

Geauga Amish Historical Library

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The Geauga Amish Historical Library (GAHL) was founded in 2014 with the mission of “increasing awareness of Amish and Anabaptist history through the collection, preservation, and presentation of items relating to Amish, Mennonite, and Anabaptist history, with a special focus on the Amish settlement in Geauga County and northeastern Ohio.”

Discussions about forming an Amish historical library in Geauga County began in 2008, when the National Old Order Historical Meeting was hosted by the local Amish community. As the committee tasked with organizing this biannual event discussed the various aspects of the local Amish settlement, they also agreed that Geauga County, home to the fourth largest Amish settlement in the world, should have its own historical center dedicated to the preservation and presentation of Amish, Mennonite, and Anabaptist history.



Current home of the Geauga Amish Historical Library (Photo courtesy of John Gingerich)



These conversations continued until 2014, when a group of local collectors and persons interested in Anabaptist history decided to establish a board, rent a small space in Middlefield Village, and form a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Samuel J. Weaver, whose great-grandfather Samuel W. Weaver was the first Amish settler in Geauga County, donated his collection of reference materials and artifacts, as well as his great-grandfather Samuel Weaver's ledger, in which his forefather wrote, "1886, March 28. We move to Geauga County Ohio."

Late board member Eli Miller also donated a number of items of historical value, such as a hat that belonged to Daniel J. Byler (1826–1902), many of whose 75,000+ descendants live in Geauga County. Miller also donated ledgers and artifacts that belonged to some of the early Amish settlers in the area.

Local collector and board member John Gingerich donated most of his collection of reference books and genealogies to the library. His collection of antiquarian books relating to Anabaptist history is also on rotating display and will eventually be donated to the GAHL when there is sufficient space to house the entire collection. This collection includes Froschauer Bibles; Anabaptist Testaments; European and American editions of the *Auss-Bundt/Ausbund*; the *Ernsthafte Christenpflicht*, *Gueldene Aepffel*; Dutch, German, and English martyr books; a printing of the Schleithem Confession, circa 1650; and various seventeenth to twentieth century Anabaptist confessions of faith. The collection also includes an eighteenth century "Anabaptist" concordance, sixteenth to nineteenth century printings of Menno Simons' writings, a number of sammelbands, and other books, documents, and artifacts relating to Anabaptist heritage.



Display of old editions of the *Ausbund* and *Martyrs Mirror* (Photo courtesy of John Gingerich)



Display of old Bibles (Photo courtesy of John Gingerich)



Room displaying Plain clothing styles (Photo courtesy of John Gingerich)

Board members include Amish and Amish-descended individuals in the Geauga County area who contribute their time, knowledge, and expertise to the library. (The current board consists of five members of the Old Order Amish Church, one member of Beachy Amish background, and one member of Amish descent.) Board members and community members alike have donated items of historical interest, such as family Bibles, hymnals, prayer books, clothing, and artifacts. This is a way of allowing a wide range of people in a *Freundschaft* (circle of relatives) and other visitors to view items that could be seen by only a small number of people if these objects were stored at an individual's home.

The GAHL board believes that part of the library's mission is to not only display items of interest about Anabaptist history, but also to inform others about the ideals espoused by Anabaptist groups, so they know there is an alternative to the self-centered, materialistic, often militaristic, and nationalistic ways of modern-day society. This does not mean that Amish or Mennonites are the sole possessors of "truth"; rather, the goal is for people, Amish and non-Amish alike, to reflect on their lives, their relationships with others and with the Almighty, and their spiritual well-being.

Along these lines, a publishing committee was formed with the goal of providing educational material about topics relevant to the Amish community and other groups. Articles on various subjects have been published in *Der Gemeinde Brief*, the local Amish church newsletter, as well as in other journals and magazines. The committee also produced a booklet about Anabaptist history titled *Our Amish Heritage* for use in parochial schools, as well as *Social Security Exemptions—The Past and Present*, a small publication about the Amish and Social Security.

Visitors to the library are offered visual examples of those who exemplified Christian beliefs, such as Dirk Willems, who sacrificed his life for the love of others, even his enemies.

The Geauga Amish Historical Library is well supported by the local community. In 2018, the library was invited to relocate to the Heritage Marketplace on Nauvoo Road in Middlefield Township, which offered more space to display the library's growing collection. A separate room offers displays of clothing from various eras and areas dating to the 1800s.

As the library grew, it was soon realized that even more space was needed. The board decided to rent most of the area formerly occupied by another store in the Heritage Marketplace and open a small gift shop. The gift shop's main focus is offering locally made products, including items made by local Amish people ranging in age from 13 to 90 years. The objective is to provide an outlet for local craft producers and to generate revenue to support the library.



Gift shop (Photo courtesy of John Gingerich)

Currently, the GAHL board is working on several projects. Some board members offer presentations about Amish and Anabaptist history to community groups and businesses. The library's collection is being catalogued, new display cases are being built, and plans are in the works to expand the reference section of the library.

A long-term goal of the board is for the Geauga Amish Historical Library to have its own building. A building fund drive has been established with the support of the local community and other interested parties.

The current library and gift shop hours are Monday, Tuesday, and Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., or by appointment. School and tour groups are welcome.