Old Salem’s Hidden Town Project

Hidden Town Project at Old Salem Museums and Gardens (OSM&G) is currently the main focus of the Historical Department of moravian Research.

The project has 5 major goals:
1. Locate the sites of dwelling places of enslaved peoples throughout Salem’s historic district.
2. Fully integrate this narrative into the everyday interpreted visitor experience: where they lived and worked, and who they were as human beings.
3. Connect with descendants of the enslaved
4. Archologically investigate designated sites
5. Interpret the heritage of enslaved people in Salem and their descendants through contemporary art forms, salon discussions, and public gatherings.

Old Salem’s Landmark Nomination Application, the Wake County Residents Database, census records, Moravian Records, the Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem, NC, multiple files from the Frank L. Horton Museum Center at the Museum for Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Old Salem, among other sources.

My Capstone Within Hidden Town

My focus within OSM&G’s Hidden Town Project is Francis Fries and his woolen mill which he opened in Salem in 1840. Because Salem was a theocracy, overseen by the Moravians who settled the town, any business had to receive approval from the governing members of the church. Francis pushed the boundaries of the Moravian’s rules on enslavement, by using primarily labor of enslaved people to run his business. He did hire some laborers, however, most of his employees were enslaved people. By 1860, the census lists “F & H Fries” (Francis’s brother Henry partnered with him in 1842) housing 14 enslaved individuals. His father, Wilhelm Fries, was listed to have 20 enslaved individuals on his property by that same year. Salem was reported to have around 160 enslaved persons living in the town at its height, thus, more than one-third of the population of enslaved people worked for the Fries family.

Identifying the Challenges

Lack of Physical Structure

While other lots which have been researched as a part of Hidden Town still have some original structures or reconstructed buildings standing, the woolen mill, along with its dependencies have long since been torn down. The lot has neither been excavated, as it is now home to Kaleidium Downtown, a local children’s museum in Winston-Salem, NC. Thankfully, the 1885 Sanborn Insurance Map for “Winston and Salem” identifies the structures that were present on the lot by that time. While the map was not drawn until after Emancipation, it still gives an idea of where enslaved people might have lived on the site.

Expansion of Scope

The Fries family’s legacy in Salem did not begin with Francis. His father Wilhelm came to Salem in 1809 from the Moravians in Germany. As evidenced by Moravian records, Wilhelm pushed the boundaries of what was allowed in the town. He was constantly seeking ways to make the most money he could. Wilhelm’s view of slavery informed his sons’ view. Using letters and Moravian records, I have been able to understand how the two generations of Fries were involved in changing the town’s rules regarding enslaved people. I needed to understand how enslaved people lived and worked under William’s supervision. Expanding my research to include Wilhelm’s properties became important to understanding the lives of enslaved people in Salem.

Selectiveness of Documentation

Wilhelm had property in town and outside of town. Wilhelm’s vast property holdings of land outside the town purview was not discussed as often in the Moravian records.

Resource Selection


A Special Thanks To:

Martha Hartley, Director of Moravian Research; Old Salem Museums and Gardens; Project Supervisor
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threadbare no longer

Unearthing the Biographies of Enslaved People who Lived and Worked at Fries’ Woolen Mill

Understanding the Complex Relationships

While Fries would have his “boys” (as he sometimes referred to the enslaved men or outlings, such as ice skating. As a boy at school, his letters between himself and his parents revealed an affection for the first enslaved person in their household named Fanny. Although Wilhelm spoke somewhat fondly of her, he later sells her to someone outside the town, even though her husband Adam was still working at Salem Tavern.) The paternalism Francis projected when talking about the enslaved persons in his household and business is starkly contrasted by his conducting of transactions to procure as well as sell enslaved people

Identifying Names of the Enslaved Individuals

The census taken in 1860 revealed that all enslaved people were housed by Wilhelm and Francis Fries. So far, I have found 20 names of individuals, and I am continuing in my search for more. Along with some of the names are listed their positions/occupations.

Locating Potential Dwelling Sites

I have been able to ascertain from Moravian records and historic maps that many of the enslaved people lived on Wilhems farm land north west of the town of Salem, and must have walked to the woolen mill from there. Also, since Salem’s leadership lets go of its control over laws regarding enslaved people living in town, more enslaved people lived on the mill’s property, in buildings on site. I also know from a diary kept by Francis’s daughter Mary that at least two enslaved individuals lived in Wilhems house in town (Lot 7).

Realizing the Outcomes

I was given “Lot 103: The Fries’ Woolen Mill” to research. I started my research with a checklist that Martha Hartley, Director of Moravian Research, gave me, pulling relevant information from sources listed. I extracted information from OSM&G’s National Historic Landmark Nomination Application, the Wake County Residents Database, census records, Moravian Records, the Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem, NC, multiple files from the Frank L. Horton Museum Center at the Museum for Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Old Salem, among other sources.

Building the File

I was given Lot 103: The Fries’ Woolen Mill to research. I started my research with a checklist that Martha Hartley, Director of Moravian Research, gave me, pulling relevant information from sources listed. I extracted information from OSM&G’s National Historic Landmark Nomination Application, the Wake County Residents Database, census records, Moravian Records, the Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem, NC, multiple files from the Frank L. Horton Museum Center at the Museum for Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Old Salem, among other sources.