

This Month in Moravian History

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1783: Wesley and the Moravians Reunite

On June 28, 1783, John Wesley visited the Moravian community of Zeist in the Netherlands. That day marked Wesley's 80th birthday, and the Methodist leader celebrated this event in the company of the Moravians. The visit took place 225 years ago this month -- a good reason to examine the relationship between Wesley and the Moravians.



John Wesley (1703-1791) met the Moravians during a voyage from England to Savannah, Georgia, in 1735; over the next few years, Wesley stayed in close contact with the Moravians. In 1738 Wesley returned to London, where his conversations with Peter Böhler, a Moravian minister on his way to America, were instrumental in

his personal awakening during that same year.

A month later Wesley decided to travel to the European continent and visit the Moravian communities of Heerendijk in Holland, as well as Marienborn and Herrnhut in Germany. In Marienborn, a former monastery where Zinzendorf resided during his exile from Saxony, Wesley and Zinzendorf spoke about justification and salvation. During that visit, the first differences in personality between the (authoritarian) Moravian count and the future Methodist leader became evident. In Herrnhut Wesley spoke with Christian David and other founding immigrants from Moravia. Wesley returned to England with a highly favorable opinion of what he had seen, but less than two years later, in 1740, a split developed between Wesley and the Moravians. In the following decades relations between the Moravians and the Methodists were strained. A low point was reached when Wesley published a pamphlet against Zinzendorf and the Moravians in 1755.

Wesley and the Moravians, however, never forgot about their former friendship. When Wesley was older, he visited three Moravian congregations. On April 17, 1780, he was in Fulneck, near Leeds in Yorkshire, England. Three years later, during a visit to the Netherlands, Wesley went to Zeist, and in 1785 he visited Gracehill, Ireland. In Zeist he encountered Anton Seiffert, head pastor, whom Wesley remembered from their time together in Savannah. Wesley attended a children's lovefeast, during which the children sang a few verses in honor of the Methodist minister's 80th birthday. However, Wesley was not particularly impressed with Moravian hospitality or generosity. "We were welcome to buy anything that we pleased at their shops!", Wesley ironically remarked when he was shown around the brethren's house. He was really displeased for not being offered anything to eat or drink. He was still indignant about this treatment when he visited the Moravian congregation of Gracehill in Ireland two years later. In his journal he noted: "When I called on Bishop Antone, in Holland, an old acquaintance, whom I had not seen for six-and-forty years, till both he and I were grown grey-headed, he did not ask me so much as to wet my lips! Is not this a shameful way? A way, contrary not only to Christianity, but to common humanity?"

With this unhappy feeling (and an empty stomach) Wesley left Zeist; relations between Wesley and the Moravians had been restored, but they would never be affectionate. Wesley died on March 2, 1791.

Sources: diary of Zeist; The Journal of John Wesley in 4 Vols., (London 1938).