

Ohio Amish Library

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<https://www.destinationgeauga.com/members/geauga-amish-historical-library/>

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The Ohio Amish Library was the result of a 1985 meeting of twenty concerned men of the Amish community in Holmes County, Ohio. Other Amish communities had begun to assemble historical libraries and archives and these twenty persons wished to follow suit. The original intention of the library was to “collect and preserve Anabaptist, Amish, and Mennonite related items,” including old books, genealogies and histories, documents, and periodicals. The library was housed at Kline Lumber near Berlin, Ohio, and was staffed primarily by brothers Paul and Edward Kline. A new two-story facility was built nearby in 1996 to accommodate the growing collection.

Meanwhile, the Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center (AMHC), which was located about a mile from the Ohio Amish Library, had assembled a collection of books pertaining to Amish and Anabaptist history. The center is the home of Behalt, a 10 ft. x 265 ft. cyclorama depicting the story of Anabaptist history.

The Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center approached the Ohio Amish Library in 2013 with a proposal to build a new addition that would contain both of their libraries and archives. It was soon apparent that this proposal would benefit both organizations: the Ohio Amish Library would have room to expand in the new facility and better access for the general public, and the center could expand its capacity for research and local history.

Both organizations approved the plan to construct a 2,400-square-foot addition to the center. The building costs and materials were donated by the local Amish and Mennonite community. The new library, which officially opened in 2016, includes a specially constructed vault that is climate controlled to preserve valuable books and documents. The vault is made accessible to visitors by two large windows displaying old books relevant to Amish history.





Behalt sign on County Road 77, near Berlin, Ohio
(photo courtesy of Joseph Donnermeyer)

The library was staffed by volunteer Wayne R. Miller, who was also the president of the AMHC board of trustees. He developed a catalog system using the Library of Congress Classification structure and managed the new library.

The first major project after all the dust had settled was the digitalization of *The Budget*, a weekly newspaper. *The Budget* began locally in Sugarcreek, Ohio, in 1890 and soon grew into an important media platform for Amish and Mennonite communities across America.

An agreement was reached in 2016 between AMHC and *The Budget* to digitize the newspaper's issues from 1890 to 2006 from microfilm. However, the process of digitizing from microfilm was soon abandoned because the microfilm had deteriorated, and the final product was unacceptable considering the time and money investment. Fortunately, the library had an almost complete set of physical copies of *The Budget* from 1896–1980 sitting in its vault. The narrow pages of the early editions could be scanned with a handheld scanner, but the width of the newspaper increased around 1920. After a search for a better method of digitizing the large pages, a wooden stand with a D800 Nikon camera fastened at the top was built. This camera captured high-quality images of the newspaper pages, especially after they were edited to remove the dark tinge of the old newsprint.



Improved scanner for digitizing all issues of *The Budget*, *The Diary*, *Die Botschaft*, and other valuable documents (Photo courtesy of Joseph Donnermeyer)

The new digitizing process worked well, but it was very time-consuming. The weekly newspaper expanded to over forty pages by 1980, and each page had to be cropped and edited. The digitization of *The Budget* was finished in 2018. The library reached out to other Amish newspapers and received permission to digitize *Die Botschaft* (Millersburg, PA), *The Diary* (Sugarcreek, OH), and the Pathway publications. These periodicals have all been digitized except for Pathway's magazine for teachers, *Blackboard Bulletin*.

The library today consists of over 8,000 books pertaining to the Amish or other Anabaptist groups. This includes over 250 Amish directories, published works of Amish authors, and books analyzing Amish culture and society. A number of periodicals published by the Amish have also been collected and archived. The digital collection continues to grow and expand. Besides the Amish newspapers mentioned above, several newspapers of local towns have been digitized. Old documents, ledgers, and diaries have been added to allow researchers access to the information without harming the original materials. Over 15,000 local photos have been identified and added to the digital collection. The collection of digital newspapers has been a great resource for researchers of Amish demographics, statistics, and life in general. The thousands of weekly letters by Amish scribes in *The Budget* and *Die Botschaft* offer an inside view of Amish life.



Book shelves and work area (photo courtesy of Joseph Donnermeyer)

Many Amish people have utilized the digital newspapers to research their family or community history. For example, all the letters from White Cloud, Michigan, published in *The Budget* though 1919 have been “clipped” for an Amish person living in that area today. One of the primary services of the library is to assist genealogists and family historians. Many visitors come to research ancestors who lived in Holmes County, Ohio, wishing to know more about their lives in the county. The Ohio Amish Library’s genealogy books, newspapers, plat maps, and online resources are used to reveal the lives of their ancestors.

The Ohio Amish Library has published several books, both independently and with other organizations. The hymns of the *Ausbund*, the German hymnal used by the Amish, was translated into English by library board members and published in two volumes. A series of three volumes titled *Documents of Brotherly Love*, which chronicles the financial aid given by the Dutch Mennonites to the Swiss Anabaptists using documents from archives in Amsterdam, was published by the Ohio Amish Library. That series was primarily the work of James W. Lowry and the Amsterdam Archives Committee.

Heritage Review is an annual periodical published by the library. Since the first issue in 1990, *Heritage Review* has contained articles pertinent to Amish history in Ohio and keeps its readership up-to-date on the library’s latest projects.

The main purpose of the Ohio Amish Library today is to collect and preserve historical and contemporary documents relevant to local Anabaptist history to serve the community. This mission is coupled with the desire to offer resources and build relationships with interested researchers beyond the local community.