

Bethlehem Moravian Church Settlements Formally Inscribed as World Heritage Site

By Paul Muschick

BETHLEHEM - Dignitaries from around the world gathered in Bethlehem to mark the formal inscription of a multinational group of Moravian Church settlements, including Bethlehem's, as a prestigious UNESCO World Heritage site.

The designation is expected to significantly boost cultural tourism to Bethlehem, attracting visitors from around the world. That tourism is anticipated to influence economic development in the Lehigh Valley, by increasing the region's prominence to a global audience and enriching the region's high quality of life, a critical factor people consider when choosing where to live, work, or start a business.

The inscription ceremony on Oct. 17 at Moravian University, where part of the Bethlehem Moravian Church site is located, celebrated the past while also looking ahead to what this means for the future.

"It is important that we show the world that the Moravians had outstanding human value, and it is our humanity and our community, not necessarily the buildings. The buildings are where the humanity and community happen, but the living tradition is what we continue," said Moravian University President Bryon Grigsby, a member of the World Heritage Council and Commission.

"This inscription underscores the importance of safeguarding our shared heritage, and it's a reminder that the past we protect today will inspire the future we create tomorrow," said Courtney O'Donnell, U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO.

Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure said it is important not to forget the trials the Moravian settlers endured, leaving their homeland in Europe to travel to America in search of a place where they could practice their faith without repercussions.

Covering 10 acres and multiple buildings, the Bethlehem Moravian Church site tells the story of the Moravian religious missionaries who settled Bethlehem in 1741 on a social and economic experiment that resulted in a legacy of innovation, town planning, and architecture.

"It's not all trombones and t

Among the local officials recognized for their role in achieving the UNESCO World Heritage Designation were Charlene Mowers Donchez, former President of Historic Bethlehem Museums and Sites; Hank Barnette, former Chairman and CEO of Bethlehem Steel; Bethlehem Mayor J. William Reynolds and former Bethlehem Mayors Bob Donchez, John Callahan, and Don Cunningham, now President and CEO of Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp. (LVEDC), who is Treasurer of the Bethlehem World Heritage Commission. Northampton County Council was recognized for providing funding.

"It is an extraordinary privilege to welcome our World Heritage friends and partners to Bethlehem for this long-anticipated inscription ceremony," Mayor Reynolds said. "This recognition not only honors the rich cultural and historical significance of the Moravian Church Settlements but also places Bethlehem on the world stage as a guardian of our shared human heritage. Today, we celebrate a momentous milestone for the U.S., but also a shared global commitment along with our partners in Denmark,

Northern Ireland and UK, and Germany, to preserving the legacy and values of a community that has connected continents and cultures for centuries."

Bethlehem's World Heritage designation is part of a transnational site that demonstrates the universal value of Moravian Church settlements globally. The site includes Gracehill in Northern Ireland/United Kingdom; Herrnhut, Germany; and Christiansfeld, Denmark, which previously had been designated a World Heritage location in 2015.

Lazare Eloundou-Assomo, Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Center, said the combined site is evidence that global harmony can occur and is a model for others to follow.

"It illustrates how our shared heritage and values can still bring people to be together globally," he said.

Bethlehem's site is made up of nine structures, four ruins, and God's Acre cemetery, which all already are in the Historic Moravian Bethlehem National Historic Landmark District. Included are the 1741 Gemeinhaus, the oldest building in Bethlehem, which houses the Moravian Museum of Bethlehem, and the 1762 Waterworks, an ASCE Historic Civil Engineering and American Water landmark that was America's first pumped municipal water system, located in the Colonial Industrial Quarter.

The site stands among 26 U.S. locations, including Independence Hall and the Statue of Liberty, which are recognized as World Heritage sites for their cultural and historical significance. Globally, there are 1,123 sites in 68 countries.

Historic Bethlehem Museums & Sites spent more than two decades working to add Historic Moravian Bethlehem to the World Heritage List, joined by the City of Bethlehem, Bethlehem Area Moravians, Central Moravian Church, and Moravian University.

Also participating in the inscription service were U.S. Rep. Susan Wild; Stephanie Augello, World Heritage Coordinator for Moravian Church Settlements; Richard Verma, Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources; Pedro Ramos, Acting Deputy Director, Congressional & External Relations at National Park Service; Minister Gordon Lyons of Northern Ireland; Consul General Till Knorn of Germany; and Jorgen Boyler, pastor of Denmark's Christiansfeld Moravian Church and administrator of its Unity Board.

