

## **The Blacksmiths of Early Bethlehem**

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From the Collections at [Historic Bethlehem](#) [PA]

### **The Smiths in Bethlehem's Economy**

For the first twenty years of its history, Bethlehem was organized communally under a system called the General Economy. Under the Economy, various artisans supplied the community with necessary goods and services and provided a source of income for the Church's missionary activities through dealings with the local non-Moravian population. Between 1743 and 1762, the various smiths (blacksmith, locksmith and nailsmith) plied their trade in this communal economy, where they received no pay, but instead received food, clothing and shelter. Under the Economy, the first blacksmith shop was opened in 1743, a small log structure located on the bluff overlooking the Monocacy Creek. In 1750, this small shop was superseded by a 1 -1 /2 story, 46' x 25' stone structure, which housed the blacksmith, locksmith and nailsmith under one roof. The nailsmith moved out of this complex in 1754 and into the former pottery. In 1761-2, the building was enlarged by adding a second story and a 36' x 25' addition to the north. With more space now available, the nailsmith moved back into the structure, where all three trades stayed on in the building until the 1700s when the nailsmith, John Georg Weiss removed his operation to a small log building on Rubel's Alley. By 1820, only the blacksmith remained in the building.

In 1762, the General Economy was abandoned and management of the trades reorganized. Some trades were immediately privatized: with the artisan paying rent for the property. Other trades were managed by the Single Brethren's Choir while others, including the smiths, were kept under the direct control of the Congregation, with the artisans receiving a salary and a percentage of their profit. Eventually, the various smithing operations were privatized. A Supervisor's Committee or Aufseher Collegium was established to regulate trade and commerce in the community. The store, once an outlet of community-made products, became a competitor to some of the artisans. This semi-communal, semi-capitalistic economy lasted until 1845, when the Church relinquished its authority over community affairs and sold its land holdings thus opening the town to non-Moravians.

By 1800, Bethlehem's nailsmith and locksmiths found it increasingly difficult to compete with cheaper, imported items. The nailsmith was the first to succumb and by the late 1820s, with the opening of the Lehigh Canal, it became almost impossible for the locksmith to continue without diversifying. Increasingly, Bethlehem's smiths found their roles reduced to maintaining and fixing massed-produced items, a role which enabled the blacksmith to maintain his position in Bethlehem Township well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Working World of the Smiths

To become a blacksmith, locksmith or nailsmith required apprenticing to a master smith for four to six years. In Bethlehem, as it was in the rest of the world, it was not uncommon for the son of a master smith to apprentice to his father. Smiths George Huber, Marcus Fetter, Anthony Schmidt and Daniel Kliest, Jr. all learned the trade in this manner. In Bethlehem, boys were assigned to learn specific trades under the direction of a master artisan. It is not known how much input the boys had in the decision, but it is clear that if the boys showed little aptitude for their work, they were reassigned to learn another trade. George Henry Neisser, the son of Germantown clockmaker Augustine Neisser, first apprenticed to a hatmaker in 1704, but soon got into trouble and ran away. He later returned and was put to learn the trade of nailsmithing. This trade apparently didn't suit his taste either for he ran away again in 1794, never again to live in Bethlehem.

Most boys successfully finished their apprenticeships and after a period of working in their master's shop as paid journeymen, they typically were assigned a position in another Moravian community. Smiths trained in Bethlehem went on to work in the local Moravian communities of Lititz, Nazareth, Christiansbrunn and Hope, NJ, but also as far away as North Carolina and Ohio.

Being a smith in a Moravian community also meant taking part in other activities, some associated with work, others not. Some of the early smiths were involved in missionary work, such as Anton Schmidt and John Leonard Galtermeyer. Several smiths were also accomplished musicians. Apart from their social and religious duties in the community, the smiths also acted as teamsters, hauling iron and steel from regional suppliers back to Bethlehem. At least until the 1760s, most of the wrought iron used by the smiths was obtained from forges in New Jersey. Steel was obtained from Philadelphia. Another task of the smiths was that of the production of charcoal to fuel the fires in their hearths. Charcoal was made by carefully tending a smoldering stack of cut wood covered with soil and leaves with the object of driving out all the moisture in the wood and creating a pure fuel that was easily ignitable. The smiths typically made their charcoal north of Bethlehem near the Blue Mountain.

Living in a pietistic community, the smiths were subject to strict moral standards. Being only human, some failed to meet these standards. Blacksmith Georg Schmidt was prone to excessive drinking, especially after he was transferred to North Carolina and nailsmith Carl Kunkler was expelled from the community for having an affair with Magdalena Huber. Others rebelled against the strict economic controls over their trade. After the dissolution of the General Economy in 1762, blacksmith Stephan Blum apparently did not feel that he was receiving his fair share of the shop's profits and left the community altogether. Although there were problems with some smiths, as a group, the smiths were some of the most important and productive artisans in the community.

## The Blacksmith

The blacksmith was one of the community's most important craftsmen, as is evident by the establishment of a shop less than two years after the community's founding. The blacksmith produced and mended many of the items necessary to build and sustain a community such as tools, architectural hardware, mill and agricultural machinery, wagon components and household items. In short, there was scarcely a utensil, vehicle or instrument that did not owe its origin, either directly or indirectly, to the hand of the blacksmith.

The diversity of the blacksmith's work is shown in the following excerpts from an Economy account book:

May 19, 1756	Turner for stealing 2 Hatchets*	£-.5.-**
November 30, 1756	36 "Faling" (felling) axes for Francis Corbin	£13.10-
December 31, 1756	Strangers store for Irons on the window	£2.12.6
Sept. 30, 1757	Lititz for work done on the Mill irons	£5.-.-
April 29, 1758	Skinner for a Dressing Iron	£-.7.-
May 3 1, 1759	for an Indian corn hoe	£-.4.-

\* A turner is an artisan who shapes wood with a lathe and "stealing" refers to putting a new steel blade or edge to the hatchet.

\*\*prices are given in pounds (£), shillings (s), and pence (d) in the form £.s.d

While much of the blacksmith's work was utilitarian in nature, some of his work allowed for some artistic license. Despite the community's conservative nature, the Moravians did not restrict the ornamentation of some utilitarian objects. In fact, some architectural hardware such as hinges, latches, handles, chandeliers and even weather vanes were often highly decorative in appearance.

One of the single greatest demands on the Bethlehem blacksmith was that of shoeing horses. When Benjamin Franklin passed through in February of 1756, he had his horse shod at a cost of 1 shilling, 9 pence. This aspect of the trade helped sustain the blacksmith even after advances in metal working technology and transportation put the nailsmith and locksmith out of business. Bethlehem's 19th century blacksmiths spent much of their time repairing farming equipment, wagons and of course, shoeing horses. Henry Krause even went one step further and opened an iron ware store that supplemented his blacksmithing operation.

## Master Blacksmiths

Stephanus Blum, (c. 1735-?)

Stephan was the eldest son of Franz and Catharine Blum of Saucon Township, Bucks County. The Blums encountered Peter Boehler in 1740 and became members of the Moravian Church in 1743. Stephan attended the Moravian boarding school at Henry Antes' home in Frederick, Montgomery County between 1745 and 1750. In 1756, he is identified as a "singleman" working as a blacksmith at the Christiansbrunn settlement. Four years later, he was transferred to Bethlehem to work in its shop. Blum is identified as a "Master."

Matthew Drown, (1794-1853)

Apprenticed to Samuel Luckenbach, Matthew Brown took over his former master's shop sometime after 1825. Brown married Magdalena Miller and was a Church Sacristan and member of the Board of Trustees.

### **The Nailsmith**

The construction of Bethlehem's many buildings, not to mention furniture, shoes and other items required the use of many thousands of nails, tacks and spikes. Until 1740, the Moravians obtained many of their nails from a nailery near Durham Furnace in northern Bucks' County. Even though Bethlehem opened its own nailery soon thereafter; events outside Bethlehem soon made having a master smith manufacture nails by hand impractical.

By the 1790s, efforts in England and America to mechanize nail production had succeeded in developing various machines that could produce up to 20,000 nails a day. But, even before the invention of these machines, large-scale naileries were established employing young men at low wages to hammer out nails. It became increasingly difficult for small-time nailsmiths to compete. In 1767, Bethlehem nailsmith Gottfried Roemelt asked that the wages of his journeymen be reduced so that he might better compete with the lower prices being charged at the store. Forty years later, Bethlehem could no longer support a full-time nailsmith.

After 1800, other smiths produced nails when the opportunity arose. Locksmith Joseph Micksch, who owned a "machine for cutting nails" at his death in 1824, made nails for various buildings on Plantation Number 4 (formerly Burnside's Plantation) between 1821 and 1823.

Before the 1790s, nails were individually made by hand. The tedious process required four steps. First, a piece of "rod" iron was heated in the hearth and then, while red-hot, it was hammered into shape. Once formed, the nail was cut from the rod stock. The nailor completed the process by inserting the nail into a heading tool and hammering out the portion remaining above the header into a head. Although time-consuming and certainly monotonous, a skilled nailor could produce up to 1,000 nails a day,

An accomplished nailsmith could produce literally dozens of different types of nails, spikes, rivets and tacks. According to the 1769 inventory of the nailsmith shop, he had in stock nails for furniture construction, shingles, lath, clapboard, shoes, saddles and horse shoes. The inventory also listed "big zinc coated nails." Account books also mention the production of "plaster nails," "spricks," "shoe tacks" and simply "big" and "small" nails. Prior to 1762, a large portion of the nails produced went to the community or "strangers" store for resale.

## **Master Nailsmiths**

Johann Gottfried Roemelt, (1712-1799)

Gottfried Roemelt was trained as a nailsmith in his home of Breslau, Silesia. After finishing his apprenticeship, Roemelt continued working as a journeyman smith until he moved to Hernnhaag. From there, he came to Bethlehem in 1746 and soon thereafter married Juliana Haberland in 1749. Apparently for a period in the late 1750s, Roemelt was absent from Bethlehem, (probably on missionary work) but by 1762, he was back and again master of the nailsmith shop. Roemelt continued to serve as the community's nailsmith until around 1789.

Joseph Hopsch, (c. 1739-?)

On February 28, 1752 the Single Brethren's Diary noted the arrival of Brother Hopsch into the "nailsmithy." Four years later he is identified in a provincial tax as being "put to learn the nail-smith trade." By 1759, Hopsch was the master nailsmith, a position he held until 1762 when he left the community.

Melchoir Christ, (1734 -1806)

Christ was born in Lauffen, Württemberg. He came to Bethlehem with his parents Rudolph and Ana Christ in 1750. In 1759, he is identified as being in the shop of Joseph Hopsch and ten years later the Single Brethren's Catalogue identified him as a nailsmith. Shortly thereafter, Christ moved to Lititz, Pennsylvania and married Barbara Kling. In 1774, Christ moved to Nazareth and practiced his trade there until his death.

Johann Georg Weiss, (1750-1811)

Son of the community dyer, Matthias Weiss, Georg Weiss learned the trade of nailsmithing from Gottfried Roemelt.