

## The Moravian Women of St. Philips Moravian Inspire

The Moravian women of St. Philips, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, inspire. Today these Moravian sisters of African descent, and their predecessors over nearly two centuries, live lives of faith, dignity, thankfulness and patience. They are women of the only historic Black Moravian congregation in the United States, which is also one of the oldest African American congregations of any denomination in the country. Next year, the congregation will celebrate its 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The tenacity of this unique congregation in America is due to its people, men and women, who have nurtured and sustained the workings of the church, despite enormous challenges over the centuries. These Moravian sisters today celebrate their heritage and eagerly seek to share their church and its history with the community.

The congregation's origins are in the early period of the Moravian Church in North Carolina, when enslaved people were owned by the church. Enslaved people who were also Moravians attended church with the whites; however, with the passage of time attitudes changed. Although there was not a unified philosophy regarding slavery among residents in Salem, by the early 1800s, Black Moravians were no longer welcome in the white church. Burials of Blacks in the Salem God's Acre ended in 1813 and a separate Negro God's Acre was established in 1815.

It was the women of the white church, organized as the Female Missionary Society, who pressed for a "mission among the Negroes" in Salem. May 5, 1822 is the date of formal organization. A log church was built the next year, and the congregation was known as the African Church in Salem. A large beautiful brick church was built in 1861. Freedom was announced there on May 21, 1865 by a Union cavalry chaplain. Sunday School, with its opportunity for education, became a focus of the church after the war, with women from the Female Missionary Society continuing their support in this endeavor.

The church was named "St. Philips" in 1914 and white Moravian ministers continued to serve until 1946 when Dr. George Hall, a Nicaraguan Moravian, was appointed lay pastor of St. Philips. In 1952 the congregation made a decision they had contemplated for decades, moving to an African American neighborhood. The historic brick church they left behind in Old Salem became a general storage facility for the Salem Congregation.

At Dr. Hall's retirement, The Rev. Dr. Cedric Rodney became the first ordained minister of African descent of St. Philips in 1968. Rev. Rodney served St. Philips for nearly thirty years and was the impetus for the retrieval of the historic church. With Rev. Rodney's leadership, the "St. Philips Committee" was formed in 1989, composed of Moravian leadership and preservationists. Old Salem entered into an agreement with the Moravian Church to restore the site, which opened to the public in 2003 and includes the 1861 Brick Church, the Strangers' God's Acre, the Negro God's Acre, the reconstructed 1823 Log Church, and the grounds. The Brick Church remains a consecrated building, and is a sacred place.

The St. Philips congregation has been a participant in the process of retrieval over the past two decades, and significant outreach from Old Salem and the Salem Congregation has brought the St. Philips Moravians closer to their roots.

As facilitators of the African American program at Old Salem in 2009 and 2010, we have come to know, love and admire the Moravians of the St. Philips congregation, men, women and children. We became partners in sharing the St. Philips story. They eagerly seek knowledge of their history, desire honesty in its presentation, and have participated in training sessions to learn. Several members serve as docents in sharing the story with visitors to Old Salem. One of the ladies attended the Brick Church as a little girl and shares her stories with visitors and the community. These women help to host events on site and at community events.

The women of St. Philips prepare the St. Philips graveyards for Easter with beautiful flowers. Christmas Lovefeasts are held on the anniversary of the consecration of the Brick Church, December 15. The congregation worships in their historic home on fifth Sundays of months with five Sundays. Children and grandchildren are included in all church activities, creating memories for them. This renewed vigor brings life to history and spiritual continuity to the historic place.

The sisters of St. Philips are mothers, wives, professionals. At least three women attended St. Philips in the Brick Church as little girls and fondly recall Dr. and Mrs. Hall and how she would drive their station wagon to homes to pick up children on Sunday. Several women were active in the Civil Rights Movement. The Woolworth's in downtown Winston-Salem was the site of the 1960 sit-in that led to the desegregation of the lunch counter after a record 107 days. During the tumultuous period of this time, at least one St. Philips sister was arrested for peaceful protest; another was present in Washington for Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech. They have lived through the decades of change and lack of change. The struggle to overcome racism is ongoing here in Winston-Salem, and the sisters of St. Philips continue to live their lives with that realization every day, but they have also seen progress through their lives.

The Moravian sisters of St. Philips cheerfully attend to their duties as Moravian women and travel to meetings and conferences in Winston-Salem and beyond. The white and black worlds remain separate in many ways, and they experience perplexing encounters but they persevere. In April 2010, the decision was made to bring St. Philips Moravian Church into the Salem Congregation. With St. Philips now in the Salem Congregation, after nearly 200 years, Black Moravians may once again be buried in Salem God's Acre.

The Moravian women of St. Philips are steadfast in their faith and positive in outlook. Knowing their heritage, the struggles they have encountered and continue to encounter, they inspire us.

Submitted by:

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