

the 1750s. In 1777 John married Elizabeth Eschleman; the couple had five children before emigrating to Canada, and Elizabeth was pregnant with their sixth child when she made the trip. Although four more children were born to them in Canada, all but one died in infancy.<sup>7</sup>

The date of the beginning of John Winger's association with the Brethren is not certain. It seems likely that he was among those helping to found the church, but if not, he undoubtedly joined the group soon after its formation. The evidence admittedly rests largely on his leadership role in the group. By 1788, the year in which he emigrated to Canada, he was a minister among the Brethren, a position not normally given quickly by the Brethren in the earlier years of their history.<sup>8</sup>

Emigrating to Upper Canada with John and Elizabeth Winger were John's younger sister Mary and her husband Jacob Sider and their three children. From recent research, it appears that Jacob was the son of Georg Seider, who came from the Palatinate in Germany to Pennsylvania in 1752. He eventually acquired property in Dauphin County, close to where the Brethren originated. Jacob, his second son, was born around 1758. Jacob's brother, born two years earlier, claimed exemption from military service.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that by the end of the Revolutionary War, the family, possibly originally German Reformed in religion, was either Mennonite (since Jacob married a woman of Mennonite background), or even that the family, or some of its members, had become Brethren, since the group had been founded from three to five years before the end of the war. All that is known with certainty is that Jacob and Mary were Brethren when they emigrated to Canada in 1788.

The Wingers and the Siders arrived in Upper Canada in 1788. The date, about which there has been some uncertainty, is established by the petitions for crown lands which John Winger and Jacob Sider made in 1797. In his petition Winger states that he came about 1789, but this statement is qualified when later in the petition he writes of coming in 1788. Isaac Swayze, who certified the petition, states categorically that Winger came in 1788. This date is further confirmed by Sider's petition, in which he declares that he came in 1788.<sup>10</sup>

Others made the trip north with the Wingers and Siders. According to the tradition in the Damude family, they included John Winger's sister Anna and several Damude brothers, one of whom Anna had married before going to Upper Canada.<sup>11</sup> Johannes Groh

(later anglicized to John Crow), a Brethren, also accompanied the group.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the Damude tradition claims that “a large number of neighbors” were in the party, but if this image of a large group of emigrants is accurate, it is not likely that all were Brethren.<sup>13</sup>

The emigrants left Pennsylvania in the summer and four months later arrived in Upper Canada, shortly before the onset of winter.<sup>14</sup> Presumably they travelled as others did who were making the trip north in those days—across the mountains by Conestoga wagon, on horseback and on foot, driving their cattle and other livestock before them. Grandchildren of the Damudes in later years recalled stories they heard of their ancestors’ move to Upper Canada: “The Winger party brought cows and other things they needed. They milked the cows in the morning, then put the milk in a keg which was in a bag, with a stone on the opposite side to balance it on the horse. In this way the milk was kept from milking to milking as they travelled. They obtained butter from the milk shaking on the horse’s back.”<sup>15</sup>

The group, again according to tradition, crossed the Niagara River into Upper Canada above Grand Island near what is now Fort Erie, their horses swimming the river and pulling rafts the immigrants had spent two weeks in building. The Winger and Sider crown land petitions show that the group then made their way to the Short Hills in Pelham Township, Welland County, near the present town of Fonthill. Here they “settled on some lands.” The land may not legally have been theirs: the expression may have meant only that they selected some undeveloped tract and treated it as their own.

Either coming with the group, or, more likely, joining it shortly afterwards in the area of the Short Hills, were several other Brethren. Christian Stickley, writing to the government in March 1797, says that he came into the country nine years earlier (1788), and was assigned 200 acres in the Short Hills (in another document, he says that he came with a wife and two children).<sup>16</sup> Christian’s son, also Christian, writing from Markham Township in York County in 1829, confirms his father’s statements by saying that his father came into the province “as a preacher or leader of the class of people called Tunkers;” his statement is attested to by three witnesses who also appear to be of the group.<sup>17</sup> As this quotation suggests, the Brethren, for reasons explained below, became known as Tunkers shortly after arrival in Canada (thus the term will be used in this account in reference to the early members of the group in Canada).



While Stickley, the evidence suggests, was a member on coming to Canada, others appear to have become Tunkers after the group arrived in the Short Hills. Among them was George Hansler (Hansell), born in Germany. Hansler first settled in New Jersey (1756) and then came to Canada in 1787. Family tradition claims that he became one of the ministers in the Pelham group, as did his son Andrew (born 1790).<sup>18</sup>

Brethren tradition holds that in 1789 or shortly afterwards (only about a year following the emigration), Jacob Engel came to Pelham to visit the group. He also came to organize the members, placing Winger at its head.<sup>19</sup> This appears to have been somewhat redundant since tradition also holds that Winger was already a minister in the church before leaving for Upper Canada. It may be that the apparently quick emergence of the ministers—Hansler and Stickley—meant that recognition needed to be given to one of them as bishop; to Engel, the obvious choice must have been John Winger.<sup>20</sup>

From the beginning, the Pelham group ran into difficulties. One was economic in nature. Some poor crops, according to the Damude tradition, forced them “to eat greens which they were not certain had ever been used as food. They thought what the cattle would eat man could eat and by this means they ventured to add new varieties of greens to their meals.”<sup>21</sup> In 1792 a strong wind (designated as a hurricane in the Winger and Sider land petitions) levelled their crops and buildings, and around the same time a fire swept through fields and timberland.

Perhaps a social factor was also at work to discourage Winger and Sider with life at Pelham. It has been suggested that the group at Pelham developed a feisty spirit, at least by the early years of the 1800s. If so, that spirit may already have been at work in the 1790s and may have disturbed the milder characters of men like Winger and Sider.<sup>22</sup>

Discouraged with their condition of life, the Winger and Sider families decided to leave the Short Hills. The Damude tradition maintains that they set out to return to Pennsylvania, but by the time they reached the Niagara River they had changed their minds, at least in part because they liked the heavier soil of Bertie Township more than the sandy soil of the Short Hills.<sup>23</sup> They both bought land from Parshall Terry, a former officer in Butler’s Rangers of Revolutionary War fame. Their petitions in 1797 for crown land were granted. This resulted in Jacob Sider obtaining 400 acres of land in

districts in the brotherhood. So many young Brethren and Sisters, intelligent, and yet so meek and godly in their manners.<sup>102</sup>

Some members of the Bertie congregation lived around Shisler's Point near Lake Erie. Because they found it difficult, particularly in the winter months, to meet with the main group to the north, they began to hold their own prayer meetings. In 1896 they financially assisted the Mennonite Brethren in Christ to construct a church building, and for this assistance were allowed to use the church for Sunday services (they also assisted the Mennonite Brethren in Christ in a union Sunday school). When their membership in the area declined, the Mennonite Brethren in Christ sold the building to Adam Carver, a local Brethren in Christ, who presented it as a gift to the congregation. In 1931 the congregation sold this building and purchased another one from the Old Mennonite Church, at its present location near Sherkston.

For many years ministers from Bertie filled the preaching appointments. This was less than satisfactory, again particularly in the winter months when the small group would sometimes be without a minister. Among other consequences, this meant that the work of holding the congregation together fell to one or two leaders. Nicholas Michael (brother-in-law to Asa Bearss) was one of these leaders. Born a Lutheran, he was a man of "great Christian character," and well-known for his patience and kindness in both church and community. Ministerial stability was finally obtained in 1948 when nineteen-year-old Roy Sider began a long tenure as pastor of the congregation. Under his leadership, Sherkston became one of the most forward looking and rapidly growing congregations in the Canadian church.<sup>103</sup>

Recent research has shown that the congregation at Pelham, the oldest of all the Tunker centres, had a longer history than at one time thought.<sup>104</sup> According to the Damude family tradition, John Winger continued to visit his relatives in Pelham, enjoying when he did so the shortcake that they made for him.<sup>105</sup> Undoubtedly he conducted services for those who had remained in the area. Andrew Hansler, son of the George Hansler who was among the first settlers, was minister to the group; as noted earlier, he travelled periodically, beginning in 1840, to minister to the Wainfleet members. According to family tradition, Hansler also travelled to York County to minister to the congregations at Markham and Vaughan, perhaps on love feast occasions. The Brethren there once deliberated on whether to reject his ministry because he came to them in a buggy with springs