

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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Founding of the Ebenezer Mission in Australia

Compared to other Moravian missions, the mission to Australia was small and short-lived. However, despite its brief duration, the mission had profound impacts on Australian history. On May 2, 1859, the Moravian mission station Ebenezer (stone of help) was founded in northwest Victoria, on a site on the Wimmera River, known as Bunyo budnutt by the traditional inhabitants, the Wotjbaluk, a tribe of Aboriginal people.



Moravians resolved in 1848 to undertake mission work in Australia. With the help of British Moravian Charles Joseph La Trobe, lieutenant governor of Victoria, the first mission station was established at Lake Boga by Andreas Friedrich Christian Täger and Friedrich Wilhelm Spiesecke. La Trobe described the Aboriginal population as “poor, despised creatures, who are on the lowest level.” This perception was due in part to Aboriginal retention of their nomadic, hunting-gathering lifestyle and strong resistance to becoming “civilized.” This resistance, coupled with tensions between races exacerbated by the Australian gold rush, caused the mission station at Lake Boga to fail within a decade without gaining a single Christian convert.

Not to be deterred the Moravians established a second mission at Ebenezer in 1859 with Spiesecke supported by a new missionary, Friedrich August Hagenauer, and later Job Francis, a carpenter. Initially the situation looked hopeful with the mission surrounded by friendlier, Christian neighbors. At first only twelve natives resided on the land, and two known as Young Boney and Old Charley helped construct the first wooden hut for the missionaries. A school was soon opened with Young Boney as the only student. Church services commenced six days later, initially attended only by men. Wives for the missionaries arrived in 1861, opening up the mission field to native women.

The Aborigines continued to resist adoption of European culture and Christianity. Attempts at evangelism were met with responses such as “pray tomorrow” and “no more prayer.” Tensions between the three missionaries created further difficulties, with Hagenauer and Francis complaining that Spiesecke controlled even when they took coffee breaks. The first convert, Nathanael Pepper, was baptized August 12, 1860. The second, Young Boney, converted in 1862, taking the name of Daniel. He traveled to Adelaide as the first native missionary, but died soon after in 1865.

Adolf and Mary Hartmann arrived in Ebenezer in 1863, by which time the Hagenauers had already moved to Gippsland to establish the Ramahyuck mission among the Gunai people. In that same decade another short-lived mission station was established, Kopperamanna (1866-1868). At the end of the 19th century the Australian government increasingly controlled Aboriginal affairs, with the missionaries serving a “double post” as agents of both God and the government. Hagenauer in particular took on this dual role with his appointment as secretary and general inspector of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in 1890.

Economic depression hit Victoria at the end of the 19th century. Facing public pressure, the government cut funding to the Aborigines, who already neared complete decimation due to disease. Ebenezer closed in 1904 after the death of the last missionary; Ramahyuck closed in 1908. From then on, Moravians looked toward New South Wales and Queensland where mission work continued until 1919.

Sources: Felicity Jensz, *Collecting Cultures for God: German Moravian Missionaries and the British Colony of Victoria, Australia, 1848-1908* (2007); J. Taylor Hamilton, *Moravian Missions* (1901); Augustus Thompson, *Moravian Missions* (1890).

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