

Kapp, John Jacob ^[1]

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by M. Keith Kapp, 1988

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John Jacob Kapp, early [Moravian](#) ^[2] miller, was born in Münchenstein, near Basel, Switzerland. His parents, Johannes and Judith Kapp, were members of the [Reformed](#) ^[3] church. Fleeing religious persecution and economic hardship, they left Switzerland for Pennsylvania in 1740. Most of the family, including Kapp's mother, died at sea. His father remarried and settled in Lancaster County, Pa., where he carried on his trade as a cartwright. Perhaps not wholly at home with his father's second family, John Jacob Kapp was attracted to the teachings of the [Moravian](#) ^[2] missionaries from Bethlehem, Pa. In 1748 he joined the Moravian church, accepting its idea of a Christian communal society.

Kapp was one of twenty-two Single Brethren selected to start a Moravian settlement at Christian's Spring, Pa., in 1749. Five years later, he was asked by the church to go with seven other men in the second band of settlers to the new Moravian town of [Bethabara](#) ^[4] in western North Carolina. The settlement was less than a year old when they arrived on 26 Oct. 1754. Kapp's inclusion in the group was part of a carefully drawn plan typical of Moravian settlements. He was a skilled woodworker who had other mechanical abilities. One of his assignments was to work with two men sent to find a site for and build a mill. On 28 Nov. 1755, they put into operation the first gristmill in northwestern North Carolina. Besides the Moravian groups, it served on a custom-grinding basis settlers on the Yadkin, in the [Quaker](#) ^[5] community of New Garden (now [Guilford College](#) ^[6]), in the Irish settlement of modern [Davidson County](#) ^[7], and along Town Fork Creek (now [Stokes](#) ^[8] and [Rockingham](#) ^[9] counties). Kapp served as assistant to the first miller. He was also vestryman for Dobbs Parish, the Anglican designation for the area [Moravians](#) ^[2] knew as [Wachovia](#) ^[10].

During the [French and Indian War](#) ^[11], Kapp was in charge of caring for the hundreds of refugees who sought safety from [Cherokee](#) ^[12] attacks with the Moravians of Bethabara. He helped supervise the building of a stockade around the gristmill and ten log cabins to house the refugees. He worked, too, to feed a starving region. Only the Moravians had food during a time of war-ruined crops, and Kapp, through his post at the mill, helped distribute supplies. In 1759, he assisted with another project aimed at easing the refugee crunch—the founding of nearby Bethania, where Moravian Brethren and nonmembers could live outside the traditional communal society.

At war's end in 1763, Kapp returned to his routine as assistant miller, becoming chief on the retirement of the first miller nine years later. He held the position for thirty years. Because his work at the mill gave him an unusual amount of contact with outsiders, Moravian leaders and ministers found him a useful companion in their political and religious journeys outside Wachovia.

During the [American Revolution](#) ^[13], Kapp the miller ground grain for both sides between the battles of [Kings Mountain](#) ^[14] and [Guilford Court House](#) ^[15], but Kapp the man upset the carefully neutral leadership of the church by early declaring his sympathy for the Patriot cause.

He spent the rest of his years quietly pursuing his trade, raising his family, and practicing his faith. Unlike many millers of his time, he amassed no great estate; in Moravian society, the profits from work were turned back to the church and all in the community were provided for according to their needs. Retiring from the mill in April 1802, Kapp moved into the village of Bethabara where he died five years later of influenza. He was buried in God's Acre, the graveyard at Bethabara.

His service during the French and Indian War was recognized in 1903, when a plaque was erected at Bethabara. However, his greatest legacy was the milling tradition carried through five generations. His son, Henry, ran the first mill in nearby Bethania and later established another near the northern boundary of Wachovia. Henry's son, Thomas, established another mill three miles northwest of Bethania. John M. Kapp, another grandson of the original miller, operated "Kapp's Mill" on the Mitchell River in the Mountain View community of [Surry County](#) ^[16]. The last of the mills operated into the 1920s.

Kapp was married three times. His first wife, Margaretha Schor (or Shore), arrived in Bethabara as a refugee in the [French and Indian War](#) ^[11]. They were married in 1764 and had four children, two of whom had their own families. The oldest son, John Frederick, moved with his family to Tennessee in 1794. The second son, Henry, remained in Wachovia; to his line belong the Kapps now living in and around [Forsyth County](#) ^[17]. There is some indication that eastern North Carolina families with the name of Capp and Capps may be descended from John Jacob Kapp as well. His second marriage—to Elisabeth Everit in 1779—produced no surviving children. But he had two by Louisa Doll, whom he married in 1783. Their son is known to have left Bethabara in the early nineteenth century.

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M. Keith Kapp with Hunter James, "And Well to Grind the Grain," *The Three Forks of Muddy Creek* 2 (1975).

Emma L. Lehman, "Family Register of Mary Amanda Kapp" (1895 manuscript in the possession of Mrs. Herbert Weber, Charlotte).

Stokes County Wills (Danbury).

Additional Resources:

Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem: <http://moravianarchives.org/> ^[18]

Subjects:

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Origin - location:

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