

Bethlehem Moment 9: Supporting Moravian Single Women

The Bethlehem Gadfly Bethlehem Moments, Fun Stuff, Gadfly's posts April 3, 2019

Take the “Connecting Bethlehem” survey

Bethlehem Moment 9

City Council

April 2, 2019

[Video \(start at min. 3:08\)](#)

Ed Gallagher, 49 W. Greenwich St.

This Bethlehem Moment was delivered on “[Equal Pay Day](#),” was inspired by Councilman Callahan’s [evolving wage discrimination ordinance proposal](#), and was written with Gadfly’s nine granddaughters firmly in mind.

A Bethlehem Moment: August 13, 1757

“Virtually every woman in 17th and 18th century America eventually married.”

recent textbook

“To whom should the helpless Maiden go?” Penry’s life in America constitutes an answer to that question. If she were lucky, the “helpless Maiden” could “go” to a Moravian single sisters’ house, which offered economic and social, as well as spiritual, asylum.

Scott Gordon

On August 13, 1757, Mary Penry (1735-1804) received communion in the Gemeinhaus chapel, marking her full membership in the Moravian Church. She would live in the Bethlehem Single Sisters’ House till 1762 before moving to the Single Sisters’ House in Lititz for the rest of her life. We mark this moment to value the role that our Sisters’ Houses played for women single either by fate or choice. Penry was born in Wales where her parents lived in “desperate and worrisome circumstances.” At age 9, after the death of her father, Penry moved with her mother to live with a female relative in Philadelphia, only to live a life of “Egyptian bondage” under the roof of the relative’s husband, a “terrible person,” whom after the relative died, impregnated her mother, marrying her only two months after the baby was born, a union Penry describes as “true

despair,” for the husband threatened to kill her “daily.” Penry was a vulnerable teen, poor – the wealthy husband died absolutely unfairly leaving her and her mother literally only a few shillings – and she would remark that put a “u” in her name and you get “penury” – Mary Penury – poor and sexual prey herself she was. But at age 19 Penry found the Brethren’s church, had a saving vision of the wounds of Christ, learned of Single Sisters’ House from the famed artist Johann Valentine Haidt, whose portraits can be found in museums around the City, and came to Bethlehem. Penry *chose* to remain single: “I desire to spend and be spent in the service of the virgin choir,” she said. The Sisters’ Houses gave this single woman family, religious refuge, economic refuge, and a satisfying career. She was bookkeeper, accountant, translator, town guide – she embroidered. She was gainfully employed. She was no grumpy old maid, no silenced cloistered nun – her editor/biographer describes the voice in her letters as devout, yes, but garrulous, witty, plaintive, worldly-wise, curious, heartbroken, joyous, prophetic, bold, irreverent. Sisters’ House gave Mary Penry and other women the choice to remain single. Thus, Sisters’ House gave Mary Penry and other single women life.

Drawn from Scott Paul Gordon, ed., *The Letters of Mary Penry: A Single Moravian Woman in Early America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2018).

A few additional soundbites from Dr. Gordon’s book:

- Penry may have been an “ordinary” woman, but she is unusual in an important way for historians of early America: she writes, self-consciously as a single woman at a time when singleness was rare.
- The choice to remain single was made possible by the Moravian communities in which Penry lived. . . . Single women lived together in great stone buildings called “choir” houses. In these choir houses, which still stand, Moravian single sisters lived, worked, and worshiped alongside one another. They also laughed, played music, gossiped, and mourned their dead.
- Visitors to Bethlehem between 1754 and 1773, for instance, would have found that about 54 percent of the community’s

women were single, having never married. . . . The number of those who, like Penry chose to *remain* single throughout their life was high. In 1758, for instance, Penry lived with ninety-three others in Bethlehem's single sisters' house. . . . It was a remarkably diverse group of women. An astonishing 42 percent of these women remained single sisters for their entire life.

- This arrangement offered an extraordinary amount of authority to women, who . . . were “led and guided by people like themselves, which . . . elsewhere in the whole world is not usual.”
- None of these Moravian communities relegated single women to the “usual despised State of Old Maids.”
- The popularity of the single sisters' choir took Bethlehem's founders by surprise.
- Many Moravians, including single sisters such as Penry, also preserved persistent and deeply felt *social* ties with the world beyond Moravian settlements.
- Moravian single sisters' houses embraced women whose circumstances had left them little hope.
- Penry never worried that she would become destitute. Her community would care for her even if she could no longer contribute economically.

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