

Pa. Garb Law Has History of Hostility to Religious Minorities

By JEAN-PAUL BENOWITZ

Residents of Elizabethtown, did you grow up in or around any of these churches? Mennonite, Reformed Mennonite, Old Order Mennonite, Amish, New Order Amish, Beachy Amish Mennonite, Church of the Brethren, Brethren in Christ, River Brethren, United Brethren, United Zion Church, Dunkard, Seventh Day Dunkard, or Quaker. Most readers know members of these churches are called the "Plain People." Dressing in plain clothes is currently required for members of these churches or historically it has been part of their tradition.

Moravians used to dress plain. There are some Quakers who still dress plain. Some readers might remember when the Methodists wore plain clothing. Members of The Allegheny Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist and Evangelical Methodist Churches still adhere to dressing plain.

Did you know it is illegal in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for members of the "Plain Churches" to wear plain clothes if they are teachers employed in public schools?

Did you know in 1895 the Pennsylvania Legislature passed the Pennsylvania Garb Law? PL. 395-S.L. Sec. 4801: "No teacher in any public school shall wear in said school or while engaged in the performance of his duty as such teacher any dress, mark, emblem or insignia indicating the fact that such a teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect, or denomination."

Did you also know in 1949 the Garb Law of 1895 was absorbed into the Public School Act Section 1112? "Religious Garb, Insignia, etc., Prohibited; Penalty. — (a) That no teacher in any public school shall wear in said school or while engaged in the performance of his duty as such teacher any dress, mark, emblem or insignia indicating the fact that such teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect or denomination."

There is a reason why members of the churches listed at the start of this article dress plain. All of these churches share a common denominator; a commitment to nonviolence based on an interpretation of Jesus Christ as a pacifist. Thus the association of these sects known as the Historic Peace Churches. The term first appeared in 1935 at a meeting of Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers held at Newton, Kan.

The formal association and joint endeavors of the peace churches resulted from challenges with the First and Second World Wars regarding support for conscientious objectors and alternatives to military service. Plain clothing is a strong political statement as it has historic roots in rejecting military uniforms reflecting rank and accomplishment. Plain dress is an ideological statement symbolizing a belief in pacifism and nonresistance.

Typically, plain clothes for men means a dark suit with the lapels removed and this is called a standing collar "plain coat" sometimes accompanied by broad fall pants. Men wear a felt or straw hat; the size of the brim can indicate their leadership role in the church. Plain dressed men do not wear neckties.

A plain dressed woman's wardrobe is defined by what is called a "cape dress" often accompanied with an apron, worn even when not in the kitchen, and can symbolize her husband or father's leadership role in the church. Their hair is grown long, worn pinned up, and finished with what is called a "covering" which is a prayer veil and can be topped with a bonnet. Plain people do not wear cosmetics or jewelry.

Dressing plain means you are a member of a church which emphasizes humility, egalitarianism, and conformity to community. Because of these beliefs and a lifestyle of nonconformity to the world, these churches have often been referred to as the "Peculiar People" as well as the "Plain People."

There has been discrimination against Plain People. During the First World War,

Joseph (1894-1918) and Michael Hofer (1893-1918), Hutterite brothers from Rockport Colony, S.D., were court marshaled. They would not forsake their baptismal vow of dressing plain and refused to wear military uniforms when they were conscripted into military service.

Imprisoned at Alcatraz (1910) they were consigned to solitary cells, fed only bread and water, and subjected to a technique of torture known as high cuffing. In December of 1918 they were transferred to Fort Leavenworth (1827) and died two weeks after they arrived, due to complications related to influenza. The U.S. Army returned the Hofer brothers' bodies, to their family, dressed in the very military uniforms they refused to wear.

In 1885 Elizabeth Myer (1863-1924), a member of the Conestoga Church of the Brethren (1724) in Bareville, Lancaster County, enrolled as a student at the Millersville State Normal School (1855). Elizabeth Myer was the only student at Millersville dressed in plain clothes. Myer felt dismissed by her teachers and marginalized by the students. She was discerning leaving the school until the principal Benjamin Franklin Shaub (1841-1913) promised she would be respected for her convictions.

Dr. Shaub was a Mennonite and therefore sympathetic to plain dress. Student and faculty opposition to Shaub's support of Elizabeth Myer forced him to resign as principal in 1887. In the same year, Elizabeth Myer graduated and delivered the salutatorian address for the class of 1877. She taught in the Lancaster County public schools for fourteen years. Elizabeth Myer's success inspired other Anabaptists of the plain sects to attend state normal schools and teach in public schools.

In the same year Elizabeth Myer entered Millersville State Normal School, as a student wearing plain garb, the right of teachers to wear religious dress in public schools was challenged, for the first time, before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1894 in the case John Hysong v. School District of Gallitzin Borough.

This public school district employed Roman Catholic nuns who wore the religious garb of the order of The Sisters of St. Joseph (1650). Certain Protestant parents wanted the nuns removed from the public school. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania rejected the contention of wearing religious garb amounted to sectarian teaching. The following year, in 1895 the Pennsylvania legislature effectively annulled the court's decision by prohibiting the wearing of religious dress in the public schools, and the state supreme court upheld the legislation.

This legislation prompted discussions among Historic Peace Churches about establishing a private institution of higher education for students from plain sects in Lancaster County. There was little support for establishing a college among the Mennonites. The Church of the Brethren, on the other hand, had established five colleges (actually private normal schools) across the nation.

In 1899 Elizabethtown College was established by members of the Church of the Brethren. The first faculty member the College hired was Elizabeth Myer. This was a clear statement of how the College was formed in response to the Garb Law by hiring the champion of defending plain dress in state normal schools and public schools.

In the first Elizabethtown College catalog, for the 1900-1901 academic year, it states, "All those who are members of the Brethren should bring their certificates of membership and it is expected that all such conform to the order of the church in all her doctrines, plainness of dress, and daily Christian deportment."

In 1908 Lillian Herr Risser (1887-1988) graduated from Elizabethtown College. The Board of School Directors for Mount Joy Township hired Risser, a plain dressed Men-

nonite from Lebanon County, to teach in the public schools. In 1909 the Board of School Directors of Mount Joy Township was brought under investigation for violating the 1895 Plain Garb Law. Certain members of the local community demanded the directors of the school, in compliance with the law, remove Lillian Risser from the classroom and the school directors subject to pay a fine.

The case was heard by Charles Israel Landis (1856-1932), President Judge of the Courts of Lancaster County. Judge Landis was an Episcopalian descendant of Swiss Mennonites from Paradise, Lancaster County who was sympathetic to plain garb. Judge Landis ruled the Act of 1895 was contrary to Sections 3 and 4 of Article I of the Bill of Rights.

The Junior Order of United American Mechanics (1844) held their annual convention in Lancaster City. This group was anti-Roman Catholic. They supported the 1895 Garb Law as a way to prevent nuns from teaching in public

schools. At their convention they appropriated \$1,000 toward the expenses of testing the Lillian Risser case and appealing to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

Elizabeth Myer, editor of the Elizabethtown College Times, featured a call to the campus and community to raise funds, "not less the \$500.00 to pay the costs of testing this case in the above courts. If any of our readers or friends of the College are disposed to contribute to this fund, please send your contribution to H. K. Ober Acting Treasurer of Elizabethtown College."

The Rev. George Bucher (1845-1923), founder of the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren (1898) in Quarryville, among the founders of Elizabethtown College, one of the first members of the Board of Trustees, wrote a series of articles in 1908 defending plain dress, published in the Daily New Era newspaper and later printed as a booklet entitled, "The Garb Law An Argument on The Pennsylvania Garb Law in Relation to

Public School Teachers."

In 1910 the case was presented before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in Commonwealth v. Amos R. Herr. The justices upheld the Garb Law of 1895 and found the school directors of Mount Joy Township in violation of the law. The law remains in effect even today.

Between 1681 and 1683 William Penn (1644-1718) established the colony of Pennsylvania as a "Holy Experiment." In 1681 before departing England for Philadelphia, Penn wrote to the settlers already living in Pennsylvania, "... you shall be governed by laws of your own making and live free." The first law passed by the Pennsylvania Assembly guaranteed religious liberty and toleration for all faiths.

Pennsylvania was established on the Quaker principles of religious liberty, political freedom, and pacifism. The democratic principles established by the "Holy Experiment" were the basis of the U. S. Constitution. For 337 years Pennsylvania has been a refuge for religious groups who were persecuted for their

belief in pacifism, conscientious objection to military service, social justice, and nonconformity to the world by wearing plain clothes.

The Pennsylvania Garb Law PL. 395-S.L. Sec. 4801 is inconsistent with the founding principles of William Penn's Holy Experiment in Pennsylvania. In 1909 Judge Charles Israel Landis (1856-1932) ruled this law is contrary to Sections 3 and 4 of Article I of the Bill of Rights. Now, 123 years after the passage of the Garb Law, Pennsylvania State Representative David S. Hickernell, (R-Lancaster-Dauphin), Elizabethtown College Class of 1983, is taking the lead on repealing the 1895 Garb Law which was absorbed in 1949 into the Public School Act Section 1112.

"Right is right, even if everyone is against it, and wrong is wrong, even if everyone is for it." — William Penn (1644-1718).

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- Cornerstone Community Ministries**
95 S. Wilson Ave.
- St. Paul's Dove Christian Fellowship**
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- Elizabethtown Brethren in Christ Church**
996 E. High St.
717-367-2651
Worship Services 8:30 & 11am
Sunday School (Adult, Youth and Children) 10:10am
etownbic.org
- Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren**
777 South Mount Joy Rd (next to E-town College)
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717-492-8167
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Worship: 11 a.m. (Sept. thru May)
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Sunday Morning Worship and Children's Church 9am
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713 Church St.
- Hope Community Church**
1806 Harrisburg Ave.
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861 Milton Grove Road
- Lord's House of Prayer**
22 W. Main St.
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530 Saint Marys Drive
- Mary Mother of the Church Parish**
625 Union School Road
- Milton Grove United Methodist Church**
2026 Cloverleaf Road
- Mount Joy Mennonite Church**
320 Musser Rd
717-653-5660
Mjmc.org
SS 9am
Worship 10:15am
- Mount Pleasant Brethren in Christ**
1756 Mount Pleasant Road
717-653-1284
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10:15am Worship
mountpleasantbic.org
- Proclamation Presbyterian Church**
815 Bruce Ave.
- Rheems Mennonite Church**
1435 Schwanger Road
- St. Luke's Episcopal Church**
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- St. Marks United Methodist Church**
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