In Bethlehem, An Educational Tradition

Lehigh University shares in the historical heritage of Bethlehem, even though, having been founded in 1865, it is a relative newcomer. The fact that Lehigh was established in Bethlehem reflects the tradition of education established by the community's first settlers thirty years before the founding of the nation.

The first Moravians were among the many German religious sects that came to the New World, and especially to Pennsylvania, during the early 1700s. But unlike William Penn, who established his sylvania as a new land where he might hold his Quaker beliefs away from England's oppression, the Moravians came as missionaries with the intent of converting the Indians to Christianity. For this purpose they settled the Lehigh Valley.

The early Moravians were industrious. Their first building, the Gemein Haus (community house) was completed in 1741. This building stands today, one of thirty-nine remarkably preserved pre-Revolutionary War buildings constructed by the Moravian settlers and in continuous use ever since by the Moravian community. Many of these buildings are located on Church St., west of the City Center; industrial buildings are located in the 18th Century Industrial Area in the Monocacy Creek valley west of the business district.

The leader of the Moravians was Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf of Dresden. He arrived in the settlement in time for their observance of Christmas Eve in 1741 and gave the settlement the name Bethlehem —"house of bread".

The settlers built high-quality structures of stone, demonstrating principles of engineering that were not generally used elsewhere. They were interested in music, and established the first symphony orchestra in America. In 1748, the settlement had a fourteen-man orchestra. The community's first organ was built in 1757 by John Gottlob Klemm. The musical tradition, including the trombone choir, continues today, perhaps most visibly in the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, whose yearly Bach Festival is held in the university's Packer Memorial Church. In 1985, the 300th anniversary of the birth of Johann Sebastian Bach was observed.

Zinzendorf envisioned Bethlehem as the center for manufacturing; outlying Moravian settlements, such as Nazareth, Pa., would be primarily devoted to agriculture. On October 15, 1742, a large barn was "raised" with the help of most of the residents. Three months later a grist mill at the community spring produced the first flour. In 1758, the Sun Inn was built along Main St., a haven for travelers. Reconstruction of the picturesque inn was completed in 1982, and it now operates as a community center and restaurant.

Zinzendorf's determination that Bethlehem would be a major industrial center was assisted by the completion in 1755 of the water works, the first public utility in the New World.

The Moravian dedication to education was an extension of the philosophy of John Amos Comenius, who had written, "Everyone ought to receive a universal education." The Moravian educational institutions that continue today, including Moravian Academy and Moravian College, stem from this tradition.

The Moravians, although avowedly opposed to war, found their community pressed into service as a hospital when Washington's troops bivouacked at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-78. Washington came to the community once, and many other Continental Army officers were visitors.

The Sun Inn was also used as a hospital during the war; among its patients was an aristocratic renegade from France, Marie Joseph Paul Ives Gilbert Motier, the Marquis de la Fayette. Lafayette had come to assist the Continental Army aboard his own ship, the "Victory." Fifty years later a college in Easton was named in his honor and it became Lehigh's traditional football rival.

The first bridge across the Lehigh River was built in 1794. It was replaced in 1816, but the latter was destroyed by a flood in 1841. In 1759, the turnpike (toll road) over South Mountain, generally along the route of the present Wyandotte St. hill, was opened. The present Hill-to-Hill Bridge was built some fifty years ago.

"Black gold." During the late 18th century, anthracite was found in the mountains north of the Lehigh Valley. In 1818, the Lehigh Coal Co. and the Lehigh Navigation Co. were formed, one to mine the anthracite on the upper Lehigh River, the other to transport it down river to metropolitan markets.

The Lehigh River was difficult to navigate. Consequently, in 1829 the Lehigh Canal was completed from Mauch Chunk (now Jim Thorpe), through Bethlehem to Easton, where it connected with the Delaware Canal. During the 1840s, iron mines were opened in the area, and several blast furnaces, fueled by coal, were in operation. Zinc ore, was found in neighboring Upper Saucon Township. In the 1850s Asa Packer built the Lehigh Valley Railroad. These origins eventually led to the heavy industry that continues in the Lehigh Valley today.

When Asa Packer founded Lehigh University in 1865, one of his objectives was to make possible broadly based education for young people of the region, combining the technical skills needed to run the flourishing industry of the Lehigh Valley with a liberal education.

In addition to its role as a steel-making center, Bethlehem today is a major tourist attraction. The Moravian community sets up an elaborate nativity scene and the entire city is decorated with lighting during the holiday period. The Moravian tradition of a single candle (now electric) in each window is widely observed.

Atop South Mountain is a steel tower known as the Star of Bethlehem. During the holiday period, the star's hundreds of bulbs create a 95-foot-high star that can be seen for many miles. The star was the gift to the community of Marion Brown Grace, wife of Eugene Gifford Grace, the steel magnate and president of the university board of trustees.

The community of Bethlehem has a population of approximately 78,000 persons with segments from a variety of nations who retain traditions of their country of origin.

There are five principal independent colleges in the Lehigh Valley besides Lehigh. They are Lafayette, DeSales University, Moravian, Muhlenberg, and Cedar Crest. A cooperative program is maintained that allows cross-registration for courses as well as shared cultural events. There are also two community colleges in the area.

In August 1984, Bethlehem held its first Musikfest, a 10-day annual festival that features a variety of musical performances and ethnic foods. An instant success, Musikfest was the brainchild of Jeffrey A. Parks, a lawyer and 1970 Lehigh graduate.