

HISTORIOGRAPHER'S REPORT 2019

O ZION HASTE, THY MISSION UNFULFILLED?

A few years back I was reflecting on our Lord's title 'Alpha and Omega' which speaks of his all-encompassing nature – the A to Z and beginning and end of all things. As meditations can often do, this one took me to thinking about the fact that our Diocesan church names do not span the alphabet: we only cover from Annunciation to St. Thomas. I thought it was too bad no parish in our Diocese has ever taken St. Zeno or St. Zacharias as patrons!

It was with that fact tucked in the attic of my brain that one day in the archives I ran across mention of Zion Church in Moravia, NJ and the church building still exists!

Nowadays, driving through southern Gloucester County, a mile or two beyond the advancing exurban sprawl of tract mansions and condominium clusters one finds sitting on a bluff above Oldmans Creek a small rectangular brick building. If you pull off the road and get out you can also see the small churchyard punctuated by gravestones and catch the pungent aroma of the horse farm across Kings Highway.

Walking up the hill to the tightly shuttered building, there is a marble plaque incised into the brick between the two front doors (presumably one for men and one for women). It reads:

Near this site A.D. 1747, the MORAVIANS erected a log church which was dedicated AUGUST 31, 1749,
o.s. by BISHOP A.G. SPANGENBERG.

The construction of this church was begun in JUNE 1786, and dedicated JULY 5, 1789, by BISHOP J.
ETTWEIN.

This property was conveyed to THE PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH of NEW JERSEY
OCTOBER 15 1836.

The GLOUCESTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY placed this tablet AUGUST 31, 1907.

Clearly, this is enough evidence to suggest there may be a story worth telling.

The lower reaches of the Delaware River from the falls in Trenton to the north to its bay in the south was I-95 corridor from the earliest days of European colonization to the advent of the rail-roads. The numerous creeks and bays of this tidewater region were the on and off ramps for settlement and for commerce. As a result, this slice of southeastern New Jersey was successively colonized and fought over by Swedes, Dutch and finally, the English

To the credit of all these nations, the settlers of the previous colorizations were permitted to remain and contribute to the development of the area and attracted further newcomers to join them. One of the centers of this growth was at the head of navigation on Raccoon Creek, Swedesboro named after that first wave of colonizers.

As to be expected, Swedesboro had a Swedish church which was pastored by missionaries sent by the Church of Sweden. These men continued to conduct the services of that communion in the mother tongue for over 150 years. But by the mid-18th century, resupplying clergy to the former colonies was a very long and time-consuming process and many of the churches found themselves without an ordained minister for two to four years at a time.

Down river from Swedesboro, a group of settlers fleeing from religious intolerance began to make their home near the head of navigation of Oldman's Creek, also the boundary between Salem and Gloucester Counties. These folks, known as Moravians were decedents of one of the earliest of protest movements to the abuses of the Roman Church. They traced their faith back to the 15th century Czech reformer Jan Hus who had been in turn inspired by the writings of "The Morning Star of the Reformation," English priest John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384). After Hus was burned at the stake in 1415, many of his followers returned to the Roman faith under pressure from the Hapsburg Emperors while others led a precarious existence for a more than a century. Eventually, thanks to Martin Luther, these United Brethren were in the position to influence and be influenced by the Reformation occurring just over the mountains in Saxony.

Eventually, a group of Moravians found refuge at the Saxon estate of Herrnhut, where they re-grouped under the protection of Count Nicholas Louis von Zinzendorf. From there they began a movement to settle in and missionize the British colonies in North America. By the mid-18th century they were in James Oglethorpe's Savannah, Georgia (where John Wesley met them), North Carolina, southern New Jersey and most famously in Bethlehem and Nazareth Pennsylvania.

In 1743, a Swedish speaking Moravian missionary came to the settlement on Oldmans Creek. Many of the Swedes in Swedesboro, whose church had been without a pastor for some time invited this missionary, Paul Daniel Brycelius to lead worship and preach. While a majority of the congregation appeared to be satisfied with the situation, many were not and a complaint was sent to Sweden. Gabriel Naesman, the new pastor of the Swedish church in Philadelphia (now Gloria Dei) arrived in October 1743. Naesman came across the Delaware River and severely denounced Brycelius. This gave the Lutheran loyalists the upper hand, and they locked the doors of the church to Brycelius. Those who came from near and far to church were thus disappointed and a riot resulted, with the crowd howling and rocks thrown through the windows of the building. The situation went to court and Brycelius and his supporters lost. He continued to preach in the area, a congregation developed and requested a pastor from the Moravian authorities in Bethlehem, PA. A piece of property was donated to the cause three miles away on Oldmans Creek and in 1747 a small log building was erected and dedicated to the worship of the Moravian communion. Later a graveyard was started and a parsonage erected.

The small log church housed the congregation comfortably for decades, but the turmoil of the American War of Independence took a physical toll on the facilities which were used and abused by both sides during the conflict. So, in 1786 the building of the present brick church began. The area however was poor and progress was slow. Even when the building was dedicated in 1789 it remained unfinished.

The neighborhood around the church continued to decline in prosperity and population and a mere 15 years later, in 1804 the church and parsonage were abandoned. Local Methodists were allowed in the building in 1807, but that soon ended as a local worthy thought it his duty "to go there and forbid their keeping any more meetings there till I wrote to Bethlehem to know what's to be done with the meeting house as I know it was built for a place of serious worship."

On April 10, 1836 Bishop George Washington Doane, traveling from Swedesboro to Salem City in the company of the Revd Mr. John Woart, Rector of Trinity Church Swedesboro (the Swedish churches in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware affiliated with the Episcopal Church after the Revolution) and Mr. Howey a layman, stopped at the long derelict Moravian Church and took an interest in it. Bishop Doane requested that the Moravians deed it over the Episcopalians, who would repair and return it to public worship. This indeed was accomplished, the Diocesan Convention approved the acceptance of the property, and Bishop Doane consecrated it to public worship on April 26, 1837. The Bishop told the Convention of 1838, "What was my delight, to find on my arrival a neat, tasteful and becoming building completely finished, and

furnished, and filled with expecting worshippers; I was prepared for much, but I found more than I could have imagined.” Thus Zion Chapel in Moravia was born.

The Revd Thomas Tanser was originally appointed to Zion and he reported that he led services there every other Sunday, and that vestments, prayer books a pulpit Bible and altar linens had been donated for the church’s use. Mr. Tanser however also was responsible for St. George’s Penns Neck, St. Stephen’s in Mullica Hill and St. Thomas’ in Glassboro. This four-point charge was deemed awkward and by 1845 Zion was transferred to Swedesboro’s care and twice a month evening services were held.

Sadly, by 1848 Bishop Doane reported that, “In the afternoon in Zion Chapel Moravia the Rev Messrs Frost and Boggs read prayers and I preached The (sic) remembrance of those who were wont to greet me here whose places now know them no more made this a tender hearted visit The memory of them is blessed,” suggesting that there had been serious attrition in the congregation due to death and relocation.

By 1855, Bishop Odenheimer reported in his address, “I visited the venerable Trinity (sic) Chapel Moravia which has been closed for years inspected the building and property and arranged for the resumption of occasional services.” This appears to mean a visit once a month from the missionary at St. George’s Penns Neck. However in subsequent years, St. George’s itself closed for a time. Monthly services and a weekly Sunday School were not resumed until 1884, again under the auspices of Trinity Swedesboro. In 1891, Bishop Scarborough wrote, “The Rev Dr Watson of Swedesboro continues the services at Zion Church Moravia. There is no village near and the development of towns adjacent has taken away the necessity for services but the Church building is there and we are in a measure in honor bound to witness for the faith.”

By the time the historic plaque was put in place in 1907, Zion Chapel was only being used once a year for services, generally the first Sunday in June. Repairs were made to make the building usable in 1917. But the attitude of the Episcopal Church to the chapel can be best described in a 1938 letter of the Revd Joseph Urban then Rector of Trinity Swedesboro (later Dean of Trinity Cathedral and Suffragan Bishop of New Jersey): “...the building has an interesting history...but other than its being an historical spot, it has no value...there is no need for a religious building there now.”

The church continued to deteriorate as reported by Fr. Urban’s successor in Swedesboro, the Revd Parker Auten. He wrote in 1946, “It is a source of regret and embarrassment to me that the diocese is allowing the old Moravian Church near here to fall into ruins. Many historical groups visit there and cannot understand why the building has been allowed to so deteriorate. It would seem that the time has come to either sell the church, repair it, or tear it down.” Complaints also came from Gloucester County Freeholder Alvin Crispin and State Assemblyman Hugh Mehorter, both of whom had attended the Sunday School held at Zion. So the Diocese decided it was time to see if the site could be given away.

Since Mr. Mehorter was also the President of the Gloucester County Historical Society (GCHS) the Society accepted the offer of Diocese of New Jersey first made decades before and decided the time was right to assume ownership of the building and the churchyard. No deed from the Moravians to the Episcopalians was found after a fruitless search of the (then far less-well organized) archives so a resolution of Diocesan Convention in 1948 officially turned over the property to the Historical Society. They re-christened it the Moravian Church at Oldmans Creek – Zion Moravia.

The GCHS was able to make some important repairs and in 1971, the building was placed on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places. The records of the Moravian Church at Oldmans Creek were compiled by Dr. Paul Minotty and published by the GCHS in 1969, which offers a list of names from the early church records, 1742 to 1810, and a history of the congregation’s beginnings. Archeological digs have

been sponsored and the church has been opened for tours and open houses. In 2019, the GCHS received a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust for \$90,000. Work is expected to begin in July 2020.

There are a number of things to be learned about the Episcopal experience at Zion Chapel. Foremost is that a church building without people to worship within it is just a building. The chapel was a lovely space, but the 'Field of Dreams' approach ('if you build it they will come') was not very successful. Nonetheless, people's lives were affected by our ministry there both in the worship and in the over 30 years the Sunday School was in operation.

I do have a vision as part of this story. The little church on Oldmans Creek was the result of the interaction of Lutherans, Moravians and Episcopalians. Those relations were not always the best, but in the 21st century our three churches now practice intercommunion and our bishops are involved in each others' consecrations. Perhaps a joint service consisting of elements of all three of our traditions could serve as a sign of reconciliation and modern co-operation in this ancient and sacred space whose walls and history encompass all three Christian traditions.

Respectfully submitted,

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