

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 59



December 2010

Arrival of First Moravians in Suriname, 1735

On December 20, 1735, three young men from Herrnhut arrived in the port of Paramaribo, Suriname, to begin missionary work in that South American country. This month we will commemorate the difficult history of this first attempt to found a Moravian mission in Suriname.

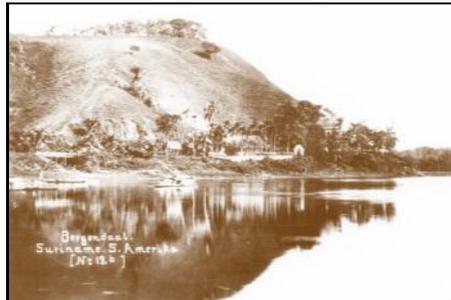
The beginnings of Moravian work in Suriname are closely connected to the uncertain situation in Herrnhut in the 1730s. Herrnhut, with its large population of refugees from Bohemia and Moravia, was under close scrutiny of the Saxon government: although existing immigrants were tolerated for the time being, no new immigrant from Bohemia and Moravia was allowed to settle in Saxony. This decree caused great uncertainty for Herrnhut: what would happen if the Saxon government decided to expel the immigrants and, what to do with newcomers who kept arriving despite this decree? The leaders of the Herrnhut community began looking for other places in the world where colonists were welcome.

At the end of 1734, August Gottlieb Spangenberg began negotiations with the Trustees of Georgia in London and with the Society of Suriname in Amsterdam. These boards were eager to find colonists to populate their developing territories overseas. Moravians hoped their colonists would be able to do missionary work.

The Society of Suriname offered Spangenberg 300 acres for each family and free transportation from Amsterdam to Suriname. Colonists would be exempt from paying any taxes for the first ten years; they would receive the necessary farming tools from the Society and enjoy the same religious freedom as in the Netherlands. Although this seemed to be a generous offer, Spangenberg had some reservations regard-

ing the terms. Because the Society of Suriname demanded that the colonists build their houses in the middle of their fields, the Moravians would be unable to pursue their ideal of communal living.

Possibly this last requirement caused the Moravians to give up on the idea of sending a group of settlers to Suriname. Instead, they focused on sending smaller numbers of missionaries. On August 7, 1735, three missionaries for Suriname left Herrnhut: Georg Piesch, Georg Berwig, and Christoph von



Larisch. On October 3 they embarked on a ship in Amsterdam that would take them across the Atlantic. "There were 35 soldiers on board, and not a single sensible person," reported Larisch. After eleven weeks of enduring seasickness, storms, and brawls the three Moravians arrived at Paramaribo, the main city of Suriname. An acquaintance of one of the Amsterdam Moravians took them into his house, so that they could recover from the long journey and look for a way earn their livelihood.

The Dutch governor offered them work at Berg en Dal, a wood plantation ca. sixty miles south of Paramaribo. The three Moravians hoped the work on the plantation would offer them an opportunity to preach the Gospel to the slaves and Indians. In no way, however, were the Moravians prepared for the hard physical work in the

tropical climate nor for their work as missionaries. Larisch died on February 4, 1736; Piesch took a ship back to Holland three weeks later. That left Berwig by himself in the Surinamese rain forest. A letter dated March 31 speaks of his misery: "I am still sick. I have not had many healthy days here. Now I have a fever that makes me so weary I can hardly walk. If nothing changes here, I don't know what to do." Not knowing the language, he was unable to speak with the "heathen." Without receiving assistance or at least instructions from Herrnhut, he decided to return to Europe as well. With Berwig's departure on May 20 the first attempt to establish a Moravian mission in Suriname ended after only five months.

The Moravians did not give up, however. Berwig returned the following year with his wife and Michael Tannenberger. They laid the foundation for Moravian work in Suriname. Today almost 10% of the population of Suriname is Moravian. The Berg en Dal plantation where the first three men worked under harsh conditions was purchased by the Moravian Church in 1870. After Berg en Dal became a ghost town as the result of civil war (1986-1992), the Moravians established a new use for the plantation. Today Berg en Dal is an "eco-cultural" resort, owned by the Moravian Church, where visitors can enjoy an "Amazonian Caribbean experience" in an ecologically sustainable way.

Sources

Image: Berg en Dal, ca. 1880; F. Staehelin, Die Mission der Brüdergemeine in Suriname (Herrnhut, n.d.); www.bergendalresort.com