The Moravians in Georgia

The Moravians in Georgia, 1735-1740 by Adelaide L. Fries chronicles the trials and contributions of Moravian missionaries in colonial Georgia, highlighting their faith, perseverance, and cultural interactions during a pivotal era.

Chapter I - Antecedent Events

Chapter I - *Antecedent Events* begins with a portrait of early 18th-century England, where social reformers were disturbed by the harsh treatment of debtors. James Oglethorpe, deeply moved by the conditions in London’s prisons, spearheaded a vision for a colony that would rehabilitate the poor rather than punish them. He saw land in America as a means to offer a fresh start, believing that structured opportunity could restore dignity. Parliament responded, and by 1732, a charter was granted to the Trustees of Georgia. This legal document permitted settlement by the poor and persecuted, excluding Catholics due to ongoing British fears over papal influence. It also imposed a unique moral constraint: the trustees could not personally profit, ensuring the colony’s founding principles would remain altruistic.

These early settlers were not just impoverished Britons; persecuted European Protestants were also welcomed. Among the first were the Salzburgers, who fled Catholic repression and arrived in Georgia with the help of public donations and royal support. Their town, Ebenezer, became a powerful symbol of what Georgia could represent—a safe haven for faith-driven communities. Meanwhile, another group, the Moravians, prepared for their own migration. Their history of spiritual independence and communal living made them ideal participants in the Trustees’ utopian ambitions. Originating from the Unitas Fratrum in Bohemia and Moravia, they had endured

centuries of persecution before finding refuge under Count Zinzendorf in Saxony. Their eventual journey to Georgia was part of a larger spiritual and social experiment in the New World.

Oglethorpe’s influence extended far beyond administration. His diplomatic outreach to Native American tribes helped secure peace in the region, which allowed the settlers to cultivate land and build communities with reduced threat of conflict. The Trustees hoped Georgia would also act as a geopolitical buffer against Spanish Florida, shielding British colonies to the north. This blend of charity and strategy distinguished Georgia from other colonies. It was planned with moral architecture: slavery was initially banned, alcohol restricted, and landholding capped to prevent class stratification. The colony’s soil and climate were described with optimism, touted as suitable for silk production and viticulture, promising both spiritual and commercial success.

Yet, as this chapter shows, idealism had its limitations. The promise of fertile land often clashed with the reality of an untamed environment. Disease, climate, and labor shortages quickly tested the colonists’ resilience. Despite these challenges, the Moravians maintained a disciplined life centered around worship, music, and mutual care. Their settlement would eventually become a model of communal effort and missionary outreach. Unlike other settlers, they came not primarily to prosper but to serve. Their vision aligned with Oglethorpe’s hopes for Georgia—not just as a place of opportunity, but as a moral beacon. Their arrival in Georgia, although modest in numbers, carried the weight of centuries of conviction.

The Trustees’ charter and recruitment efforts were ambitious in scope but fragile in practice. Balancing economic expectations with humanitarian ideals proved difficult. While the Salzburgers adapted through agricultural perseverance, the Moravians sought to build spiritually cohesive communities rooted in pacifism and simplicity. These early chapters of Georgia’s settlement illustrate not just the planting of a colony, but the clash and fusion of European worldviews. The colony became a space where religious exiles, idealists, and practical reformers collided and cooperated. Their intertwined stories reflect a broader narrative—how the American South began not

only as a frontier but also as a forge for cultural and spiritual experiment.

By anchoring Georgia’s origin in both economic planning and religious refuge, this chapter illuminates the powerful role of conviction in shaping colonial identity. The Moravians and Salzburgers did not come merely to escape hardship but to build something enduring and principled. The chapter closes with a sense of transition, where the groundwork has been laid and the arrival of the Moravians signals the beginning of a unique experiment in American communal and religious life. Their legacy, though tested by future hardship, would root itself in education, tolerance, and service—values planted alongside the first crops in Georgia’s red soil.

Chapter II - Negotiations with the Trustees of Georgia

Chapter II - *Negotiations with the Trustees of Georgia* unfolds as a pivotal moment where idealism met the realities of colonial administration. Count Zinzendorf, known for his deep spiritual convictions and political insight, pursued the creation of a haven for the Moravians and Schwenkfelders amidst the religious turbulence of early 18th-century Europe. The initiative was not simply about relocation; it represented a pursuit of freedom to worship, build, and serve without interference from state churches or suspicion from dominant political powers. Zinzendorf’s proposal came with carefully worded conditions, aiming to assure the Georgia Trustees that these settlers would remain law-abiding subjects while maintaining their religious principles. His diplomatic approach, coupled with his noble title, allowed the negotiation to progress despite lingering doubts among British officials about foreign religious groups.

In the midst of these exchanges, the plight of the Schwenkfelders added urgency. Forced out of Saxony by decree, they looked to Zinzendorf not only for leadership but for survival. He worked to shield them from unjust accusations by appealing directly to legal channels, requesting that a public investigation clear his name and intentions. This move reflected a broader pattern of the Moravian ethos—resolving conflict through orderly means rather than confrontation. Ultimately, while the Schwenkfelders chose to follow a separate path toward Pennsylvania, their story paralleled the Moravians’—each group searching for freedom yet guided by different counsel. The Moravians stayed the course toward Georgia, focused on building a community that could model both spiritual discipline and civic responsibility.

The outcome of these negotiations secured a small but promising tract of land for the Moravians in Georgia. Though it lacked immediate advantages, it symbolized a new

beginning for those driven not by conquest but by calling. This land was to serve not only as a home but also as a mission field, especially to the Native American tribes nearby. The trustees, concerned with maintaining order and populating the colony with industrious settlers, found the Moravians' peaceful character appealing. They agreed to logistical support, including provisions and shipping arrangements, with the understanding that the settlers would abide by the laws of England and avoid political entanglements. Such agreements reflected the delicate balance Zinzendorf managed—preserving autonomy while aligning with imperial expectations.

During this period, political suspicion toward nonconformist groups ran high, especially in colonial contexts where loyalty to the Crown was paramount. Zinzendorf had to walk a careful line. His correspondence was anonymous or filtered through intermediaries, a strategy used to reduce direct backlash and prevent any accusations of insurrectionist tendencies. Even with these precautions, the Moravians' communal lifestyle and missionary ambitions were scrutinized by both secular and ecclesiastical authorities. Their commitment to pacifism particularly stood out in a world increasingly shaped by militarism and colonial conquest. Still, they managed to convince the trustees of their loyalty, in part by emphasizing their willingness to labor, educate, and minister without causing disruption.

Although the Moravians' original goal was shared settlement with the Schwenkfelders, diverging decisions ultimately shaped the distinct destinies of both groups. The Schwenkfelders' move to Pennsylvania was encouraged by other Protestant communities already established there, such as the Mennonites and Quakers. Their decision created a natural parting, yet the Moravians proceeded with confidence, grounded in their theological clarity and strong community bonds. With preparations underway, they envisioned a settlement marked by order, devotion, and a distinct identity—a place where faith guided every aspect of life. While challenges lay ahead, the successful conclusion of this phase marked a hopeful threshold into what they believed would be a meaningful presence in the New World.

Looking at this chapter today, it offers more than a historical account—it mirrors modern challenges in religious freedom, migration, and cross-cultural negotiation. The Moravians' story reminds us that migration driven by conscience often requires navigating power structures with both humility and conviction. The Georgia Trustees, like many modern gatekeepers, had to assess unfamiliar communities through the lens of political utility and social stability. That the Moravians gained a foothold speaks to their clarity of purpose and diplomatic skill. Their example remains relevant not just for religious history, but for anyone studying how ideals are sustained when transplanted across oceans and rooted in new soil.

Chapter III - The First Year in Georgia

Chapter III - *The First Year in Georgia* marks a time of intense labor and hopeful ambition for the newly arrived Moravians. Spangenberg, alongside his fellow Brethren, was filled with a deep sense of purpose and gratitude as they set to work constructing their new settlement. Each day was met with the same spirit of determination, their hands moving swiftly to complete the communal house that would shelter them through their first uncertain months. Timber was gathered, nails were pounded, and plans were drawn with both faith and practicality guiding every decision. Their shared belief in divine provision bolstered their spirits, even as the Georgia heat bore down and the tasks mounted.

Progress came steadily, thanks to the unity and cooperation among the group. The construction became more than a building project—it was a symbol of their resolve to live differently, governed by peace, humility, and brotherhood. As the walls of the house rose, so too did their confidence that this place could become a refuge of faith and fellowship. Yet, not all was easy. The challenges of unfamiliar climate, sickness, and cultural differences with neighboring settlers made clear that the journey would require endurance. Nevertheless, they welcomed their arriving Brethren with open arms, eager to strengthen their numbers and build a lasting witness in the New World.

The Moravians didn’t come to Georgia simply to survive—they came to live out their faith in visible, practical ways. Each morning began with prayer and song, and then the community turned to their various duties: tending gardens, crafting tools, and engaging in trade. Efforts were also made to learn local languages, especially for those preparing to engage in missionary work among the Native American tribes. The settlers believed that through service and kindness, they could demonstrate the love of Christ more powerfully than words alone. This year became their training ground, not only for skills of survival but for the shaping of character through communal life

and spiritual discipline.

As days turned into weeks, their health and strength were tested. New illnesses emerged, likely from both the damp environment and exposure to unfamiliar pathogens. Some were confined to their beds, cared for by others with patience and prayer. Still, no one was abandoned, and no work was left undone for long. Their motto, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love,” was not just spoken—it was lived. The bonds formed during these trials became the backbone of their spiritual identity in Georgia.

In addition to physical trials, spiritual tensions occasionally surfaced. Differing interpretations of doctrine, especially around how to integrate with the larger Protestant community, sparked quiet debates. Spangenberg navigated these with humility, seeking peace without compromising the mission’s core values. He wrote letters back to Herrnhut detailing their progress and requesting guidance, reinforcing the idea that their community, though separated by oceans, was still part of a larger whole. The humility with which they approached both conflict and cooperation helped to define the tone of their ministry in the colony.

The Moravians also began their outreach efforts beyond their own group. They forged respectful relationships with local Indigenous communities, not with the aim of control but of shared understanding and mutual trust. Early interactions were built on listening and helping, rather than preaching first. This approach, though slow, laid a foundation for longer-term trust, distinguishing the Moravians from many other settlers of the time. In every action, they sought to reflect peace and compassion, believing these to be more effective than argument or power.

Despite the many hardships, their first year in Georgia was considered a spiritual victory. Though their numbers were small and their external influence limited, the internal strength of the community flourished. It was clear that their foundation had been laid not only in brick and timber but in faith and fellowship. This chapter in their history remains a testament to what can be accomplished when conviction, cooperation, and courage are met with compassion. As the year drew to a close, the

Moravians looked not to what they had endured, but to what still might be achieved through God’s leading.

Chapter IV - Reinforcements

Chapter IV - *Reinforcements* begins with a pivotal change in direction for the Moravian Church’s expansion efforts. By 1740, after careful reflection on earlier experiences, the Church leaders determined that Pennsylvania, rather than Georgia, would provide a more promising environment for their next missionary company. This decision arose from both practical and spiritual considerations, as Pennsylvania’s religious tolerance, growing German population, and fertile social conditions better aligned with Moravian objectives. Georgia, with its mounting political and cultural tensions, appeared less suitable for nurturing a stable religious settlement. The shift in destination reflected a larger pattern within the Moravian movement: adaptability without abandoning core convictions. Though it marked a retreat from their original plan, it opened doors for long-term influence in regions more receptive to their presence.

Back in Savannah, the settlers continued striving to realize their vision of communal life. They worked the land collectively, built shared housing, and organized daily tasks around spiritual rhythms. Their farm was modest but consistent, providing sustenance and unifying the group in purpose and practice. Beyond agriculture, skilled trades were pursued, such as carpentry and blacksmithing, which supported both the settlement and nearby communities. Interaction with neighboring residents brought opportunities to witness through work and worship alike. Despite occasional friction and cultural misunderstanding, the Moravians held fast to their goal: to live as a harmonious, spiritually devoted community amid a diverse colonial frontier. This blend of labor and faith became their defining feature in Georgia.

Though the experiment in communal living eventually gave way to more individualistic structures in later settlements, Savannah's model offered valuable insight. The trials faced—scarcity of resources, friction with authorities, and internal disagreements—shaped how future Moravian communities would organize themselves.

Lessons learned included balancing shared ideals with practical needs and maintaining identity without isolating from the broader population. Their experience illustrated that spiritual vision must be paired with flexibility, especially in unfamiliar or volatile contexts. As Moravian leaders expanded into other regions, they applied these insights, adjusting models while holding tight to their core values. Savannah's influence was not erased by its decline but reframed as a foundational chapter in the Moravian narrative in North America.

The settlers’ economic contributions also should not be overlooked. Projects like brick making and linen weaving were not only practical but visionary, reflecting an attempt to create a self-sustaining society that upheld dignity through labor. These ventures connected them with wider markets, strengthened their settlement, and reinforced their reputation for industry and honesty. Even when projects fell short, the spirit of innovation remained, carrying over into later communities. Religious life was never separate from the work of their hands—it was embodied through it. By anchoring their daily existence in both spiritual discipline and craftsmanship, the Moravians exemplified a faith that functioned not just in church, but in field and forge alike.

Individuals such as August Spangenberg and David Nitschmann played essential roles in shaping the direction and resilience of the mission. Their leadership combined vision with pragmatism, nurturing both the spiritual growth and operational stability of the settlements. They encouraged open dialogue, guided difficult transitions, and remained firm in their convictions, even when external pressures mounted. Under their guidance, the Moravians cultivated not only crops and commerce but a culture of care and commitment that stood in contrast to many neighboring settlements. Their example inspired others, reinforcing the sense that the mission in Georgia, though temporary, was part of something larger and enduring. What they began in Savannah laid seeds that would flourish elsewhere, bearing fruit long after their departure.

This chapter in the Moravian story is not just about physical reinforcements or the redirection of personnel. It reflects the deeper idea that spiritual reinforcement—of faith, resolve, and purpose—is equally necessary. The Savannah mission may have

faded, but the values it tested and proved continued to guide the Church in its unfolding American journey. Their presence, marked by cooperation and humility, left impressions on the region that extended beyond religious conversions or land ownership. In the quiet rhythm of their work, worship, and witness, the Moravians built a legacy of thoughtful devotion and communal strength, one that would resonate well beyond Georgia’s borders.

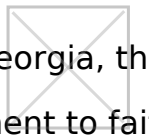
Chapter VI - Disintegration

Chapter VI - *Disintegration* unfolds the final moments of the Moravian mission in Georgia, closing a chapter that had started with profound optimism. While the settlers had arrived with high aspirations of building a peaceful, faith-centered community, the reality of political pressure, health crises, and ideological clashes proved too great a burden. Their desire to maintain religious neutrality during a time of mounting colonial conflict created tensions with authorities and other settlers. They were misunderstood, accused of disloyalty, and faced repeated challenges that hindered their progress. Rather than compromise their spiritual values, the Moravians chose to leave Georgia, not in defeat, but in pursuit of a more hospitable environment for their beliefs. Their quiet withdrawal marked the end of a vision—but not the end of their mission.

The departure of the Moravians was not a retreat from their core principles, but a strategic redirection. Many of them moved north to Pennsylvania, where Moravian communities had already gained a stronger foothold. In these new settings, they continued their work among both European settlers and Native American tribes. Their schools, mission houses, and organized settlements reflected the same emphasis on humility, education, and nonviolence that they had brought to Georgia. The lessons learned from their southern venture informed how they would operate in future colonies, adjusting to cultural and governmental demands while remaining true to their beliefs. Though their time in Georgia was brief, it served as a refining moment that clarified the conditions under which they could most effectively serve. Their resilience turned a failed settlement into a blueprint for sustainable ministry.

As the Georgia chapter closed, figures like August Spangenberg and Bishop John Gambold continued to shape Moravian outreach in broader regions. Gambold’s death and chosen epitaph from Corinthians reflected the humility that defined the movement: their strength came not from themselves but from divine sufficiency. This

guiding principle remained central to all their missions thereafter. Although their property in Georgia eventually passed into other hands, their brief presence had introduced a model of communal living that emphasized equality, peaceful cooperation, and spiritual depth. The Moravians believed that even the smallest efforts could echo through generations if rooted in sincere devotion and purpose. This mindset encouraged them to press forward, planting seeds in more fertile ground.



Their legacy in Georgia, though often overlooked in larger historical narratives, stands as a quiet testament to faith under pressure. Rather than dominate or assimilate by force, they chose integrity over compromise, often at great personal cost. Their approach contrasted sharply with other colonial powers who prioritized expansion and control. This difference—between peaceful ministry and territorial conquest—makes their experience in Georgia uniquely compelling. Even without lasting settlements, they contributed to the religious diversity and cultural experimentation that defined early colonial America. Their willingness to disband rather than distort their faith demonstrates a rare kind of courage that many larger, more successful ventures lacked.

It is worth noting that the Moravians' efforts were not in vain. The educational practices and community structures they introduced found new life in other colonies, influencing American Protestant traditions in subtle but lasting ways. Their hymns, liturgies, and communal decision-making processes would go on to inspire future congregational models. The departure from Georgia became part of a larger pattern of adaptation and survival that ultimately allowed the Moravian Church to endure and evolve. Their story is a reminder that success cannot always be measured by permanence, but by faithfulness to principle and the quiet impact on those they served. The marks they left on hearts, even in a brief span of time, outlasted the structures they abandoned.

As the mission disintegrated in form, it expanded in spirit. New possibilities opened elsewhere, proving that sometimes letting go of one field allows the harvest to flourish in another. The Moravians, though scattered from Georgia, remained unified in

purpose. They had faced hardship, suspicion, and loss, yet emerged more certain of their calling and better equipped for future challenges. Their presence in Georgia may have faded from maps, but not from the unfolding story of faith communities in America. By walking away with dignity and grace, they preserved what mattered most: a vision of faith that could endure beyond geography or politics.

Chapter VII - Conclusion

Chapter VII - *Conclusion* brings a contemplative end to the Moravians' journey in Georgia, tracing their persistence through turbulent decades. By the time John Hagen arrived in 1740, much of the initial momentum had dissipated. The Cherokee mission he intended to join had already been abandoned. Finding the terrain and political climate inhospitable, Hagen opted to remain in Savannah, where his health and the impracticality of reaching the native population influenced his decision. Instead, he turned to gardening and pastoral work among the local German-speaking residents. His efforts to foster a congregation were deeply affected by theological disputes, particularly with George Whitefield, whose rigid stance on predestination clashed with Hagen's inclusive faith. Ultimately rejected by Whitefield, Hagen found support among more sympathetic allies, notably John Brownfield and settlers in nearby communities, where his message found more resonance.

The chapter then details a proposal by General Oglethorpe in 1746, encouraging the Moravians to restart their mission farther upriver. However, the plan faltered before any progress could be made, symbolic of the recurring pattern of optimism followed by inaction. Nearly three decades later, in 1774, a fresh attempt to revive the mission took shape with Ludwig Mueller and John George Wagner heading to Georgia to minister to enslaved individuals. Though well-intentioned, this mission faced relentless adversity. The harsh southern climate took its toll on their health, and fever was a constant threat. As the American Revolution unfolded, the instability of war eventually forced the Moravian missionaries to retreat. Their departure closed another chapter in an already fractured narrative, one where faith and ambition were repeatedly tested by external forces beyond their control.

The narrative then shifts to the fate of the physical remnants of the Moravian presence—most notably their land in Savannah. Originally granted in the 1730s to

Spangenberg and Nitschmann, this property was intended as both a sanctuary and base for mission work. Legal disputes and wartime disruptions stalled these plans. For decades, the land remained a point of contention, bound in legalities that reflected the larger issues faced by religious minorities trying to maintain a foothold in a colonial society. By the 1800s, claims to this property remained unresolved, signaling how the legacy of the Moravians was as much about what was lost or left undone as what was achieved. The departures, deaths, and changes in leadership during this period underline the fragile nature of such an endeavor, where the line between perseverance and defeat often blurred.

Yet within these setbacks, the Moravians left a spiritual imprint that outlasted their physical presence. The chapter carefully lists names, dates, and notes of those who arrived, left, or passed away, forming a kind of roll call of quiet dedication. These records serve as evidence that while permanence eluded them, their mission was not without meaning. Many of their teachings and principles found homes elsewhere in the colonies, influencing future religious and educational movements. In a world marked by colonial expansion and religious competition, the Moravians stood apart for their communal values, emphasis on humility, and desire to live in peace with those they served—even when their efforts failed to flourish on Georgian soil.

The closing reflections invite the reader to view the Moravian story not as a tale of failure, but one of sincere struggle and remarkable conviction. Their repeated efforts, even in the face of political opposition, disease, and cultural resistance, reflect a unique spiritual resilience. Unlike some colonial missions that exploited their settings for material gain, the Moravians sought harmony, education, and faithfulness. Though the City of Savannah did not become the thriving mission center they hoped for, their example still serves as a model of service motivated not by conquest, but compassion. Through every setback, their story underscores the belief that not all success is seen in numbers, but often in integrity and purpose maintained despite hardship.

In the end, the Moravian mission in Georgia encapsulates the tension between vision and reality. They arrived with high hopes of outreach and community but encountered

resistance both natural and human. Their journey is a reminder that early American history was shaped not just by battles and founding fathers, but by quiet groups like the Moravians—persistent, faithful, and often unsung. While the land may have changed hands and their settlements faded, the Moravians’ enduring spirit shaped future generations who shared in their devotion to peaceful purpose and spiritual discipline.