

This Month in Moravian History

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

No. 23

September 2007

Lafayette and the Moravians

September 6 marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, marquis de Lafayette - French hero of the American Revolution and friend of the Moravians.

Lafayette convalesced for nearly a month in Bethlehem after suffering a leg wound in the Battle of Brandywine on September 11, 1777. With a love of liberty and hatred for the British, Lafayette had left behind a wife and young daughter in order to join the American cause against the wishes of the French monarchy. He joined the American army as a volunteer and served at his own expense after Congress appointed him a major-general on July 31, 1777. At the time of his appointment, he was 19 years old.

The Bethlehem diarist recorded the “distinguished Marquis” arrived in Bethlehem ten days after suffering his wound, late in the afternoon of September 21 with several other French officers. In a letter to his wife from Bethlehem, Lafayette described his wound: “*The surgeons are astonished by the rate at which it heals; they are in ecstasy every time they dress it, and maintain that it is the most beautiful thing in the world. I myself find it very foul, very tedious, and rather painful; there is no accounting for tastes.*”

In describing Bethlehem he wrote in the same letter: “*I am at this moment in the solitude of Bethlehem... This establishment is truly touching and very interesting. The people here lead a gentle and peaceful life.*” On October 16 the Bethlehem diarist remarked: “*since September 21 [Lafayette] has been recuperating here at the Inn,*” although a long oral tradition in Bethlehem has placed Lafayette in the home of Georg Friedrich Boeckel, the overseer of the Bethlehem farm. In this version, Lafayette’s care is credited to Boeckel’s second wife and her 21 year old step-daughter, Elisabeth. This story is bolstered by Elisabeth’s lifelong career as a nurse in Bethlehem and the fact that she never married.

The Bethlehem diarist twice described Lafayette as a “handsome young man,” who toured the Single Sisters’ house and read reports of the Moravian missionaries from Greenland “with much pleasure.” George Washington took a paternal liking to Lafayette, describing him in one report as “sensible, discreet in his manners” and possessing “a large share of bravery and military ardour.”

Lafayette seems to have cultivated this popularity through his diplomacy and good nature. From Bethlehem he wrote to his wife, “*As for my part in the typical disputes and discussions found in all armies, especially when officers of several nations are together, I am always even-tempered and easygoing and am happy to be liked by everyone, foreigner or American. I like them all.*”



This anniversary is marked by two local exhibits: *Son and his Adoptive Father:*

The Marquis de Lafayette and George Washington at the Williams Center for the Arts, Lafayette College, Easton, from 9/6 - 10/28/07; and Lafayette in Bethlehem at the Moravian Museum of Bethlehem, from 9/7-12/31/07.

Sources: *Bethlehem Diary*, Sept-Oct 1777; Church register Bethlehem; Catalog of the single Sisters in Bethlehem (BethSS 24); Memoir of Elisabeth Boeckel; *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution, Selected Letters and Papers, 1776-1790*, ed. Stanley J. Idzerda et al, Cornell University Press, 1983.

published by the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pa.
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image: print, 1857, based on pastel portrait by Jean Baptist Weyler, 1790 (courtesy David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania).