

This Month in Moravian History

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The Moravian Founding of Nazareth, Pennsylvania

This month marks the 275th anniversary of the arrival of Moravians in Nazareth. After receiving a commission from evangelist George Whitefield to construct an orphanage, the first group of Moravian settlers arrived in May 1740.

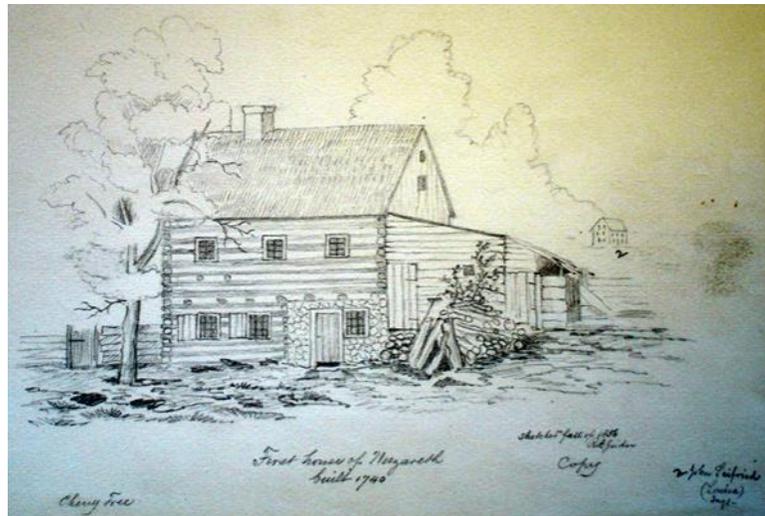
In the early months of 1740 the evangelist George Whitefield invited the remaining Moravians in Savannah, Georgia, to accompany him to Pennsylvania, where he intended to establish a school for the orphaned children of slaves. The Moravians accepted this calling, and set out for Philadelphia aboard Whitefield's sloop on April 13. Arriving in Philadelphia about two weeks later, the group sought temporary refuge in Skippack.

On May 5, Whitefield and Peter Boehler, the leader of the small Moravian group, met in Skippack and discussed possible locations for the school for orphans. Whitefield suggested a 5000-acre tract that he had recently purchased from the Penn family, situated in the Forks of the Delaware. Boehler and Moravian sympathizer Henrich Antes inspected the property on May 7, and returned to Skippack to confirm the settlement site with Whitefield.

The first group of Moravian settlers arrived on May 30 as "working guests" of Whitefield, camping overnight under an oak tree, which affectionately became known as "Boehler's Oak." Among this small group were Anton Seiffert, Peter Boehler, Johann Martin Mack, David Zeisberger Sr., Rosina Zeisberger, David Zeisberger Jr., Johann Böhner, Matthias Seybold, and Hannah Hümmel, along with two indentured boys named Benjamin Summers and James.

Soon after the arrival of the Moravian settlers, theological differences between Boehler and Whitefield resulted in a cessation of all building activities on the property. For this reason, the settlers acquired land south of Nazareth and founded the community of Bethlehem. Despite their differences, the relationship was eventually reconciled. Amidst his own financial struggles, Whitefield later sold the property to the Moravians. Whitefield wrote of their reconciliation on November 15, 1741: "I have read your kind Letter over & over again & have said Amen & Amen to all the petitions you put up concerning Our Union. Oh! my D[ea]r Brother, none but the Sympathizing Jesus knows what I have undergone sin[c]e our Difference."

On this original property remains the three-and-a-half story limestone building known as the Whitefield House, which served for almost two centuries for various purposes: as a place of worship, a boarding school for Moravian girls, a nursery for the children of missionaries, as the Moravian Theological Seminary, and as a home for missionaries on furlough. Built between 1740 and 1743, it functions today as the administrative home and museum of the Moravian Historical Society. Also remaining is the Gray Cottage, which served as the first Widows' House in America for Moravians. The first house, which was removed in the nineteenth century, was recently uncovered in an archaeological dig on the grounds of the Moravian Historical Society.



Sources

Image: Pencil drawing of the first house of Nazareth, by Rufus Grider, 1856 (MAB). Sources: *Two Centuries of Nazareth, 1740-1940*. Nazareth, 1940; Bethlehem Congregational Diary; Peter Boehler Papers (MAB); Bethlehem Digital History Project.