

# Mennonites: rooted in peace and community

The Stouffers and the other families who accompanied them here in 1804 were Mennonites, and they are buried in the Mennonite cemetery at Altona, a few miles east of Stouffville.

Just who were (and are) Mennonites? We derive the answer from the introduction to Mennonites in Ontario: A Bicentennial Portrait, published in 1986. We thank the authors, and the Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum for lending us their book.

Early in the sixteenth century Christianity in western Europe came to be divided into two groups: the historic Catholic Church and the dissenting groups, the Protestants, such as the Anglicans, Lutherans or Calvinists. Mennonites have their roots in the Anabaptists, which is often characterized as the left wing or radical Reformation.

In Zurich, Switzerland in the early 1520's a small group of earnest seekers, some of them students of Ulrich Zwingli, studied their Bibles carefully to determine their

own beliefs about Christianity, the Church and the meaning of baptism. In 1525 these people began to rebaptize each other as adults, thus indicating their voluntary commitment to Christ. Others around them nicknamed them "rebaptizers" or Anabaptists, and they are the forebears of the Mennonites, Amish and Brethren in Christ of Ontario today.

Like a prairie fire the Anabaptist movement spread throughout Europe, often fanned by winds of persecution. By the late 16th century, some Anabaptists were referred to as "Mennists" or "Mennonites" after Menno Simons, a Dutch reformer. By the seventeenth century there were many Mennonites in Switzerland. Persecution led to migration away from suppression and in the direction of greater opportunity.

Early in the 18th century, such an opportunity arose in the New World colony of Pennsylvania, whose founder and governor, William Penn, offered a refuge for



oppressed Quakers and other religious groups. Passage funds for distressed Mennonite refugees enroute to America were often provided by Mennonites in Holland.

Those who settled in Pennsylvania experienced relief from heavy taxation and religious restrictions, as well as freedom from military conscription, in accordance with their pacifist beliefs. This freedom was soon threatened by the American Revolutionary War. In search of peace and the opportunity to establish new communities many of them came to Upper Canada, a place with the promise of land and religious freedom.



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