

## Immigration to the American Colonies

Rapid immigration to the American colonies in the mid-eighteenth century nearly doubled the land occupied by colonists in the previous 150 years. Members of the **Moravian Church**, a Protestant denomination, helped to advance this fervent pace of immigration. The sitter in the portrait *Young Moravian Girl* likely immigrated to the colonies at this time. Originally from the historical Central European countries of Moravia and Bohemia (now part of the current day Czech Republic and Germany), the Moravians came to America for two important reasons: missionary work and religious freedom.

The height of Moravian persecution occurred during the **Protestant Reformation**, when Moravians and other Protestant reformers accused the Catholic Church of corruption and abuse of religious doctrine. The American colonies provided the Moravians with a safe haven to practice their faith and an opportunity to further their **ecumenical** and **missionary** efforts. Their missionary efforts extended as far as the West Indies and South Africa, making them the most active missionaries of the eighteenth-century. The Moravians began to migrate in waves from Germany to the American colonies in 1735. Emigrating with an established community ensured the Moravians greater success in the new world than other immigrants who came independently or with few resources. Moravians traveled in ships owned by their church, so they were not charged exorbitant prices for the passage. Additionally, journeying with community members and family provided stable emotional and physical support so that practical the needs of building a new community could quickly commence upon arrival in the colonies.

The Moravians settled in Pennsylvania, one of the most religiously-tolerant locations in the colonies thanks to the **Quaker** principles of **William Penn**. Their settlement, named **Bethlehem**, became a base of operations for the Moravian missionaries to help spread the word of God to the Native Americans through conversion to Christianity. The former Bishop of the Moravian Church Joseph Mortimer Levering wrote that, "the uncertainty of [the Moravians'] situation in Saxony [Germany] . . . might compel them to cross the ocean to find liberty and peace, and that such a settlement in Pennsylvania might then be not only a center of missionary operations but also a refuge for people leaving Bohemia and Moravia to seek freedom of conscience." In order to emigrate, however, members of the community had to be given permission by community elders. The needs of the community were always placed above those of the individual and as such, elders considered the demographic needs of the missions first and not which individuals desired to go.

In contrast, the family of Mrs. George Watson, the former Miss Elizabeth Oliver, had been established in the colonies since the early seventeenth century. Her great-great grandfather had emigrated from London in 1632 and settled in Boston, Massachusetts. A surgeon by profession, he was likely attracted by the endless, untapped economic prospects the colonies offered. His future descendants would benefit from his emigration, as all would become successful merchants and politicians themselves or marry into other wealthy merchant families. Mrs. Watson's father, Peter Oliver, spent his early life in business with his brother Andrew, importing wine and textiles before starting several businesses on his own and serving as a Massachusetts Superior Court Justice. The extravagant amount of silk fabric in the portrait of Mrs. Watson is likely a nod to both her father's early success as a textile importer and her husband's prosperous international trade business. Like his father-in-law, George Watson also practiced law in addition to his mercantile business. He was descended from a long line of successful merchants that came to the colonies from England in the 1630s and settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

## Glossary

**Bethlehem:** The largest Moravian settlement in America, established in 1741.

**ecumenical:** *a* : of, relating to, or representing the whole of a body of churches, *b* : promoting or tending toward worldwide Christian unity or cooperation.

**missionary:** a person who is sent to a foreign country to do religious work (such as to convince people to join a religion or to help people who are sick, poor, etc.)

**Moravian Church:** A Protestant denomination arising from a 15th century religious reform movement in Bohemia and Moravia, land that today is the Czech Republic.

**Protestant Reformation:** 16th century religious movement that sought to reform the practices and beliefs of the Catholic Church.

**Quaker:** Also known as the Religious Society of Friends, the Quaker faith emerged as a new Christian denomination in England during a period of religious turmoil in the mid-1600's with a strong focus on pacifism and humanitarianism.

**William Penn:** (1644-1718) early American Quaker and founder of the province of Pennsylvania, later the state of Pennsylvania.