

Chaos in Salem

The diary of the congregation at Salem, 7 February 1781, in Adelaide L. Fries, ed. *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1930), 4:1674–75.

As you read...

THE MORAVIANS AND THE REVOLUTION

This narrative is from the official diary of the Salem, North Carolina, congregation of Moravians in February 1781. Each congregation kept careful records, and from these we can learn a great deal not only about the Moravians themselves but about the times in which they lived.

By the fall of 1780, Patriots and Tories were fighting each other throughout the backcountry, and both sides took the policy that “if you’re not with us, you’re against us.” That left groups like the Moravians, who were mostly pacifists, in a difficult position.

The Moravians supported the Patriots in the war. Like the Quakers, they would not swear an oath, including the oath of loyalty to the new state government, and most Moravians would not take up arms, though some younger members of the congregation did join the Patriot militia. The state Assembly recognized their loyalty, allowing them to affirm their loyalty without swearing an oath and exempting them from military service if they paid a triple tax.

Still, many backcountry Patriots and Continental Army soldiers didn’t trust the Moravians. They spoke a different language (German); they practiced a strange religion; and — worst of all — they refused to fight for either side. The story told here, from February 7, 1781, was typical of their experience in late 1780 and early 1781. As Adelaide Fries, the Moravian historian who edited their church records, wrote:

For the Moravians this [1781] was a peculiarly difficult year, since their towns were so near the center of activities that they were constantly overrun by troops, and exorbitant [outrageous] demands were made upon them for supplies of various kinds. In spite of their willingness to serve the American cause in every possible way they had to endure false accusations of Torism, and suffered much from the excesses of wandering bands of militia, out mainly for pillage [robbery or looting] under the guise of patriotism. Their honest loyalty, their compliance with [acceptance of] all reasonable and many unreasonable demands, their kindness to the sick and wounded soliders left in their care, gradually turned sentiment in their favor; and when the meeting of the Assembly in Salem in November gave opportunity for personal investigation by the leading men of the state, the Moravians were frankly accorded the commendation they had so richly earned. (4:1656)



Figure 1. Salem's Moravian community was raided by both Patriots and Loyalists during the War for Independence.

General Morgan's Brigade-Major, named Brooks, came from the army, near Spurgeon's, and looked over the town. An officer came from General Greene asking for boots, but there were none to be had, and they both left most politely. About four o'clock in the afternoon a hundred and seventy-odd of the Wilkes Militia arrived unannounced. Their Captain, Herndon, first demanded brandy, which was furnished; then he wanted meat and bread or flour, and the flour was supplied; then he insisted on having meat, and some of that also was furnished. Then he and the Captains with him tried to press powder from Br. Bagge; he replied that he had none, but there was a little lead¹ belonging to the public which was at their service if they thought wise to take it. They insisted that we had powder in the town, and that it must be given to them. Their demands were finally ended through the arrival of their senior Captain, [William] Lenoir, who brought more men. The requisitions began again about seven o'clock. In the Tavern many ate and drank as they pleased, and there they took three bundles of oats; the Single Brethren² had to give them half an ox, 100 lbs. of meal, and several gallons of brandy; the store furnished corn and salt, the pottery had to supply ware, and in addition they took whatever came to hand. All these demands were made with threats, which sounded as though they sought an excuse to plunder the town. One Captain said he had inquired about the people in the town and had found that some were for and some against the common cause, and the former should now show it. Lenoir declared roundly that we were his enemies, but for the time he would not harm us except that we must give what they needed and demanded. After we had had much trouble with them, and felt the Power of Darkness, they left about ten o'clock at night, with a show of politeness, taking the public lead, cut into small pieces. Prior to leaving, several of them went into the town, represented themselves as Tories and tried to lead the Brethren to join them, but they did not succeed, for the Saviour gave our Brethren grace to speak cautiously, and protected them from harm. After eleven o'clock three of them came back into the town, and were forbidden, by the nightwatch, to roam about; they claimed that they were looking for a deserter. After they left the night was quiet.

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Notes

1. Lead was needed for making bullets. It was in short supply during the Revolution.
2. The unmarried brothers, or members, of the Moravian church.

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