

Sarah Eyerly, Florida State University

*Interpreting Moravian Heritage Through Sound and Music*

The recent inscription of Bethlehem, along with Christiansfeld (Denmark), Gracehill (Northern Ireland), and Herrnhut (Germany), on the UNESCO World Heritage List affirms the global significance of Moravian religious, architectural, and cultural contributions. Led by the new Institute for Moravian History and World Heritage at Moravian University, a team of researchers is developing public humanities programming for the Moravian Church Settlements–Bethlehem (MCS-B). This work is undertaken in partnership with the City of Bethlehem, Bethlehem Area Moravians, the Bethlehem Area School District, the Moravian Historical Society, and tribal partners connected to the history of Indigenous Moravians, including the Delaware Nation’s Eastern Extension Office.

A central goal of the MCS-B project is to create an interpretive framework grounded in the lived experiences of eighteenth-century Moravians. Music and sound are essential to this reframing, and this paper considers how they can anchor the interpretive work at MCS-B. Moravian communities were among the most musically active in early America, cultivating extensive sacred and instrumental repertoires and drawing on global influences through the church’s missionary networks. From chamber music to choral oratorios, contrafacts of popular songs to adaptations of contemporary opera, the Moravians were active producers and transmitters of music.

Research in the archives of the Moravian Church and the Moravian Music Foundation, which holds one of the largest bodies of eighteenth-century music manuscripts in North America, will inform the development of sound-centered visitor experiences for MCS-B. These materials include Indigenous-language hymnody, early American chamber music, and rare choral and instrumental performance sources that reveal how Moravian musicians adapted European idioms to local and intercultural contexts. Interpretive possibilities under consideration for the MCS-B project include immersive audio exhibits, guided and self-guided sound walks, and digital soundscapes. By engaging diverse audiences through multisensory interpretation, sound and musical presentations can help to deepen public understanding of daily life in historic Moravian settlements and establish a replicable model for public humanities work across global Moravian sites.