

# Historic Rural Churches

## JERUSALEM LUTHERAN CHURCH—A SALZBURGER IN GEORGIA

STORY BY CLAYTON H. RAMSEY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN KIRKLAND

Just north of the sweep of the majestic Alps, tucked in a valley wedged between Bavaria and Austria, is a slice of territory called Salzburg. Seven centuries before the Common Era, Celts mined salt in these mountains, a prize that gave its name to the settlement. The Celts shipped the salt down the Salzach River to ports hungry for the staple.<sup>1</sup> For hundreds of years, as mineworkers burrowed to the extensive salt bed below, they also pulled up precious metals and other minerals, and as long as the earth was generous with her treasures, those who knew where to look were well rewarded. Over time, they built a flourishing society, blessed by Providence with abundant natural resources.

Just as geography shaped the prosperity of those who inhabited these mountain passes, so the social and religious movements rippling through the Holy Roman Empire of central Europe during the early modern era influenced the proud citizens of this region. These Germanic families heard the strong echo of Luther's declaration of "Here I stand, I can do no other," his proclamation at the Diet of Worms that defied the powerful Roman Catholic Church and centuries of tradi-

tion. They read his vernacular translation of the Scriptures and existed in the eddy of the crosscurrents of pietism, separatism, and emerging Lutheranism that flowed through the age. In the years following the Reformation, they felt the convulsions of the German Peasants' War, the destructions of the Thirty Years' War, and the sting of the Counter-Reformation that struggled to bring the dissident Lutherans back into the embrace of Holy Mother Church.

These were decades of conflict and change for those who lived in Salzburg. The social structure of medieval Europe was being transformed in fits and starts into the culture of the modern world, and the Salzburger were not insulated from these revolutions in governance, thought, religious practice, and social organization.

By the early eighteenth century, these Protestant pockets of defiance had nursed their rebellion against the Catholic authorities for almost two centuries. By this time, the province had developed into a sovereign church-state, governed by a succession of Catholic archbishops who held both civic and ecclesiastical authority.





Religious rites that were practiced by the Protestant Salzburger and the creeds they held contrary to the orthodoxy of Rome were done in secret, a strategy that allowed them to avoid inquisitors while still maintaining the integrity of conscience. For decades there was a struggle for the soul of the region as generations of Catholic administrators tried to strike a balance between fostering a financial prosperity that depended on the muscle and skill of Salzburger peasants and enforcing a religious conformity demanded by the ancient Roman Church.

On the other side of this social and religious gulf were the inhabitants of this region who were fiercely loyal to their God and their interpretation of Scripture. These dissenters were also pragmatic enough to understand the consequences of defiance. And so a tenuous equilibrium existed between the prince-prelates and their subjects.

On October 31, 1731, the 214th anniversary of Luther's "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," which initiated the Protestant Reformation, the delicate peace and religious stasis in Salzburg ended. Eager to prevent the dissent expressed by 100 Protestants in the Salt Oath of August 5 from growing into a movement that even troops and decrees limiting assembly could not control, Archbishop Count Leopold Anton Eleutherius von Firmian, who had purchased his position in 1727, signed the Emigrationspatent, the so-called "Edict of Expulsion," on Reformation Day.<sup>2</sup> To deepen the insult, he scheduled the reading of the Edict for November 11, the anniversary of Luther's baptism. The message was clear. Every person who lived in the province must either affirm his faith in the Roman Catholic Church or risk expulsion and exile.

Emphasizing the "paternal love and clemency" of the Archbishop and the persistent rebellion of those who would not renounce their Protestant convictions to acknowledge the authority of the Archbishop and the church and state he represented, the document was a masterpiece of self-justification, wrapped in a religious and legal language that made the crime of the persecution that was to follow even more reprehensible. Those of property who refused the offer to affirm Catholic allegiance had three months to sell their lands, order their

affairs, and depart the region. Those of lesser means who held no property, such as miners, tradesmen, and day laborers, had eight days to leave or face severe punishment.

Of course the greatest beneficiary of the property forfeited by the Protestants was the Archbishop and his administration. No doubt expecting a widespread return to Catholic faith in the face of such a stringent proclamation, the Archbishop instead was confronted by 21,475 Protestants who refused to relinquish their confession.

The result was a massive displacement of tens of thousands of Salzburger, forced from their homes and lands, their children given to Catholic families to raise, their possessions strapped to their backs, sold for a pittance, or left for the enrichment of those who remained, their books of devotion and bibles burned. Frederick William I welcomed 16,000 of these refugees to East Prussia, in the hope that they would provide a buffer on the Lithuanian border against invasion.<sup>3</sup> Of the others, 200 were recruited for mining operations in Holland, 3,500 settled in other locations, and 300 crossed the Atlantic, bound for the colony of Georgia.

Those bound for Georgia included Peter Gruber, a farmer from the village of Dorfgastein.<sup>4</sup> His surname was derived from the word for "miner" or "tunneler," a name that linked him to the area by an ancient trade.<sup>5</sup> Peter was born in 1697 in Taxenbach, Berchtesgaden, Salzburg District, Austria, to Michael and Magdalena Amoser Gruber. He had three brothers: Hans, Michael, and Thomas.<sup>6</sup> He was no prince or prelate, but the story of the wresting of his property, his expulsion from his homeland, and the trials of his itinerancy is important not just as that of a single man, but also as the narrative of an entire people of faith.

There was no delay between the issuance and the execution of the Edict. The first group of Salzburger was forced out during a violent snowstorm in the icy months between November 1731 and January 1732. Another Gruber, Franz (of no known relation to Peter), would compose the music for "Silent Night" in 1818, but during this exodus the refugee Salzburger did not yet have those iconic words of peaceful reflection. Instead, as they fanned out through Europe, seeking refuge in rare

Protestant principalities, they sang Luther's Reformation hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," Joseph Schaitberger's "Exile Song," and Isaac Watts's "Come, Gracious Spirit, Heavenly Dove"<sup>7</sup> as they pushed through the snow and fought the bitter winds.

Peter made his way to Augsburg and the Lutheran Church of St. Anne's, led by the Rev. Samuel Urlsperger. Whereas the refugees had received charities from Protestants across Europe, it was the Rev. Urlsperger who negotiated an arrangement for Peter and some 300 fellow Salzburger to escape to the New World.<sup>8</sup>

In cooperation with the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), the Rev. Urlsperger appealed to King George II of England on behalf of the Salzburger. His Majesty was also a Lutheran and a German Duke so the appeal succeeded. Like the Prussian King who accepted refugees as a line of defense, King George II was not just moved by humanitarian concerns; he believed the Salzburger would add to the local economy, raise the moral and spiritual climate of the debtor's colony, as well as provide a buffer for English interests against the Spanish colonies in Florida.<sup>9</sup> Mediated by the Rev. Urlsperger and the SPCK, King George II and the Trustees of the Georgia colony extended an invitation to the refugees in Augsburg to settle in Georgia.

They gratefully accepted the sponsorship and left Augsburg on October 20, 1733. They travelled down the

Rhine to Rotterdam, where they met the men who would serve as their spiritual leaders: Pastors Johann Martin Boltzius and Israel Christian Gronau.

Having already taken on passengers from Bremen and Dusseldorf, Captain Tobias Fry accepted 37 Salzburger families on the First Class Frigate HMS *Purysburg* in Rotterdam and set sail for Dover. Storms delayed their voyage. A trip that would ordinarily last a couple of days on the water stretched to three weeks. Once the passengers made landfall in Dover, they celebrated Christmas and the New Year with prayer meetings, services, singing and eating, and swore an oath of allegiance to the crown, thus becoming English citizens with all the rights of English colonists.<sup>10</sup>

The Salzburger sailed for America on January 8, 1734, again on the HMS *Purysburg*. Peter Gruber was listed on the ship manifest for Transport Number One. There would be four so-called "transports," travelling groups that often included more than one ship. He had twenty-seven guilders and twenty Kreuzers in cash money and what could fit in a sea chest.<sup>11</sup>

It took Captain Fry two full months to make the passage to the New World. The lookout sighted land on March 5. On the 7th they docked in "Charles Town," South Carolina, although only the two pastors disembarked at that time. On March 12, the ship arrived in Savannah, where General James Oglethorpe met the immigrants and assigned them a place to





settle 25 miles inland on Ebenezer Creek.

The biblical Hebrew name “Ebenezer” was chosen for their new home because it meant “Stone of Help” (I Samuel 7:2-14). They were no longer harassed by Catholic authorities, chased across Europe for their beliefs. Here they could worship and live in peace, using their agricultural and craftsman skills to sustain what they only assumed would be a utopian existence.

The reality was not nearly as idyllic as they might have imagined. At least thirty settlers died of dysentery in their first two years in Georgia, including Peter’s brother, Hans, the only other member of his family on the transport.<sup>12</sup> The soil was poor and the land swampy, creating challenges for both raising crops and tending livestock. In addition, the topography was problematic. They were too far inland with no direct access to the Savannah River, a fact that required travel of eight miles on boggy roads to the nearest settlement, the Scottish Abercorn, for supplies. In spite of the Salzbergers’ best efforts, the colony struggled.

After relentless petitioning by the colonists, Oglethorpe eventually agreed to move the community in 1736 to a site on a bluff above the Savannah, where Ebenezer Creek emptied into the River. They appropriately named the place New Ebenezer. Here, with the vast improvement of their circumstances, the Salzbergers thrived. With their native industry and the financial backing of several sponsors, they added to their earlier accomplishments. At Ebenezer, they had established Georgia’s first Sunday school (1734) and saw mill (1735). At New Ebenezer, they built the colony’s first orphanage (1737), the first water-driven rice mill and gristmill (1740), and the first silk filature (1741).

With natural population growth and an influx of immigrants arriving on subsequent transports, New Ebenezer’s population swelled to 1,200 people by 1741, leading to the movement of some to new communities. By 1752 the Salzbergers had expanded to Bethany and three other settlements.

Between 1767 and 1769, the Salzbergers replaced the wood frame Jerusalem Church of 1741 with a structure of lasting brick, their house of worship that still stands today. It is the oldest Lutheran church in America with a still-active

congregation, topped with a weathervane in the shape of a swan, a symbol of Martin Luther.

The Salzbergers shared an ethos and an identity shaped by religious persecution, a frontier-survival mentality, a common ethnicity, and a regional character that emphasized industry, devotion, and independence. Those qualities undoubtedly contributed to their early success, but as New Ebenezer accepted other refugees from Europe they became increasingly multicultural. When Pastor Boltzius, their spiritual anchor, died in 1765, the centrifugal forces of size and diversity contributed to a loss of social cohesion.

The American Revolution sounded the death knell for New Ebenezer. British troops bivouacked there, using the church for a hospital and its pews for firewood. A single bullet hole in the metal vane is evidence of a shot taken by one of these soldiers. The colonials did regain control in 1782 and used the town as a temporary state capital for two weeks, but the British destruction of property, the loss of external funding, and the social and economic changes that had taken place over the decades had driven most of the remaining Salzbergers to find prosperity elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

While families moving to other communities took Salzburger traditions with them, the experiment at Ebenezer ended at the close of the 18th century. Jerusalem Church would survive Sherman’s March to the Sea in 1864 and an 1886 earthquake, and believers who cherish the faith of their ancestors still worship there even today, but the rest of the settlement is a memory.

Peter survived the transatlantic journey and joined the others in Ebenezer, receiving fifty acres and a home site.<sup>14</sup> He built a hut on his plot and struggled with the others to farm. He produced 22 bushels of corn, 2 bushels of beans and 10 bushels of sweet potatoes that year. The winter following their landing he married Maria Kraher Moshammer on February 23, 1735. They had two children: Peter Jr., who lived just five days, and John.

Peter survived the harsh conditions of the new colony, but died on December 2, 1740, in Ebenezer, at the age of 43, while tending his crops. He was buried in an unmarked grave. He left

no books or monuments, nothing that would commend him to history, except a son and a spiritual legacy.

Two hundred and seventy six years have passed since Peter's death, and the number of descendants who can claim his patrimony is significant. But the true value of his legacy is in what he dared.

He dared to defy an archbishop and prince, knowing that his defiance would require the loss of his family, his home, and most of his possessions. He knew he was trading familiarity for uncertainty. He was called a heretic and a traitor and was forced from everything that he knew, everything he had labored to build, and thrust into a situation that required a genuine exercise of faith. He believed he was justified in his defiance, that he would be sustained and protected as he wandered as a refugee, and that his forward movement was leading him home. Nothing was assured beyond the certainty of his faith.

It was Peter's faith that saw him from Austria to Georgia. Nine generations later, I exist as one of his descendants, one of the inheritors of his legacy.

This is just one of millions of immigrant stories, a now familiar narrative template of mistreated refugees driven to these shores in search of better lives. Should Peter's brief biography mean anything to the wider world beyond my family? He was a simple farmer, but a man of courage, tenacity and conviction. That should be example enough for anyone.

The fact that Peter was an original member of a successful Austrian settlement at the beginning of the British colony of Georgia commends his experience to history. But in a world in which religious violence is displacing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, the historical significance of his short life and the story of his co-religionists take on a particularly poignant and urgent meaning.

Peter's story is the story of faith and hope, but it is also one of vulnerability. His history should open us to the plight of those who find themselves on the margins of society, those who are the flotsam of socio-economic, political or even religious regimes. His faith and courage should inspire as virtues expressed in circumstances that continue to echo three centuries later.

Peter Gruber and his small band of Salzburgers remain a testimony to the acceptance of the powerless and displaced in our "shining city on a hill." They commend the flexibility and endurance of our American experiment, and the beginning of this early effort to forge a viable community in the wilderness that would become the state of Georgia.

His story is the story of us all. ■

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*Clayton H. Ramsey is a freelance writer and former president of the Atlanta Writers Club. He lives in Decatur.*



## Endnotes

1. Heather Quinlan, "Georgia's Salzburger Immigrants," <http://www.genealogytoday.com/articles/reader.mv?ID=692>, March 9, 2016.
2. The "Edict of Expulsion" is reprinted in its entirety in English translation in Frank L. Perry Jr, "Catholics Cleanse Salzburg of Protestants," <http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?action=read&artid=561>, March 9, 2016.
3. Francis Tannie Arnsdorff, "Ebenezer and the Salzburgers' Separatist Identity in Colonial Georgia," <http://archive.armstrong.edu>, March 9, 2016.
4. Dana M. Groover, *The Groover-Ramsey Cemetery* (2009), 17.
5. Ibid, 22.
6. "Peter Gruber/Groover (1697-1740)," <http://www.geni.com>, March 9, 2016.
7. Perry, op. cit.
8. George Fenwick Jones, ed. *Detailed Reports on the Salzburger Emigrants Who Settled in America...* Edited by Samuel Urlsperger, 17 vols. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968-93).
9. Renate Wilson, "Halle and Ebenezer: Pietism, Agriculture and Commerce in Colonial Georgia," (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1988), 2.
10. George Fenwick Jones, *The Salzburger Saga: Religious Exiles and Other Germans Along the Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 8-13.
11. Groover, op. cit., 24.
12. Ibid, 25.
13. Arnsdorff, op. cit.
14. Groover, op. cit., 25.

*For more information about Jerusalem Lutheran Church and other historic rural churches in Georgia, visit [www.brcga.org](http://www.brcga.org).*