

Peter, John Frederick ^[1]

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Peter, John Frederick

by Frank P. Cauble, 1994

19 May 1746–19 July 1813

John Frederick Peter, musician, composer, teacher, and minister, was born of German parents in Heerendyck, Holland, where his father, John Frederick Peter, was a [Moravian](#) ^[2] pastor. His mother was Susannah Peter. Before coming to America, young Peter received excellent musical training, and while a student at the theological seminary in Barby, Saxony, from 1765 to 1769, he began his lifelong habit of copying the works of noted German composers. Some of his beautifully written transcripts are now the only existing copies.

By 1770, when he joined the Moravian colony at Bethlehem, Pa., Peter was a brilliant and accomplished musician; that summer he composed a solo for strings and organ. He later directed performances of works by Bach, Handel, and Graun and developed a full orchestra which played symphonies by Haydn, Mozart, and their contemporaries.

Peter went to Bethlehem as assistant superintendent of the unmarried men. After the Brethren's House was turned into a Continental hospital, he was called to [Salem](#) ^[3], N.C., where he arrived in June 1780 and was ordained as a Moravian deacon on 16 September. He preached and performed many other duties in addition to his musical activities.

Under his leadership, the Collegium Musicum Salem was organized in 1786 and soon became the foremost musical society in the early history of North Carolina. It had at its disposal one of the largest and most diversified libraries of secular music in America. Peter's six quintets for two violins, two violas, and cello, composed at Salem in 1789, have been acclaimed as the earliest extant chamber works written in America and the most important compositions in the history of early American music. Although these works followed the classical tradition, they displayed considerable harmonic freedom and boldness in modulation. During his ten years at Salem, Peter also composed thirty interesting and effective anthems and four soprano solos. He left Salem in August 1790 and in 1793 again took charge of the musical activities in Bethlehem, Pa. There he directed in 1811 the first complete American performance of Haydn's *Creation*.

For more than a century after his death, Peter's musical compositions were largely forgotten, but in recent years they have received national recognition on account of scholarly research and publications in the field of early [Moravian music](#) ^[4]. He now occupies a prominent position in American musical history.

He married Catharine Leinbach (1755–1830), a soprano singer of Salem, in 1786. There were no children. Peter continued his musical career until the day of his death; he was buried in the Old Moravian Cemetery at Bethlehem.

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