

This Month in Moravian History

A monthly newsletter published by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem,
commemorating events from Moravian History

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250th Anniversary of the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem

250 years ago, on January 31, 1757, Brother Matthäus Hehl was assigned to organize and create an inventory of the records of the Bethlehem congregation. Within a short time Hehl completed this task and presented the elders with a detailed list of the archives' holdings. This event marks the initial organization of the Bethlehem archives. Today the Moravian Archives considers January 31, 1757 as its starting date.

Moravians believed that God was acting in their congregations. Consequently, they considered their history as something special, almost a continuation of biblical history. Because of this belief Moravians kept detailed records of events in their congregations and carefully preserved their documents. Zinzendorf, as a man of high nobility trained in law, knew the importance of good record keeping. Beginning in the early 1740s archives were organized in most Moravian communities.

Initially the records of the Moravian congregation in Bethlehem were kept in the *Gemeinhaus* on Church Street. In 1757 the church elders felt the need to better organize the papers that had accumulated there. Bishop Matthäus Hehl (1705-1787) was appointed to this task. He organized the Bethlehem archives for the first time and compiled the first catalog that still survives today.

Over the years the Moravian Archives has been housed in six different locations. The *Gemeinarchiv*, or congregational archives, remained in the *Gemeinhaus* until 1812. In August of that year the archives, along with the library of the congregation (*Gemeinbibliothek*) and the bookshop were moved to the Old Chapel, which had fallen out of use since the dedication of the new Central Church sanctuary in 1806. When the Old Chapel was turned into a concert hall in 1827, a decision was made to move the archives back to the *Gemeinhaus*. Whether or not this move actually took place is unclear. In 1836 the archives could be found in one of the rooms on the ground floor of Central Church. In 1860 after this room had become too small, the archives was moved once again, this time to the chapel or *Kleiner Saal* on the second floor of the church building. Photographs show what the archives looked like in this location.



In the beginning of the 20th century it had become quite clear that the *Kleiner Saal* was far from ideal. By now the Bethlehem archives had been combined with the archives for the Northern Province of the Moravian Church. The archives had again outgrown the available space and - even more importantly - the church building was not fireproof. Finally in 1930 the archives moved into its own building on the corner of Main Street and Elizabeth Avenue on the campus of Moravian College (today a wing of Colonial Hall). When the College offered the archives a piece of land on West Locust Street a modern repository was built with two large climate-controlled and fireproof vaults offering optimal storage conditions for the valuable historical collections of the Moravian Church. Since 1977 this has been the home for the Moravian Archives and it is from this location that the current archives' staff preserves and promotes "the future of our history".

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