

# Bethlehem: “possibly the only city in the United States founded by Divine dictation”

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 *Latest in a series of posts on Bethlehem history* 

from Richmond E. Myers, *Sketches of Early Bethlehem*. Bethlehem: Moravian College Alumni Association, 1981.

## How Moravians Chose Bethlehem Other Options and the Lot

The land on which the City of Bethlehem is situated was purchased by the Moravians from William Allen of Philadelphia on April 2, 1741.

The sale was conducted by the "pious" Henry Antes, then of Frederick, Montgomery County, acting for the Moravians. At that time, the Moravians had no legal corporation, nor had any of them been naturalized, hence it was necessary for someone to act for them.

Antes was a prominent man in colonial Pennsylvania, and active in helping the Moravians become established here so it was natural that he acted for them.

The site for their settlement had been a vexing question while the brethren were spending those few winter months in a cabin at Nazareth. Various reasons had led to a consideration of other places, and there was enough uncertainty among them to deadlock the matter. It was at length decided that the question should be decided by lot.

The other places considered were Skippack near Germantown, Conestoga Manor in Lancaster County, a settlement on the banks of the Susquehanna River, and several locations in Northampton County.

To this list was added the site between the Monocacy Creek and the Lehigh River, known to the Indians as "Monogassi." The lot decided in favor of this location, so the first purchase of 500 acres was made. Hence Bethlehem is possibly the only city in the United States founded by Divine dictation.

The actual sale was consummated by Nathaniel Irish, William Allen's land agent. Irish lived in Saucon Township, at what later became Shimersville. On April 2, 1741, Henry Antes, Bishop David Nitschmann and a few others rode down to Irish's place and signed the deed.

The new title was the fourth in succession after William Penn, but none of the early owners ever set foot on the land in question. The Moravians, therefore, if not the first owners, were the first settlers. Penn had sold 5,000 acres of his new-world woodlands to John Lowther of London, who sold his American holdings to Joseph Turner. Lowther and Turner were merely London speculators. William Allen purchased the land from Turner in 1731. He went so far as to have the land located and surveyed, but by the time of the Moravian purchase he had not visited the land himself. He established a hunting and fishing camp on the Little Lehigh, but used the Perkiomen Valley to reach his retreat, thus not passing the site of Bethlehem until after the Moravians took possession.

Now if is a little word. It is utterly useless to stir up arguments which can never be proved, such as if Lee had won at Gettysburg, or if

Lord Baltimore and not William Penn had been granted the present site of Philadelphia, what would have been the subsequent course of events? No one knows, and it does not matter one iota, yet debates over such issues that never have happened are good mental gymnastics and a testing ground for one's knowledge of history.

If the Moravians had not chosen (by lot) the site for Bethlehem on the Monocacy but selected one in Berks or Lancaster counties instead, what would have been the story of Bethlehem and its place in the Lehigh Valley? One can safely say that the natural advantages of the site would in time have led to its settlement and eventual industrial development, but Bethlehem's spiritual heritage would have been elsewhere.

Thus we can assume that Christmas traditions might have been glorified on the Conestoga or Susquehanna and not on the banks of the Monocacy. The general hospital of the Continental Army might have been in Oley Valley and the Bach Choir might have germinated on the banks of the Skippack.

The site geography of communities is an interesting study. Towns develop because of certain very definite factors or advantages in their locations. If these factors are strong enough, villages grow into cities. If the favorable factors are too few, communities sink into oblivion.

In the case of Bethlehem, the lot pointed to its founding and natural forces took over from that point. Are we foolish to assume that the destiny of man is in greater hands than he imagines? One thing we realize and that is the absolute belief of Bethlehem's founders in divine guidance. Would that we could be reconvinced of this today.



Bishop David Nitschmann

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*We live together on land originally the land of the Lenape people.*

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