on the occasion of a “legacy service”. That worship service was essentially a closing service for the Rockhill Church – the congregation had voted to merge with Ridgeline Community Church, a fairly new church-plant based in the Souderton area, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

The merged congregation would continue as Ridgeline Community Church, which then assumed the former Rockhill Mennonite property and meetinghouse. But the new congregation would not be part of Franconia Mennonite Conference, as the Rockhill congregation had been for over 250 years. So this “legacy service” marked an ending and a threshold. I was asked to come and share some themes from the congregation's three centuries of life and experience.

### 18th century settlement

Before Rockhill Township, Bucks County, was established, the area between Richland and Hilltown Townships was called “Servants Township” and “Free-town” in some early deeds and surveys. Supposedly, the Penn family set aside free land there, to be made available to immigrants who had come to Pennsylvania as indentured servants, and had served out their contracted time. The area opened for settlement and land purchase around 1735.



Fraktur commemorating immigrants Michael and Agnes Derstein, made by historian John D. Souder, 1940. Mennonite Heritage Center Collection.

In 1735 or 1736, brothers-in-law Michael Derstein (1712-1777) and Isaac Kolb (1711-1776) and their families were apparently the first Mennonites to settle in “Free-town”, on a tract just northeast of present-day Telford. Rockhill Township was established in 1739. Other Mennonite families who settled here before long included the Detweiler's, Gehman's, Groff's, Biehn's, Clemmer's (Clymer's), Kinsey's, Woodward's, and Yoder's. The Kooker's, Landis's, Souder's, Horning's, Allebach's and other families became part of the congregation later.

### First ordained leaders

Early records indicate that Isaac Kolb was ordained a preacher in 1744, and Michael Derstein ordained a deacon about the same time. These ordinations suggest the beginning of the Mennonite congregation at Rockhill by 1745.

Derstein and Kolb were prospering. In about 1742, Derstein built a grist and saw mill, one of the first in the local area. This indicates his relative wealth, success and influence in the community. After living in a smaller log house for over a decade, Derstein built a new, substantial stone house in 1748. That house stood until 1895 and is documented in a photo from about 1890. Derstein died in 1777 and is buried in the Rockhill cemetery. The oldest gravestone surviving in the cemetery is for his son Jacob Derstein who died in 1772.



Derstein Homestead, circa 1890.  
Mennonite Heritage Center Collection

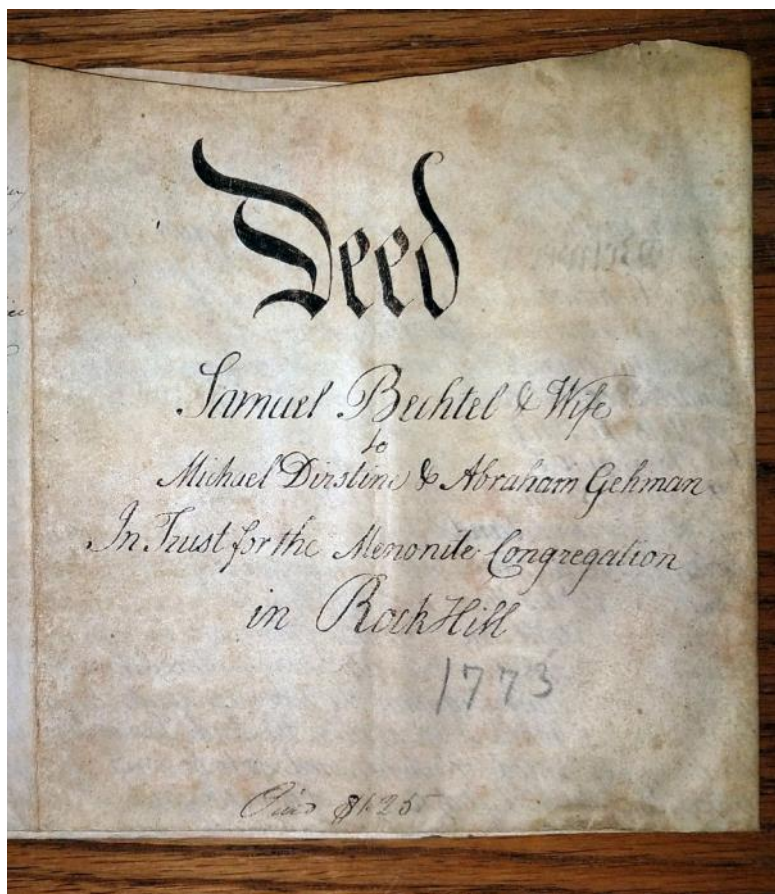
Isaac Kolb had a farm of 150 acres, along what is now State Road closer to Telford, where several industrial buildings now stand. He was ordained a bishop in 1761 for the Franconia district (which included Rockhill), but in 1764 Kolb sold his farm here to Samuel Bechtel (another Mennonite preacher), and moved to Gwynedd Township (now Lansdale, Montgomery County), where he helped to establish the Plains Mennonite congregation.

### Mennonite identity in a new land

The 1740s and 1750s were years of concern and testing for Mennonite leaders in eastern Pennsylvania, as they were trying to establish an Anabaptist identity in a new land. They were seeking to pass on a pacifist or “defenseless” Christian identity here – during times of war, and threats of war. These were the years of war for empire between the English, the French and Spanish – King George’s War, and the coming of the Seven Years (or French and Indian) War. “The flames of War are rising higher” Mennonite leaders at Skippack and Franconia wrote in 1742 to leaders in Amsterdam, seeking help in bolstering the nonresistant identity of their young people. They wanted help with translating their great book of martyr stories (the *Martyrs Mirror*) from Holland Dutch into German, so their young people could read the stories of “faithful witnesses who have walked in the way of truth and given their lives for it.”

They eventually succeeded in having the large volume translated and republished at the Ephrata Cloister press in 1748-49, a major undertaking for the young Mennonite fellowship here in eastern Pennsylvania. In this same decade, area Mennonite leaders worked to have other key Anabaptist writings republished here in Pennsylvania, so that the new Mennonite communities would be strengthened in their faith. Preacher Isaac Kolb of Rockhill no doubt supported these projects. The Mennonite Heritage Center has Isaac Kolb’s own signed copy of the 1748 *Martyrs Mirror*.

It is not known when the first meetinghouse was built at Rockhill, but we do know that one stood there by March 1773, when the first deed granted to the congregation states that a "Meetinghouse of Public Worship and Burying place" was already erected. The half-acre of land where it stood was sold (not given) by Preacher Samuel Bechtel and wife Mary to Michael Derstein and Abraham Gehman, "elders and trustees" of the congregation. All were ordained men, and Gehman was Bechtel's son-in-law. It may seem strange to us, but in those days ordained ministers were often the legal officers/trustees of Mennonite congregations.



Mennonite Heritage Center Collection

### 1840s-50s – Division

Across the Franconia Mennonite Conference, including the Rockhill congregation, a major schism developed in the 1840s, driving a wedge between traditional and progressive leaders and members. Conflict developed over issues like preparation (training) for ministry, minute keeping at Conference assembly and in congregations, whether a constitution was needed to help guide the Conference leadership, and political involvement in the local community. The conservatives generally rejected these innovations, claiming that traditional practice and submission to ordained leadership should guide the Conference. As a result, at least six congregations across the Franconia Conference were divided in 1847-48: Deep Run, Swamp, Saucon-Springfield, Hereford (Bally), Skippack and Rockhill. Preacher John Oberholtzer of Swamp was one of the prime leaders of the progressive group, known locally as "New Mennonites", which formed a new conference, most recently called the Eastern District Conference.

At Rockhill, the deacon John F. Detweiler (1786-1864) sided with Oberholtzer and the progressives, and helped to organize the new "East Pennsylvania Mennonite Conference", but after a few years he returned to the conservative congregation. After the Division of 1847, there was a "New Mennonite" congregation at Rockhill, known as the Branch congregation, which met on alternate Sundays from the "Old Mennonite" congregation. These two congregations shared the meetinghouse for almost forty years. The Branch congregation closed by 1884, but when Zion Mennonite Church, Souderton, was organized in 1893, a few former Branch members were among the founders.

## Ordination by lot

Jacob Detweiler (1795-1879) was a conservative preacher at Rockhill in these years who remained with the “Old” Mennonite congregation. It was said he couldn’t preach very well – he seldom spoke more than a few minutes, but had a pleasing personality that served him well. In fact, from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th, the Rockhill congregation had at least eight Detweilers spanning five generations who were ordained as deacon, minister or bishop: Jacob, John F. (I), John F. (II), Samuel D., John F. (III), Isaac F., Alfred A., and Alvin D. Detweiler. And several decades ago, Russell Detweiler served as pastor at Rockhill. Just to illustrate how ordination could fall within one family line: Deacon Alvin D. Detweiler (1904-1974) was the son of Preacher Isaac F. Detweiler (1876-1942), who was the son of Bishop Samuel D. Detweiler (1841-1917), who was the son of Deacon John F. Detweiler II (1807-1880), who was the son-in-law of Deacon John F. Detweiler I (1786-1864), who was the grandson of Bishop Christian Funk!

The traditional Mennonite practice of ordination by “casting of lots” was a time of drama, emotion, and suspense for the congregation and the wider Mennonite community. An article by an unknown writer, dated November 4, 1909, published in what appears to be the *Perkasie News Herald*, describes the scene of an ordination at the Rockhill Meetinghouse. Here are some excerpts:

*“Mennonites elect their new pastor. William Landis... chosen by Lot...”*



*The picturesque old Rockhill Meeting House... furnished the setting for one of the most interesting and impressive ceremonies in the whole Mennonite service, when members of the congregation, with friends and visitors, gathered Tuesday morning to enact the final scenes in choosing a new minister.*

*Nestled close beside the Reading [railroad] tracks under the towering oaks which surround it, with its gray walls and plain white woodwork, the quaint old building impresses the traveler... with a sense of peace, of*

*quiet dignity..., which is deepened by a glimpse of the ever-growing City of the Dead whose crumbling tombstones bear the date of births long before the Revolution.*

[Photo of Rockhill meetinghouse, circa 1900. Mennonite Heritage Center Collection.]

*The choosing of a minister in the Mennonite Church properly begins several weeks before the final service... Last Sunday, October 31 [1909], each male member of the church was privileged to hand in a sealed envelope containing the name of the member whom he wished to be chosen. But five such names were handed in: Isaac Detweiler, of Souderton; William Landis, of Garisville; Irwin Derstine, of Sellersville; Jonas Detweiler, of Sellersville, and Rein Benner, from near Souderton.*

*The day for the election or choosing of the one who should serve his people [came]... and soon after seven o'clock Tuesday morning the people began to gather and from then until half-past 8 a steady stream of humanity poured in from every direction by trolley, carriages and on foot, until the meetinghouse was packed to the doors and still they continued to come. The aisles were filled, the cloak rooms, the doorways, and even then many were obliged to remain outside. Over 600 witnessed the ceremony.*

*Precisely at 9 o'clock... Rev. Jonas Mininger, Bishop from Lansdale, rose from behind the long white pulpit, where were seated eight other bishops, ministers and deacons, and led the assembled throng in an impressive opening hymn or chant. Bishop Mininger made an introductory address... and ended by requesting the entire assemblage to kneel in silent prayer. Rev. Andreas Mack [bishop] preached an impassioned sermon...*

*During a few explanatory remarks by Bishop Henry Rosenberger..., Deacon Clemmer and Rev. Michael Moyer, of Franconia, left the room, returning with five books... each containing a slip of paper. Four of the slips were blank, but the fifth one contained a verse of scripture – Proverbs, 16th chapter and 33rd verse, reading: “The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.”*

*The books were set on edge on the long white pulpit, a hush almost of awe fell upon the people, and then all knelt in reverence while Bishop Rosenberger invoked divine guidance; the throng rose and were seated and then silently each one of the five [men] went forward and selected a book.*

The article then explains in detail the drama of five candidates each selecting a book, and the ultimate selection and revelation of the lot slip with the solemn verse in one of those books. The man who selected that book was then immediately ordained to ministry, for life. The practice of calling and ordaining ministers by the casting of lots continued in the Franconia Mennonite Conference until the early 1960s.

### **Themes from the 20th century**

A sewing circle, supporting relief and mission work, was organized at Rockhill in 1919. During the 1920s-1930s there was growing interest in and support for organized mission work. Some adult Sunday School classes made significant donations to Mennonite mission work in these years. Ordained leaders and lay “workers” across Franconia Conference started numerous rural and urban “mission stations” in southeastern Pennsylvania in the 1930s and 1940s. Many of these developed into congregations, and some Rockhill members were involved in this outreach. A Summer Bible School program for children was started at Rockhill in the late 1940s, and was very successful for a couple decades.

The 1920s were also a decade of significant events in congregational life at Rockhill. In 1923, Alfred Detweiler was ordained a preacher, replacing William Landis who died that year. In 1924, Preacher Mahlon Souder died, and his son Edwin was ordained to succeed him. The congregation built a new, substantial brick meetinghouse in 1925, at the cost of almost \$29,000 (pictured on front cover). For a decade, it was considered one of the most modern meetinghouses in the Conference. Things looked promising. Then financial depression hit, and



Mennonite Heritage Center Collection

both preachers (Detweiler and Souder) experienced financial failure. Both were “silenced” for a time (Detweiler in 1930 and Souder in 1933) by the Franconia Conference, since it was thought that they borrowed more heavily than they could repay. After a few years, they were restored to full ministry. In the interim, Isaac F. Detweiler was ordained to ministry in 1934. As might be expected, there was some tension among the leadership in those years.

Along with the interest in mission outreach in the 1920s-30s-40s, there was increased emphasis and teaching on “non-conformity”, as it was called. This was the call and expectation for church members to dress, speak, act, and live differently from the dominant culture. Devoted church and mission “workers” were expected to practice uniform standards of plain dress and “separation” from worldly affairs. The burden of these expectations fell heavily on preacher’s families and on women in particular. This is evident in many photos of “Old” Mennonite families we have from the time.



Preacher Edwin & Ruth Kraybill Souder family, 1945. Photo courtesy of Naomi Kolb Dublanica.



Curtis & Mildred Derstine Godshall family, mission workers at Centereach, Long Island, about 1953. Photo by Frank Keller.

Particularly in ministerial families, we now know that these expectations sometimes had negative impacts on individual members. Sometimes people were marginalized and left the church. Sometimes marriages were strained or children of church leaders “rebelled.” The 1930s-40s-50s were marked by years of conservatism and a mentality that set “Old” Mennonites apart from the wider community and other church groups.

But, on the other hand, there was a strong sense of identity and of belonging for most members. There was security in basically knowing where the boundaries were. While members were not “conforming” to the world, most were trying to conform to each other and to church standards.

That sense of separation and non-conformity began to change and fade across the Franconia Conference in the early 1960s, but I think the transition started a bit later and took longer in the Rockhill congregation. In the 1970s and following decades, through several leadership transitions, the congregation evolved in an evangelical-progressive direction.



Rockhill Mennonite Church Quartet, about 1954. Left to right: Elwin Moyer, Willard Detweiler, Frank Keller, and Henry Goshow, later pastor at Estella, Sullivan County, PA.

Around 2010, worship attendance began to decline. When the opportunity came to partner with and share their well-maintained church property with a young, growing Baptist community church, the Rockhill congregation chose this as a viable and faithful path into the 21st century. Congregational leaders also took care to see that their records were archived here at the MHC, so that future generations will remember the history of Rockhill Mennonite Church.

For more on the merger with Ridgeline Community Church, see “Better Together: Ridgeline Community, Rockhill Mennonite churches launch merge” in *The Reporter* (Lansdale, PA), June 17, 2018. There is a copy of the article at the MHC.



Vacation Bible School at Rockhill, 2008.

## Upcoming Exhibit

### Faces and Places: Photography by Sally Gwyn Heffentrager

May 9 - August 8, 2020

A selection of fine photography from the artist's travels throughout Asia and North America.

From the artist's statement: ...One of my favorite books as a child was Richard Halliburton's *Book of Marvels*, which took me on adventures to foreign lands. It made me want to explore the world and see how other cultures lived their life. In high school, I discovered photography.... The camera has been my constant companion. It's purpose was to capture memories. I'm happy that I can share these memories with you through this exhibit.



## Upcoming Events

### Perkiomen Valley Art Center Exhibit Reception

Sunday, March 29, 2:00-4:00 pm Exhibit is open March 24-April 25.

### Heritage Banquet

Friday May 1, 6:00 pm — Blooming Glen Mennonite Church  
Join us for a catered dinner and program of stories from 100 years of relief work by Mennonite Central Committee. Tickets are \$100 per person; proceeds will be divided between MHC and MCC. Call 215-256-3020 to reserve your tickets, or register online at [mhep.org](http://mhep.org). Please note this is a change of program from what was printed in our 2020 calendar of events.



### WHACK & ROLL Croquet Tournament

Friday, May 29 and Saturday, May 30 (see page 2)

### Mennonite Practices for the 21st Century

Tuesday, June 16, 7:00 pm — Franconia Mennonite Church  
Program planned and hosted by Mennonite Heritage Center staff. Hear from a panel of local leaders and bring your voice to the conversation: Where do you find life in the Mennonite/Anabaptist tradition? What practices (new or old) will be important to Mennonite witness in this century? No registration required.



**MHC Quarterly**  
565 Yoder Rd  
Harleysville, PA 19438-1020

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## Have books that need a new home?

Our Used Book Sale is back, thanks for volunteers!  
We invite you to donate good condition used books  
and/or rare books for this year's sale.

### **Book collection begins June 2 and ends July 10.**

Bring donations to the Mennonite Heritage Center at  
565 Yoder Rd, Harleysville. Also needed are good  
condition used CD's, DVD's, and puzzles. Please no  
encyclopedias, textbooks, magazines, Reader's Digest Condensed, or cassettes.



### **2020 Book Sale Hours:**

Thurs., July 16, 10:00 am-7:00 pm

Fri., July 17, 10:00 am-7:00 pm (half-price)

Sat., July 18, 10:00 am-2:00 pm (bag sale)

Tues., July 21, 10:00 am-5:00 pm (bag sale)

Wed., July 22, 10:00 am-5:00 pm (bag sale)

Thurs., July 23, 10:00 am-5:00 pm (bag sale)

\$2 hardbacks; \$1 paperbacks first day; half price second day. Special prices on rare and collectible books.