

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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250th anniversary of the founding of Bethania

Extraordinary circumstances mark the founding of the Moravian community of Bethania in North Carolina in the summer of 1759. War, typhus and the demise of Zinzendorf have all been associated with the foundation of this small farming community in Wachovia.

In 1759 the French and Indian War raged around the inhabitants of Bethabara, the first Moravian settlement in North Carolina. A constant threat of Indian attacks coupled with a scarcity of food drove many settlers to seek refuge at the stockaded mill at Bethabara. By May the Moravians at Bethabara housed 25 neighboring families, 119 extra people in total.

At the same time Moravian leaders elsewhere considered founding small farming villages in the Wachovia tract as a means of producing revenue to benefit the financially strapped church in Europe. When Spangenberg arrived in Bethabara on June 5 with the plan to establish Bethania, he serendipitously found many willing volunteers to settle the community. The diarist recorded: *Among the refugees at the mill there are also many who gladly hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These are people who have already been chased here from the New River and their homesteads several times before. By this means they have become acquainted with the Brethren. Up to this point they have indeed had no hope of coming into closer fellowship with the Moravian Church other than simply being neighbors and friends. Now, however, the situation is exceptional, in that they have been driven here just when Brother Joseph is arriving [to found a new village], and when they themselves have developed an inclination to live together in a village.* The only problem being, the new community was intended for Moravians only.



On June 12 the site of Bethania was chosen in the so-called "Black Walnut Bottom," an area northwest of Bethabara nestled in a wide valley between two creeks and gentle hills. On June 30 the land was staked out with twelve building lots situated above a central square, and twelve below. On July 1 eight refugee families in Bethabara drafted a letter seeking admittance to the new community stating that "they recognize the truth of the Brethren's teaching and experienced the power of the blood of Jesus Christ upon their hearts," notwithstanding the fact that "at the present time they cannot return to their homesteads." After a few days consideration, in a highly unusual move, these families were allowed to settle at Bethania, along with the eight Moravian families chosen.

This decision, although successful at the outset, was not without repercussions. The news of mixing Moravians with non-Moravians at Bethania, which was delivered to Zinzendorf in Herrnhut on May 3, 1760, enraged him to such a degree that he experienced a "connoption fit" and died six days later. Earlier, amidst the clearing and move to Bethania, a typhus epidemic tore through Bethabara, killing ten Moravians, including the doctor and minister. Despite this loss of leadership, the settlement of Bethania progressed quickly, and the congregation thrives 250 years later.



Sources: Hamel, *Bethania: The Village by the Black Walnut Bottom* (2009); Crews and Starbuck, *With Courage for the Future* (2002); Crews, *Bethania: A Fresh Look at its Birth* (1993).
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