

This Month in Moravian History

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David Zeisberger

On November 17, 1808, two hundred years ago this month, David Zeisberger passed away in Goshen, Ohio - the American Indian mission station he founded. At the time of his death Zeisberger was 87 years old. Zeisberger remains one of the best known Moravian missionaries.

Zeisberger had an eventful life. He was born on April 11, 1721, in Zauchtental (Suchdol nad Oudrou), a village in Moravia with strong Protestant traditions. When David was only five years old his family left Moravia for Herrnhut, where they joined other religious refugees. The Zeisbergers did not stay in Herrnhut for long. David's parents were sent to Savannah, Georgia, in 1735 as part of a group of Moravian settlers; their son was left behind in the Moravian congregation of Heerendijk in Holland. David, who worked as an errand boy, was soon able to communicate in Dutch - a first sign of his linguistic abilities. Young David, however, was not pleased with the harsh treatment by the brethren and decided, together with another Moravian adolescent, to run away and find his parents in the New World. A baker in Amsterdam helped the two boys find a ship to England, from where they made the passage to America. In Georgia David was reunited with his parents but they - according to his memoir - "did not recognize their son and had to believe it was him."

After the Moravian community in Savannah was dissolved, David went to Pennsylvania in 1740, where he assisted with the construction of Nazareth and Bethlehem. David remained headstrong. When Count Zinzendorf, who had visited Pennsylvania in 1742, prepared for his return to Europe, David Zeisberger was supposed to join the travel group. As the ropes of the ship in the New York harbor were being untied David changed his mind, jumped ship, and declared his wish to remain in America.

David's linguistic talents came in useful. He learned the language of the neighboring American Indians and he was able to communicate with them. Moravian missionaries took him along on their travels. He also served as interpreter for the government during peace negotiations. His true vocation, however, was to serve as missionary among the American Indians. By foot and on horseback he traveled endless miles through the American woods, preached to the Indians, and founded several mission stations.

Zeisberger was already 60 years old when he married Susanne Lecron in Lititz on June 4, 1781. Together they

served as missionaries among the American Indians. For the last 40 years of his life David was never away from a mission station for more than six months; during this period he only made three visits to a congregational settlement. It was during these years that he also saw mission stations being dissolved when Indians were driven away or killed. Many times Zeisberger had to start all over and rebuild a mission station from scratch. In 1798 he founded Goshen, his thirteenth mission station. Here Zeisberger spent the last ten years of his life, working on translations into the language of the Delaware Indians. In 1803 a *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the Christian Indians of the Missions of the United Brethren* was printed; it included 530 Moravian hymns and liturgies, all translated by Zeisberger. He writes in the introduction: "All our converts find much pleasure in learning verses with their tunes by heart, and frequently sing and meditate on them at home and abroad."

In October of 1808 all the missionaries and their children in Goshen fell seriously ill; whereas most of the inhabitants recovered by the end of the month, Zeisberger's health declined. He suffered from severe stomach aches and could no longer sit or stand. During the last days of his life, Indians gathered to sing hymns at his sick bed; these were the hymns Zeisberger had translated himself. He died during the afternoon of November 17, 1808. His wife, Susanne, moved to Bethlehem, where she lived in the widows' house until her death on September 8, 1824.

Image: portrait of David Zeisberger by Johann Valentin Haidt, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem.



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