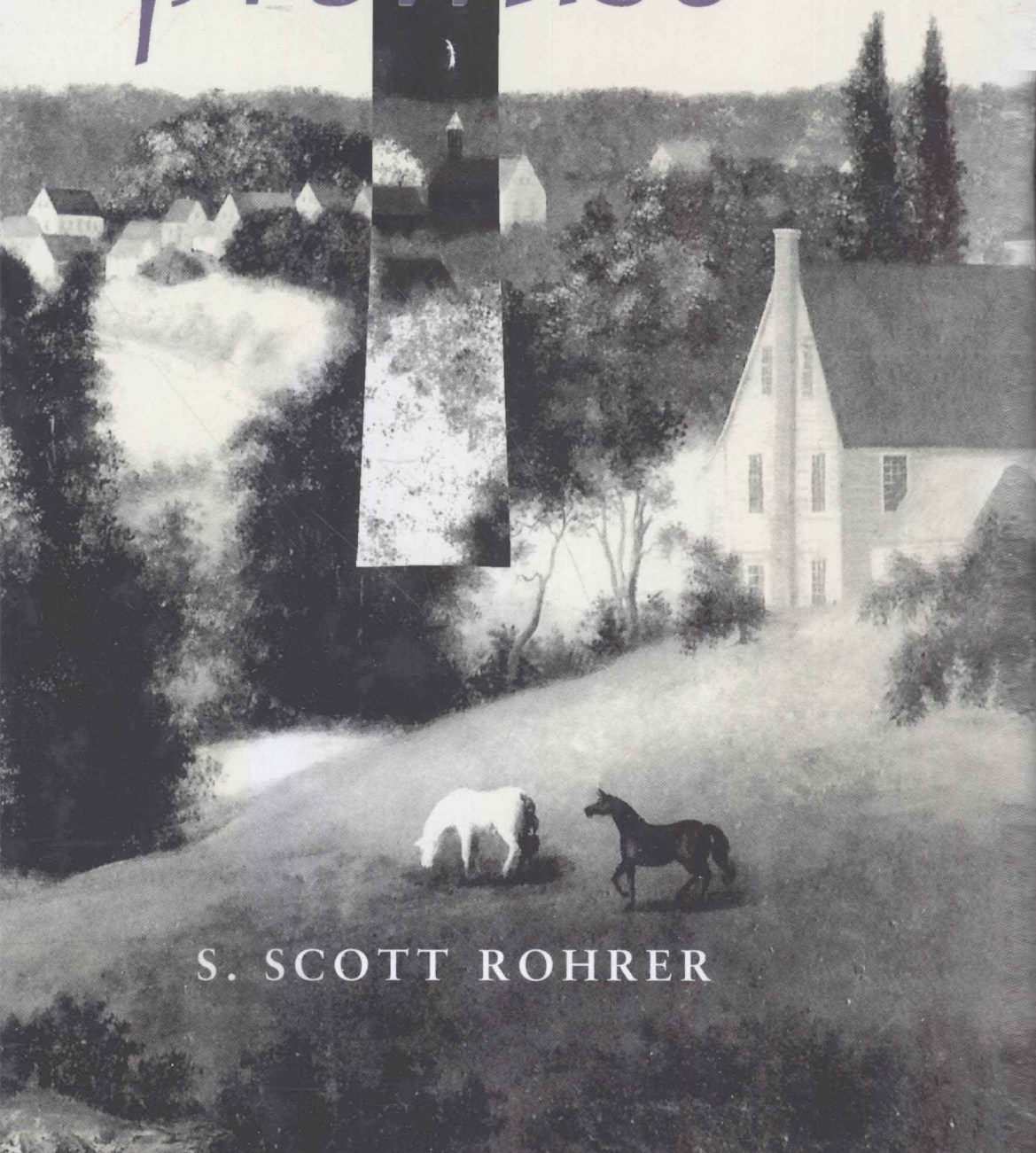


HOPE'S

RELIGION AND ACCULTURATION
IN THE SOUTHERN BACKCOUNTRY

promise



S. SCOTT ROHRER

Hope's Promise

Religion and Acculturation in the Southern
Backcountry

S. Scott Rohrer

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS
TUSCALOOSA

The University of Alabama Press
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0380

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Manufactured in the United States of America
Typeface: Adobe Garamond

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The paper on which this book is printed meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Science—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rohrer, S. Scott, 1957—

Hope's promise : religion and acculturation in the Southern backcountry / S. Scott Rohrer.
p. cm. — (Religion and American culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8173-1435-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Moravians—North Carolina—Forsyth County—History. 2. British Americans—North Carolina—Forsyth County—History. 3. Acculturation—North Carolina—Forsyth County—History. 4. Ethnicity—North Carolina—Forsyth County—History. 5. Forsyth County (N.C.)—Ethnic relations. 6. Forsyth County (N.C.)—Religious life and customs. 7. Evangelicalism—Social aspects—North Carolina—Forsyth County—History. 8. Christian communities—North Carolina—Forsyth County—History. 9. Frontier and pioneer life—North Carolina—Forsyth County. I. Title. II. Religion and American culture (Tuscaloosa, Ala.)

F262.F7R64 2005

975.6'6700882846—dc22

2004008812

Acknowledgments

This book has been a challenge to write on several levels. I would first like to thank those who provided so much encouragement and support over the past ten years during the many ups and downs of the research and writing process.

John B. Boles graciously agreed to read the completed manuscript, helped smooth out the writing, and steered me to the University of Alabama Press. John Stagg, my dissertation adviser at the University of Virginia, has been unflagging in his support of my work and endlessly patient with my numerous questions and concerns. His help was no small thing: John is editor of *The Papers of James Madison* and is an authority on, among other things, the War of 1812. A study on a small religious community in backcountry Carolina could not have been further removed from his research interests. Yet his enthusiasm for my work was genuine and long lasting. I benefited greatly from his extensive knowledge of social history and the early national period. I also learned a great deal from other members of Virginia's venerable History Department, most notably Stephen Innes and Peter Onuf. The first hesitant manifestations of this book appeared in their seminar classes, and they helped shape my work at an early stage.

A summary of the book was published in the summer 2001 issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic*, and I thank the editors for allowing me to use this material. Christine Leigh Heyrman and the anonymous readers of my article greatly clarified my arguments, astutely challenged many of my assumptions, and pushed me to take my analysis to another level. The final version has benefited immeasurably from their vigorous critiques. I also benefited greatly from the input of panelists and participants at two conferences. In 1997, I presented a paper on Hope at a conference of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. I thank commentator Philip D. Morgan for his excellent suggestions in his critique, and I thank those audience members who

urged me to integrate my work on religious acculturation with outside economic and political forces.

The symposium on German Moravians in the Atlantic world, held in April 2002 at Wake Forest University, played a far bigger role in the completion of this book than its organizers probably realized. I began rewriting my dissertation in earnest in late summer of 2001—and was promptly thrown off track by the events of September 11. Besides being a national tragedy, the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington forced me to work long and tiring hours at the Washington magazine where I work. The symposium succeeded in refocusing my efforts on the manuscript and in convincing me that my approach was the correct one. I returned from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, re-energized and determined to finish the manuscript by the end of 2003. I especially thank Marianne Wocke for her encouragement, advice, and support. She took a great interest in my work and helped provide me with the confidence to finish. She also suggested using *Hope* as the title of the book. I also thank Michele Gillespie, Robert Beachy, and Randal Hall of Wake Forest for their encouragement and help.

Parts of chapter 1 appeared in the *North Carolina Historical Review* in 2002, and I am grateful to Anne Miller and her staff for permission to use this material. Aaron Spencer Fogleman played an especially important role in improving this section of the manuscript, and I thank him for his assistance. Quite simply, Aaron has proved to be the most perceptive critic of my work yet.

My debts to previous scholars of Moravianism, including Elisabeth W. Sommer, should be apparent. I gratefully acknowledge their excellent work and thank them for the support they have given mine. Daniel B. Thorp has written the finest study on Wachovia's founding, and I have relied greatly on his research throughout. I had the good fortune to meet Jon F. Sensbach in 1989 while working as a consultant at Old Salem Inc., and he has proved to be both a friend and a mentor since those days.

The research would not have been possible without the support of my friends at Old Salem and in the Moravian Church. I thank the staff of the Moravian Archives in Winston-Salem for making their impressive collections available to me. The archives staff—C. Daniel Crews, Richard Starbuck, and Grace Robinson—handled my ceaseless requests with patience and good humor. I also owe a large thanks to the staff of the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, led by Vernon Nelson. It was in this congenial setting where I learned to read archaic German script, and it was there where I researched the northern origins of the *Landgemeinen*. The staff of Old Salem and the Museum

of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) were exceedingly generous in making their collections available to me. Brad Rauschenberg, director of research, allowed me to copy vital biographical records that made the demographic study possible; the librarians were gracious in lending me books; and Jennifer Bean Bower assisted in providing illustrations. Other staff members, John Larson in particular, provided much other help as well, including lodging for a last-minute research trip to the archives.

Financial assistance on the graduate level aided the research. The North Caroliniana Society awarded me an Archie K. Davis fellowship in 1996 to support my research in North Carolina. The Society of Cincinnati provided a generous grant, and Virginia's History Department provided timely support along the way.

I owe a debt of gratitude to other friends, colleagues, and family members. Steve Manson, a childhood friend from New Jersey who has put up with me way too many years, converted the dissertation to Microsoft Word. This sleight of hand saved me from countless hours of retyping. I also thank my colleagues and friends at *National Journal* magazine—including Charles Green, Marge DuMond, Monica Sullivan, and Marty Davis—who have tolerated my love of history and taught me so much about good writing and editing. Jodie Morris took time out of her busy schedule at the magazine to produce two of the maps that appear in this book.

Last but not least, I thank the two most important people in my life—my wife, Anne, and son, Josh, who have supported me through all the highs and lows of writing this book. Anne, a talented wordsmith at the *Washington Post*, helped prepare the manuscript for publication, and Josh, a bright and inquisitive high school student, kept me on my toes with his probing questions about history that ranged from the bubonic plague of the medieval period to German military strategy in World War II. Their faith in me and in this book never wavered. And it is to them whom I dedicate this work, with love and gratitude.

A Note about Translations

The Moravians kept voluminous records, and many of these records have been translated into English. I have availed myself of these translations when available. Church records after 1845 were mostly in English. In the notes, I was the translator on those primary sources listed in German. I also relied on my own translations for the Land Arbeiter Conferenz, except where indicated (I am grateful to Frances Cumnock for her help with the Land Arbeiter Conferenz minutes).

Introduction

Hope's promise could be found in a remote corner of a remote community of an emerging evangelical world along the southern frontier. Hope, the settlement, was tucked among the hills of Piedmont North Carolina. Its founders—tobacco farmers and fishermen from Maryland—selected the site in 1772, partly for its promise as a farming community. Along the fertile banks of Muddy Creek, they would build their houses and establish their working farms of 175 acres and up. Hope, the congregation, represented something far more important to its founders than good soil and a bountiful supply of water. Here, in this backcountry haven, Hope's members would worship the Savior and raise their children in God's ways. As a sign of their commitment, the settlers built a small meetinghouse at the center of their community and a bridge over the river so that all interested hearers could reach this house of God.

Hope's promise represented something else, however, something deeper. These English speakers—former members of the Anglican Church who hailed from Carrollton Manor in Frederick County, Maryland, and who numbered about seventy-five souls in 1772—had chosen to live in an enclave of German-speaking evangelicals belonging to a German-based sect known formally as the Renewed Unitas Fratrum (Unity of Brethren) and informally as the Moravian Church. Small and obscure as it was, Hope was thus something quite interesting: an Anglo-American congregation of evangelicals residing in a predominately German-speaking enclave located along a predominately English-speaking frontier. These Anglo-Americans were the ultimate minority—a minority within a minority.

The Marylanders' seemingly unusual decision to live among German-speaking Moravians hints at the complexity of what was happening along the southern frontier in the eighteenth century. From Maryland to Georgia, the population of the southern backcountry was exploding in midcentury as thousands of settlers migrated from Pennsylvania and other northern colonies. North

Carolina alone watched its white population swell from 40,000 in 1740 to 175,000 in 1770. These newcomers to the southern backcountry were, in the words of Charles Woodmason, an Anglican missionary, from “all Sects and Denominations—A mix’d Medley from all countries and the Off Scouring of America.” And they were, indeed, a diverse group: English, Scots and Scots-Irish, Welsh, Dutch, and German, among others. Their religious backgrounds were equally diverse: Separate Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, Moravian, Dunker, and Lutheran.¹

Other missionaries saw the migration in a more positive light than did Charles Woodmason. For them, the huge influx of people constituted an opportunity to spread their evangelical belief that one can achieve eternal life by undergoing a “new birth.” The missionaries’ optimism was well placed. As at Hope, the massive migration to the southern frontier was bringing people anxious to find not only land but God.² The overall migration was so large that it outran the ability of established churches and sects to supply ministers. Evangelical missionaries, ranging from the Moravians to the Baptists, traveled on horseback throughout the backcountry to fill the void, and they routinely drew crowds of people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Their work among both the churchd and unchurchd laid the groundwork for the growth and eventual dominance of evangelism throughout the South in the antebellum period.³

The intense rivalries among evangelical sects and their feuding leaders are well known and documented. Theologians argued passionately, and sometimes violently, over everything from baptism to conversion. Their followers, meanwhile, aggressively sought to win converts to Christ and to reform a world they saw as corrupt and godless. Their efforts often unleashed a flood of hostility from those at the receiving end of their proselytizing—the unsaved and the gentry.⁴ Beneath all this divisiveness, though, evangelism was producing a different kind of tremor on the southern social landscape. By creating an evangelical culture centered on the new birth, this religious movement was influencing the very way that people from different ethnicities interacted. In open fields and at informal gatherings among the curious and the devout, communities of believers were forming. These communities were based not on ethnicity or nationality or sectarian loyalties, but on a commitment to Jesus Christ and the new birth. Within these communities of believers, peoples in a polyglot South met and mingled, creating social bonds that often transcended ethnicity and sectarian differences: English with German, Baptist with Presbyterian, “com-

moner" with gentry, and (within limits that grew stricter over time) white with black.⁵

Hope's Promise tells the story of one such community in the evangelical world: the Moravian colony in North Carolina called Wachovia, of which Hope was a member. This book, covering the years 1750 to 1860, peers into the inner workings of these communities of believers in an effort to answer far larger questions about religion, identity, ethnicity, and cultural development. By examining one outpost in an evangelical world that stretched in the 1750s from the northern colonies to Georgia, this study seeks to understand the ability of the new birth to mold a common identity among diverse groups of people. More specifically, it seeks to understand how an evangelical culture influenced the acculturation of ethnic groups in the southern backcountry. The settlement of Hope—the most obscure of the obscure—serves as the central metaphor in a complex story of religion and acculturation. Hope's promise, as should be abundantly evident in the following pages, represents the flowering of the evangelical dream of creating a community of believers based on Jesus Christ and not ethnicity or nationality.

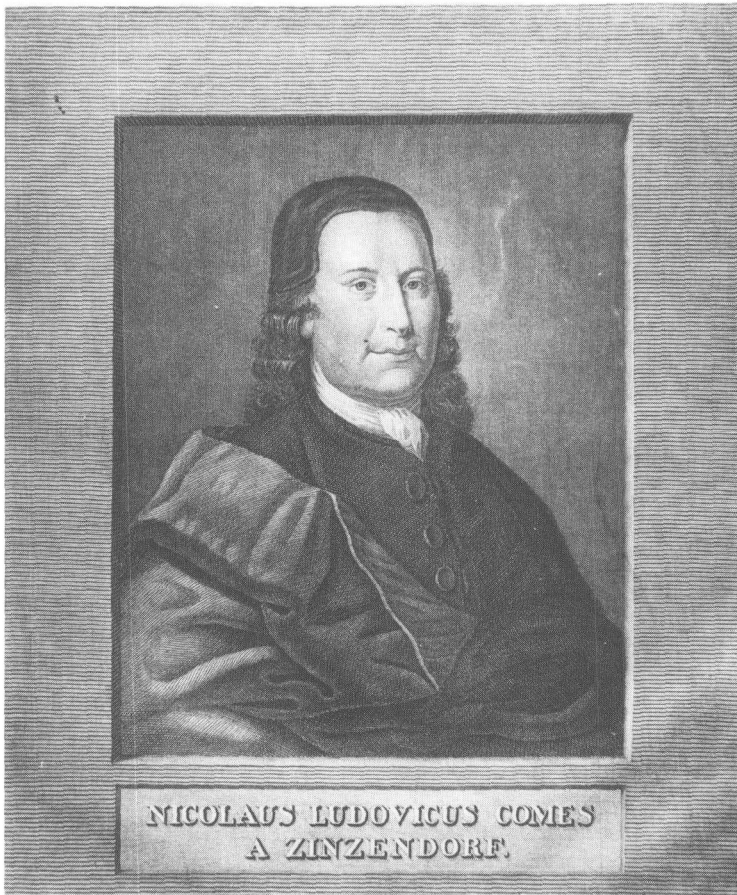
The Moravians came to North Carolina in 1753. They founded der Wachau, or Wachovia, on a 98,895-acre tract that the brethren had purchased from Lord Granville, the last of the colony's original proprietors. The church leadership, based in Herrnhut, Saxony, envisioned Wachovia as a religious enclave where its followers could worship free of the persecution religious sects still faced in Europe. It also intended that this Moravian colony be a viable commercial enterprise. In the fertile soils of the southern backcountry, Wachovia was to be an economically diverse community mixing crafts and farming that would generate income to help support a Moravian missionary movement with global ambitions.⁶

The *Unitas Fratrum* had a long history behind it by the time it launched its colony in North Carolina. Followers of reformer John Hus founded the Moravian movement in Lititz, Moravia, in the mid-fifteenth century and preached a radical social doctrine. Disillusioned with a Catholic Church they saw as corrupt, they wanted to emulate the early primitive Christians by renouncing all worldly wealth and living a life of simple piety, based on a belief in Jesus Christ. Granted asylum in Moravia by a sympathetic archbishop, the brethren established a settlement in Lititz and proceeded to gain an impressive following by the early sixteenth century in Moravia and neighboring Bohemia. Membership totaled more than two hundred thousand on the eve of the Counter-

Reformation.⁷ The Unity became so large that it became a threat to the Roman Catholic Church; in the early seventeenth century, Hapsburg emperor Ferdinand III spearheaded a Catholic attack on Protestantism that saw the brethren, now known as the *Unitas Fratrum* (or Unity of Brethren), forced underground during the Counter-Reformation. The Moravian congregations in Bohemia and Moravia disappeared as their members scattered to avoid persecution. Jan Amos Comenius, the last independent bishop of the ancient Unity, kept the episcopal succession—and the seed of faith—alive. Comenius found asylum in England. There, he recorded the Unity's beliefs in a document he titled *Ratio Discipulas*, a document that Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf and his Moravian followers discovered in the eighteenth century.⁸

In 1722, carpenter Christian David led a small group of refugees from Moravia to Zinzendorf's estate at Berthelsdorf, seeking asylum.⁹ The refugees' choice was an understandable one. Zinzendorf, who was born in 1700 and died in 1760, was a committed Pietist who would presumably be sympathetic to their plight. The count's maternal grandmother, Henriette Catherine von Gerstorff, raised Nicholas after his father died in 1700. From the outset, she exposed her young charge to the latest teachings from Halle, the center of German Pietism in the eighteenth century. Philipp Jakob Spener, the main pietist leader in Halle, became Nicholas's godfather, and other Pietists routinely stopped at the Gerstorff castle for lodging and companionship. In 1710, Nicholas's mother and grandmother sent him to Halle for his education. When Christian David's tiny band arrived in 1722 at the count's estate, Zinzendorf took them under his wing. Other emigrés followed until the settlement's population had reached two hundred by 1727. Zinzendorf eventually took charge of the settlement and compiled a set of regulations on civil life called "Manorial Injunctions and Prohibitions." He drew up a second document called the "Brotherly Union and Compact" that dealt with religious practices. The community, named Herrnhut, selected twelve elders with spiritual oversight of religious life. On August 13, 1727, the settlement held a communion service. Moravian Church historians mark this date as the rebirth of the Unity.

Zinzendorf guided the Unity during his lifetime and espoused "heart religion," where religion was to be a matter of feeling, not reasoning. He expressed an intense, almost mystical, devotion to Jesus Christ that went beyond what more mainstream Pietists and evangelicals preached.¹⁰ For Zinzendorf, Jesus was the center of everything. "The Savior is our God," he liked to say. "Through him we know the Father and the Holy Spirit."¹¹ A critical component of his plan for Moravianism was his ecumenical vision. He wanted to



Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, the leader of the Moravian Church in the eighteenth century, established the Diaspora in an effort to revitalize Christendom by spurring an awakening among individual hearers. *Collection of the Wachovia Historical Society, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; courtesy of Old Salem Inc., Winston-Salem, North Carolina.*

carry the message of Christ's salvation to all parts of the globe—"heathen" and Christian alike—and, in 1727, the Moravians began sending missionaries to continental Europe, Greenland, Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and North America for work among blacks, Indians, and whites. Besides trying to Christianize the "heathen," Zinzendorf established his "Diaspora": the Moravian missionaries' effort to win over Christians of other faiths to heart reli-

gion. The goal was a very pietistic one. Moravian missionaries sought to awaken spiritually dead worshippers of other faiths. Zinzendorf hoped to minimize doctrinal differences between Protestant denominations and create a Christian church family that, while having different worshipping styles, would be united in the figure of Jesus Christ. The count's highest hopes for this ecumenical vision were in America and specifically Pennsylvania. On the Monocacy Creek north of Philadelphia, the Unity purchased five hundred acres for a *Pilgergemeinde*—a congregation town that would focus on missionary work. In 1741, Zinzendorf arrived to oversee the development of Bethlehem.¹² Within twelve years, the Unity cast its eye southward as well because of the need to find a refuge for members of two European congregations and to generate income for a debt-laden Unity.¹³

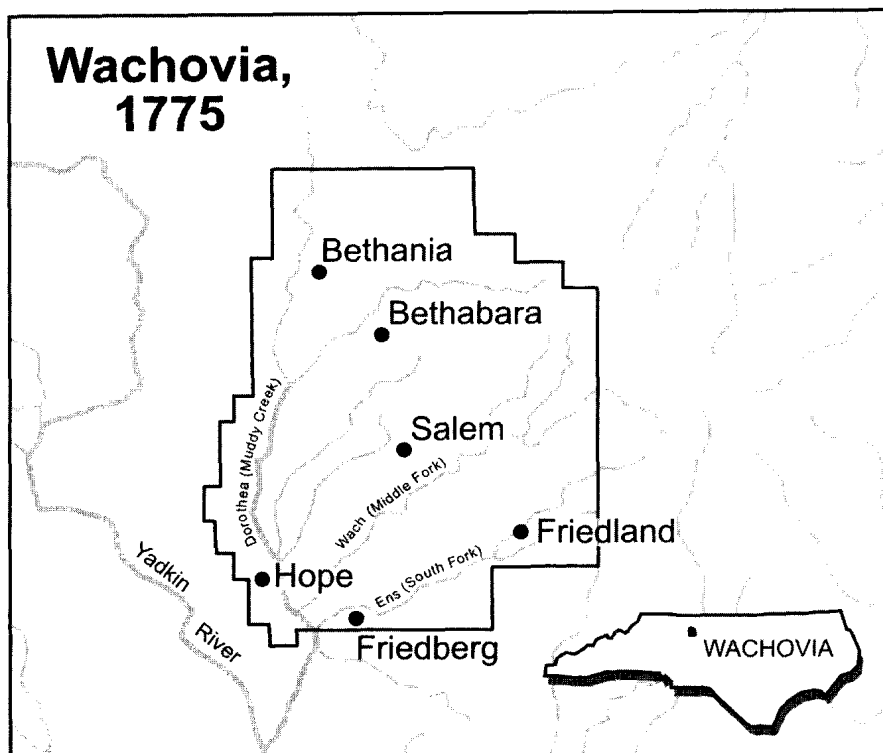
The large tract the brethren bought in central North Carolina was chosen carefully to meet their spiritual and worldly goals. The site was relatively empty but not isolated. Thus, the Moravian colony would have some distance from neighbors while not being too far from markets. The land itself was beautiful—well wooded and watered among rolling hills. Located at the three forks of Muddy Creek, the tract “has countless springs, and numerous fine creeks. . . . There is much beautiful meadow land,” Bishop Augustus Gottlieb Spangenberg recorded in his diary.¹⁴

Church authorities in Bethlehem handpicked ten men to establish a base on the North Carolina frontier.¹⁵ This vanguard left Bethlehem on October 8, 1753, and founded a small village called Bethabara, the house of passage. The Unity established two other villages (Bethania in 1759 and Salem, Wachovia's capital, in 1766) known as *Ortsgemeinen*, or congregation towns, where church leaders restricted residency to full-time church members and expected inhabitants to devote their lives to Jesus and the church. In practice, this meant that the church owned the land and tightly controlled the economy and residents' social lives. Here, in these congregation towns, the Unity would realize its dream of creating communities of the truly devout that would set an example for others to emulate. Christian love would be the bond that united inhabitants.¹⁶

But there was another side to this religious mission. The mandate to revitalize Christianity by introducing inhabitants to the new birth resulted in the formation of Moravian societies, where interested hearers could participate in Moravian congregational life without having to become full members of the Unity. A second settlement type grew up around these societies: *Landgemeinen*, or farm congregations, that consisted of full and partial members. Under the

Diaspora, Moravian missionaries in the northern colonies offered Christians of all faiths a chance to worship with the Moravians and learn of Christ's liberating power while remaining members of their home churches. In the 1760s and early 1770s, largely in response to this missionary outreach, nearly three hundred society members from northern colonies founded three *Landgemeinen* settlements (Friedberg, Friedland, and Hope) in southern Wachovia. In the *Landgemeinen*, diverse groups of German- and English-speaking settlers from a variety of religious backgrounds did not live in compact towns but on dispersed family farms with less oversight from church authorities. By 1800, Wachovia's population totaled some twelve hundred pilgrims, 88 percent of whom were German speakers from Lutheran, Reformed, and Moravian traditions. The remaining 12 percent were Anglo-Americans, Scots-Irish, Irish, and others from western Europe, the Caribbean, the northern states, and elsewhere.¹⁷ Living side by side in six distinct settlements under different rules, yet sharing a common belief in the power of the new birth, Wachovia's inhabitants created one of the most sophisticated and enduring religious communities in early America.¹⁸

It is within Wachovia's borders, amid a complex ethnic and religious landscape, that we can so clearly see how an evangelical culture influenced social development and the interaction of diverse groups of evangelicals. As the Moravian experience demonstrates, assimilation among evangelicals was multi-layered and worked in three stages.¹⁹ In the first stage, evangelism—because of its ability to create a community of believers centered on the new birth—helped create the conditions that made intermixing between various ethnic groups possible. These individuals met and mingled in and outside of the meetinghouse and came to share a close bond from having undergone a rigorous conversion. This common experience enabled the reborn to overcome ethnic and social differences, leading to close friendships and often intermarriage. Thus, the conversion experience and religious life fostered an intermixing that produced swift and decisive cultural change beginning in the first generation. This, however, was not traditional "assimilation," where a minority group absorbed the ways of the dominant cultural group. Instead, different cultural groups coalesced around a shared evangelical religion to produce a new "ethnicity" that was an amalgam of their respective cultures. Ethnicity, in this case, did not mean a sense of peoplehood defined by language, customs, place, and a shared ancestry. It was, instead, a sense of peoplehood defined by religion. Such a phenomenon was not unique to evangelism; certain other religions such as Mormonism could produce the same results. In the 1940s, soci-



Map by Jodie Morris.

ologist Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy coined a phrase for the impact of religion on acculturation—a “triple melting pot.” That is, nationality groups merged through intermarriage and acculturation into their larger respective religious backgrounds.²⁰

While this new ethnicity was being created, evangelical religion was helping to drive a second stage of acculturation. Evangelicals, unlike many Anabaptist and utopian sects, were never recluses from the world. They actively sought to convert the unconverted and to reform a corrupt world they saw around them. This mandate meant that evangelicals were engaging the outside world on several fronts, from the frontier store to the meetinghouse. Such an engagement led to extensive intermixing with outsiders in the economic, religious, and political spheres, an engagement that changed the evangelical in profound ways. It meant, in the case of the Moravians, that the brethren were drawing closer to their southern and American neighbors, and this growing closeness was oc-

curing at the same time the brethren were creating creole families and forming multiethnic congregations. The first two stages overlapped, and they combined to produce a third stage of assimilation, which in the case of Wachovia began about 1830. The separate cultural and religious ingredients from the first two stages mixed together to produce something quite unique: an Anglo-German culture that was drawing ever closer to American and southern society. In this third stage, acculturation accelerated under the impact of intermixing, and the brethren became even more “American” and “southern.” The use of the German language declined, and the nature of religious commitment shifted. Yet the impact of the first stage remained critical, and the commitment to heart religion remained strong. The brethrens’ world of the 1830s and beyond was very much an Anglo-German one whose foundation remained evangelical religion. In this religious “melting pot,” Wachovia became an amalgam of cultures whose key ingredient was evangelism.

Part One of *Hope’s Promise*—three chapters in all—shows in detail how this new ethnicity arose during the first stage of acculturation. The story begins not in Europe but in the northern colonies, where Moravian missionaries attracted a large and diverse following among German and English speakers. Chapter 1 explores the origins of Wachovia’s founders. It focuses on those brethren from Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Maine who founded the North Carolina *Landgemeinen*. These settlers were the most ethnically and religiously complex in Wachovia, and they played a huge—if not decisive—role in driving change within southern Moravianism. The opening chapter shows how Diaspora members began to form a Moravian identity before coming to Wachovia, and it explains why these pilgrims migrated to North Carolina. Chapter 2 concentrates on the heart of the evangelical experience—the new birth. It demonstrates how evangelicals regardless of ethnicity came to share a bond as reborn Christians. The chapter also shows how religious life, and strife, contributed to the acculturation process. Chapter 3 looks at the Anglo-German world that emerged from all this internal intermixing. By peering into the workings of Moravian families, the chapter reveals that Anglo-Americans and German speakers successfully merged their two respective cultures into a new ethnicity based on heart religion.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the second stage of the assimilation process—the Moravians’ encounters with the outside world. Chapter 4 looks at the Revolutionary era and its impact on Wachovia. The American war for independence forced North Carolina’s Moravians to take sides and to get involved with the political issues of the day. The tremendous stresses of war helped forge a sense

of nationalism among Moravians of all ethnicities, and the war accelerated the process by which the brethren saw themselves as “American.” Chapter 5 examines a closely related development—how North Carolina’s brethren began to see themselves as “southern.” The Moravians participated fully in the regional and national economies, and through this participation, they began absorbing the ways of their neighbors. Acculturation in the economic realm was nowhere more evident than in the brethrens’ attitudes toward slavery and religion. The Moravians became willing, and in some ways eager, participants in slavery. By holding slaves, they identified even closer with their fellow southerners.

The concluding chapter looks at the third stage of assimilation through the eyes of a twenty-eight-year-old German-speaking Dane who arrived in Wachovia in 1834 to become pastor to the congregation at Bethania. The Reverend George Frederic Bahnson was very much an outsider who was somewhat taken aback by what he found in his new home: a community that was very southern, American, and evangelical. The first two stages had produced a thorough assimilation into American and southern life. The use of German was on the wane, and North Carolina’s Moravians were becoming both more mainstream and more like other southern evangelicals. Yet in 1860, the brethren still followed heart religion, and elements of their German culture endured.

The story is important in several particulars. *Hope’s Promise* is one of the first studies on evangelism to explore in such detail the effect of an evangelical culture on ethnicity and social development. Historians have recognized that evangelism attracted a diverse following, but few have examined how the new birth itself influenced the acculturation of ethnic groups on the community level. Instead, the political implications of evangelism continue to fascinate historians. This fascination takes two forms: one school of historians seeks to understand how evangelical religion contributed to the rise of individualism and democracy in the early Republic, and a second school debates how evangelicals tried to reform—or not reform—American society. For historian Rhys Isaac, the radicalism of evangelicals produced a cultural clash in Virginia as the Baptists confronted the gentry with a spirited challenge to their worldly lifestyle centered on tobacco, horse racing, gambling, and drinking.²¹ For Nathan O. Hatch, evangelism helped democratize American society by giving power to ordinary people.²² Countless other historians have likened the explosive growth of the Baptists and Methodists in the early nineteenth century to an invasion, with circuit-riding evangelicals putting older, supposedly more mainstream