

Moravian Women in Eighteenth-Century North Carolina:
A Proposal for Research

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Topic

The Moravian Brethren were officially recognized as a Protestant Episcopal Church in 1749 when British Parliament “passed an act” securing “the free exercise of all their rights as a *church* [...] throughout Great Britain and all her colonies.”¹ The Moravians, or Unity of Brethren, had proven “themselves as a sober, quiet, and religious people, and had made many improvements” in their first Pennsylvania settlement in 1747.² The act encouraged the people to seek out additional property for the expansion of their mission, and, in 1751, the Brethren ultimately accepted an offer from Lord Granville, “the owner of a very large tract of land in North Carolina.”³

By late 1753, the first Moravian settlers arrived from their original settlement in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to the Piedmont of North Carolina, near present-day Winston-Salem, to establish the tract of 100,000 acres known as Wachovia. Over the next twelve years, five individual communities arose from Lord Granville’s former property – Bethabara, Bethania, Salem, Friedberg, and Friedland.⁴ Community life was central to the Moravian way with “property” being “held in common and settlers” drawing from “community stores for food, tools, and other supplies.” The church controlled both the government as well as “many aspects of the personal lives of the people.”⁵ For the success of the settlement, it was essential that every member of the community play a significant part. Men were the authority figures, while children focused on education. Women’s roles have been largely disregarded in most traditional accounts of Moravian history. Despite the existing detailed records of both church activity and community

¹ Reverend Levin T. Reichel, *The Moravians of North Carolina: An Authentic History* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1857), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ C. Daniel Crews, “Moravians,” NCpedia, last modified January 1, 2006, <https://www.ncpedia.org/moravians>.

⁵ Harry McKown, “November 1753: Moravians Come to Bethabara,” NC Miscellany, last modified November 1, 2008, https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/ncm/2008/11/01/this_month_nov_1753/.

life, historians have seldom utilized them to explore the lives of women during these initial years of settlement in North Carolina.⁶

To gain a fuller understanding of how Moravian society operated and ultimately succeeded in establishing a settlement in North Carolina, it is essential that historians consider all participants, including the often over-looked women of the community. In her book, *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801*, Elisabeth Sommer alluded to one uncommon place where women were included: “the Brethren stood apart from the world in allowing women to hold authority within the church.”⁷ Despite this fascinating revelation, Sommer failed to address these roles any further. In a similar manner, Leland Ferguson, the author of *God’s Fields: Landscape, Religion, and Race in Moravian Wachovia*, referenced two women whose gravestones archeologists uncovered during an excavation in Salem. The inscriptions carved into these stones read, “‘Rose, 1855, Aged 81y.’ Rose’s gravestone lay over a similar one for ‘Phyllis, dec’d Dec: 9, 1828, Aged 21 Years.’”⁸ However, his interest appeared to end there. There is no further mention of these women or the roles they played in Salem. Given the community’s emphasis on transcribing meticulous records throughout their history, it is difficult to believe these details were not available. These are just two examples of researchers’ negligence to include women in their accounts of the early years of the Moravian settlement in North Carolina. It is crucial that scholars confront this gender gap in

⁶ Crews.

⁷ Elisabeth W. Sommer, *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 27, https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=938358&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_27.

⁸ Leland Ferguson, *God’s Fields: Landscape, Religion, and Race in Moravian Wachovia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 1, https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=396613&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_1.

order to develop a more complete picture of both the Moravian community and North Carolina history.

What were the general and specific roles of Moravian women in eighteenth-century North Carolina? How did these roles differ from the men in the community? Did these roles reflect the common practices in early America at the time, or were they more innovative? How did the women feel about their place in society? These are vital questions which historians must seek to answer if they are to understand the whole of Moravian life, culture, and history.

It is likely that women aided predominantly within the domestic sphere, as evidenced in the 1773 memoir of Johanette Maria Ettwein: “It was her true heart’s joy and her life to serve with joy and tirelessly her dear husband.”⁹ However, it is known that some women held public jobs. Such is the case of Mary Penry, a single Pennsylvania Moravian, who referenced her position as a clerk in a 1788 letter to her friend Elizabeth Drinker, detailing the events following the death of a co-worker: “This Circumstance gave me more than Usual Employment [*sic*] in closing our Accounts at her Decease.”¹⁰ Men tended to hold most of the authoritative roles within the community, but unlike much of America during the eighteenth century, it appeared that Moravian society valued women beyond the commonly accepted social constructs.¹¹ For this reason, it can be presumed that women were mostly content with their place.

It is tempting, based on preliminary research, to assume that married women and single women had very different roles and were satisfied within them. However, it is entirely possible that these duties and expectations may have overlapped to some extent. Penry, a single Moravian

⁹ Katherine M. Faull, ed., *Moravian Women’s Memoirs: Their Related Lives, 1750-1820* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 38.

¹⁰ Mary Penry, “24. To Elizabeth Drinker,” in *The Letters of Mary Penry: A Single Moravian Woman in Early America*, ed. Scott Paul Gordon (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018), 72, https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1914593&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_72.

¹¹ Sommer, 27.

woman, wrote of such a circumstance when describing a boarding school, founded in the single sisters' house "at the repeated Request of Parents who earnestly wish'd us to take the charge of their children upon us."¹² Here, the domestic responsibility of rearing children fell to the single women of the community.

Although it appears that women were satisfied carrying out such roles, there is at least one instance indicating that they were not altogether fulfilled by such duties. Some desired an identity comparable to their male counterparts. Such a recognition would grant women greater authority over their own lives and within the community. In 1730, a young woman "named Anna Nitschmann led seventeen other Moravian women into a covenant," bypassing male leadership and placing themselves directly under service to Christ.¹³ Religious officials deemed the action as defiance against male superiority and eventually dispossessed the independent group of any influence within society.¹⁴ While mostly at peace with their roles, some clearly felt it necessary to stand apart as women of Christ.

These sources represent two ways in which tentative conclusions have already been challenged; it is doubtless there are more. Integrity is at the core of the historical profession. Therefore, a commitment "to follow sound method and analysis wherever they may lead" and an "awareness of one's own biases" are crucial to the research process and the interpretation of sources.¹⁵ Moravian history is wide-ranging and replete with numerous records, letters, diaries,

¹² Mary Penry, "64. To Katherine Penry and Eliza Powell," in *The Letters of Mary Penry: A Single Moravian Woman in Early America*, ed. Scott Paul Gordon (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018), 225, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1914593&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp>.

¹³ Beverly Prior Smaby, "Female Piety Among Eighteenth Century Moravians," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64 (Summer 1997), 151, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27774057>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁵ "Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct," American Historical Association, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/statement-on-standards-of-professional-conduct>.

journals, and memoirs. Dedication to examining these various layers and reporting on their content with open-mindedness and honesty is not just important but necessary.

Research Methods

Much of the previous research into Moravian history relied on meticulous records or published sermons. Although historians' resulting accounts are thorough and informative, many lack the analysis of personal documents and even fewer focus specifically on North Carolina. Leland Ferguson, utilizing a far different method, approached research from a strictly archaeological perspective. Throughout his book, Ferguson relied on various non-traditional sources, such as preservationist maps, to illuminate the oversight of Moravian historians' coverage of racial division in Salem.¹⁶ Though his evidence is compelling and his use of atypical sources inspiring, Ferguson's principal neglect of written primary material to support his research weakens his method overall.¹⁷

General history resources, such as *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801*, by Elisabeth Sommer, and *The Moravians in North Carolina: An Authentic History*, by Reverend Levin Reichel, provide necessary overviews of Moravian culture. In order to understand how women functioned within the society, it is crucial to first gain knowledge of the basic history of the Moravian settlement in North Carolina. The bibliographies of these and similar books offer further sources for evaluation. After compiling a personal bibliography of relevant secondary sources, exploring existing primary sources is key to the research process. Documents such as letters, diaries, and Moravian records give insight into not only the role of women, as do those of Mary Penry, but also to their feelings about their place within the society. Some of these sources are included in published collections, but many

¹⁶ Ferguson, *God's Fields*, 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

resources from the eighteenth century are only accessible through archives. Gaining admission to these locations is an important step in the process of illuminating women's roles in Moravian North Carolina.

However, limited accessibility to such repositories could prove to be a logistical issue. A willingness to expand the locations of research may assist in solving this problem. Elisabeth Sommer's exploration included the Unity Archive in Herrnhut, Germany, and other historians have relied on the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in addition to the collections housed in North Carolina, to obtain a broadened wealth of information.

Source Analysis

John Henry Clewell's *History of Wachovia in North Carolina* is little more than a collection of notable facts and figures from the early days of the Moravian Church in the American South. Clewell eschews narrative and analysis in favor of a more direct chronology of events. Although his account is useful, informative, and largely drawn from archival documents, it lacks the depth and research of other comprehensive histories. Clewell even acknowledges his hope "that this book may act as an influence to stimulate further research into the history of Wachovia," which he claims "has thus far not been given its proper place" in both North Carolina and Moravian Church histories.¹⁸

Clewell's book delivers a concise, straight-to-the-point compilation of major and minor events in the life of the early Church in North Carolina. However, given the time period in which he was writing, Clewell fails to address more contemporary topics, such as gender and race. This still remains a valuable source for general history and provides an interesting opportunity for

¹⁸ John Henry Clewell, *History of Wachovia in North Carolina: The Unitas Fratrum or Moravian Church in North Carolina During a Century and a Half, 1752-1902* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1902), vii, https://archive.org/details/historyofwachovi00clew_2/mode/2up.

examination into how women are acknowledged and viewed throughout the recording of Moravian history.

Katherine Faull's article, "Girl Talk: The Role of the 'Speakings' in the Pastoral Care of the Older Girls' Choir," details the Moravian choir system and its use in shaping the spiritual and physical life of young females in the community. She argues that both the "Instructions for the Choir Helpers of all the Choirs" and the existing memoirs of Pennsylvania's Moravian women help to create "a picture of the church's expectations of adolescent girls' spiritual, emotional, and physical development."¹⁹ Although incredibly compelling, Faull's interpretation suffers from a lack of thorough research. She relies heavily on her own understanding of primary documents rather than supporting her beliefs with the wealth of knowledge available through extensively researched Moravian histories. Faull presents powerful questions into the Moravian's view of women, but her article is weakened by a lack of evidence. With further research, these inquiries could well illuminate women's roles within the community and beyond the boundaries of Pennsylvania.

In *God's Acres: Landscape, Religion, and Race in Moravian Wachovia*, Leland Ferguson explores the history surrounding the archeological discovery of a number of hidden African American gravestones in Old Salem, North Carolina. While his bibliography of secondary sources is extensive and comprehensive of those works pertaining to the Church in the South, Ferguson's use of primary sources is not well documented and only referenced *en masse*. As a result, his account is often biased, such as alluding to the "[m]useum 'magic'" which "transformed the scars [of slavery] from an ugly embarrassment into an attractive object of

¹⁹ Katherine Faull, "Girl Talk: The Role of the 'Speakings' in the Pastoral Care of the Older Girls' Choir," *Journal of Moravian History* 6 (Spring 2009): 98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41179849>.

interest.”²⁰ However, Ferguson’s work offers an interesting perspective into the role of race in Moravian North Carolina and presents an opportunity for further examination into the influence of African American women on the community.

In his article, “Women on the Trail in Colonial America: A Travel Journal of German Moravians Migrating from Pennsylvania to North Carolina in 1766,” Aaron Fogleman explores the writings of Salome Meurer, a sixteen-year-old Moravian woman traveling from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to North Carolina in the mid-eighteenth century. His account includes a vast array of biographical and historical data taken from official Moravian records as well as Meurer’s diary of the thirty-day migration. Although he claims that the travel journal “reveals important ways in which women’s experiences in overland migration may have been different than men’s,” he neither attempts a comparison with men’s accounts nor consults women’s writings in addition to Meurer’s.²¹ Further research in women’s experiences would provide much greater support for the questions Fogleman attempted to answer.

Reverend Levin Reichel offers a short, albeit concise, history of the Moravian Church in North Carolina, beginning with its founding in 1752, through his work, *The Moravians in North Carolina: An Authentic History*. In much the same vein as Clewell, Reichel presents his account in a purely chronological format, leaving any attempt at narrative and analysis to the reader. The book is mostly devoid of any direct mention of sources and only occasionally references a relevant document. It does, however, include an excellent collection of tables, statistics, and important dates, as well as comprehensive lists of residents and church members. Despite having

²⁰ Leland Ferguson, *God’s Acres: Landscape, Religion, and Race in Moravian Wachovia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 200, https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=396613&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_.

²¹ Aaron S. Fogleman, “Women on the Trail in Colonial America: A Travel Journal of German Moravians Migrating from Pennsylvania to North Carolina in 1766,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 61, no. 2 (April 1994): 206-234, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27773721>.

been published in 1857, Reichel's book remains an often-used source among Moravian historians.

An appendix listing "First Settlers and Heads of Families" is especially interesting.²² Listed here are the names of Moravian North Carolina's first residents. This list, however, lacks any mention of women, either as a single individual or as a wife. Given the age of Reichel's work, this is not unexpected, but it does leave a significant gap in the history and genealogy of the North Carolina Moravians which requires further exploration.

In her article, "Female Piety Among Eighteenth Century Moravians," Beverly Smaby explores the religious role of women in Moravian society. As she asserts, Moravian women "emphasized feminine themes especially appropriate to women [...] and developed a religious practice separate and distinct from the practice of men."²³ Smaby relies heavily on primary documents from the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Herrnhut, Germany, to provide compelling evidence of the role of female piety from its establishment among Moravian women in the 1730s through its eventual dissolution in favor of a more uniform orthodoxy. Though she references "the appointment of women to religious governing boards" and women's work as "Acolytes, Deaconesses," and "Eldresses," Smaby spends far more time discussing the opposition to these roles rather than exploring the positions themselves.²⁴

Through *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801*, Elisabeth Sommer details the rise of the Moravian Church and the development of its model religious community. The parallel comparison of the two branches of the Church's operation in North Carolina and in Germany is at the center of her narrative. She presents a

²² Reichel, 167-178.

²³ Beverly Prior Smaby, "Female Piety Among Eighteenth Century Moravians," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64 (Summer 1997): 151, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27774057>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

diverse bibliography filled with manuscripts found in the Moravian Archives in North Carolina and the Unity Archive in Germany to support her discussion of events. However, her account suffers from her focus on a single community, Salem, in North Carolina. She argues that “a study of the structure of one settlement can help to illuminate the structure of the others,” but it is difficult to excuse her total neglect of the various Moravian communities surrounding Salem.²⁵ The particulars of these towns require equal attention in order to fully represent Moravian history in North Carolina.

Peter Vogt, in his essay, published in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, highlights the role of Moravian women as speakers, preachers, and teachers throughout the eighteenth century. Through the use of period documents, Vogt lays out women’s involvement in the religious community and argues that it was “a deeply religious, biblical vision of human community and a particular receptiveness to spiritual experience that opened up the possibility for women to speak, to preach, and to teach.”²⁶ “A Voice for Themselves: Women as Participants in Congressional Discourse in the Eighteenth-Century Moravian Movement” presents one of the most comprehensive analyses on the religious roles of Moravian women during the period. Unlike Smaby’s article addressing a similar topic, Vogt devotes much more time to documenting evidence of women’s participation rather than focusing on its opposition. Although it is certainly intriguing, the chapter just barely scratches the surface of understanding women’s unique roles in Moravian society.

²⁵ Elisabeth W. Sommer, *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 34, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.snhu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=938358&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²⁶ Peter Vogt, “A Voice for Themselves: Women as Participants in Congressional Discourse in the Eighteenth-Century Moravian Movement,” in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 243, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264154906>.

Three particular published collections of primary sources have provided limited knowledge into the role of women and have supplied a basic understanding of Moravian history in eighteenth-century North Carolina. *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina* includes extensive documentation of the activity and history of the Southern Province of the Moravian Church, from its founding in 1752 to 1876. *The Letters of Mary Penry: A Single Moravian Woman in Early America* provides incredible insight into an unmarried women's place in Moravian society and into her own personal observations and perceptions within the community. *Moravian Women's Memoirs: Their Related Lives, 1750-1820*, gives the detailed remembrances, in an autobiographical format, of Moravian women from every position – married, single, and widowed – in society.

With the exception of these last two collections, information pertaining directly to women in Moravian history is not yet widely available. Moravian women in North Carolina appear to be largely non-existent within most narratives. This will require exploring the archives and repositories related to Moravian history in order to fill the gap.

The often-utilized Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem “is the official repository for records of the Moravian Church in America, Southern Province” and holds a vast array of documents which have yet to be examined.²⁷ Though the exact nature of what is contained within the collection is unclear, there is likely to be further information on women's religious roles in these records. However, given that men held most of the authority within the church, it is likely that the records pertaining to female participation may be cursory at best and lack the details for a fuller understanding. Personal letters, diaries, and memoirs contained within collections elsewhere may assist in the creation of a clearer picture of women's roles.

²⁷ “Our Mission, Our Witness,” Moravian Archives, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://moravianarchives.org/>.

The Anne P. and Thomas A. Gray Library in Old Salem also “contains over 20,000 cataloged volumes, including books, periodicals, rare books and manuscripts, and microforms” and is likely to hold collections of a more personal nature, such as journals, letters, writings, memoirs, and other items which may be unavailable through the Church archives.²⁸ Possibly due to its location within a museum, previous historians, who often choose to focus entirely on the Moravian Archives, have mostly overlooked this research library. This provides a wealth of opportunities to explore new material. However, since the library is associated with a museum, it is possible the available collections could be biased toward how the museum desires to share the history of the Moravians in North Carolina. Other repositories should contain any materials missing from the library.

The State Archives of North Carolina is one such repository. Since there is likely to be a broad range of available documents pertaining to North Carolina’s Moravian history within the archives, a problem could arise in deciding which ones are relevant to research. An initial online catalog search utilizing advanced search options should aid in paring down the large number of results and help to focus the exploration.

It is clear from the existing documentation that Moravian historians have largely overlooked the roles of women, especially those in North Carolina. Mary Penry’s letters offer a glimpse into life as a Moravian woman, but as Scott Paul Gordon, the editor of the collection, points out, she lived most of her life in “small Moravian communities in Pennsylvania.”²⁹ No such collection of published letters is known to exist for any woman in Moravian North Carolina.

²⁸ “Library/Archives,” Scholarship & Research, Old Salem Museums & Gardens, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://www.oldsalem.org/scholarship-research/library-archives/>.

²⁹ Scott Paul Gordon, ed., *The Letters of Mary Penry: A Single Moravian Woman in Early America* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018), 1, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1914593&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp>.

Likewise, Katherine Faull took her published collection of Moravian women's memoirs solely from Pennsylvania with no mention of the settlement in North Carolina. The significant gap in the existing literature is a disservice to both Moravian women and North Carolina history.

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