

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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Moravians in Greenland

This year marks the 275th anniversary of the beginning of Moravian mission work in Greenland. On January 19, 1733, Matthäus Stach, his cousin Christian Stach, and Christian David departed from Herrnhut as the first Moravian missionaries to this Arctic island.

The Moravian mission in Greenland was begun only a few months after the Herrnhut community sent out missionaries to St. Thomas. The reason for choosing St. Thomas and Greenland as their first mission fields was the personal acquaintance Count Zinzendorf had made with people from these countries. When Zinzendorf attended the coronation of Christian VI and his wife Sophia Magdalena as King and Queen of Denmark in 1731, he met Anthony, a slave from St. Thomas, as well as two Greenlanders.



Before the three missionaries left Herrnhut they received some extra clothing and a little bit of money. Matthäus Stach later wrote: "Neither could anyone give us much information about things, or many instructions how we should manage; for the congregation [in Herrnhut] had as yet no experience in the affair of missions, and we were but the second who were commissioned to try whether the heathen would embrace the message of peace concerning their Creator and Redeemer. Therefore it was left to us to act in all circumstances, as the Lord and His Spirit should lead us." The three men traveled from Herrnhut to Copenhagen, where they boarded a ship to Greenland on April 10th. Because of a heavy storm the

sea journey took longer than expected, and on May 20th they finally arrived in Greenland.

The first years in Greenland were difficult. Christian David engaged in a theological dispute with Paul Egede, a Lutheran missionary, whose father had begun the mission in Greenland in 1721. The conflict ended only when Zinzendorf forbade the missionaries from engaging in further theological disputes and Egede left Greenland in 1736. Much time was needed to find sufficient food, to study the language, and to construct accommodation for the growing group of missionaries. In 1736 four more missionaries arrived, three of whom were women.

The missionaries called their first mission station New Herrnhut. Later stations were Lichtenfels (1758) and Lichtenau (1774). By 1782 the combined membership of these three mission stations was 1,222. In the 19th century Friedrichsthal (1824), Umának (1861), and Igdlorpait (1864) were founded. By the end of the 19th century there were six main stations with nine schools, as well as 28 outstations with 24 schools.

Unfortunately, at the end of the 19th century the financial situation of the worldwide Moravian mission work was in dire straits. The General Synod of the Moravian Church, which met in 1899, decided to reduce missionary activities and consequently handed over the work in Greenland to the Danish Lutheran Church. After 167 years the last Moravian missionaries left Greenland on September 11, 1900, while a trombone choir played in the harbor.

Sources: David Cranz, *The History of Greenland* (London 1767); Hartmut Beck, *Brüder in vielen Völkern* (Erlangen 1981).

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