

Mennonite Life Library & Archives

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On a typical day at the Mennonite Life Library & Archives, you might see a multi-generational group gathered for a family reunion huddled around a carefully displayed centuries-old family Bible. At another table, distant cousins connect in person for the first time after emailing back and forth about a shared ancestor. And at the reference desk, a volunteer is deep in conversation with a researcher looking for old county maps to browse.

Mennonite Life—formerly known as the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society—has been a hub for historical and genealogical research since the late 1950s. Today, Mennonite Life encompasses the Library and Archives, the 1719 Museum, and the Mennonite Life Visitors Center. While each campus connects visitors to stories and information about Lancaster County’s Anabaptist communities, this piece focuses on the first of these three.



*Researchers gather at the Mennonite Life Library.
(Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life)*

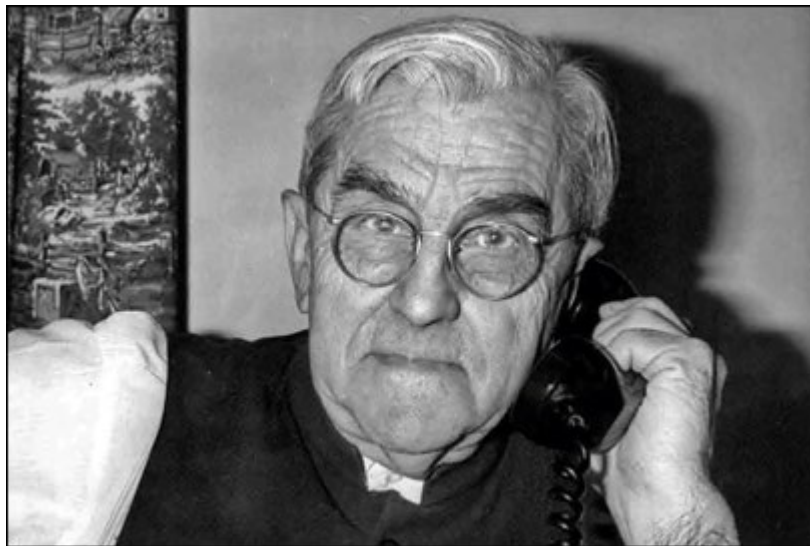


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History of the Mennonite Life Library and Archives

The Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society was founded in part because Lancaster Mennonite minister and farmer Ira D. Landis needed a place to store and care for a wealth of church documents he had gathered and inherited. For years Landis had been carefully collecting and preserving the documents in his own home, finding space for them in drawers and cabinets. When Christian E. Charles, a Landisville Mennonite Church deacon, donated his voluminous theological library to Lancaster Mennonite Conference, Landis joined a committee tasked with creating an archive for church records and other historical materials. Charles's collection evidenced a life of dedication, containing approximately 40,000 theological works.

The historical society first met in 1958, the same year Lancaster Mennonite Conference founded the Mennonite Information Center (now the Mennonite Life Visitors Center) as a resource for tourists visiting the area. In 1964, the two organizations began sharing space in a building off Lincoln Highway and Millstream Road.



Pastor and farmer Ira D. Landis was instrumental in advocating for a Mennonite historical society in Lancaster.
(Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life Collections)

The historical society's founding and initial growth occurred in the midst of rapid cultural shifts both in the broader world and among Lancaster Mennonites. In general, Mennonites were becoming less agrarian and more integrated into society. Recent generations had seen a shift from German to English, the incorporation of Sunday schools, and changes to Mennonite meetinghouses, such as the installation of prominent raised pulpits. The society founders, staunch adherents to Lancaster Conference's 1954 *Statement of Christian Doctrine and Rules and Discipline of the Mennonite Church*, saw an urgent need for a mechanism of preserving impressions of Mennonite and Amish life as they knew them. This mechanism, they believed, could act as a bridge between diversifying Anabaptist groups in Lancaster.

In addition to housing donated books, documents, and artifacts, the historical society became a wellspring for in-depth research by local historians. From 1960 to 1977, it published *Mennonite Research Journal*. A twelve-page quarterly primarily written and edited by Ira Landis and printed in-house, *Mennonite Research Journal* was the official publication of the historical society as well as the Eastern Mennonite Associated Libraries and Archives (EMALA). *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, started in 1978 after Landis's death, is an ongoing scholarly research journal covering history, religious thought, arts, cultures, and family histories of Mennonite and Amish-related groups originating in Pennsylvania.

Ira Landis headed the society for fifteen years as historian and genealogist. After he stepped down, Carolyn (Charles) Wenger became the first paid director. During her twenty-five-year tenure, Wenger played a major role in transforming the organization into the most active Mennonite historical society in the world, as well as a robust Pennsylvania German genealogy resource center. Just as important as these leaders at the forefront were the volunteers and community members whose dedication to preserving history helped establish a rich and continuously growing collection of resources. Today, a team of staff and volunteers at Mennonite Life welcomes scholars, researchers, tourists, and families from all over the world seeking to learn more about their roots or about Lancaster County's history.

Resources for Researching Plain Groups at Mennonite Life



The Mennonite Life library and archives are located in the Mennonite Life Collections Building, at 2215 Millstream Road, Lancaster, Pa. (Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life)

The library and archives at Mennonite Life hold rich resources for researching Amish, Old Order Mennonite, and other Plain Anabaptist groups, including Lancaster-area Old Order Mennonites'

roots in Lancaster Mennonite Conference. Totaling over 35,000 volumes, the library is home to a vast variety of genealogy, church history, and denominational history books, as well as biographies, hymnals, periodicals, and rare books dating back to the sixteenth century. The archives houses hundreds of collections, including personal papers, genealogical papers, church and congregational records, and organization and school records, in addition to tens of thousands of photographs, over 3,000 tracts, hundreds of deeds, and innumerable unique diaries, letters, and other manuscript artifacts.

Perennially popular with library researchers is the genealogical file of index cards containing information on various Mennonite, Amish, and non-Mennonite individuals and families with connections to Lancaster County. Though no longer updated, the file is nonetheless a frequent gateway to family history research, especially after it was uploaded to Ancestry (ancestry.com) in 2013 under the name “Lancaster, Pennsylvania, U.S., Mennonite Vital Records, 1750-2014.”

Many resources help supplement the card file, such as surname files from A to Z, which may contain any or all of the following: correspondence, photocopied Bible records, family group sheets, marriage invitations, obituaries, and other materials. Genealogy and family history books from the nineteenth century to the present contain a wealth of information on Amish, Mennonite, and non-Mennonite ancestors. Researchers often consult cemetery listings, especially if an online search on the website Find a Grave (findagrave.com) fails to bear fruit. Since most of the typed records are over fifty years old, they can aid in deciphering gravestones with inscriptions rendered illegible by time and weather.

Ship lists, will indexes, census records, and other genealogy resources, available in books as well as through the library’s Ancestry account, offer additional access points, as do Amish and Old Order Mennonite church directories for specific counties or geographical areas—not limited to Lancaster County or even to Pennsylvania. One frequently used resource is the *Early Landowners of Lancaster County* CD of digital maps, particularly the “overlay with modern roads” option, which projects today’s roads on top of the original plat maps of each township.

Books in the library’s collection range from early Swiss and Dutch Anabaptist history to Mennonite, Amish, and Anabaptist life, culture, and artwork today. The entire spectrum of Anabaptist traditions all over the world is represented, from groups who wear plain clothes and drive buggies, to those who do not dress distinctively and drive cars, and everyone in between. These traditions are also represented by the library’s collection of thousands of issues of current and discontinued periodicals, including active subscriptions to *Anabaptist World* and *Missionary Messenger* alongside *The Budget*, *The Eastern Mennonite Testimony*, *Weaverland* and *Groffdale* Conference meeting calendars, and many more.

Rare Book Collection

Many unique and valuable treasures of early Anabaptism are found in the rare book collection. Some of the earliest titles date back to the sixteenth century, such as three books written by Ulrich Zwingli. They were published in 1522, 1524, and 1527, the third being an anti-Anabaptist book. All three were printed by Christopher Froschauer, who would go on to produce the first complete

German Bible. The library is home to sixteen Froschauer Bibles, dating from the first folio-size Bible published in 1531 to the 1744 Ephrata Cloister reprint, almost all of which contain family records. Mennonite Life also owns seven *Täufer-testaments*, Anabaptist New Testaments based on the Froschauer New Testament, dating from 1611 to 1825.

Every early edition of the *Martyrs Mirror*, from the first edition of 1660 to the 1814 reprint of the Cloister *Martyrs Mirror* printed in Lancaster, is represented in the rare book collection. There are multiple copies of each edition except for the first one. Many contain ownership inscriptions or family records.



Copy 1 of the Ephrata Martyrs Mirror owned by Mennonite Life sports rare red ink on the second title page. (Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life Collections)

Also part of the collection are three rare items related to the *Martyrs Mirror*. *T'merg van de historien der martelaren* (The marrow of the history of the martyrs), a condensed version of the *Martyrs Mirror*, was acquired at the July 2023 Mennonite Life book auction. Published in 1722, this is the second edition of this condensed version, featuring half of Jan Luyken's engravings from the 1685 *Martyrs Mirror* in a smaller size. *Theatre des martyrs* = *Schau-bühne der Martyrer* is an early eighteenth-century picture album featuring all the Luyken engravings with French and German captions, as well as ten additional prints of Reformed martyrs, which were omitted a few years later when the book was reissued by a Mennonite publisher. This book was reprinted by

Mennonite Life as *Drama of the Martyrs* in 1975. The most unique of the three items is a one-of-a-kind original copper plate used to print the illustration of Algerius, a Roman student who was burned at the stake, that appeared in the 1685 *Martyrs Mirror*.

Mennonite Life also owns the only known copy in the world of the 1710 edition of an Anabaptist Bible concordance first published in 1540. Titled *Concordantz-Büchlein* and created to accompany the Froschauer Bible, it was printed in Speyer, Germany, and purchased at the Clarke E. Hess Estate auctions in 2019.



This rare Anabaptist Bible concordance, printed in 1710, is the only known copy in the world and features ownership records of the Berg family of Manheim Township, Lancaster County.

(Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life Collections)

Hymnals and Music

A particular strength of the Mennonite Life library is its robust collection of hymnals. In 1993, Mennonite Life received the Martin E. Ressler Music Library, which represents a wide array of traditions, including Mennonite, Brethren, Amish, and other Anabaptist groups. Mennonite Life currently owns several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European versions of the *Ausbund*, as well as multiple copies of every early edition of the *Unpartheyisches Gesangbuch*—the first hymnal of Lancaster Conference—and other early and contemporary hymnals and songbooks from Amish to Reformed Mennonite to Old Order Mennonite to Church of the Brethren.

Archives

Mennonite Life is the official repository for LMC—formerly known as Lancaster Mennonite Conference—and Atlantic Coast Conference of Mennonite Church USA, as well as organizations and schools related to the two conferences. Especially relevant to Plain communities are the Maple Grove and Millwood congregations, which began as Amish-Mennonite churches.

Personal papers collections capture the lives of Mennonite individuals, couples, and families in the Lancaster area and beyond, notable and ordinary people alike. Notable figures include influential ministers and bishops such as J. Paul Graybill, who was key to the rise of the missionary movement and also championed plainness and separation as Lancaster Conference became, in his view, more worldly. Some personal papers collections include research on Amish culture, life, or genetics, such as materials related to Amish bishop “Tennessee” John Stoltzfus, the subject of a book published by Mennonite Life in 1987, and the research notes of Daniel and Kathryn McCauley, the authors of *Decorative Arts of the Amish of Lancaster County*, who gave a large portion of their extensive collection of Amish textiles, furniture, and artwork to Mennonite Life. Amish and Reformed Mennonite diaries are also a key primary source of information about the daily lives of the Plain community in Lancaster County.

In 1984, Mennonite Life received a donation of over 3,600 postcards related to Mennonite, Amish, Brethren, and other Anabaptist communities from the late Harold C. Shank, an avid local historian and lifelong collector. The Harold C. Shank Collection is one of the most comprehensive collections of Lancaster County Amish and Mennonite tourism materials known to exist, featuring not only thousands of postcards depicting illustrations and photographs, but also countless pieces of business ephemera: advertisements, cards, bags, pencils, magnets, and mugs bearing the names of Amish and Mennonite businesses. Souvenir items, such as cast-iron Amish figures made in Lancaster County foundries and Amish and Mennonite dolls, are also found in Shank’s sizable collection.



Thousands of postcards and business ephemera make up Harold Shank’s collection of Amish and Mennonite tourism materials. (Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life Collections)

Another large collection comprises over 230 postcards, which were mailed by individuals all over the United States to the Patterson School in Santa Maria, California, in 1984 after they placed a letter in the syndicated newspaper column “Dear Abby” asking for information on the Amish. The archives is also home to also several large photograph collections and nearly 4,000 tracts, many of which address topics such as plain dress; nonresistance; baptism; and avoiding movies, radio, public bathing, and other activities and pursuits considered worldly.

Museum Artifacts

The museum collection is home to many objects handmade by Amish people: quilts, samplers, pincushions, needlework, Berlin work, show towels, furniture, privy bags, and clothing. Many of these artifacts belong to the McCauley Collection, which includes over 550 cataloged items. Mennonite-made examples of similar objects are found in the Clarke Hess Collection, with 700 cataloged items ranging from textiles to traditional Pennsylvania Dutch Fraktur artwork. Eight wooden dioramas by twin artisans Aaron and Abner Zook depict a variety of subjects, including two depictions of the 1719 Herr House, the horse auction in New Holland, and a unique triangular diorama titled “Feet Washing.”



A diorama titled “Feet Washing,” created by Aaron K. Zook, is on display near the genealogy card file. (Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life Collections)

Bookplates by Fraktur artist Barbara Ebersol and paintings by craftsman Henry Lapp provide unique examples of accomplished amateur artists. Ebersol and Lapp engaged in other artistic pursuits: she sewed pincushions, and he built furniture by trade. Examples of both are represented in Mennonite Life’s artifact collection.



Amish Fraktur artist Barbara Ebersol is known for her simple style and vibrant, glossy colors. She also sewed several of the pincushions in Mennonite Life's artifact collection.
(Photo courtesy of Mennonite Life Collections)

Community Research

The wide range of materials at Mennonite Life draws in a variety of researchers. Staff and volunteers are equipped to answer straightforward questions as well as complex inquiries, often starting with just a name, congregation, or address. Since volunteers have different areas of expertise, researchers commonly plan their visits around volunteers' schedules, and even take on ongoing projects together. Outside of the library, many members of the local Plain community attend Mennonite Life's rare and used book auctions, which feature rare and historically significant books and documents. While bidders have the option to submit bids online or by phone, the Friday night auctions continue to see lively crowds.

The Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society began with a dedicated group of local Mennonites who saw the need for a trusted archive of information where researchers could gather and collaborate. In the years since, younger researchers have picked up where their ancestors left off or found new threads to follow.

Mennonite Life continues to navigate questions about technology and its place in historical research. Plain research and expanded technology are not incompatible at Mennonite Life. Modern cataloging and exhibit software enable staff and volunteers to provide expanded access to books, documents, and artifacts to researchers on-site and around the world. Online exhibits, found at

mennonitelife.org/learn, offer more in-depth looks at aspects of Plain life in Lancaster. One such exhibit, *[Tokens of Tradition: Exploring Amish and Mennonite Pincushions](#)*, showcases Mennonite Life's collection of Amish and Mennonite pincushions.

Mennonite Life joins a global community in commemorating the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism in 2025 and looks forward to supporting ongoing historical research and education for generations to come.