

HISTORY MAKER

ANNA MARIA SAMUEL

Born: Dec. 24, 1781, Bethabara, N.C.

Died: Feb. 13, 1798, Bethabara, N.C.

Known for: Being the first student of color and first enslaved student known to have attended classes at Salem Academy

Born in the ice-slick pre-dawn hours of Christmas Eve 1781, Anna Maria Samuel was baptized that afternoon “in a meeting for adults and children” as the Moravians of Bethabara gathered to celebrate Christmas.

She attended the Bethabara school for little girls, but there was no school for older girls in the small farming community. Her parents paid for her to attend school in Salem, the school that would become the Salem Academy and College.

None of this was unusual, as the Moravians valued education. What makes her story significant is that she, her parents, and her siblings were enslaved Blacks.

Johann and Maria Samuel were leased and later purchased from Virginia slave holders, Johann by the town of Bethabara as a farm laborer and Maria by Salem to work in the tavern.

The Moravian church, whose members were mostly from continental Europe at the time, discouraged ownership or use of enslaved people. But the practice was pervasive in the South, and the council allowed it.

Before 1800, many of the Wachovia enslaved were owned

by the communities, not individuals. Black Moravians, free or not, had better lives than most other enslaved people.

“If you were baptized, you were treated as part of the community,” said Michelle Hopkins Lawrence of the Salem Academy History Department. “(Blacks and whites) sat next to each other in church, and back then, it wasn’t the handshake of peace; it was the kiss of peace.”

Most importantly, she said, enslaved members of the church were allowed to marry, and the church would not separate family members. Johann was baptized in 1771, the first baptism of anyone in the Salem congregation; Maria in 1780.

Their 1781 marriage is the first record of Black Moravians marrying in the South. Anna Maria was the eldest of their seven children. All who survived spoke both English and German and went to school.

Sadly, Anna Maria was still enslaved when she died at 16, but her parents and siblings would all eventually live free.

Today her legacy and that of all enslaved people who lived and worked



Artist rendering of Anna Marie Samuel by Carrie Dickey, a 2000 Salem College grad.

in the Wachovia tract is celebrated by continuing research into their lives by the Anna Maria Samuel Project: Race, Remembrance, and Reconciliation at Salem Academy and College, which Lawrence co-chairs.

“The town and the school were built with free and enslaved African and African-American labor,” she said. “But she was a student, she lived and ate and prayed and studied with the white girls, and that’s a story worth knowing.”