

## Research Note:

### Recovering the Story of Bertha Leaman, Ph.D. (1893-1975), an Early Mennonite Woman Historian

LYDIA M. NOLT AND STEVEN M. NOLT\*

*Abstract:* The story of Bertha Leaman's life and career as the first Mennonite woman to earn a Ph.D. is integral to completing a fuller narrative of scholarship on Mennonite women and inspiring women who follow in her footsteps. Leaman's lifelong studies, teaching, and travels concentrated on French history and were supplemented by involvement in many organizations, including advocating for women and international students. Throughout her productive career, Leaman made significant contributions to scholarship and to the institutions for whom she worked; yet she has received less recognition than her male contemporaries. Although she came from a strong Mennonite community in rural Pennsylvania, toward the end of her life Leaman joined the Quakers, which may help to explain the muted response of the Mennonite community to her success.

Stories and how we remember them do a great deal to define who we are, how we live, and the futures we imagine for ourselves and others. Because stories hold this power, they can inspire or discourage those who hear them, revealing or hiding examples for those who follow. In 2018, Mennonite historian Rachel Waltner Goossen reflected on the importance of knowing women as colleagues and role models and feeling an absence of female predecessors in the early days of her career.<sup>1</sup> Women can find it challenging to succeed or even to be heard in a scholarly field long dominated by men. This contemporary reality was even starker a century ago, which makes the story of Bertha R. Leaman all the more striking. In the early twentieth century, Leaman, a young Mennonite historian from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, faced a double disadvantage as a female professional from a community that did not especially encourage higher

---

\*Lydia M. Nolt is a history major at Goshen (Ind.) College; Steven M. Nolt is professor of history and Anabaptist studies at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown (Pa.) College.

1. Rachel Waltner Goossen, "What Do Historians Look Like?" Anabaptist Historians blog, July 26, 2018, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/07/26/what-do-historians-look-like/>. Waltner Goossen pointed to the website Women Also Know History ([www.womenalsoknowhistory.com](http://www.womenalsoknowhistory.com)), which offers a directory of women historians to provide "concrete way[s] to address explicit and implicit gender bias in public and professional perceptions of historical expertise."

education, and particularly not on the part of women. Nevertheless, she almost certainly became the first North American Mennonite woman to receive a Ph.D., earned in 1935 at the University of Chicago with a dissertation in history on the French Third Republic.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the well-known C. Henry Smith, commonly considered the first North American Mennonite man to earn a Ph.D., also from Chicago and also in history, it seems safe to say that Leaman is not widely remembered today in Mennonite circles.<sup>3</sup> Some might say that this lower profile is explained by Leaman's gradual shift from Mennonite to Church of the Brethren and eventually to Quaker affiliation, and by the fact that her historical research did not focus on Anabaptist topics. Yet such reasons hardly justify disregarding her. This brief essay seeks to restore something of Leaman's memory in the belief that her story deserves to be told.

Born in 1893 into a family with deep roots in the Mennonite world of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Bertha Ruth Leaman spent her early years in Leacock, Strasburg, and Paradise townships among her Leaman, Denlinger, Hershey, and Breckbill relatives, almost all of whom were Mennonites. Her father, Christian B. Leaman, was the sexton of Strasburg Mennonite Church, and various family obituaries suggest the Leamans were active in that congregation. The death notice of Bertha's mother, Anna Mary Denlinger Leaman, described her as an especially faithful church member: "She looked beyond and placed her whole confidence, trust and hope in her dear Savior... [and] devotedly served Him till He called her home."<sup>4</sup> That home-going at age 36, however, left Christian with four fairly young children. It seems that following Anna's passing, for a time at least, Bertha and perhaps other siblings were sent to live with a maternal aunt and uncle in the village of Paradise.<sup>5</sup>

Apparently, Bertha Leaman was a strong student. Upon her graduation from Paradise Township High School in 1910 the local public school board

---

2. Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness, 1683-1983* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1983), 122, 228. During the 1940s, two more Mennonite women, Alta E. Schrock and Dorothea S. Franzen, earned Ph.D.s, in biology and zoology, respectively.

3. Perry Bush, *Peace, Progress and the Professor: The Mennonite History of C. Henry Smith* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2015). Two other Mennonite men earned doctorates at European universities in the same year as Smith earned his (1907): Noah C. Hirschy (Bern) and Samuel K. Mosiman (Halle).

4. "Leaman, Anna Mary," *Herald of Truth*, Aug. 15, 1900, 254-255.

5. Florence E. Bender to Elaine Sommers Rich, Nov. 28, 1982, Women's Missionary and Service Commission (hereafter WMSC) publication files, IV-20/003, box 2, folder 60, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Elkhart, Ind. (hereafter MCUSAA). Christian Leaman later married Emma Herr and together they had a daughter and a foster daughter. One might speculate, based on later newspaper notices such as *Lancaster New Era*, Dec. 27, 1921, that the aunt and uncle with whom Leaman lived was her mother's sister, Barbara Denlinger Eby, and her husband, Jacob S. Eby, who lived in Paradise and had no children.

immediately hired her to teach in one of the township's one-room schools. They continued to rehire her for the next six school years.<sup>6</sup> At the time, grammar school teachers had to pass an exam, but further education was optional. Many women school teachers taught for a few years, then married and left the classroom. Those who sought to make a career of teaching—a decision more common for men—might later attend a state normal school, such as the one in nearby Millersville, Pennsylvania.

Leaman was “determined” to continue her education, she told a friend, no matter how unconventional some might regard that choice. The uncle with whom she had lived “didn’t believe that women should go to college.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, she appears to have had the support of other relatives, especially her mother’s first cousin, the prominent Mennonite businessman and Paradise Mennonite Church member Leaman J. “Lem” Denlinger.<sup>8</sup> Still, there were no female mentors as she considered an academic vocation. It must have been a big step when, in September 1917, having “taught school [long enough] to earn money for her college expenses,” 24-year-old Bertha Leaman enrolled at Goshen College in Indiana.<sup>9</sup>

Although a Mennonite school, Goshen had relatively few connections to Leaman’s Lancaster Mennonite world, where some church leaders thought the school’s outlook was too liberal. Nevertheless, it had always attracted some students from Leaman’s community, and while she attended, Goshen briefly had a president from Lancaster, H. Frank Reist. Perhaps her choice of Goshen and a major in history indicated an interest on her part in combining her tradition with a desire to expand her world. Clearly, she threw herself into campus life. The *Maple Leaf* yearbook reports an array of involvement, including participation in the Avon literary society, the oratorical association, interclass debate, the Christian Worker Band, the Young Women’s Christian Association, and the student

---

6. “School Boards Organize,” *Lancaster News-Journal*, June 17, 1910, 2; “Paradise Township,” *Lancaster Examiner*, June 10, 1911, 6; “Teachers Elected,” *Intelligencer Journal*, June 8, 1912, 1; “Paradise Township,” *Intelligencer Journal*, June 10, 1913, 7; “Paradise Township Teachers,” *Intelligencer Journal*, June 11, 1914, 5; “Elect Teachers,” *Lancaster Examiner*, June 5, 1915; and “Paradise Teachers,” *Intelligencer Journal*, June 7, 1916, 3.

7. Florence E. Bender to Elaine Sommers Rich, Nov. 28, 1982.

8. *250 Years in Paradise, 1712-1962* (Paradise, Pa.: Anniversary Celebration Committee, 1962), 125. Lem and Emma Denlinger often hosted Bertha when she returned to Lancaster and invited guests to hear of her travels: untitled, *Lancaster New Era*, Aug. 19, 1926, 15; “Paradise,” *Intelligencer Journal*, Aug. 27, 1926. The Denlingers sent their only child, Aaron, to Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster City. One of Bertha’s paternal uncles, Enos H. Leaman, was a medical doctor, but he does not surface in her story.

9. Florence E. Bender to Elaine Sommers Rich, Nov. 28, 1982. Evidence of Leaman’s independent income appears in a list of donors aiding children in wartime Belgium: “Contributions to Relief Fund,” *Lancaster New Era*, Jan. 30, 1917, 1, to which she contributed \$5 (approximately \$100 in 2021).

newspaper, *The Record*.<sup>10</sup> She served as an officer in several of these student organizations. "Intellectuality and pluck are the distinguishing marks of this brilliant Pennsylvania girl," her student peers decided, adding that "we predict for her a very successful career."<sup>11</sup> Later correspondence suggests she made lifelong college friends, including especially Esther A. Steiner (later Meyer).

Leaman graduated from Goshen in 1921, having been elected senior class treasurer and chosen to deliver the class gift oration at commencement. By that time, however, several years of turmoil had entangled the college and weighed heavily on faculty as Goshen's trustees tried to steer the institution through growing criticism, not just from Lancaster but also from Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference leaders.<sup>12</sup> Under pressure, some faculty left, including history instructor Jacob C. Meyer, soon to be married to Leaman's friend Esther Steiner.<sup>13</sup> With Meyer's departure, the college hired Leaman, making her Goshen's first female history professor.<sup>14</sup>

During Leaman's time as a faculty member, tensions at the school continued to rise, and the board announced the college would not reopen in fall 1923. As Goshen closed its doors that summer, Leaman was back in Lancaster and making plans to return to the Midwest, this time for the University of Chicago where, the *Lancaster New Era* reported, "she will spend the summer and the coming year taking graduate work in history."<sup>15</sup>

---

10. *Maple Leaf*, 1921 (Goshen College), 27, 30, 79.

11. *Maple Leaf*, 1920 (Goshen College), 45.

12. Susan Fisher Miller, *Culture for Service: A History of Goshen College* (Goshen, Ind.: Goshen College, 1994), 63-86.

13. Meyer taught at Goshen from 1919 to 1921. He left for continued graduate study in fall 1921 and never returned; he is listed as a faculty member "absent on leave" in the 1922 *Maple Leaf*, 27.

14. *Maple Leaf*, 1922 (Goshen College), 27, 109. One wonders if Meyer recommended her for the job. Typical for the time, faculty also carried out administrative work and Leaman was also registrar, see John S. Umble, *Goshen College, 1894-1954: A Venture in Christian Higher Education* (Goshen, Ind.: Goshen College, 1954), 266. See also *Official Directory of Normal Schools and Colleges in Indiana, 1921-1922* (Indianapolis: s.n., 1922), 10, 32, <https://archive.org/details/officialdirector00indi>, which lists Leaman as a member of the history faculty and as the registrar (Umble lists her as assistant registrar).

15. "Will Enter University," *Lancaster New Era*, June 11, 1923, 7. This news account reports that Leaman had most recently been teaching history in Egg Harbor, N.J., and that high school is also listed on her résumé, found in United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, Correspondence, Record Group 11B, series II, box 46, folder 662, Yale Divinity School Archives, New Haven, Conn. (hereafter UBCHEA Correspondence). How to square this job with sources saying she taught at Goshen from 1921 to 1923 is not obvious; she may have left Goshen after the fall 1922 semester as enrollment dropped on news of the school's impending closure. Egg Harbor is the mainland town linked to the barrier island of Ocean City, a Methodist seaside resort then popular with Lancaster Mennonites. Leaman later spent

Leaman spent 1923-1924 in Chicago completing her master's degree, and soon her home community was again informed of her accomplishments: "Miss Bertha Leaman, formerly of Paradise ... was granted her A.M. degree by [the University of Chicago] at the Spring Convocation. Miss Leaman has done her work in modern European history."<sup>16</sup> Similar newspaper notices, common at the time, appeared periodically through the next decades and documented her visits with family and friends in Lancaster County, sometimes also mentioning that she spoke to groups about her travels. Although she stayed connected with her home community, her experiences would carry her well beyond her birthplace.

Those experiences included living and studying in France. Leaman's graduate work, as well as future research and writings, was driven by her fascination with Europe and with France in particular. Perhaps her personal connections had sparked this interest. One of her brothers, Willis, had joined the army during World War I and been sent to the Western Front. Her Goshen professor and friend J. C. Meyer had also been in France, but as a conscientious objector with a Quaker relief unit. He certainly must have spoken about his experience when teaching at Goshen during Leaman's junior and senior years.<sup>17</sup> In any case, she herself would eventually make multiple trips to Europe. Her first trip to France came in the summer of 1926 "in company with friends from the University of Chicago."<sup>18</sup> A year later she crossed the Atlantic again, this time to spend the summer studying at the University of Grenoble, followed by an entire academic year at the Sorbonne, with side trips to the University of London and to Geneva, where she observed a session of the League of Nations.<sup>19</sup> (Her expeditions to France continued throughout her life; her last European trip may have been the one she made in 1961 at age 68.<sup>20</sup>)

---

summers in Ocean City, judging from addresses on her 1958 and 1959 correspondence in UBCHEA Correspondence.

16. "Secured Degree," *Lancaster New Era*, July 3, 1924, 18.

17. Melanie Springer Mock, *Writing Peace: The Unheard Voices of Great War Menmonite Objectors* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press U.S., 2003), 223-291; *Global Anabaptist Menmonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Reconstruction Work (France)," [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Reconstruction\\_Work\\_\(France\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Reconstruction_Work_(France)).

18. Untitled, *Lancaster New Era*, June 18, 1926, 7.

19. Leaman, 1958 résumé; "Paradise Professor on Research Trip," *Lancaster New Era*, June 21, 1927, 5; untitled, *Intelligencer Journal*, Aug. 7, 1928, 20. Leaman's father died in an auto accident during this year she was living in France; see "Leaman, Christian B.," *Gospel Herald*, May 3, 1928, 111.

20. Abigail Hoffsommer, notes, Sept. 1, 1961, UBCHEA Correspondence. In the summer of 1968, Leaman traveled alone through Mexico, as reported in Leaman to J. C. Meyer, Aug. 11, 1968, Jacob C. Meyer papers, HM1/044, box 2, folder 33, MCUSAA.

Home from France in late summer 1928, Leaman resumed her education at the University of Chicago and began work on her dissertation, which she completed in 1935 as "French Foreign and Colonial Policy under Radical-Socialist Party Control, 1898-1905."<sup>21</sup> Typical of women and men in this era, she did most of her dissertation writing while simultaneously teaching, including summer courses, to earn income. Leaman picked up work at Manchester College; Ball State Teachers College; the University of Illinois's nascent Chicago campus; and Wisconsin State Teachers College in Oshkosh, among others.<sup>22</sup> After receiving her doctorate, she returned to Manchester, a school operated by the Church of the Brethren. Later, she would teach at another Church of the Brethren institution, Juniata College, in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, and serve on the summer school faculty at Ashland (Ohio) College, affiliated with the Brethren Church. During the mid-1940s she returned to the Chicago area and joined the faculty at Frances Shimer College, at the time a women's junior college linked to the University of Chicago. Her longest tenure was at West Liberty State College, in West Liberty, West Virginia, from 1949-1963, where she was also head of the Division of the Social Sciences, an administrative role she had also held at Shimer. Throughout her career, she taught European history, but may have also taught United States history when staffing realities required it.<sup>23</sup>

Leaman's academic credentials and employment history illustrate the dynamics of gender in the historical profession. From the 1910s through the 1940s, roughly 20 percent of doctorates awarded in history were earned by women, after which the percentage fell by half as male enrollment in graduate school skyrocketed after World War II and the enrollment of women declined slightly. But the relatively higher enrollment rates in the 1920s and 1930s—the years Leaman was in graduate school—as compared with those of the decades that followed, belie the occupational position of those early women historians. Virtually no women were hired by the universities that awarded graduate degrees.

---

21. Bertha R. Leaman, "French Foreign and Colonial Policy under Radical-Socialist Party Control, 1898-1905" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1935).

22. Positions listed in Leaman's 1958 résumé, plus notices, such as "Ashland College and Seminary News," *Brethren Evangelist*, Sept. 13, 1941, 8; and "Paradise Woman Guest-Lecturing," *Lancaster New Era*, July 21, 1947, 3.

23. Sometime in the 1940s (see "Home for Holidays," *Intelligencer Journal*, Dec. 25, 1943, 16), Leaman also authored a series of popular-audience booklets, distributed by *Encyclopedia Britannica* and presumably for use in school classrooms. Extant copies seem unavailable, which is unfortunate since their intended audience and their contents—*Recent European History*, *Events Leading up to World War II*, *Hispanic-American History*, *Natural Resources of the United States*, and biographies of several U.S. presidents—might offer a window into her approach in the classroom. In the early 1980s, Elaine Sommers Rich, researching her book *Mennonite Women*, could not locate copies of the booklets; see WMSC publication files, IV-20/003, box 2, folder 60, MCSUAA.

Thus, women historians played almost no role in training future generations of Ph.D. students.<sup>24</sup> Instead, women like Leaman nearly all taught at small, undergraduate colleges that were, until the post-war boom in higher education enrollment, apt to be perennially struggling and offering only short-term or annual contracts. These realities produced career paths like Leaman's: teaching in at least ten schools over a dozen academic years and summer terms before finding a stable job in 1949.

Despite her frequent moving, heavy teaching loads, and administrative responsibilities, Leaman also fulfilled campus and community service, with a special emphasis on supporting international (at the time, European) students, arranging international relations student clubs, and, in Wheeling, West Virginia, an international affairs community discussion group. She also did public speaking, addressing community groups on current events, and described herself as "very active" in the American Association of University Woman, as well as the American Association of University Professors.<sup>25</sup> And she seems to have frequently attended the annual meetings of the American Historical Association, even at age 77 when she traveled to Boston for the 1970 convention.<sup>26</sup>

In the midst of her heavy campus and community activity, Leaman also found time to research and write scholarly articles. In April 1941, she contributed an essay on "The Future of France" to the journal *Social Studies*. In it, she reviewed the partisan political history of the Third Republic to explain why the country's liberal "collapse" and acquiescence to fascism was lamentable but not altogether surprising. Leaman clearly had no sympathy for the French right wing, but she argued that many Western observers had overestimated the strength of the liberal republicans.<sup>27</sup> A few months later, she published a lengthy article, "The Influence of Domestic Affairs on Foreign Policy in France, 1898-1905,"

---

24. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 367, 491-492. As late as 1970, of the ten largest history departments in terms of doctoral student enrollment, the combined faculties included only two women among 274 full professors and five women among 317 assistant and associate professors (492).

25. Activities summarized in Leaman's 1958 résumé. Other examples include *Aurora*, 1927 (Manchester College), 84; *Juniata College Bulletin*, Feb. 1939, 4; and a 1954 statement that she was leading a Wheeling, W.V., community group discussing articles in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, in "Letter to Hamilton Fish Armstrong from Allen W. Dulles," (1954; Internet Archive, n.d.), 6, <https://archive.org/details/lettertohamiltonfisharmstrongfromallenwdulles/80b01676r0040001500383/>.

26. Leaman to William P. Fenn, Jan. 9, 1958, and attached résumé, UBCHEA Correspondence; Arthur E. Barbeau to Elaine Sommers Rich, March 31, 1981, WMSC publication files, IV-20/003, box 2, folder 60, MCUSAA.

27. "The Future of France," *Social Studies* 32 (Apr. 1941), 158-161.

drawn from her dissertation, in the prestigious *Journal of Modern History*.<sup>28</sup> In that piece, Leaman tackled the question "Why, with a pacifistic party [i.e., Radical-Socialist] in control of the government, did France become so nationalistic by 1914?" Her answer was that the pacifists "did not control foreign affairs" and that proponents of colonialism and French colonial interests were able to exert undue influence in foreign policy, maneuvering the cabinet in a series of no-win situations that led to the fall of the Socialist government and the stoking of popular nationalism in response to perceived weakness vis-à-vis Britain and Germany.<sup>29</sup> A decade later, she published a related study, this one focusing on Franco-German relations in the period 1906-1911.<sup>30</sup> She also authored three articles that drew on nineteenth-century French-language sources about life in the United States, mostly from the pen of Jean-Jacques Ampère, a younger protégé of Alexis de Tocqueville.<sup>31</sup>

Leaman's writing generally featured extensive citations of French sources and included her own translations and discursive annotation. In a style common to academic prose of her time, her essays can seem quite formal, even formulaic, in their structure, and their syntax and diction sometimes over-written. That period style makes her occasional bits of dry humor all the more striking, as in a discussion of Ampère's visit to a Pennsylvania asylum, which he deemed well-heated. Leaman added a footnote: "It is with reservation that one accepts the word of a Frenchman that any place is well-heated."<sup>32</sup>

As she approached age 65, Leaman considered retiring from West Liberty State College and finishing her teaching career in Taiwan under the auspices of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia.<sup>33</sup> Though she pursued that possibility for several years, she ultimately decided to remain in the classroom at West Liberty until she turned 70. She then retired to Haverford, Pennsylvania, approximately forty miles east of her childhood home, to connect more closely with Haverford's

---

28. "The Influence of Domestic Policy on Foreign Affairs in France, 1898-1905," *Journal of Modern History* (Dec.1942), 449-479.

29. *Ibid.*, 479.

30. "Development of Moroccan Mines as a Factor in Franco-German Relations, 1906-1911," *Proceedings of the West Virginia Academy of Science* 23 (1951), 119-124.

31. "A Frenchman Visits Philadelphia in 1851," *Pennsylvania History* 8 (Oct. 1941), 261-277; "Travel Notes of a Mid-Nineteenth-Century Frenchman," *Ohio State Archeological and Historical Quarterly* 51 (Apr.-June 1942), 101-118; "American Quakerism through French Eyes: Ampère and Voltaire," *Quaker History* 61 (Autumn 1972), 116-119.

32. Leaman, "A Frenchman Visits," 275, n.39.

33. Various letters, 1958-1963, in UBCHEA Correspondence.



Quaker community since she had, by then, affiliated with the Religious Society of Friends.<sup>34</sup>

Leaman's religious development is not easily tracked through surviving sources. Her good friend Esther Meyer believed she "had a deep and firm faith," but "was so unwelcome in the Mennonite church, she finally found peace and fellowship with the Friends Church."<sup>35</sup> Clearly her childhood context and many of her lasting relationships, from both Lancaster and Goshen, were with Mennonite friends and relatives, though a brother, Willis Leaman, and a sister, Ada Leaman Wenger, were both Methodists at the times of their deaths.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that her years at Goshen College—which coincided with the significant church conflict in northern Indiana, including but not limited to the college itself—had a souring effect on her relationship with the church. Then, too, her determination and independence, evidenced in her pursuit of education despite all odds, may have placed her on the outer edges of a community that rewarded female submission and at least a nod to domesticity. A male colleague from West Liberty State described her as a "small, but very feisty woman."<sup>37</sup> Such a characterization can carry sexist assumptions, though one wonders if Leaman might have appreciated the remark. Florence Bender, one of Leaman's Goshen contemporaries and an academic herself, thought that Leaman "got a raw deal from the Mennonite Church and her ability and accomplishments were never recognized."<sup>38</sup> Exactly what "deal" Bender had in mind is unclear, though her close institutional connections to Goshen College through her brother, Goshen's academic dean Harold S. Bender, make her comment intriguing. Interestingly, in the decade and a half after Goshen reopened and during which Leaman was an invited summer instructor at schools across the Midwest, Goshen was not on her itinerary.

At the same time, some evidence points to positive Mennonite ties: friendly correspondence with Harold Bender when she taught at Manchester, or her urging one of her Juniata students to ask Bender for

---

34. In 1962, Leaman told Abigail Hoffsommer she expected to retire to Lancaster County; by the following winter, however, she had decided on the greater Philadelphia area—Leaman to Hoffsommer, May 8, 1962, and Feb. 10, 1963, UBCHEA Correspondence.

35. Esther Steiner Meyer, quoted in Florence E. Bender to Elaine Sommers Rich, Nov. 28, 1982.

36. The church affiliation of Bertha's brother Samuel C. Leaman is unclear. Bertha's half-sister, Esther Leaman Brubaker, and foster sister, Anna Burnett Burkhart, were both Mennonite Church members.

37. Arthur E. Barbeau to Elaine S. Rich, March 31, 1981.

38. Florence E. Bender to Elaine Sommers Rich, Nov. 28, 1982. Bender graduated from Goshen College in 1922 and was, like Leaman, a member of the Aurora Literary Society. She earned a master's degree from Purdue University and taught at Bowling Green (Ohio) State College.

supplementary Anabaptist source materials for a paper the student was writing on the Radical Reformation.<sup>39</sup> And in 1968 she was considering an invitation to visit Goshen College to speak on global affairs and talk with history majors about graduate study, but then declined, suggesting that a younger scholar could better “give students an opportunity to develop [current] contacts with a graduate school.”<sup>40</sup>

Whatever its specifics, her spiritual identification remained within the circle of the Historic Peace Churches. During her seven years at Manchester and Juniata colleges, campus ethos and expectations suggest she would have worshiped at these schools’ respective campus Church of the Brethren congregations. By 1958, she was describing herself as a Quaker of “Mennonite background.”<sup>41</sup> Peace was a theme in her scholarship, but not in the vein of mid-century Mennonite nonresistance or in the style of Vietnam-era critics of U.S. foreign policy. In her assessment of global affairs, international relations, the causes of war, and the prospects for peace, Leaman’s views and assumptions parallel those of C. Henry Smith, her much better-known contemporary and commentator on current events.<sup>42</sup> The likeness is not surprising given the similar progressive-era worldview and academic training each had received at the University of Chicago. In addition, Leaman’s time in Paris seems to have provided her with a noticeably cosmopolitan outlook, and her essays are apt to cite sources such as *The Times* of London or the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>43</sup>

In her retirement, around the corner from Haverford College’s Magill Library, Leaman continued research, writing, and occasionally teaching summer courses.<sup>44</sup> She attended the Haverford Friends Meeting, remained active in A.A.U.W. programs, did volunteer work for the American Friends Service Committee, and organized a regional professional group known as Modern European Historians of the Philadelphia Area.<sup>45</sup> Her writing now centered on locally available sources, especially a collection of more than a hundred letters that her grandmother, Ann Breckbill

---

39. Harold Bender to Bertha Leaman, Jan. 38 [sic], 1937, Harold S. Bender papers, HM1/278, box 7, folder 1; and Raymond Thoman to Harold S. Bender, Nov. 17, 1937, Harold S. Bender papers, HM1/278, box 9, folder 7, both in Goshen College Archives, Goshen, Ind.

40. Bertha Leaman to J. C. Meyer, Aug. 14, 1968, Jacob C. Meyer papers.

41. Notes of Abigail Hoffsommer, Sept. 2, 1958, UBCHEA Correspondence.

42. Bush, *Peace, Progress and the Professor*, 91-94, 292-294, 299-301, 310-314.

43. E.g., Bertha R. Leaman, “The Future of Democracy,” *Juniata College Bulletin*, Feb. 1939, 4-5, 15.

44. Leaman mentions definite plans to teach summer courses in Leaman to Abigail Hoffsommer, Feb. 10, 1963, UBCHEA Correspondence.

45. Leaman included information about this organization in her Aug. 11, 1968, letter to J. C. Meyer.

Leaman, had received from Brethren relatives who had moved to Guthrie County, Iowa.<sup>46</sup>

Bertha Leaman died on October 6, 1975, at age 82 and was buried in the cemetery of Strasburg Mennonite Church, across the road from the meetinghouse of her youth. And although she had not worked in Anabaptist-Mennonite history, her estate underwrote such scholarship. She left \$20,000 to Goshen College to benefit faculty, designating her bequest to help subsidize the salaries of faculty teaching European Civilization or similar courses.<sup>47</sup>

In a way that was remarkably determined for her time, Bertha Leaman charted an education and career path with few guides or mentors. As a young person from a community and tradition that was not yet accustomed to women with such lofty goals, she nevertheless developed a successful and apparently satisfying career as a teacher and scholar. At the same time, within her Mennonite community, her example as a pioneering woman historian was largely forgotten. The remedy for such omission is not simply to focus on *firsts*, generating a chronicle of the first person to do one thing or another. History should help us recognize deeper patterns and cultivate the kind of transformation necessary for long-term change. In 2021, on the centennial of her teaching appointment at Goshen College, it seems appropriate to remember Bertha Leaman and integrate her story into the narrative of Mennonite history, especially since she dedicated her life to recovering and interpreting stories through the practice of history.

---

46. Bertha R. Leaman, "An Early Settler in Iowa: Westward Expansion in Microcosm," *Annals of Iowa* 41 (Summer 1971), 684-708. The Iowa letter writer was Ozias Ferree (1818-1909), whose wife, Sarah, was a cousin of Leaman's grandmother. (Leaman later donated the letters to the Pennsylvania State Archives.) The *Annals of Iowa* editor's headnote to the article reports that Leaman "was recently awarded a grant by the American Philosophical Society."

47. Untitled news item, *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 9, 1977, 604; Jan M. Ramer, Goshen College Development Office, email to Steve Nolt, Jan. 12, 2021. Between 1977 and 2010 this would have applied to professors John S. Oyer and John D. Roth. The fund was closed in 2010 when it fell below a value that justified its separate existence and was then incorporated into a general faculty development fund.

**Research Grant:** The Mennonite Historical Society announces an “Open Research Grant” of \$2,500 to promote research and publication in Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. To apply, send the following materials by March 1, 2022, to Carrie Philipps (phillipsc@bluffton.edu), Secretary, Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526: a two- or three-page summary of the project stating its significance to the field of Anabaptist-Mennonite history, a budget of anticipated expenses, a vitae, and one letter of recommendation. All applicants must be members of the Mennonite Historical Society. Recipients of the award will be announced at the May meeting of the MHS Board of Directors. Disbursements will be made by June 1. The Prize Selection Committee may choose not to award the grant if none of the applications is deemed acceptable. *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* has the “right of first refusal” for scholarly articles that result from research funded by the grant.

---

The Schafer-Friesen Research Fellowship is awarded annually by the Mennonite Historical Library (MHL) at Goshen College to support scholarship in Reformation and Anabaptist History. First priority for the award is to individuals doing advanced research using the resources of the Mennonite Historical Library. The award will support travel costs to the Mennonite Historical Library, and up to three weeks of room and board. The Fellowship may also be used, secondarily, to support publications on Reformation and Anabaptist topics. To apply, please send a letter of interest, along with a one-page research plan and budget, by March 1, 2022, to John D. Roth at johndr@goshen.edu.