

JOHN ADAMS' BETHLEHEM
"A curious and remarkable town"



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John Adams (1735-1826) visited Bethlehem twice during his political career.

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Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, was founded in 1741 by the Moravians, a middle-European Protestant denomination, as a base for missionary work among the Indians of North America and German settlers who had no church affiliation. It quickly became a unique community on the colonial American frontier, attracting many visitors with its unusual social organization, its excellent examples of Germanic architecture, and its sophisticated industrial area. Often these contemporary travellers left vivid and varied accounts of Bethlehem, in their letters, autobiographies, and diaries, capturing the life and spirit of this religious settlement in ways far different than the early Moravians described themselves in their own prolific records.

The Revolutionary War years in particular brought many notables to Bethlehem. One important visitor during this time was the Massachusetts patriot John Adams (1735-1826). Adams stayed in Bethlehem on two occasions when he was a member of the Continental Congress. The first time, in January 1777, he was on his way to rejoin Congress in Baltimore where it had convened after fleeing from Philadelphia at the British Army's approach. Three months earlier, Adams had been granted a leave of absence to visit his wife and family in Braintree, Massachusetts. After hearing of George Washington's victories over the British at Trenton and Princeton, Adams was urged by his fellow congressmen to return to the group. Adams' journey took him along the Hudson River to Poughkeepsie, across the Hudson through New Jersey, then across the Delaware River to Bethle-

hem—all in an effort to find a road not controlled by the British.

Adams arrived in Bethlehem in late January. He reached Baltimore on February 1 and six days later wrote a letter to his favorite correspondent, his beloved wife Abigail, in which he promised her a “more particular Account of that curious and remarkable Town.”

Adams began his letter with a physical description of Bethlehem:

When We first came in sight of the Town, We found a Country better cultivated and more agreeably diversified with Prospects of orchards and Fields, Groves and Meadows, Hills and Valleys, than any we had seen. . .

The Town is regularly laid out, the Streets straight and at right Angles like those in Philadelphia. It stands upon an Eminence and has a fine large Brook flowing on one End of it, and the Lehigh a Branch of the Delaware on the other. Between the Town and the Lehigh are beautifull public Gardens.

Colonial Bethlehem's appearance impressed every visitor. The community was well-planned with a large, open grassy area in the center called *Der Platz*, meaning “the place” or “the plaza” in German. *Der Platz's* boundaries and their modern counterparts were the Single Brethren's House on the south (south campus of Moravian College), the Pottery and Forge Complex on the west (the west side of Main Street), the original agricultural area with its barns and stables on the north (the location of the present Hotel Bethlehem), and the apothecary shop and children's house on the east (the east side of Main Street where the Moravian Book Store stands today).



This view of Bethlehem, drawn by Nicholas Garrison in 1757, shows a well-planned community on the colonial frontier.

All roads opened onto *Der Platz*. Roads to Allentown led north and southwest. Ohio Road, so-called because in colonial times it led in the direction of the Ohio Territory, went down the hill to the industrial area along the Monocacy Creek (Adams' “large Brook”). Church Street with its large stone buildings was originally called “Sisters' Alley” and Market Street, just north of God's Acre, was originally *Ladengasse* (in German, “store street”) because the first community store was opened here in 1752.

Church Street was old Bethlehem's main residential area and many of the original stately buildings remain today. Here stood the *Gemein Haus*, or Community House, erected in 1741 out of logs. It is the oldest building in modern Bethlehem and probably the largest log house still in continuous use in the United States. Other residential buildings included the Sisters' House (1744), built originally for the unmarried men of Bethlehem but later turned over to the single women in 1748; the Bell House (1746), for the married couples which

later housed the famous Moravian Seminary for Girls; the Brethren's House (1748), the largest structure in colonial Bethlehem and a center for crafts and trades, as well as living quarters for the unmarried men; and the Widows' House (1768), for the widows of Moravian missionaries and ministers. Modern-day Moravians are justifiably proud that most of these old residential buildings are still owned by the Moravian Church, have been maintained in excellent condition, and are basically used for the same purposes for which they were erected over 200 years ago.

Church Street was also the religious center of old Bethlehem. The first place of worship in the community was a room in the *Gemein Haus* called the "Saal." In 1751, a second house of worship was constructed to accommodate more people. This building, called the Old Chapel today, was visited by many Revolutionary War period visitors to Bethlehem, including George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette. John Adams never saw Bethlehem's third church, the Federal-style Central Moravian Church built in 1803. Now a Bethlehem landmark, this structure could seat 1,500 people and was probably the largest church in Pennsylvania when completed.

John Adams was particularly impressed with Bethlehem's agricultural planning. The large barn, stables, and stockyard, which originally stood on the northern boundary of *Der Platz*, had by this date been moved to the east side of Main Street just north of the junction of the present Market Street. The town was surrounded by well-kept fields of wheat, rye, oats, corn, peas, barley, and buckwheat, and 18th century travellers reported that probably nowhere else in Pennsylvania could be seen such well-standing grain fields. The Moravi-



Bethlehem at the time of John Adams' visit did not appear much different than it did in this drawing made by Garrison and Oerter in 1784.

ans also maintained vineyards, vegetable and herb gardens, and extensive peach and apple orchards.

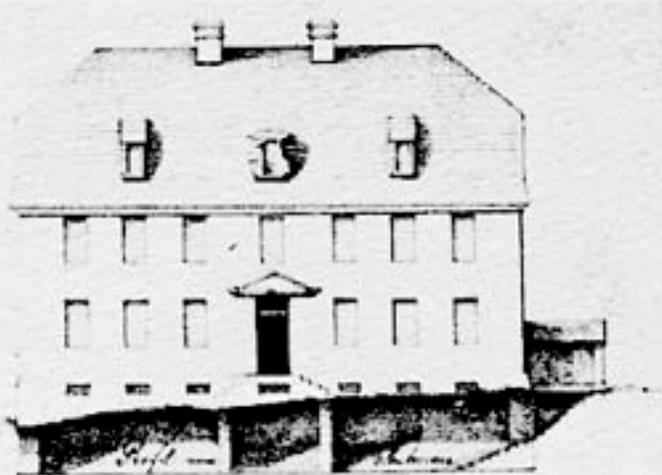
Careful agricultural methods in land clearing and soil preparation were necessary to produce enough food for Bethlehem's constantly growing population. In 1757, the 300 residents of the town consumed almost 2,300 bushels of wheat, 13,000 eggs, and 16,000 pounds of meat. Six years later, when the population had increased to 500, Augustus Spangenberg, one of colonial Bethlehem's most able leaders, reported that the Moravians in Pennsylvania lived more comfortably than people who had resided in the colony for 30 years.

Adams' continued his letter with a description of his lodging which he praised highly:

When We came into the Town We were directed to a public House kept by a Mr. Johnson, which I think was the best Inn, I ever saw. It belongs it seems to the Society, is furnished, at their Expence, and is kept for

their Profit, or at their Loss. Here you might find every Accomodation that you could wish for yourself, your servants and Horses, and at no extravagant Rates neither.

The patriot, of course, was describing the Sun Inn. Located near the corner of present-day Main and Broad Streets, the inn, built in 1758, was famous for its fine wines, cuisine, and hospitality. The Moravian Church owned the hotel just as it owned all the land and the other trades in Bethlehem.



When Adams visited Bethlehem he stayed in the Sun Inn, a 1758 hostelry known for its fine food and hospitality.

During the first 20 years of Bethlehem's history this system of complete Church ownership was called the General Economy. The people worked for the good of the community, receiving food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, and cultural benefits in place of wages.

By the time of Adams' visit in 1777, however, that portion of the General Economy dealing with communal life was no longer in effect. In 1760, Moravian craftsmen began to work for a wage and to rent their buildings, tools, and inventories from the Church. This change in economic policy was brought about by the increased secularization of the community. Moravian workers saw their neighbors working for a profit and desired to do the same. In addition, the increase in the quantity and quality of goods produced by the Moravians improved Bethlehem's standard of living and the idea developed that perhaps the workers did not really have to depend on the General Economy any longer. The Church did continue to own all the land in Bethlehem until 1844, however.

The increase in the standard of living was due in large part to the fine industrial area which the Moravians had established along the Monocacy Creek. Adams, like most other colonial visitors, was impressed with this area and he stated that the Moravians had "carried the mechanical Arts to greater Perfection here than in any Place which I have seen." In particular Adams mentioned the Waterworks, the first pumped municipal water system in the American colonies, which he described as a "sett of Pumps which go by Water, which force the Water up through leaden Pipes, from the River to the Top of the Hill, near an hundred feet." Adams also observed that the Moravians had the "best Grist Mills and bolting Mills, that are any where to be found. The best fulling Mills, an oil Mill, a Mill to grind Bark for the Tanyard, a Dycing House where all Colours are died, Machines for shearing Cloth &c."

From its founding, Bethlehem was designed to be self-sufficient. The residents grew their own



Adams was intrigued by the 1762 Waterworks, the first pumped municipal water system in the colonies. This building has been restored by Historic Bethlehem Inc.



The 1751 Grist-and-fulling Mill in the Industrial Area provided food for the Continental Army.

food and made their own goods from local materials. There were two areas of economic activity in the town. Light crafts were located in the residential area at the top of the hill. The single women had charge of spinning and linen weaving. The Single Brethren's House was also a core of activity with the saddler, tailor, cobbler, community bakery, braziers, bell founder, and silk worm raising located here.

Heavy industry was located along the Monocacy Creek and in the Pottery and Forge Complex sites on the west side of *Der Platz*. By 1747, the Moravians had established 32 industries in Bethlehem. Many of these required the power of the Monocacy Creek to turn the waterwheels that operated millstones and gears. The men who ran these trades were highly skilled craftsmen and technologists.

A subsidiary industrial complex was located further downstream at the junction of the Monocacy Creek and the Lehigh River on Sand Island, just under the present Fahy Bridge. This small peninsula contained a saw mill, the single sisters' laundry, the flax processing house, and the linen bleachery. Sheep were also raised here.

While these industries were able to supply the Moravians with most of their needs, it was also necessary to sell some of their products to get money on hand for items such as gunpowder, iron, and salt which they could not make or grow themselves. The first community store was located on Market Street in the Timothy Horsfield House (the residential portion of this building still stands). Of the items for sale in the store when it opened in 1752, the Moravians were able to supply about 180 of them. The Moravians also traded with Philadelphia and New York, dealing especially in the

purchase of hides for the Tannery and the exportation of linseed oil processed in the Oil Mill.

The Moravians had a very unique social system which visitors never failed to comment upon. This highly controlled social structure was called the choir system (from the German *chor*, a group to sing the praises of God). It was a grouping of individuals according to age, sex, and marital status. Thus there were choirs for the single men, the single women, the married couples, the widows, the widowers, the older boys, the older girls, the little girls, the little boys, and the children in the nursery. Many of these groups had their own residences which were combinations of dormitories and industrial and religious centers. Adams mentions three of the choirs in his letter—the men's, women's, and widows'. His remarks about the single women's choir, however, are the most interesting:

There is another large Building, appropriated in the same Manner to the young Women. There is a Governess, a little like the Lady Abbess, in some other Institutions, who has the Superintendence of the whole, and they have elders. Each Apartment has a Number of young Women, who are vastly industrious, some Spinning, some Weaving, others employed in all the most curious Works in Linnen, Wool, Cotton, Silver and Gold, Silk and Velvet. . .

Adams went on to state that:

This Institution displeased me much. Their Dress was uniform and clean, but very inelegant. Their Rooms were kept extremely warm

with Dutch Stoves: and the Heat, the Want of fresh Air and Exercise, relaxed the poor Girls in such a manner, as must I think destroy their Health. Their Countenances were languid and pale.



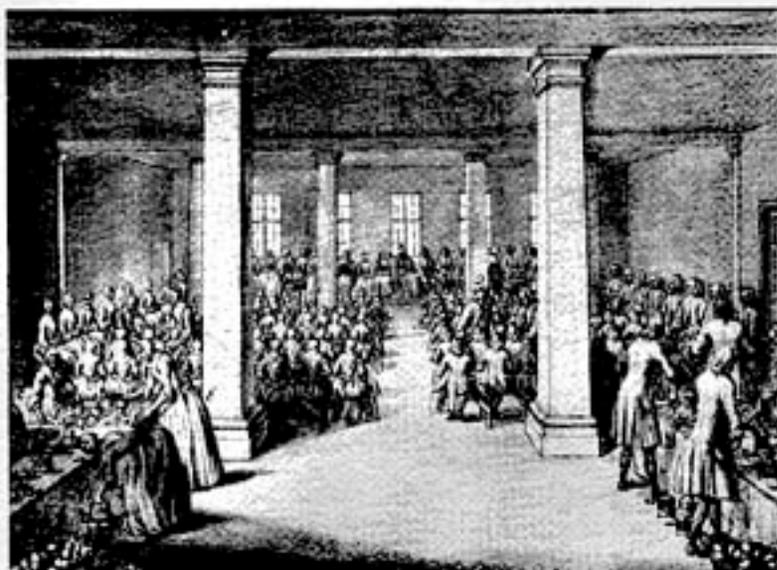
John Adams visited the Sisters' House, an "Institution which displeased me very much."

Art and music also attracted Adams' attention during his stay in Bethlehem. He was taken into the church (the Old Chapel) where he observed that it was "hung round with Pictures of our Saviour from his Birth to his Death, Resurrection and Ascention. . ." These were painted by John Valentine Haidt, "the Painter who is still living in Bethlehem, but very old," considered by modern scholars to be the first painter of religious subjects in the colonies.

Adams then commented upon the "good organ in their Church of their own make." Music was an integral part of the sacred and secular lives of the

early Moravians. Hymns were used freely in all religious services and the Moravians went to work singing songs of praise. Organized musical groups included the Collegium Musicum, founded in 1744, a group of amateur musicians who played for their own pleasure, and the trombone choir which announced religious services, deaths, and the arrival of important visitors to Bethlehem. Talented Moravian craftsmen also built their own musical instruments such as violins and organs.

John Adams closed his letter to Abigail with other interesting observations including comments on courtship and marriage and the basis of the Moravians' religious beliefs. He also stated that "Christian Love is their professed Object, but it is said they love Money and make their public Institutions subservient to the Gratification of that Passion."

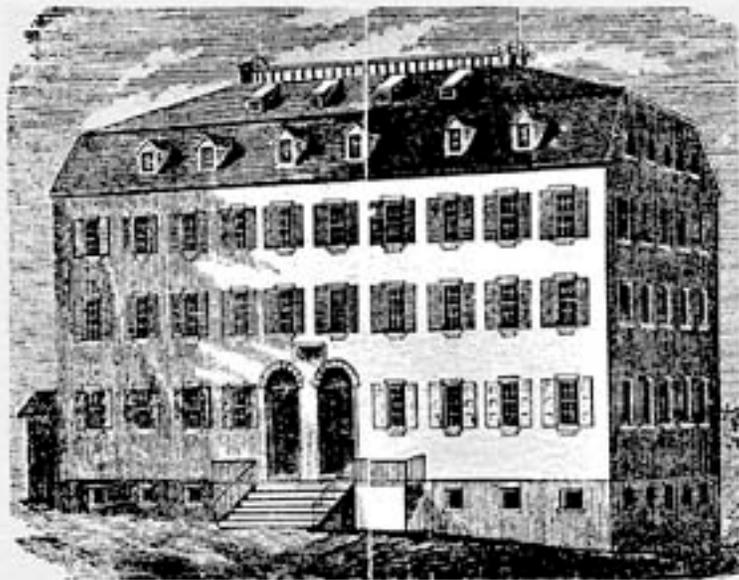


Adams attended a number of church services in Bethlehem about which he reported that "The Women sat together in one Body and the Men in another."

John Adams came to Bethlehem again from September 22 to September 24, 1777. Still a member of Congress, he, like many of his fellow congressmen, passed through Bethlehem on his way to Lancaster to escape the British General Howe's invasion of Philadelphia. This time he recorded his brief observations in his diary. He noted that he visited the single women's choir and the industrial area and "walked among the Rows of Cherry Trees, with spacious orchards of Apple Trees on each Side of the Cherry Walk." In addition, Adams commented that at a church service "The Women sat together in one Body and the Men in another. The Women dressed all alike. The Womens Heads resembled a Garden of white Cabbage Heads."

While John Adams' observations of life in Bethlehem in 1777 are informative, he failed to mention the effect the Revolutionary War had on the Town. While war never came directly to Bethlehem, the town did feel its wrath. The Industrial Area provided food, leather, and linseed oil for the Continental Army. The single sisters supplied lint, bandages, clothing, and blankets for both soldiers and civilians who had fled from war-torn areas of the country. Bands of militia marching through the community disturbed the peace. Soldiers encamped on the outskirts of Bethlehem while prisoners-of-war and their guards were housed in the *Gemein Haus* and Waterworks. The question of pacifism versus the bearing of arms became a moral issue which provided many differences of opinion among Bethlehem's residents and leaders.

The care and housing of wounded soldiers in the Continental Army was, perhaps, the most significant contribution to the Revolutionary War effort by the Moravians in Bethlehem. Twice the Single Brethren's House was used as an official



The Single Brethren's House, from a drawing made about 1814, twice served as the official hospital of the Continental Army during the Revolution.

hospital for the Army. The first time, from December 4, 1776 to July 21, 1777, occurred after the Battle of Brandywine and coincided with Adams' earlier visit. While most of the single men's trades continued to operate, a number of apartments in the building were cleared for over 400 sick and wounded soldiers.

On the second occasion, from September 20, 1777, to June 1, 1778, the Brethren's House was completely vacated and about 120 single men and boys were housed in private homes in Bethlehem and in the Brethren's Houses of Nazareth and Christiansbrunn, nearby Moravian communities. Additional buildings were also hastily erected behind the Brethren's House to serve as a kitchen and to provide more hospital space. About 800 wounded and sick were crowded into these facili-

ties, and hospital personnel wanted to appropriate either the Sisters' House or the Widows' House as well. Members of the Continental Congress staying in Bethlehem, including Adams, however, immediately vetoed the suggestion.

Conditions in the hospital were so cramped that typhoid fever spread rapidly, killing about 400 soldiers who were hastily buried on the hillside on the east bank of the Monocacy Creek overlooking the Industrial Area. A number of Moravians also contracted the disease and died, including the son of John Ettwein, Bethlehem's assistant administrator.

After the hospital moved away from Bethlehem in 1778, the Moravians faced a major reorganization of their community life. The Brethren's House was reconverted to use as a residence for the unmarried men but the full complement of trades once carried on here never reached its pre-war years' peak.

John Adams' Bethlehem was indeed a remarkable and curious town. However, if Adams had returned when he was the second president of the United States, from 1797 to 1801, he would have found that almost nothing had changed. Bethlehem remained a quiet, little community in the years following the Revolutionary War. Change would have to wait until the industrialization of the early 1800's.

ABOUT HISTORIC BETHLEHEM INCORPORATED

Historic Bethlehem Incorporated (HBI) was organized in 1957 as a private, non-profit, community, educational institution to preserve Bethlehem's unique heritage. In 1966, it acquired from the City of Bethlehem a ten-acre tract along the Monocacy Creek which had once been the site of early Bethlehem's thriving industrial area. Here, where John Adams stated the Moravians had "carried the Mechanical Arts to greater perfection than in any Place I have seen," HBI began to restore,



preserve, and interpret this aspect of Bethlehem's history.

Today the 18th Century Industrial Area, as this tract is called, includes 12 buildings, sites, and foundations. Through its extensive archival and archaeological programs, HBI has restored the 1761 Tannery and the 1762 Waterworks (the first pumped municipal water system in the American colonies) and reconstructed the 1764 Springhouse. In addition, the Industrial Area contains the 1869 Luckenbach Flour Mill and the 1780's and 1830's Grist Miller's House; the foundations of the butchery, the dye house and dwelling, the oil mill, and the pottery; and the sites of the forge complex, the grist-and-fulling mill, the tawry, and numerous outbuildings.

HBI interprets the industrial history of the early Moravian community to the public in various ways. The site is open to the public five days a week for tours and special visits for school students and other groups are regularly scheduled. In-school educational packages are available, as well as "living history" programs. Research, both archival and archaeological, is an important aspect of HBI's work and an active publication program has begun. In addition, HBI sponsors intern programs to introduce local college and high school students to museum work.

HBI also owns the 1810 John Sebastian Goundie House at 501 Main Street. Once the home of a prominent Moravian brewer, the Goundie House has been restored and the authentically furnished North Rooms exhibit area interprets the life-style of a middle-class master craftsmen in the early 19th century. The Goundie House Shop, featuring a fine selection of hand-crafted wares is also located here.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

John Adams' letter to his wife Abigail can be found in *The Book of Abigail and John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) edited by L.H. Butterfield. The excerpts from Adams' diary were taken from the *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961, 4 vols.). Additional information about this period in Adams' career can be found in Page Smith's *John Adams* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962, vol. I).

Material on the Moravians and Bethlehem during the Revolution can be found in *Bethlehem of Pennsylvania: The First One Hundred Years* (Bethlehem: Lehigh Litho, Inc., 1968); Gillian L. Gollin's *Moravians in Two Worlds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), and Kenneth G. Hamilton's *John Ettwein and the Moravian Church During the Revolutionary Period* (Times Publishing Company, Bethlehem, Pa., 1940).

Historic Bethlehem Incorporated is gratefully acknowledged as the source for the photographs used in this book.



Karen Zerbe Huetter, a native of Reading, Pennsylvania, received her B. A. degree in History, *cum laude*, in June 1969, from Albright College (Reading, Pennsylvania). While at Albright, she was awarded the Phi Alpha Theta prize in 1969, for her senior thesis: *A Question of Loyalty or Treason: Local and National Pro-German Sympathies in World War I*.

Mrs. Huetter received her M. A. in History from Lehigh University (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) in 1975. Her thesis, *A Moravian Pilgrim's Progress: The "Travel Diary" of Nathanael Braun*, is an annotated translation from the German of the travel account of Moravian missionaries Nathanael and Elisabeth Braun, who went from Philadelphia to Jamaica in 1797.

Since June 1970, Mrs. Huetter has been employed as Historian by Historic Bethlehem Inc. Her duties include research in Bethlehem and Moravian history, preparation of interpretive materials, and care of the Archives. She also served as Acting Executive Director in July and August, 1976.

Mrs. Huetter has published *The Bethlehem Waterworks* (1976) and "Call to Arms: Reading's Reaction to the Gettysburg Campaign" (*Historical Review of Berks County*, Autumn, 1970).