

Historic Preservation and Moravian Legacy in the Southern Province: Old Salem and Beyond

Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is the headquarters of the Moravian Church in America, Southern Province, and is a vibrant city of a quarter million people in Forsyth County. Called the "City of Arts & Innovation," its credentials come from the Moravian Church, which began building the community as Wachovia in 1753. The city derives from generations of people born in or descended from Europe and Africa. The story is complicated, and the Moravian legacy endures in the culture, people, and place today. Historic Preservation has been invaluable to heritage stewardship in Winston-Salem, including Moravian buildings, graveyards, landscapes, objects, structures, and sites.

The Wachovia Tract is the 100,000 acres purchased by the Moravian Church in 1753 following Bishop Spangenberg's selection of land with resources to support successful settlement and future generations. His diary recorded: "The land on which we are now encamped seems to me to have been reserved by the Lord for the Brethren." Leadership designed a system of congregations for Wachovia, and by 1773, there were three Moravian town congregations (Bethabara, Bethania, Salem) and three developing country congregations (Friedberg, Friedland, Hope). From these founding six congregations, there are now twenty-nine Moravian churches in Forsyth County, and thousands of local people are descended from early Wachovia families. Wachovia is unique in the Unity and illustrates the foresight, durability, and beauty of the Moravian plan.

Salem was the settlement congregation and central town that quickly became a regional commerce center. Wachovia grew in population (including non-Moravians) and prospered, with emerging industrialization and entrepreneurship. In 1849, the new county of Forsyth was formed, which included Wachovia as its core, and the Moravians sold land for a secular county seat, Winston. The towns grew side by side until consolidation in 1913 as Winston-Salem. Textiles and tobacco propelled the city as the largest and wealthiest in North Carolina until the Great Depression, with 100 millionaires by 1930.

The 20th century brought challenges to the integrity of the places that people knew and loved, and Moravian activism initiated grassroots historic preservation. Pioneering city planning and zoning protected Moravian places, and a master plan was created to restore the town of Salem. The wealth of documentation in the Moravian world allowed for such bold measures. Old Salem, Inc. was established in 1950 when historic preservation in America was in its infancy. When the National Historic Preservation Act passed in 1966, Old Salem became the first National Historic Landmark District in North Carolina and has been a preservation leader for over 75 years. Bethabara and Bethania have also been designated National Historic Landmark Districts, and across the community there are many Moravian-associated properties recognized on the National Register of Historic Places.

However, there has also been loss, especially from later 20th-century highways and urban sprawl. Advocacy and activism have been and continue to be essential to the preservation of the Moravian legacy in North Carolina. This lecture will review Historic Preservation in the Southern Province.