

Sarina Jarrahi Horner

Single Sisters

On a chilly October morning in 1766, a group of 16 German-speaking young women set out on a 29-day journey, traveling 500 miles from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to North Carolina with a single goal in mind—to help establish a Moravian community (Lawrence). These females joined the group of pioneers who founded what is today known as Old Salem (“Single Sisters House Museum | VisitNC.com”).

Dedicated in 1786, the Moravians successfully built the Single Sisters House, one of the earliest buildings in Salem, on a strong foundation of faith, leadership, and community service (“Single Sisters”). Eager to learn science, mathematics, and geography, they also learned the skills of needlework and spinning thread and yarn (*Anno 1785: Sisters* 4). Many of these Single Sisters dedicated themselves to educating young women of all backgrounds who came to Salem with the common desire of pursuing an education and opportunities for leadership (*Anno 1785: Sisters* 3).

Some of the Single Sisters’ duties involved housekeeping, cooking, laundering, and gardening. Others weaved, sewed, spun yarn, or made gloves. Several worked for families in Salem to earn wages. They worked incredibly hard during the day and into most evenings. For entertainment they sang together, took strolls, and went on picnics, returning to cramped quarters to retire for the evening as one of their four rooms was used for the girls’ school (*Anno 1785: Sisters* 8).

After collectively saving up to build a larger home, they began their historic endeavor, not realizing at the time the tremendous impact they would make for centuries to come. Once the construction of the new home began, the women were allowed to visit the construction site only on Sundays. When it was finally completed in 1786, the new Single Sisters House was the largest building in Salem (“Single Sisters House Museum | VisitNC.com”).

The Sisters continued to serve as teachers, housekeepers, and in many other capacities. They also set up two looms to weave linen while continuing to make leather gloves (Griffin 6). Many of the Sisters who were teachers took on a motherly role for the students, making caps for them and helping dress them, in addition to offering them support and advice (*Anno 1785: Sisters* 19). Because Salem was a communal society, the profits of various groups were shared with the rest of the community whenever the need arose. We see many of the significant contributions these Single Sisters made to our community with these profits through a simple stroll up Old Salem’s Main Street today (Horner).

The inaugural group of Single Sisters shared many qualities with one another—a commitment to sisterhood, leadership in the community, strong education, and service to others (*Anno 1785: Sisters* 27). They were more fortunate than others in similar positions in other geographical locations as there were few opportunities for unmarried

women during this time. The Single Sisters operated a successful business through the boarding school, owned their own house, and were overall independent (*Anno 1785: Sisters* 8).

Established in 1772, Salem Academy and College has earned its place as **the oldest educational institution for girls and women in the United States** and the Single Sisters House stands as one of the most significant buildings in the history of women's education in the United States. It has been stated that “no effort could accurately portray the permanent role which the Salem Academy for girls and women has played in the educational development, not only of North Carolina and the South, but of the whole country” (Blandin 32).

Today, Salem Academy and College sit on a 47-acre campus in the heart of Old Salem. The institution has developed into Salem Academy, a college preparatory school for girls in grades 9 through 12, Salem College, a liberal arts school for women, and The Flier Center for adult education. It also has a graduate program which is open to both men and women (“Our History”).

Works Cited

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