

# The Catherine delivers her Moravian cargo

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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.

## **Voyage of the Catharine The First Sea Congregation**

**T**hree historic ships brought settlers to the new world. The Mayflower brought her Pilgrims, the Welcome brought her Quakers, and the Catharine brought her Moravians. All these passengers were seeking, among other things, religious freedom.

The Catharine was commanded by Capt. Thomas Gladman, a man with much experience and adventure at sea. He had been in the service of George Whitefield, and on one of his voyages for the great evangelist he had been shipwrecked off the Georgia coast. He was the master of the vessel in which Whitefield and Peter Boehler sailed from Savannah to Philadelphia, and after leaving these two men of God in the Quaker colony, he took his ship back to England early in 1740.

Capt. Gladman was in close contact with the English Moravians and, when in 1742 it was decided to send the first colony of Moravians to Pennsylvania, he was chosen to command the ship.

The Catharine was especially fitted to transport large groups of people. On Feb. 24, a group of the brethren en route to America arrived in London from the continent. Two days later a memorable meeting was held in the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane. It was presided over by Bishop Spangenberg. At this meeting the colony was organized for the voyage. It was set up along the lines of a church society under the name of the Sea Congregation. Peter Boehler, who had returned to England, joined them with his wife, and he was appointed chaplain for the voyage.

Now in those days the seas were infested with dangers that today are almost unknown to ocean travelers. Pirates and privateers followed the main sailing routes hunting likely prey. Spanish and French vessels were continually harassing English shipping. The passengers of the Catharine were well aware of this, but they placed their trust in God and Capt. Gladman.

March 16 they sailed. On April 7 the Catharine called at Madeira, took on fresh water and provisions, and after a brief stay to give everyone a chance to stretch his or her legs on terra firma, continued westward across the Atlantic.

Luck was with them. The only trouble encountered was a few bad blows, and Long Island was sighted on May 18. Five days later they put in at New London for some minor repairs, and the next week the anchor went down in New York Harbor.

There some of the group left to travel overland to Bethlehem. The next day the Catharine sailed for Philadelphia, reaching the Delaware port June 2, having had to lie at anchor for two nights before a pilot could be secured to take the ship up the Delaware River.

In Philadelphia, Count Zinzendorf came on board to welcome the

newcomers. He took them to the State House to qualify before the authorities, under the laws of the province. These formalities gave no trouble. Everyone was welcomed heartily. On June 17, farewells were said to the good ship Catharine. She never made another voyage for the Moravians. The ship was sold and her subsequent history is unknown.

This one voyage has given the Catharine a place in American history as well as in Moravian history. It was in many ways a remarkable voyage. It was made without convoy, a custom prevalent for 18th century British merchantmen on transatlantic passage.

The voyage also set the pattern that other ships bearing groups of Moravians to the new world followed; that of organizing sea congregations.

Under this mode of life at sea the day was divided into specific times for Bible study, preaching, prayer and recreation. Leaders were appointed for various age groups based somewhat on the "choir" system, that is; single brethren, married couples, single sisters, etc. Such a discipline not only did much to ease the monotony of the long voyage but also prepared the brethren for their religious life in their new homes.



Peter Bohler

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

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