

## *The ‘Town Builders’ of Winston-Salem, 250 Years Ago*

Winston-Salem, the City of Arts and Innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, had its beginning with a visionary church that saw a great future in colonial America.

The Moravian Church, missionary pioneer to the West Indies, Greenland, Southern Africa, bought 100,000 acres in colonial North Carolina in 1753. The Moravians called their land Wachovia, which today is the south central two-thirds of Forsyth County, encompassing almost the entirety of today’s Winston-Salem, North Carolina.



*Adelaide L. Fries, Archivist  
of the Moravian Church,  
1911-1949*

The Moravians settled Wachovia, first with Bethabara in 1753, then with Bethania in 1759. But to administer their land, serve the region, and take the Gospel to Native Americans, the Moravians needed a community or town located in the center of Wachovia — Salem.

The site for Salem was selected on February 14, 1765. The felling of the first trees took place on January 6, 1766, an especially cold day that froze the medicines they had. Then to make it official, a band of Single Brethren made the first permanent residence in Salem on February 19, 1766 — 250 years ago as we celebrate their anniversary in 2016.

For the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 1915 Adelaide L. Fries, early in her career as long-time Archivist of the Moravian Church, published a little booklet, *The Town Builders*. In it, she told of that first band of Single Brethren to move from Bethabara on February 19, 1766, to become the first permanent residents of what grew to be Winston-Salem. There were eight of them. They were a diverse group but held a united purpose to build their community, as Winston-Salem is diverse today:

- Nils Petersen, a brewer and cook from Danish Holstein;
- Jens Schmidt, an anchor-smith from Denmark;
- Gottfried Praezel, a weaver from Germany;
- John Birkhead, a cloth maker from England;
- Jacob Steiner, a miller from Pennsylvania;
- George Holder, a farmer from Pennsylvania;
- Melchior Rasp, a stonemason and bricklayer from Salzburg;
- Michael Ziegler, a farmer from Pennsylvania.

Together these eight set the course of industry, hospitality, and vision that makes Winston-Salem famous today.

Here is Miss Adelaide’s *The Town Builders* with the scripture verses the Moravians used from their devotional texts as they worked and worshiped together to begin what is today’s Winston-Salem.

Richard W. Starbuck  
Archivist, Moravian Church  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina  
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# THE TOWN BUILDERS

*By* ADELAIDE L. FRIES



WINSTON-SALEM, N. C.  
DECEMBER, 1915

# THE TOWN BUILDERS

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IT was a very cold day, that Monday the 6th of January, 1766, only a little less cold than the preceding night when drugs dissolved in home-distilled spirits froze and burst their bottles on the shelves of the apothecary shop. But timber to be used in building needed to be cut in January and February, when the sap was down, and the Wachovia pioneers were inured to all kinds of weather, so it did not occur to them to postpone execution of the plans for the day, chief of which was the beginning of "the new town."

The Text Book for 1766 had not yet come from Germany, so a "Watchword" was drawn from the Text Box, which contained a cherished collection of Bible verses written on slips of paper rolled into tiny quills that could be easily handled. Their thoughts were full of the new town, so the text unrolled seemed a direct promise from on high:—"I will defend this city" (Is. 37: 35). Later in the month the Text Book came, and it was with touched hearts that they read for January 6th, "Ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it?" (Deut. 4: 32.) To them it seemed but a small thing, this felling of a few trees in a North Carolina forest, the building of a little log house, and they wondered whether the text were a prophecy, a confirmation of the "Watchword" they had drawn, little realizing that what-

ever the years might bring their deed in itself was great, for it meant faith and courage, obedience and self-sacrifice, and there is naught greater than these.

When Wachovia was bought it was planned to plant a town in the center of the hundred-thousand-acre tract, where the inhabitants might be free to live according to their ideal of a Christian community. The finding of an abandoned house where they could have immediate shelter from the wintry blasts of 1753 led to the establishment of Bethabara as the first village of Wachovia, and six years later Bethania was begun three miles to the northwest, but now the time had come to carry out the plans for a central town. There were those that thought it folly—why not continue where so good a start had already been made? But others said, "The original plan had the approval of the Lord," and so while letters went to Herrnhut to ask final, positive orders, the preliminary steps were taken.

On this bright, cold, morning, therefore, they tramped the six miles southward from Bethabara, a band of sturdy men, some looking forward to homes of their own in the new town, others lending a brotherly hand in the undertaking. At their head were Johannes Ettwein, representative in Wachovia of the Unity Boards, and Jacob Loesch, their "Vorsteher" or business manager, the latter reviewing in memory his journey to Wachovia with the first colony thirteen years before and the beginnings then made. The seven men from Bethabara and five from Bethania, to whom the building of the house had been entrusted, took with them besides their tools a tent as shelter for the night; the rest carried axes and hatchets, and spent the day clearing the road, which had been only partly opened the preceding spring.

First, though, all proceeded to the site selected for the new town, and there beside the "west branch" hymns were sung and the first tree was felled for the first house. Willing hands cleared a sufficient piece of ground, the cutting and hewing of logs began, and by Wednesday enough were ready so that the house could be raised. Johann Michael Graff, their pastor, later the first resident bishop in Wachovia, and Lorenz Bagge, head of the Single Brethren, came from Bethabara for the day, and all went well, for though Christian Triebel fell from the wall while helping to lay up logs he was fortunately not hurt. On Thursday the Bethania brethren went home, those from Bethabara remaining to put up the rafters and return on Friday, the house being left temporarily without roof or door.

A rather amusing incident occurred the next week. It was becoming difficult for the Bethabara brethren to provide food for their large herd of swine, and the fields were suffering from their depredations, so seventy-five head were driven the six miles to the new town, and Peter Stotz was sent to look after them. Three days later they "came running" back in groups, the writer of the daily Diary recording the consoling fact that the "ground is now frozen so hard they cannot hurt the fields digging for roots," the roots probably being turnips, of which a considerable quantity were raised.

It was known that a company of colonists were on their way from Germany to Wachovia, via Charleston, S. C. (the first to come direct instead of by Bethlehem, Pa.), and on January 29, news was received that they were at Christian Frey's. Ettwein and Lorenz at once took a wagon and went to meet them, but it was dark when they reached Frey's, and find-

the travelers already asleep they considerately waited until morning before greeting them and taking them to Bethabara.

The colonists had walked practically all the way from Charleston, and might well have been worn out, but after being warmly welcomed into the community in a Lovefeast that evening they spent the next day in becoming acquainted with Bethabara; the following day visited Bethania; the next, being Sunday, they attended the various services; on Monday visited Salem; and on Wednesday began work!

This company brought with them the much desired letters from the Directing Boards at Herrnhut, and the Text Book for the year. The letters stated that the building of Salem had been "positively ordained of the Lord," and recommended that the work should be actively undertaken at once.

Tradition says that the name "Salem" was selected for the central town of Wachovia by Count Zinzendorf before his death in 1760, he loving the word because of its meaning "Peace." In the Wachovia Diary, however, it appears for the first time in the entry for January 30, the day the European colony arrived, and thereafter it was not "the new town," but SALEM to all who wrote of it or labored there.

The reference to the command of the Lord is characteristic of the period. As the Children of Israel in the wilderness believed that they were divinely led by the pillar of cloud and of fire, so the Moravians of the latter half of the eighteenth century believed that they were guided by the Lord through the "lot." It was no random "drawing of straws," as is

sometimes supposed, but when a matter of serious import was in doubt the two, or sometimes three, alternatives were carefully thought out and reduced to writing, and the Lord was asked to express His will through the "lot" which He permitted to be drawn. His will once known they gave implicit obedience, and the Lord honored the faith of His humbly trusting children and led them into paths of peace and prosperity. Customs change, and men of a later time found other ways in which to commune with their divine Master and ascertain His will, but in the days when their faith was firm the Brethren enjoyed a blessed certainty of decision which made them strong to do and to dare. It is a significant fact that the method employed is rarely referred to in the records, practically never except in the Minutes of the Board to which its use was entrusted. All other writers simply say, "the matter was approved—or disapproved— by the Lord."

So it was in the choice of a site for Salem. Several apparently suitable locations were selected in turn by the surveyor Reuter and the leaders at Bethabara, but only on February 14, 1765, was one found that was "approved by the Lord," and it was at once accepted.

The wording of the affirmative "lot," through which the establishment and future of Salem were determined, is of intense interest, and may well be copied from the Minutes of the joint Committee from the "Directorium" and "Unitaets Vorsteher Collegium" which met in Herrnhut, August 16, 1765, to discuss the affairs of Wachovia: "We are to tell our brethren in America that the Saviour wills that Salem shall be the town in Wachovia for trade and the professions, and that they shall be moved thither from Bethabara." This

was conclusive, and from January 30, when the letters came bringing the word there were no more doubts, but careful planning and purposeful action, "pledging themselves with heart and hand to be His true servants."

On February 10, the brethren were selected who should move to Salem, but a severe snowstorm delayed the start until Wednesday, February 19, when eight unmarried men went to the new town "to make a real beginning there." These eight pioneers came from widely scattered homes, ranged in age from twenty-six to fifty-one years, and had been trained to different trades, though for the nonce they were all to be town builders.

Of the four who had come with the European party on January 30, two were Danes—Nils Petersen, born April 3, 1717, in Holstein, and Jens Schmidt, born at Seeland, July 25, 1731. Gottfried Praezel was a German, born December 27, 1739, at Ebersdorf, near Löbau, and John Birkhead, an Englishman from Hutterfield, Yorkshire, born September 28, 1739. Praezel had joined the Unity of Brethren at Gnadenberg, and Petersen at Herrnhag, Germany; Schmidt at Zeist, Holland, and Birkhead at Fulneck, England. Praezel was a weaver by trade, Petersen a brewer, Schmidt an anchor-smith, and Birkhead had been trained in a cloth-factory.

Of the four moving down from Bethabara two were originally from Pennsylvania—Jacob Steiner, a miller, born July 25, 1734, near Lancaster, and George Holder, a farmer, born January 27, 1729, at Oley. Melchior Rasp was born at Salzburg, Germany, January 8, 1715. He was of Catholic parentage, but shared in the Salzburger emigration to Holland

in 1730, and ultimately joined the Brethren at Herrnhag. Thence he went to Bethlehem, Pa., coming to Bethabara in 1755 as a master mason. Michael Ziegler came to Bethabara from Bethlehem in 1764.

Petersen was appointed to write the Diary for the little colony, cook, and look after the supplies, and he and Praezel were commissioned to conduct the morning and evening prayers, for the Text for February 19 was: "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me," (Lev. 10: 3), and all desired that in the midst of their daily toil they might keep near their Lord and find strength and rest therein.

On this second notable journey from Bethabara to Salem the Brn. Lorenz and Loesch accompanied the party, while two wagons took tiles for the roof and brick for the chimney of their house, as well as bedding and a few household necessities, the building of a bridge across the Spangenberg (Silas Creek) the preceding week having greatly improved the road, and made service by wagon much easier. On the way two deer were shot, furnishing venison for the evening meal and provision for several more to come; the tile roof was quickly laid, so that the tent was no longer necessary, and with little display but plenty of quiet determination and consecration the settlement of Salem had been begun.

The year that followed was a year of "firsts," of successive beginnings, well-considered, carefully planned. Certain events are recorded in the Diary, and imagination fills the gaps with steady toil, the felling of trees and dressing of lumber, the clearing and planting of

fields and orchards, the thousand and one things which so evidently needed to be done that they were not even written down.

Each Saturday afternoon the brethren returned to Bethabara, leaving two of their number on guard when they were not relieved by friends. Each Saturday evening and Sunday they shared in the conferences and services of the parent town; each Monday they returned cheerfully to work. Often a wagon was sent with them, taking brick and tile from Bethabara or Bethania; later the making of brick was begun at Salem, and a wagon and teamster detailed for the service of the builders.

Now and then Ettwein or Graff or Loesch went to see how the work was progressing; more often the visitor was Lorenz Bagge—"Br. Lorenz"—come to see that all was well with "his brethren" physically and spiritually.

Reuter spent many days there, surveying two streets running north and south, studying the topography of the land, seeking out good springs and running levels to ascertain their availability as a future water supply, and sketching tentative plans for the town, for the log house by the west branch, its spring-house, and a log cabin built a little to the north in April were considered not a part of the town proper, but merely as temporary quarters, the larger house occupied by the brethren working there, and the cabin used for a few outsiders who sought jobs as day laborers—and they generally proved to be poor at the job and speedily departed.

On April 12, Ettwein, Graff, Loesch and Reuter went to Salem, where they met Br.

Lorenz, and after lengthy consideration decided on the location of the Square, the Graveyard, and the site of the first houses to be built on the main street. Two years later it was found advisable to move the Square "seven building lots" further south, in order to secure a better fall for the water being brought from springs north of the town, but the Graveyard and the first family houses remained where they were located that day.

The timber about Salem was not well suited for log houses, so it was decided to build frame ones, and feeling their inexperience it was resolved that the Brothers House and other large buildings should await the return from Europe of Frederick William Marshall, called to represent the Unity Boards in Wachovia, and meanwhile they would practice on a row of family houses, and so learn the method of construction best suited to the material at hand and to the climate.

On May 8, Ascension Day, Br. Lorenz went to Salem and held a service for the brethren, the first meeting conducted there by an ordained minister, if the informal one on January 6 be excepted.

On June 6, Graff, Lorenz and Reuter visited Salem, and in the presence of the resident brethren, now eighteen in number, laid the foundation stone of the first family house, on the "lower," that is, the west side of the main street. (The site was the now vacant lot just north of the Amanda Home.) The house measured 38x26 feet, and the stone was placed, not at a corner but in one of the side walls.

It was a good deal of work to carry from the branch all the water needed for building,

so "well-master" Rothe was called in, and with his hazel rod tested the Square, and concluded that water could be found at any corner thereof, at an estimated depth of from twenty-six to forty feet at different places. A well was therefore begun, and as the hole grew deeper the "well-master's" spirits sank, and he began to distrust his art and powers of divination. But at thirty-nine and one-half feet water was struck, and a little additional labor gave them a stand of eight and one-half feet, and then the well was walled up and a pump installed.

August 18 was a red-letter day in Salem, for Ettwein, Schropp and Graff escorted seven of the sisters thither, the first to visit the new town. To be sure the main street was as yet only a survey, but the new house was so nearly finished that the resident brethren and their guests could gather in its largest room and hold the first Salem Lovefeast, closing their service with the familiar lines:

Now thank we all our God  
With hearts and hands and voices,  
Who wond'rous things hath done,  
In whom his world rejoices;  
Who from our mother's arms  
Hath blest us on our way  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.

It would be interesting to know the names of these sisters, and just how personal their

interest was, but the Diary, alas, is silent. Naturally Sister Ettwein would be one, for she and her husband had been called to Bethlehem and she would wish to see the new town before she left. Sister Schropp would be another, having recently come with her husband to take the Ettweins' place at Bethabara; and the rest, whoever they were, must have been much delighted at the privilege granted them and greatly enjoyed their unusual holiday.

October 1, the foundation stone was laid for "the two-story house," just south of the one-story building. When finished a store was opened on the ground floor, and the second story served as a meeting hall until November 13, 1771, when the "Saal" in the "Gemein Haus" was consecrated and the Congregation of Salem organized.

Before the close of the year the first house was finished and occupied. Praezel set up his loom in one room; a little later George Holder and his brother Charles moved into another, the latter beginning there to make saddles; and the third room was taken by Valentine Beck, the gunsmith, from Bethabara. The two streets of Salem were also cleared and all was made ready for the active prosecution of work in the following year.

The spirit of the men who directed the building of Salem in 1766 appears in a letter written during the summer by Johannes Ettwein to the Unitaeets Vorsteher Collegium in Herrnhut. After describing the plot of Salem, "which follows Gnadenberg instead of Niesky because that fits the ground better," he writes concerning the letters to Wachovia from the Directing Boards: "The plans for Salem and Bethabara are wholly according to our heart, and tears filled our eyes as we rejoiced together over the clearness of the instructions. We

will on our part use all diligence that the designs of our Lord for these towns shall be carried out as quickly as possible. And we will constantly pray our Father in Heaven that He may fill our hands with the means whereby our good will shall be made manifest. We know that we desire to serve the Lord with all that we are and have, and in that spirit will handle every penny of our receipts and expenditures; seeking to do all things according to your directions."

Of the eight pioneer settlers of Salem, February 19, 1766, six remained there as residents, and when life's race was run were laid to rest in the Salem "God's Acre."

John Birkhead was the first to go, passing away on June 5, 1771, of a "nerve-fever." His grave was the first to be dug in the Salem Graveyard, and the simple flat stone that bears his name lies in the southeast angle of the intersecting paths at the center of that consecrated ground.

Ten years later, March 12, 1781, Jens Schmidt followed him. There is a time-honored tradition that obituaries shall be laudatory, regardless of facts, but the Salem Diarist saw his brethren, not as saints with halos around their heads, but as men with human faults and failings, and frankly characterized this one as "a man of difficult disposition, requiring much patience on the part of his associates." Since the poor fellow had cancer of the tongue, and toward the end could swallow only the thinnest broths, much may be forgiven him, especially as the frankness of this statement gives emphasis to encomiums pronounced in other cases.

Melchior Rasp stands in the records as "a trusty workman, and a man of kindly nature," although he too had much to suffer. While working on a wall in Bethabara a bit of stone deprived him of the sight of one eye, and the other, feeling the strain, became so weak that sometimes for days together he would be blind. Then one Monday morning in April, 1766, on the way to Salem, he tripped and fell, the stem of his pipe striking the back of his mouth and lacerating it badly. The wound became infected and the throat swelled inside and out so that it was nearly two months before he was able to return to work, and his throat remained delicate ever after. He passed away March 19, 1785.

Gottfried Praezel, youngest of the eight pioneers, rose highest in official rank in the congregation. In 1773 he became associate "Helfer," and in 1780 "Helfer" ("Pfleger" or chief officer) of the Single Brethren, having been ordained a Deacon July 14, 1778. In 1781 he was called as "Gemein Diener" (Congregation "Vorsteher" or treasurer), and in the same year he married the widow Elizabeth Nilson and they were placed at the head of the Married People, for each class in the congregation had its own officers. His wife died in 1782, and the next year he married Maria Elizabeth Engel. He died August 15, 1788, and of him it was recorded that he was "a brother true, and approved of the Lord, and he will be much missed."

The items added to the entry of Jacob Steiner's death, July 21, 1801, touch the heart. In 1771 he married Catharine Beroth, and moved to the mill near Salem, but of the four sons born to them there only one outlived babyhood, and he died at the age of thirteen.

The father's death at the age of sixty-seven does not seem half so pathetic as the brief record of those four little lives so quickly ended, and with them all the hopes and aspirations that parents delight to build about the future of their children and children's children.

Nils Petersen lived more than eighty-seven years, and in his old age loved to tell the rising generation stories of the founding of Salem. He never married, but passed his days in the Brothers House that he had helped to build, superintending one of the industries carried on for the support of the house. When Salem Congregation was organized he was elected into the "Aufseher Collegium" (the board that managed its financial affairs, etc.) and "by the choice of his brethren and of the whole congregation" he remained a member for thirty years. During the same period he was by turn "Vorsteher" and "Pfleger" of the Single Brethren, and "his industry, faithfulness, and punctuality" won for him the love and high esteem of all. Though increasing deafness finally forced him to resign his official positions his general health remained good, and he rarely missed a church service, saying that though he could hear little "he could still feel the presence of the Saviour, and could rejoice to be with the assembled congregation." His last months were a gentle slipping away—"If weakness is illness then am I indeed ill" he often said with a smile, and eagerly awaited the summons home, which came November 4, 1804.

George Holder remained a farmer to the end, living first on a farm on the edge of Salem, then moving nearer Bethabara, and when he passed away, January 15, 1804, his remains were borne up the steep path and laid to rest in the consecrated plot on the hilltop over-

looking that village. His wife was Elizabeth Bieler, of Warwick, Pa., and they had three sons and two daughters.

So ends the story of the town builders of 1766, men who had a vision of a city that was to be and who toiled in simple faith and with unyielding courage; and the men, women and children of a century and a half have entered into their labors.

## “WATCHWORDS”

FEBRUARY 14, 1765. Site of Salem selected.

“Let thine eye be opened toward this house night and day, even toward the place of which Thou hast said, My name shall be there.” 1 Kings 8:29.

AUGUST 16, 1765. Plans for Salem definitely determined at Herrnhut.

“Blessed be the Lord, which spake with His mouth, and hath with His hand fulfilled it.” 1 Kings 8:15.

JANUARY 6, 1766. First tree felled for “the new town.”

Text drawn at Bethabara:—“I will defend this city.” Is. 37:35.

Watchword for the day:—“Ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it?” Deut. 4:32.

JANUARY 30, 1766. Receipt of letters from Herrnhut, bringing name of SALEM, and authorizing beginning of building.

“I will perform my word with thee, and I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake My people Israel.” 1 Kings 6:12, 13.

FEBRUARY 19, 1766. Brethren move to Salem.

“I will be sanctified in them that come nigh Me.” Lev. 10:3.

APRIL 12, 1766. Site for first Square, Graveyard, and first home selected.

“Do all that is in thine heart: turn thee, behold, I am with thee according to thy heart.” 1 Sam. 14:7.

**JUNE 6, 1766.** Foundation stone laid for first home.

“I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, and establish My covenant with you.” Lev. 26:9.

**AUGUST 18, 1766.** First Lovefeast in Salem.

“Strong is thy dwelling place, and thou puttest thy nest in a rock.” Num. 24:21.

**OCTOBER 1, 1766.** Foundation stone laid of “two-story house,” which contained first meeting-hall.

“Rejoice, oh ye nations, with His people.” Deut. 32:43.

**NOVEMBER 13, 1771.** “Saal” in Gemein Haus consecrated, and Salem Congregation organized.

“The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.” Hab. 2:20.

**FEBRUARY 19, 1816.** Jubilee of Salem.

“Now, our God, we thank Thee, and praise Thy glorious name.” 1 Chron. 29:13.

**FEBRUARY 19, 1866.** Centennial of Salem.

“Even to your old age I am He; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made and I will bear; even I will carry and will deliver you.” Is. 46:4.

**FEBRUARY 19, 1916.** Sesqui-Centennial of Salem.

“Jerusalem shall be called The city of truth; and the mountain of Jehovah of hosts, The holy mountain.” Zech. 8:3.