

Women and Early American Community Life

The facet of Moravian life that bound the community together like no other was their dedication to missionary work; the Moravians were the most active Protestant missionaries of the eighteenth century, sending community members to the West Indies, South America, and as far as South Africa. By 1760, the Moravians had sent out 226 missionaries and baptized more than 3,000 converts, including American Indians. In North America the key undertaking for Moravian missionaries was to convert the Indians to Christianity. The Moravians viewed the Indians as heathens in need of spiritual enlightenment and guidance. Some missionaries even went to live among the Indians in order to learn their languages and to minister to individual members of the native population. The Moravian community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania became the center of all North American Moravian missionary activity, providing economic support and material resources for all outlying Moravian missions.

One of the most distinctive features of Moravian community life was the **Choir System**. People were separated into “choirs,” or groups, based on their age, gender, and marital status. It was believed that individuals of like age and gender were best prepared and able to encourage each other’s religious growth. Members of the same choir ate, worked, worshiped, slept in dormitories, and attended school together. This communal living arrangement was intended to strengthen the unity of the society as members had to rely on choir-mates for support rather than their siblings or parents. The names of the choirs reflected the sex, age and marital status of those in the choir, such as the “Older Boys’ Choir,” ages 12-19 or the “Single Sister’s Choir,” age 19 until marriage.

All work performed by the Moravians during the pre-Revolutionary War years operated under a system known as the “**General Economy**,” in which all goods or money produced was considered the property of the community, not the individual. Under this system there was no private wealth or housing, nor any privately owned businesses. Every member’s contribution was collectively pooled and in exchange, necessities such as food, shelter and clothing were provided. Marie Minier, a **Single Sister** in the Bethlehem community, praised the General Economy in 1750 stating that, “For 12 years now I have enjoyed the care [of the General Economy] and eaten from one bread and been clothed, all of which to this hour has been great and of importance to me. I . . . accept things the way the Brethren do things, for it is a wonder to me daily that He has maintained so large a community, and we cannot say that we have ever gone without.” For single women like Marie Minier, the General Economy system afforded them relative security and independence; single women who chose not to marry did not need to rely on a father or brother for financial support, nor worry about becoming a financial burden. In other parts of eighteenth-century America women who did not marry would have

been socially and economically excluded, dependent on their fathers or male family members. Yet by the 1760s, the system of communal property began to wear on the younger generations of ambitious Moravians who saw that in other communities hard work was rewarded with personal financial gain. In 1762, the General Economy was abolished in favor of self-owned and operated small businesses and private family homes.

The relative freedom which Moravian women enjoyed contrasted sharply with the structured, subservient life led by women like Mrs. George Watson, the former Miss Elizabeth Oliver. While Moravian women could choose not to marry if they wished, this was not an option for women of Mrs. Watson's position, who were completely governed by either their father or husband.

Marriages were always arranged, as was the case with Elizabeth Oliver's marriage to George Watson in 1753. These dynastic patterns of marriage were financially, socially or politically motivated, meant to retain wealth and influence within a certain strata of society. In Watson, Elizabeth Oliver's politically-powerful father Peter gained a son-in-law with similar political leanings and access to a vast network of trade routes, merchants and overseas contacts. In return, George Watson gained not only a young bride able to provide him with children, but connections through his father-in-law that could expand his import/ export business. Often portraits were commissioned to celebrate these dynastic marriages, as was the case with another portrait in the Museum's collection of Mrs. Lucy



[Portrait of Lucy Parry, Wife of Admiral Parry](#), 1745-49, John Wollaston, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Parry (right), wife of British Navy Admiral William Parry. By crafting these marriages the social elite began to produce a colonial equivalent of the English gentry. Over time, this strategy would enable them to consolidate and protect power among their small, elite group.

Popular pamphlets of the day stressed that a woman's service to her family and to her husband were of the utmost importance in her life. This differed greatly from Moravian women, whose chief duty was to their community and God, not to their family, husband, or self. Since Moravian women worked jobs benefitting the larger community, they were freed from

traditional familial duties and were able to sample more freedom than women in Mrs. Watson's position.

Glossary

Choir System: a separate living and working arrangement for Moravians based on age, gender and marital status. It was thought that this living situation would more successfully foster religious growth among individuals of like circumstances.

General Economy: the system used by the Moravians where all individual labors were directed toward the betterment of the community and support of its growing itinerancy and missionary efforts. All money made and goods produced became the property of the community and not the individual. The General Economy existed from 1741 to 1762.

Single Sister: the name for a single woman of marriageable age in the Moravian community. A male would be called a "Single Brother," and so on. See *Choir System*.