

# This Month in Moravian History

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## Christmas at the Bethlehem Boarding School for Girls



How did students at the Moravian Boarding School for Girls in Bethlehem experience Christmas around 1790? To answer this question, we turn to an unusual source. The records of the school contain a school diary for the years 1788 to 1791. The diary was kept not by a teacher but by the students themselves. Each month a different girl wrote the diary. These diaries give fascinating insight into life at the school and into how these students experienced life in a Moravian community. In this issue of our newsletter we quote their entries about the celebration of Christmas.

At this time, the school was still housed in what today is called the Bell House. Central Moravian Church was not built yet. The church services were held in the Old Chapel. According to Moravian practice of the time, church services were called “meetings.”

The 1788 entry describes a putz that one of the teachers had made for the students: “Today being the birth of Jesus Christ, Sister Jacobson made us an artificial description thereof on a table and window in our room,

to our great pleasure. Some of us have never seen the like, neither heard much of this important matter. Some of the children said they would [= wanted] not be at home for ever so much, they only wished their parents could be partakers of their joy. At the lovefeast we were inexpressible happy. Next day after the preaching some children said they never heard such a sermon before. In the afternoon some of us went to their friends and received, so as all the rest, Christmas presents.”

*1788, by Lydia Palmer from Horsham, Pa.*

“Thursday 24th. Today being the night watch, we employed ourselves with painting. Sr. Fisher was so kind as to present me with a small plate, some cakes & pins. It snowed middling hard today. Before meeting we spoke our dialogue. After we had eaten some supper we went in the meeting hall. It was very full so that we could go without cloaks. When it was most out we were surprised by looking on the gallery as it was most beautiful illuminated. Afterwards all the brethren came on our side, which (after we had sung our pieces) made us soon go

out. We all went happy to bed.

Friday 25th. In the morning as we came from bed, we found our lb. of cakes laying on the table with a slate pencil from Sr. Langgaar by each, and some apples. After being washed & combed we went to breakfast where we found sugar cake & coffee. The first meeting was German preaching, afterwards English; in both of which was beautiful music. ... In the evening, we spoke our dialogue for our beloved Mr. Fries. After meeting we had the pleasure to go & see the illumination of the brethren’s house, which was delightful.”

*1789, by Maria Rosina Unger  
from Lancaster, Pa.*

“Today we were all very happy as it was Christmas Eve. At one o’clock we spoke the dialogues to try them. At four we all assembled in the dining room and spoke them for the ministers and other company. In the evening we attended [the] meeting kept by our dear Brother Klingsohr which was delightful. Towards the latter part all the children under twelve had candles to hold and the gallery [in the Old Chapel] was illuminated with 50 wax candles in commemoration of its being 50 years when Christmas was celebrated in Bethlehem in the first house.

*1791, by Rachel Howard  
from Baltimore, Md.*

### Sources

Image: Christmas celebration at the Girls’ School, by Anna Rosina Kliet who was a teacher from 1788 until 1805. Source: School diary 1788-1791 (FemSem 285-290)