

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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Benjamin Franklin and the Moravians

Three hundred years ago Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts. In many places the 300th anniversary of his birthday is celebrated this year. Throughout the years Franklin had many connections with the Moravians. Recently an unknown Franklin document was discovered at the Moravian Archives.

The relationship between Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) and the Moravians began through his work as a printer. Franklin owned a print shop in Philadelphia where many of the early Moravian publications were printed. When Count Zinzendorf visited America between December 1741 and January 1743 he held meetings with representatives of different religious groups. These were the so-called Pennsylvania Synods. Benjamin Franklin printed and distributed the minutes of these conferences.

In December 1755, a month after the attack on Gnadenhütten, Pennsylvania, Franklin arrived in Bethlehem together with two other commissioners to investigate possibilities to protect the area. The diary of the Bethlehem congregation for December 19, 1755, reads as follows:

“In the evening three commissioners, Mr. Franklin, [James] Hamilton, and Joseph Fox arrived to arrange something to protect our region.”

At that time, Bethlehem was filled with many refugees, both Indians and Europeans, who tried to find a safe place. Franklin reported to the Governor:

“We found this place filled with refugees, the workmen’s shops and even cellars being crowded with women and children, and we learned that Lehi Township is almost abandoned by the inhabitants” (Levering, 334).

In his autobiography Franklin noted:

“I went to their church, where I was entertained with good music, the organ being accompanied with violins, hautboys, flutes, clarinets, etc.”

Twenty years later, shortly before the Revolution, Franklin remembered this visit to Bethlehem in a letter to Nathanael Seidel. This letter, dated June 2, 1775, is still preserved at the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem. Franklin recommended the Moravians publish a declaration that although “they cannot in conscience compell their young

men to learn the use of arms, ... they do not restrain such as are disposed”. Franklin thought such a declaration would convince critics of the Moravians’ patriotism to the Colonies. In the end the Bethlehem Moravians remained pacifist during the Revolution, choosing to remain exempt by paying sums in lieu of bodily service.



Recently another document written by Franklin was found among the records from the Labrador mission stations at the Archives. It is a letter issued by Franklin on May 17, 1781, for James Fraser, captain of the *Amity*, the Moravian ship that sailed back and forth to the missions on the Labrador Coast. At that time Franklin was serving as ambassador (“minister plenipotentiary”) of the recently founded United States of America to the French court. The letter addresses “all captains and commanders of vessels of war, privateers and letters of marque, belonging to the United States of America” that they should let the *Amity* pass without hindrance. Similar letters for safe passage were issued by the French and the English.

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