

The Effects of War

In the years before the American Revolution, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania was a quiet enclave, recognized for its ample accommodations, good music, friendly people and excellent food and drink. Despite being a “**closed community**,” Bethlehem was well-known for its hospitality to travelers. It was in these pre-war years that future prominent revolutionaries like George Washington and John Adams became acquainted with the town, its ample facilities and, most importantly, its inland location. Bethlehem was a good distance from the center of the early revolutionary activity in Boston, yet the town would become a key strategic location for the Continental Army. In an effort to counter English military efforts to control the seas and colonial port towns, American forces waged guerrilla warfare by moving frequently, maintaining interior lines and controlling essential routes of communication and trade. Bethlehem was positioned at a key interior point along these routes, thereby making it a very valuable asset for the Continental Army.



[*Young Moravian Girl*](#), 1755-60, John Valentine Haidt, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Moravians were well aware of the revolutionary storm brewing, and with the impending onset of war their pacifist community faced a moral dilemma; how were they to uphold their principles of non-violence while facing increasing pressure from other colonists to fight? Many Moravians sympathized with the colonial cause but others hesitated in their support, wary of the moral implications of war and revolution. Rhode Island Congressman William Ellery visited Bethlehem at this time and wrote of their moral dilemma: “Their people, like the Quakers, are principled against bearing arms, but are unlike them in this respect, they are not against paying such taxes as government may order them to pay towards carrying on war, and do not, I believe, in a sly, underhand way, aid and assist the enemy, while they cry peace.” In 1791 Moravian community leader John Ettwein recalled a conversation with **Alexander Hamilton** during the war in which he expounded the Moravians’ pacifist creed: “Mr. Hamilton asked me about our principles with regard to war and asked whether it was a point of Moravian doctrine to do no military service. I told him it was not a point of doctrine . . . Ever since **[Jan] Hus’** day,

the Brethren separated themselves from the others who waged war . . . and agreed to make one of their principles or rules not to fight with carnal weapons but with prayer.”

The community was divided along generational lines with younger men willing to take up arms in the name of patriotic duty and older men holding steadfast to their traditional pacifist beliefs. One community elder felt that even paying the fine for not bearing arms was “equivalent to murder and paying for a substitute.”

After news of the **Battle of Lexington** broke in April of 1775, the public’s unfavorable perception of the Moravians intensified as the pacifist community had yet to proclaim their position. The Moravians were forced to release a public declaration that they “desired the good of the country and had no intention to place themselves in opposition to the course of events, they claimed the liberty given them in all countries of exemption from military service, but would willingly bear their part of the public burden otherwise.” Not everyone was convinced that the Moravians had not secretly sided with the British; some in colonial military service deemed the community a “Tory nest” that “ought to be burned down.” This however was not the majority, and other American troops passing through Bethlehem on their way to Boston learned firsthand that the Moravians were not dangerous, nor traitorous, and even took the opportunity to attend church services offered by the community.

The negative opinion of the Moravians quickly dissipated when the community became a vital resource for the Continental Army. After the disastrous **Battle of Fort Washington**, Moravian leaders agreed to house the General Hospital of the Continental Army in Bethlehem. As a key strategic position outside the main areas of disturbance, the adaptation of Bethlehem into a hospital and way station was an ideal compromise for the Moravians; the arrangement did not compromise their religious principles and the task of caring for the sick and wounded appealed to their sense of humanity in a way that was in accordance with their character and religious mission.

The Moravians did, however, have reservations about how the army hospital would affect their way of life. It was suggested that for the time being, the Moravians of Bethlehem could move to a nearby Moravian settlement, but community leader John Ettwein wrote to George Washington on May 25, 1778 explaining the injurious nature of this move, claiming that “souls would be inexpressibly distressed” and that the people would “be entirely ruin’d [*sic*] in their Property, their useful Occupations.” Washington, while sensitive to the community’s concerns, responded to Ettwein three days later explaining how vital Bethlehem was to the Continental Army, assuring “that the public good be effected [*sic*] with as little sacrifice as possible of individual interests.”

As Bethlehem transformed into a hospital, the town was visited by such notable travelers as Samuel and John Adams (in January, 1777) and John Hancock. However, one notable visitor would arrive as a patient; the **Marquis de Lafayette**. The Marquis was brought to the town on September 21, 1777 after sustaining a leg wound in the **Battle of Brandywine** ten days earlier. Lafayette was taken to the house of the Moravian farm superintendent to recuperate and was looked after by the farmer's wife and daughter. Writing to his wife from Bethlehem, Lafayette described his wound:

The surgeons are astonished by the rate at which it heals; they are in ecstasy every time they dress it, and maintain that it is the most beautiful thing in the world. I myself find it very foul, very tedious, and rather painful; there is no accounting for tastes." Of the Moravian community he wrote, "I am at this moment in the solitude of Bethlehem . . . This establishment is truly touching and very interesting. The people here lead a gentle and peaceful life.

Lafayette recuperated in Bethlehem through the month of September, 1777. That same month word came from Philadelphia that George Washington and his troops had to fall back from Philadelphia. In

advance of the expected British occupation, an exodus of civilians and soldiers left Philadelphia and marched sixty miles north to Bethlehem, seeking shelter, medical treatment and supplies. By the next month, over 400 soldiers were lodged in the single men's house, with many more sheltering in tents at the rear of the building. One contemporary account recalled that 700 wagons containing munitions and baggage, including the personal luggage of General George Washington, arrived accompanied by 200 soldiers. Space became increasingly limited with a growing number of sick, wounded and displaced.

Conditions at Bethlehem worsened by the winter of 1777; resources quickly depleted with the large amount of people needed to be fed and cared for, and other basic supplies like clothing were in short supply. Moravian women were forced to empty out chests and drawers in an effort to make suitable bandages and bed coverings and reported that, "Three or four times we begged blankets from our people for the soldiers and distributed them to the needy; likewise shoes and stockings and old trousers for the convalescents whose clothing had been stolen in



[The Continentals](#), 1875, Frank Blackwell Mayer, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

the hospital, or who had come into it with nothing but a pair of ragged trousers full of vermin.” Another account paints a horrifying picture of the deteriorating conditions at the hospital:

The condition of things in the hospital became appalling towards the close of the year 1777 . . . the number of patients had increased beyond the facilities of the staff of physicians and surgeons to properly care for them, when additional wagons loaded with suffering men began to arrive after the battle of Germantown . . . some of these newly-arrived ones were laid upon the ground in the rain to die. . . . The Brethren’s House, especially the crowded and unventilated attic-floor, had become a reeking hole of indescribable filth. . . . A malignant putrid fever broke out and spread its contagion from ward to ward. The physicians were helpless and the situation became demoralized. Men died at the rate of five, six and even a dozen during one day or night. The carpenters and laborers of Bethlehem were not asked to make coffins and help bury the dead, as in the previous winter. This was now done by the soldiers, as quickly and secretly as possible At the dawn of day, a cart piled full of dead bodies would be seen hurrying away from the door of the hospital to the trenches on the hill . . . Unnamed and unnumbered they were laid, side by side, in those trenches.

Relief for the Moravian community came the following April, in 1778, when Washington ordered the removal of the Continental Army hospital from Bethlehem. After a cleansing and re-dedication of the former hospital, Moravian life gradually achieved normalcy; the single men moved back into the Brethren’s House which had been the hospital, trade slowly came to back and life returned to its pre-war character. As a result of the war, community elder John Ettwein wrote in January, 1778, “We have suffered considerably as to our property; yet that is quite healthy, for it counteracts the corrupted spirit which seeks to acquire surplus possessions.” He also vowed to “do nothing either directly or indirectly against the United States. . . . As long as we are protected we will pay Taxes & bear our Part of the public Burthen [Burden], as far as we are able.”

George Washington was always grateful to the Moravian community for their aid during the war, and continued a friendly correspondence with leaders of the community long after the war had ended. As president, Washington was especially appreciative of the Moravian’s mission to convert to Christianity the Native American Indians, specifically the Lenni-Lenape tribe of Pennsylvania. Washington wrote to the Moravian community leaders, “Be assured of my patronage in your laudable undertakings. . . . [It is] a desirable thing for the protection of the Union . . . to civilize and Christianize the Savages of the wilderness.” In the end, the impact that the Moravians had in transforming their community into a way station and an army hospital proved immensely more valuable to the American cause than if they had sent a handful of their

men into battle. Despite having reservations about the war in the beginning, the majority of Moravians post-war felt that the American victory had been preordained by God and had therefore been justified.

Glossary

Alexander Hamilton: (1755 – 1804) Founding Father, first United States Secretary of the Treasury, aide-de camp to George Washington during the Revolutionary War.

Battle of Brandywine: a one-day military skirmish fought on September 11, 1777, between American and British forces. A British victory forced the retreat of George Washington and his Continental Army troops and led to the British occupation of Philadelphia.

Battle of Fort Mifflin: a military skirmish fought on November 16, 1776, between American and British forces in New York. A decisive British victory gave them control of Manhattan Island and forced George Washington and his American troops into New Jersey.

Battle of Lexington: along with the Battle of Concord, this was the first military engagement of the American Revolution.

closed community: an often theocratic society that limits their contact with outsiders. The somewhat remote location of the Bethlehem settlement limited Moravian interaction with the majority of colonial American society.

Jan Hus: (1369-1415) Czech/ German religious reformer who protested the doctrines of the Catholic Church. He was a key predecessor to the Protestant movement in the sixteenth-century. Followers of Hus, called "Hussites," were the basis for the formation of the Moravian Church.

Marquis de Lafayette: (1757-1834) Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier de La Fayette, a French aristocrat and military officer who served under George Washington as a major-general in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.