

Great Philadelphia Wagon Road ^[1]



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Imagine that you and your friends are on a trip far from home. It is October 1753, and you are the Moravian Single Brothers—there are fifteen of you on this journey. Your group is traveling to North Carolina to begin a new settlement, and the route you follow all the way from Pennsylvania does not yet have its famous name: the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road.

At the time of the Single Brothers' trip, much of the Piedmont and all of the Mountains of North Carolina made up the frontier. The Piedmont, with its rolling hills, and the Mountains, with their crags and steep slopes, are very different from the flat Coastal Plain of eastern North Carolina. They are different in their topography, and they differ in the way they were settled during the colonial period.

Early European immigration to North America usually brings to mind ships sailing across the Atlantic Ocean, and this certainly rings true for the means of colonial settlement along the East Coast of the United States. We may also have images of settlers traveling to locations not accessible by boat, much like the Single Brothers did, and this is how much of the interior or backcountry of North Carolina was populated. In colonial America, thousands of people used the very important road that guided the Single Brothers and which might even be called a "colonial highway." In our state it is known as the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, the Great Wagon Road, or simply the Wagon Road. In Virginia, it is called the Carolina Road, because it led to Carolina.

Before people began to settle the interior of present-day North Carolina, there was a focus on the coastal area. Jamestown was the important English settlement in Virginia that began in 1607, and the Chesapeake Bay (into which the James River flows) became a vital center of the English colonies. Charles Town (now Charleston) in present-day South Carolina was established by the English in 1670 and in effect pushed Spanish settlement south into Georgia and Florida. Between these two great ports, the Carolina coastline was made fairly safe, and by 1735 towns such as [Bath](#) ^[2], [Edenton](#) ^[3], New Bern, Beaufort, and Georgetown (South Carolina) had been established.

South Carolina ports played a role in the settlement of the interior of North Carolina. The histories of North and South Carolina are intertwined, just as the river systems bind together their topography. In both states, ship and boat travel effectively ends at the fall line, where, as its name suggests, waterfalls begin. Because rivers in the Piedmont are difficult to navigate, early Europeans were unable to travel upstream by boat to the places that became [Winston-Salem](#) ^[4] or [Charlotte](#) ^[5], for example. It was not until the 1740s that this backcountry began to be settled ^[6], and the people who journeyed there did not travel from the eastern part of the colony. They came from the north by wagon, foot, or horseback.

In the early 1700s, the Coastal Plain, particularly along the navigable rivers, began to fill with immigrants. The Piedmont and Mountains, however, remained lands of the American Indians who had inhabited the area for thousands of years. European immigrants were pouring into the northern colonies, especially Pennsylvania and Maryland, in the 1730s and 1740s. As these colonies became populated with newcomers, particularly German and Scots-Irish, they became congested. People began to look south for potential new homes. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was an especially busy port in the 1700s, and many early backcountry North Carolina settlers entered America there. Conveniently, the Great Wagon Road to Virginia and the Carolinas had its origins in the vicinity of Philadelphia.

Immigrants began to travel south in small numbers and then in a constant stream of people that numbered in the thousands. Trails that had been used by American Indians for many years became routes into the frontier. In the 1740s one of the first groups of people to enter backcountry North Carolina was "the Bryant settlement." The leader, a Quaker named [Morgan Bryan](#) ^[7], followed a path from Pennsylvania into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and first settled there. Later, in 1748, he led a group of people farther south into North Carolina, where they settled on the Yadkin River near a crossing called the Shallow Ford. The path Bryant pioneered would become the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road. Shortly after Bryant and his family and friends moved to the Yadkin River, other settlers followed his lead into North Carolina. Some claimed land along Town Fork Creek, a tributary of the Dan River. These settlements consisted of families living on their own farms; no towns existed.

With affordable land prices and a loosely established state church, backcountry North Carolina had attracted such a sufficient population by 1753 that 348 inhabitants signed a petition asking the colonial assembly to divide [Anson County](#) ^[8] so that they would not have to travel so far for courthouse business. [Rowan County](#) ^[9] was created, with Salisbury soon

established as the county seat.

Also in 1753 a Protestant religious group of German-speaking people called Moravians ^[10] bought a hundred-thousand-acre tract of land between Bryant's settlement on the Yadkin River and the Town Fork settlement. The Moravians had big plans for this tract that they named der Wachau, or Wachovia (now Winston-Salem ^[4]). They were already well established in several places in Pennsylvania but wanted a large area where they could build a community around a way of life based on their religious beliefs. The Moravians were well organized and educated people who used their talents to quickly create a stable urban system, and Wachovia played a critical role in the backcountry's development.

The Moravians sent to begin the settlement of Wachovia were a group of unmarried men, called Single Brothers, who were chosen because each had skills that would be critical to successful settlement (minister, business manager, doctor, cook, carpenter, cooper, farmer, shoe maker, millwright, turner, tailor, baker, gardener, and so forth). For their trip from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to their new land in North Carolina, the group used the path that Bryant had taken. The Moravians kept a daily journal of the trip, recording their location and the general condition of the road and countryside; any farms, inns, or mills visited; people encountered; news heard; meals eaten; game shot; places where they bought hay for their horses; and miles journeyed.

The Single Brothers wrote about the pioneering 1748 trip by Bryant, whom they called "Morgan Bryand." They knew that the trip had taken Bryant three months from the Shenandoah Valley to the Yadkin River, and they recorded that at one place Bryant had had to take the wheels off of his wagon and carry it to the top of a hill in pieces. In 1753, when the Single Brothers made their way to North Carolina, the upper reaches of the Great Wagon Road in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and northern Virginia were fairly well traveled, but as they came farther south, the road was less traveled and conditions less favorable. The Single Brothers were using a large Pennsylvania wagon. Two days into their trip, they had a blacksmith cut it down three inches in width—which made the difference in whether the wagon fit the ruts of the road. Fording rivers and creeks was a regular task. Descending steep hillsides was dangerous, and the men would hold the wagon back with ropes. In places, the Single Brothers' wagon became stuck in deep mud, and they spent hours freeing it. Sometimes they cut new sections of road.

Ten days before reaching Wachovia, from a hilltop in Virginia, they saw Pilot Mountain and knew Carolina and their new land were near.

The Single Brothers' trip lasted about six weeks. Upon arrival, they immediately began to build a town that they named Bethabara ^[11]. It was located a mile and a half off the Great Wagon Road, which ran through Wachovia and on to the Shallow Ford at the Yadkin River. Two years later, the Moravians in Pennsylvania sent married couples and more Single Brothers to live in Bethabara. Because the neighbors on the Yadkin and the Town Fork, and others who had followed them, lived on farms spread across the landscape, the new town became a very important center. It had a doctor, a minister, and craftsmen and tradesmen to make shoes, hats, clothes, pottery, and other goods needed on the frontier. The Moravians traded actively with coastal ports. Deerskins brought into Wachovia were often traded for Moravian goods, and the Moravians sent wagonloads of deerskins regularly to Charleston.

The 1750s were also years of unrest because of the French and Indian War ^[12] and war with the Cherokee ^[13]. The American Indians had been ill-treated and were attempting to dislodge settlers from the frontier. A palisade was built around Bethabara for protection, and on many occasions outlying settlers fled to what was then known as Fort Bethabara for safety during Indian raids. Families sometimes stayed several months at a time. A second Moravian town, Bethania, was established in 1759 three miles away on the opposite side of the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, which the Moravians called the König Strasse (or King's Road). Bethania and Bethabara were crucial frontier strongholds during the turmoil, which largely ended in the early 1760s.

The Moravians had worked on the Great Wagon Road to the Shallow Ford, where it crossed the Yadkin River and continued south to Salisbury. More and more people were traveling that way, pushing on into the backcountry of upper South Carolina and Georgia. Ultimately, the Great Wagon Road was extended there.

Wachovia grew more complex as the central town of Salem was begun in 1766, and additional Moravian congregations became established. This urban center of crafts and trade attracted further settlement, and the North Carolina backcountry experienced enormous population growth in the 1760s and 1770s. Germans and Scots-Irish continued entering the colony along the Great Wagon Road. The frontier was pushed westward to the Mountains as land was cleared, fields planted, and homes built. Unlike eastern North Carolina—where farms, called plantations, often were large and spread out and used the labor of enslaved people, and where the Church of England ^[14] was established—western North Carolina was inhabited mostly by subsistence farmers on relatively small holdings. They included Quakers, Lutherans, German Reformed, Moravians, Dunkards, Baptists, and Methodists. Most small farms in the backcountry had few or no slaves.

The flow of settlement continued southward, but the Great Wagon Road was also a route of communication and trade with traffic going northward. It resembled a colonial interstate highway, similar to today's I-40 or I-95. As a matter of fact, Interstate 81 through Virginia generally follows the route of the Great Wagon Road, and Highway 220 continues that corridor into North Carolina. The route can then be followed into the Wachovia area on existing roads and abandoned roadbeds visible as deep cuts through the woods. Many of the roads we use today are refinements of such earlier routes.

As road systems survive, so do people whose ancestors came as settlers down the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road. They came seeking fertile land at a good price, new opportunities, religious tolerance, and bright futures for their children.

More than 260 years have passed, and many generations have been part of North Carolina's backcountry history since Morgan Bryant, the Moravian Single Brothers, and others pioneered the Great Wagon Road.

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