



Moravian Church Settlements BETHLEHEM

A WORLD HERITAGE SITE

moravianchurchsettlements.org



A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE

In July 2024, the historic Moravian Church Settlements — Bethlehem was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List alongside Moravian municipalities in Gracehill, Northern Ireland/UK; Herrnhut, Germany; and Christiansfeld, Denmark (inscribed in 2015). The network of Moravian Church Settlements forms a single World Heritage site representing the Outstanding Universal Value of these landmark communities and the global influence of the Moravian Church.

Moravian Church Settlements — Bethlehem is the 26th World Heritage site in the United States and the third in Pennsylvania.

World Heritage Site status is a distinction shared with 1,223 natural and man-made sites worldwide, including the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids of Giza, the Grand Canyon, and the Statue of Liberty.



Why is Moravian Church Settlements — Bethlehem so important?

Established in Pennsylvania in 1741, Moravian Church Settlements — Bethlehem exemplifies the early expansion of the Moravians' global mission. This designation also highlights their cultural interactions with Native Americans. The site reflects the Church's spiritual, societal, and ethical values, as seen in its town planning and community layout, the unique God's Acre cemetery, and the Civic Baroque architectural style of Moravian settlements. Today, Moravians continue to uphold the Church's practices and traditions as vibrant expressions of their heritage.

Who are the Moravians?

The Moravians originated in the 15th century in Bohemia and Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic). They are considered the first Protestants, tracing their roots to Jan Hus, a Bohemian priest martyred for challenging the beliefs of the Catholic Church. Also known as the Unitas Fratrum or Unity of Brethren, the Moravians promote spiritual equality for all. They emphasize communion, personal prayer, family devotions, and study as means of spiritual growth. From concentrations in Bethlehem and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Moravian churches have spread across North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and Nepal.



Jan Hus

The Moravians' sea journey

In Europe, Moravian "sea congregations" were established to help settle new territories in America. The "First Sea Congregation" arrived in Philadelphia on June 7, 1742, and its members settled in the communities of Bethlehem and Nazareth. To support these voyages, the Moravian Church owned four ships — Catherine, Little Strength, Hope, and Irene — each staffed mainly by Moravian crew members to protect passengers from negative influences during their long journey across the Atlantic Ocean, which often took three weeks or more.



The First House and naming of Bethlehem

In the spring of 1741, Moravian settlers built a small log structure as temporary living quarters. On Dec. 24, 1741, Moravian leader and benefactor Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf named the community Bethlehem during a Christmas Eve service. Originally located at 427 Main Street, this first house was demolished in 1823 to make way for stables for the Eagle Hotel, Bethlehem's third inn. In 1874, the hotel was expanded into a grand Victorian building but closed in 1922, when it was replaced by the Historic Hotel Bethlehem. The First House stood just behind the hotel's current location.

The Choir System

To foster growth, spirituality, and support, the Moravian community was organized into choirs based on age, gender, and marital status. The choirs included children, older boys, older girls, single brethren, single sisters, married people, widowers, and widows. The single brethren, single sisters, and widows lived, worked, and worshiped within their respective choir houses. A choir house typically had a dormitory in the attic, a Saal (chapel) on the second floor, a dining hall, and workshops on the lower floors.



Education for all

Moravians advocated for universal education, embracing the belief that education should be accessible to all, regardless of gender or social standing. They recognized women as the primary educators of the family. Women studied the same curriculum as men.

Waterworks innovation

The Waterworks, recognized as a National Historic Landmark, a Historic Civil Engineering Landmark, and an American Water Landmark, was constructed in 1754, modified in 1762. It featured an innovative system that pumped fresh water from a nearby springhouse up an embankment into a water tower, which then supplied cisterns for the community's use. The Waterworks was America's first pumped municipal water system. The water wheel remains functional today.



Sources: Moravian Church Settlements World Heritage Nomination Dossier, Moravian Archives, Moravian Historical Society, Moravian University & Seminary Archives
Photos: Moravian Archives, Durston Saylor, Fig Lehigh Valley, Craig Larimer

COLONIAL INDUSTRIAL QUARTER

145 Ohio Road

The Colonial Industrial Quarter, part of the Historic Moravian Bethlehem National Historic Landmark District, is considered America’s earliest industrial park. Located along Monocacy Creek, the Moravians drew potable water from a spring and harnessed the creek’s power to drive waterwheels for their mills. By 1747, the area had become a bustling hub of 35 crafts, trades, and industries.



SECOND SINGLE BRETHREN’S HOUSE

89 West Church Street

Completed in Nov. 1748, in just five months, this impressive stone structure was originally built for the single men. It features a basement and three main stories: craft shops on the first floor, a worship space on the second, and dormitories in the two attics. The building also served as a hospital during the American Revolutionary War. After the single brothers left in 1814, it became home to the Moravian Seminary for Young Ladies and is now part of Moravian University’s music department.



OLD CHAPEL

64 West Church Street

Ten years after the town’s founding, the community outgrew the Saal in the Gemeinhaus, prompting the construction of a second worship space, the Old Chapel, in 1751. It has hosted notable colonial figures, including George and Martha Washington, as well as Benjamin Franklin. Today, this building is still used for Sunday worship and various other services and events by Central Moravian Church.



GOD’S ACRE

13 West Market Street

When the first Moravian died in Bethlehem in June 1742, a hilltop location was chosen for burial, establishing the God’s Acre cemetery. All graves feature flat headstones, symbolizing equality before God. Moravians are buried according to the choir system, with separate sections for boys, girls, single brothers, single sisters, married men, and married women, rather than in family plots. The cemetery reflects a diverse community, including Native Americans and both enslaved and free people of African descent. “Strangers’ Row,” along Market Street, contains the graves of non-Moravians who died while visiting. The last burial in God’s Acre took place in 1912.



BELL HOUSE

56 West Church Street

The Bell House, constructed in 1746 and expanded twice, originally served as living quarters for married couples. It later accommodated a boarding school for girls until the school was relocated to the Brethren’s House in 1815. A distinctive feature of the building is its cupola, which originally held the town clock, now located in the belfry of the Sanctuary. The bell was cast in Bethlehem. The weather vane features the Lamb of God, a symbol associated with the Moravian Church.



SINGLE SISTERS’ HOUSE

44-50 West Church Street

Constructed in 1744 for the Single Brethren, this building became the residence of the Single Sisters in 1748 after the men relocated to a larger house. The Sisters, who had been living in Nazareth, used the third floor for dormitories, the second floor for worship, and the first floor for workshops, offices, and dining. The Sisters’ House was expanded in 1752 and 1772, with massive buttresses added in 1753 to support the heavy red clay tile roof. Today, apartments in the Sisters’ House remain exclusively for women.



WIDOWS’ HOUSE

53 West Church Street

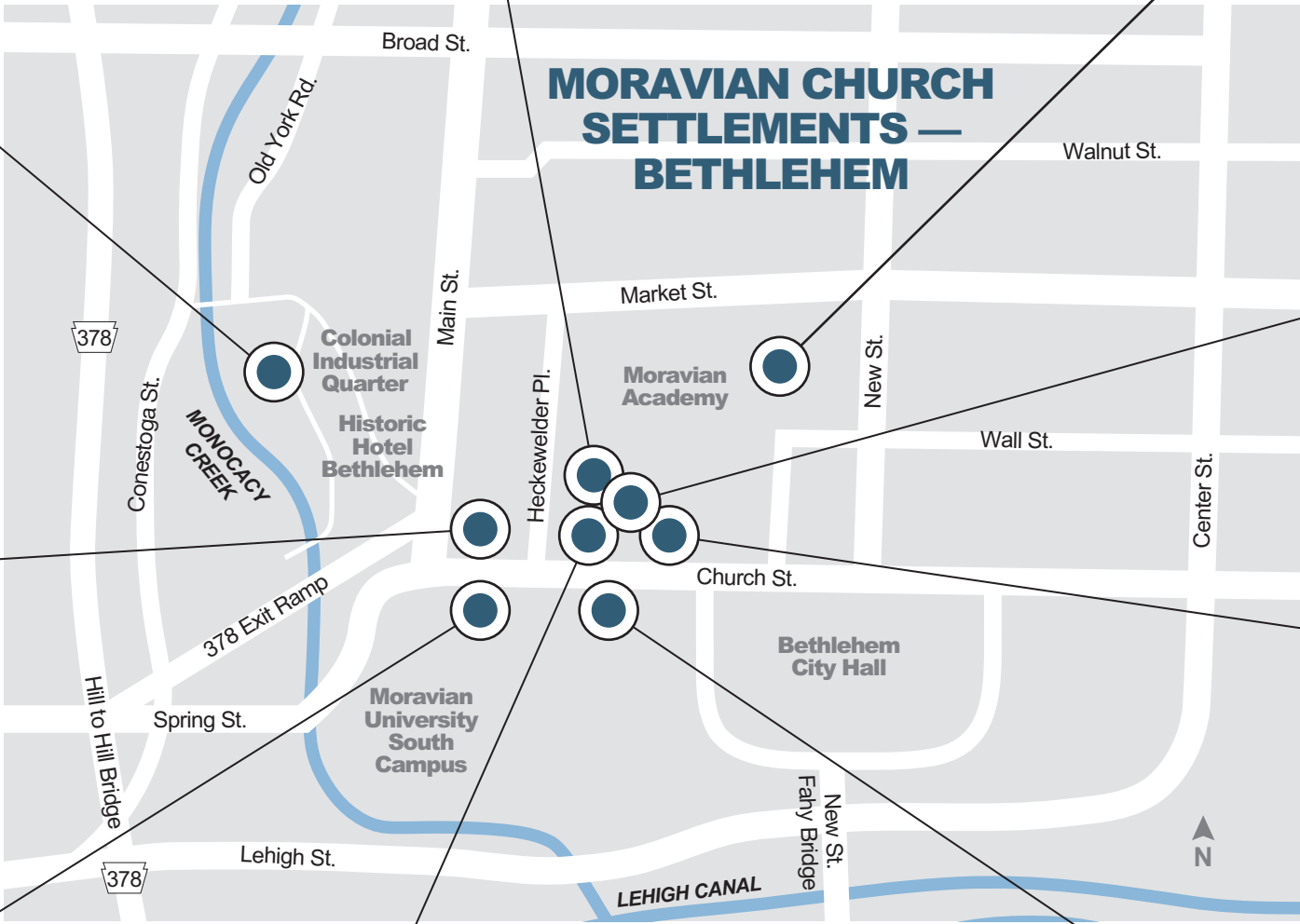
The first Widows’ House was located in the Gray Cottage in nearby Nazareth. In 1768, the widows relocated to Bethlehem when a new building was constructed on the south side of Church Street. This structure followed the community’s established pattern and included spaces for living, worship, and dining. Widows lived there until the early 21st century. Today, its rooms are used as community apartments and housing for Moravian University students and faculty.



GEMEINHAUS

66 West Church Street

Built in 1741, the Gemeinhaus (community house) is the oldest building in Bethlehem. It is a National Historic Landmark, the only remaining Gemeinhaus in the world, and home to the Moravian Museum. This multifunctional space housed worship in the Saal, classrooms, workshops, offices, and facilities for dining, cooking, and sleeping for the entire community. Its first residents included Count Zinzendorf, who occupied two rooms at the west end of the second floor.



This content and material is the property of Moravian Church Settlements — Bethlehem. Reproduction, distribution, or use in any form without express written consent is strictly prohibited.