

Joshua Follweiler, Princeton Theological Seminary

*Moravian Communities in Transition: Bethlehem and Winston-Salem in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*

Founded as communal religious settlements, Moravian towns were originally structured around ecclesiastical authority, regulated labor, and a theology that integrated spiritual discipline with economic life. By the early nineteenth century, however, changing market conditions, debt pressures, and the broader forces of American industrialization challenged these models. This paper examines the transformation of the Moravian communities of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, during the 1830s and 1840s, a period in which both towns shifted from tightly regulated church towns into increasingly industrialized urban centers.

Drawing on Moravian records and situating them within the historiography of American industrial and religious history, this paper examines the spatial transition of Bethlehem and Winston-Salem. Moravians actively shaped industrial development, adapting older communal practices to new economic realities, resulting in shifting spaces. Long-standing Moravian engagement in skilled crafts and manufacturing enabled these towns to industrialize earlier and more deliberately than many comparable communities. At the same time, the loosening of church control over property, labor, and governance in the 1830s and 1840s fundamentally altered the social, religious, and geographical character of both towns. By examining these parallel transitions, this paper argues that Moravian communities offer a valuable lens for understanding how religious traditions mediated, rather than merely resisted, the transformations of nineteenth-century industrial America.