



Background Information Regarding Enslaved People in Wachovia

The following information provides an overview of the Moravian community in Wachovia and this community's use of free labor from enslaved people.

The Moravian Church in Wachovia

The Moravian Church is one of the oldest protestant religions in the world, originating from a region called Bohemia, which is now in the Czech Republic. In 1752, the Moravian Church purchased a 100,000-acre tract of land in the piedmont of the North Carolina colony. A year later, the first Moravian emigrants arrived in their new North Carolina home, which they named "Wachovia." The mission of these German-speaking protestants was to build an economically prosperous, religious sanctuary that would be entirely self-sufficient so that they only had to rely on the labor of their own members and not be corrupted by the influence of non-Moravians, whom they called "strangers."

Over time, they settled several towns, starting with Bethabara, then Bethania, and eventually the central commercial town of Salem. Wachovia became an important commercial trade hub in the North Carolina piedmont, serving smaller, local communities as well as larger regional trade centers like Charleston, Wilmington, the Chesapeake, and Philadelphia. Because the Moravian towns were plugged into this network of trade, they were able to sell Moravian crafts, skins, furs, and agricultural goods, bringing in a crucial source of revenue for the Moravian Church. The towns were conveniently located along the Great Wagon Road, which was a frequently traveled series of trails connecting Pennsylvania to North Carolina, encouraging travelers to stop along the way at the Tavern.

The Role of the Moravian Church in Exploiting Enslaved People

During the colonial period, English, Spanish, and French settlers were exploiting enslaved labor from Africa to increase their production and profit, which threatened the Moravians and other settlers of more modest means who were now at an economic disadvantage. In the 18th century, Black laborers cost less than half the rental price of white laborers. Although the Moravians idealized about a self-sufficient society, away from the corrupting influence of strangers, it was not long before the Moravian Church started renting Black enslaved laborers to build the town of Salem. This was not the first time the Moravian Church engaged in the Atlantic slave trade, in fact, ten years before arriving in North Carolina, Moravian settlers in Pennsylvania purchased almost forty enslaved Afro-Caribbean laborers to work as butchers, tanners, farmers, tavern servants, and oil millers, among other trades.

Enslaved Persons in Bethabara, Franke and Sam

In 1763, Franke became the first enslaved person to be rented by the Moravians in North Carolina. She worked in Bethabara's tavern. According to the Bethabara Diary in 1769, Sam, an enslaved cattle hand who had been rented by the Moravians for more than three years, expressed a desire to become Moravian. Sam's enslaver, William Ridge, offered to sell him. Church elders decided to ask for divine guidance by consulting the lot, a box that held three slips of paper: yes, no, and blank, signifying they needed to pray more and try again later. The lot gave them an affirmative answer and Sam was purchased by the Moravian Church for 120 pounds. He was baptized as Johann Samuel and became the town's head herdsman and teamster leading a wagon train to Pennsylvania.





Background Information Regarding Enslaved People in Wachovia

Enslaved Persons in Salem

The Moravians had always planned to build a congregation town that would become the trades and spiritual center of Wachovia and would be governed by the church. In 1766, after consulting the lot, they began the enormous undertaking of constructing the new town of Salem, “an extraordinary affair, which I would not have undertaken had not the Saviour Himself ordered it.”—Frederic William Marshall

Outside carpenters, brick-makers, masons, roadbuilders and other craftsmen and laborers including free and enslaved Black workers were hired, rented or purchased for the job. Although many of these laborers are not named, we do know that an enslaved mason named Frank was brought to work in Salem in 1771.

Early on, the church feared that enslaved people would threaten the livelihood of white craftsmen and promote idleness. Instead of allowing congregants to purchase or rent their own enslaved laborers privately, the church itself would purchase enslaved people, with a few exceptions that were subject to church approval. Church Elders maintained control by judging the character of each enslaved person in hopes of only purchasing those they felt would not impair their vision of a perfect society. By the time of the first federal census in 1790, forty enslaved people were privately owned by Moravians in Salem.

