

Counting heads at Bethlehem's first Christmas

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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.

The First Christmas Who Was Present

One of the best known Christmas stories told in the Lehigh Valley is the account of the way Bethlehem received its name. There may be some Bethlehem residents who never heard of Count Zinzendorf. There may be some who are not aware that the first house in Bethlehem was available to hold the Christmas Eve vigil service under its roof in 1741. Some Bethlehem citizens may not know that the singing of a hymn at that service inspired the Count to name the tiny unfinished wilderness settlement, Bethlehem, yet to most this is probably common knowledge. However, there is one phase of that story that most people never hear. We wonder how many can name the actors in that little drama? Who, other than Zinzendorf, were present at that service, why were they there, and what happened to them afterwards?

Two groups of people were involved. One was a working group. These people had been on the site for almost a year. The other was a group of visitors who arrived just a day or so prior to the service. In order to present the dramatis personae in their proper perspective, a bit of background is advisable.

Negotiations on the part of the Moravians to purchase the land on which Bethlehem now stands, were begun in December of 1740. By February of the next year an agreement of purchase was made, and on April 2 the purchase was consummated.

Some Moravians under Bishop Nitschmann, who had been working on the Whitefield project in the Barony of Nazareth, had moved down the Monocacy as early as February and had begun felling trees. By spring the log walls of a one-story house were up. This building was to be used partly as a common dwelling, and partly as a stable. By September a larger structure was also under construction.

Activities were not confined to house building. Fields had been cleared and planted in the spring, and crops were harvested in the fall to be stored in the first house there to await future use. The people who were engaged in these activities constituted the working group. These indeed were the first citizens of Bethlehem.

The second group of people who were present at that memorable Christmas Eve service arrived in the settlement Dec. 21. They were housed in the still unfinished "Gemeinhaus." Led by Count Zinzendorf, who had arrived from London on Nov. 30, and then had traveled to Philadelphia overland from New York, the group increased the number of worshipers considerably. We wonder how they managed to crowd into the limited space available in the settlement's first house.

Exactly who was present at the famous service on Dec. 24, we can not say with any accuracy. The count's party of traveling companions were there, and undoubtedly most of the pioneers who had been on

hand during the year preparing the site. Others may well have been present. No actual roster was kept.

As to the "residents" of the village, their leader was David Nitschmann Sr., fondly called "Father Nitschmann" and listed as a "master workman." His daughter Anna was also present. She was a pioneer woman missionary, and destined to become Zinzendorf's second wife. Bishop David Nitschmann, nephew of Father Nitschmann, and the Moravian's first missionary to America was on hand along with John Martin Mack, listed as "assistant foreman." Mack's autobiography gives us the best description of the events of the day. (He later became the first Moravian bishop to be consecrated in America.) Then there were the three Zeisbergers, David, the missionary's father, listed as a carpenter, his mother Rosina, and of course the young David Zeisberger, listed as a "general helper."

Among the others were John Bohner, carpenter, Andrew Eschenbach, preacher, Christian Froelich, general helper, Anton Seiffert, house chaplain, and Matthias Seybold, farmer.

Two other women were on hand. One was Johanna Sophia Molther, a friend of Anna Nitschmann. She was officially the Baroness von Seidewitz. The other was Johanna Hummel. Last, but not the least, were two boys, Benjamin and James Sommers.

So much for the residents of the community. What about the visitors?

Heading this list was Count Zinzendorf. Included in his party were his daughter Benigna; Rosina Nitschmann the bishop's wife; John Jacob Mueller, the count's secretary; David Bruce of Edinborough, Scotland, the first English-speaking Moravian missionary in America; Abraham and Judith Meinung, missionaries, and John Henry Miller, a printer.

This was indeed a transitory group. A check of the old cemetery records shows that only six of these people lived out their lives in Bethlehem and rest today in God's Acre. The rest scattered to the four corners of the earth as missionaries and church workers, or returned to temporal lives.