

## **Bonn, Johann Jacob** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Laura M. Mosley, 1979

**5 Apr. 1733–31 Oct. 1781**



"Wachovia Tract Before Salem." Photo courtesy of the Wachovia Historical Society.

<sup>[2]</sup>Johann Jacob Bonn, physician, justice of the peace, sheriff, and clerk of court, was born in Skippack, Pa., to Mennonite <sup>[3]</sup>parents. When Jacob was thirteen they each joined the Moravian <sup>[4]</sup>church and moved to Bethlehem, Pa.

At first, Jacob was apprenticed to a tailor, but the confinement proved too much for his health. He then began to study medicine and surgery with Doctor John Matthew Otto and successfully completed an apprenticeship in 1758.

In November 1758 he visited Bethabara <sup>[5]</sup>. Because the appointed congregational physician was away in Pennsylvania at that time, he assisted with the medical duties of the colony during his visit. In the spring of 1759 he returned to Bethlehem, but he visited the Bethabara colony again in June 1759, accompanying an official party. Shortly after his arrival, the crowded village was struck by a typhus fever epidemic, in which the congregational physician, Doctor Kalberlahn <sup>[6]</sup>, lost his life. Bonn was appointed interim physician for the colony and functioned in this capacity until the permanent replacement, Doctor August Schubert, arrived to relieve him in September 1760. Bonn then returned to Bethlehem, Pa., and continued his association with Doctor Otto until July 1766. At that time he was called again to Bethabara as the congregational physician for Wachovia <sup>[7]</sup>, a position he held commendably until his early death.

Bonn showed promise of executive ability, in addition to his medical talent. Shortly after his appointment, he was included in the welcoming party for the visit of Governor Tryon <sup>[8]</sup>. The governing board selected him to be recommended for justice of the peace, and he received official appointment in Rowan County <sup>[9]</sup> in April 1769. When Surry County <sup>[10]</sup> was formed from Rowan in 1771, he became a justice in the new county; except for a brief period during the war, he was reappointed each year during his remaining years in Wachovia. The records indicate that this political office usurped at least 50 percent of his time. He was continually on the move visiting the six different villages in Wachovia: one day he would be found in one village collecting taxes, writing a will, performing a marriage ceremony, or acting as executor of an estate; and the next day he would be many miles away attending court in the county seat, which would detain him for several days. He appeared to be revered in his executive capacity and carried out his duties to the best of his convictions.

During the war years, the Moravian brethren, who did not believe in taking up arms, were in a precarious position. They were suspected by both the Tories and the Continental parties. Before the war, the deeds for the land in Wachovia were assigned to a church executive in England, and this was probably one reason for the frequent accusation of Toryism. When the brethren refused to bear arms in 1774 or to take the Oath of Allegiance to the state, there was a serious threat that they would lose their land and be forced to leave Wachovia. In 1775, Bonn was subjected to severe restrictions in the exercise of his legal office in the county, but he nonetheless continued to represent his people in legal matters, appeared at court, petitioned the assembly, and performed admirably in dealing with the problems of exorbitant penalty taxes for refusal of military service. In February 1778 he was appointed chairman of the county court but declined to serve: there were too many unsolved problems concerning military service and the Moravian brethren. Partly because of his patient persistence, the assembly rewrote the Oath of Allegiance in 1779. All the Moravian brethren took the revised affirmation to the state; their legal privileges were restored, the deeds for the land in Wachovia were assigned to the local administrator, and thereby both loss of land and expulsion from North Carolina were averted.

Bonn was described as a good man, and appears to have been successful in his medical practice. In 1760 a man came to Bethabara with an Indian arrow piercing his body through; Bonn removed the arrow and the patient recovered from this serious wound. If there were problems requiring help, he did not fail to avail himself of capable assistance. In April of

1781, for example, he had an elderly patient who needed a leg amputation. He called on a surgeon from Lord Cornwallis's <sup>[11]</sup> army and assisted him in the operation. Bonn had a well-organized nursing service in the town of Salem <sup>[12]</sup>, training midwives and apprentices to assist him with the problems of caring for the sick and disabled. He was quite astute in not taking sides and used good judgment when there were controversial problems. In 1780, when actual warfare was in the neighborhood, he had the responsibility of treating the wounded from both factions. He was never accused of bias and was shown gratitude for the care of the wounded and sick soldiers of both sides.

The years 1780 and 1781 were disastrous years of the war for Wachovia. Sick and wounded soldiers in several of the villages required many visits and much care. In January of 1781 a small hospital was set up in one of the houses in Salem, and the wounded were nursed there by the local people from January through April. In February, a Continental Army field hospital requested a building in which to set up temporary quarters. Two families were moved out, and a hospital occupied the vacated building for two days. Immediately afterward, Cornwallis's troops arrived and camped on both sides of Salem, one to the northwest in Bethania and the next to the southeast in Friedland. During this trying period, a smallpox epidemic was raging to the south in Friedberg. There was stealing and plunder in each village, and Bonn's much-needed horse was stolen. All this trouble came to a climax in October of 1781. Bonn arose on the morning of 31 Oct. with a severe headache. By 10:00 A.M. he had expired from what was described as apoplexy. He was buried 2 Nov. in God's Acre in Salem.

Bonn was married in November 1766 to Anna Maria Brendel. He taught her to be a successful midwife, and she practiced her art for many years in the villages of Wachovia. They had three children, two girls who died in early childhood, and a son, Johann Jacob, who followed in his father's footsteps to become a justice of the peace.

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Wachovia Church Book (MS, Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem).

## Additional Resources:

Tryon, William, 1729-1788. *Correspondence of William Tryon and other selected papers: Volume 2*. Raleigh [N.C.]: Division of Archives and History, Dept. of Cultural Resources, 1980-. 1981.  
<https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/correspondence-of-william-tryon-and-other-selected-papers-volume-2/2148955?item=2232887> <sup>[13]</sup> (accessed April 26, 2013).

Adelaide L. Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, vols. 1–3 (1922–26):  
<http://www.ncpublications.com/documentaries/moravians.htm> <sup>[14]</sup>

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## Subjects:

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Physicians, Dentists, Pharmacists, and other Medical Professionals <sup>[16]</sup>

Public officials <sup>[17]</sup>

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Forsyth County <sup>[19]</sup>

Winston-Salem <sup>[20]</sup>

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