

This Month in Moravian History

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Matthaeus Stach Brings Greenlanders to Bethlehem

This month we commemorate the 300th birthday of Matthaeus Stach, one of the first Moravian missionaries to Greenland.



Stach was born on March 4, 1711, in Mankendorf (today: Mankovice) in Moravia, a stone's throw from Zauchtenthal where so many early settlers of Herrnhut originated. He left his home as a young man, arriving in Herrnhut in the spring of 1728. Although he described himself as a “shy little pigeon” Stach wanted to become a missionary and chose Greenland as his destination. In 1733, together with his cousin Christian Stach and with Christian David, he left Herrnhut for a four-month journey to Greenland. The story of the beginnings of Moravian activity in Greenland was the topic of our January 2008 newsletter; this time we will consider Stach's visit to Bethlehem in 1749.

In 1747-49 Stach took a group of Inuit from Greenland on a journey to Europe and America. During this time, Moravian missionaries commonly took some of their converts along to present them as visible fruits of their labor to the church at home.

They also believed the encounter with European Moravians would equip the converts with experience to become helpers in their home countries. They did not realize that many of the converts would not live long in Europe. Of the five Greenlanders accompanying Stach, only three survived to make the last leg of the trip to Pennsylvania.

On May 21, 1749, Stach, Johanen and Matthes, two fourteen-year-old Inuit boys, and nineteen-year-old Judith arrived in Bethlehem. During their long journey they had been the center of interest wherever they went. The Bethlehem congregation took great joy in their presence. On June 9, the day before their departure, a farewell lovefeast was held in the *Saal* of the *Gemeinhaus*. This special lovefeast made visible the world-wide character of the Moravian community. The Greenlanders, dressed in their Inuit outfits, sat in the middle of the meeting hall. Next to them two Arawak Indians from Berbice in South America, who were staying in Bethlehem at the time, were seated.

Around the Greenlanders and the Arawaks, more than thirty American Indians took their places: Delaware, Mahikan, and Wamponoag. The missionaries and members of the congregations filled the remaining space surrounding the non-Europeans. As everyone sang in their own language, the diary notes: “This was something very special and heavenly—a concert without parallel.” For the Bethlehem Moravians the biblical promise of the gathering of people from all nations had become a reality. During the evening service Stach spoke Greenlandic as he bade the congregation farewell.

From Bethlehem the group traveled on to Philadelphia to meet with the Governor of

Pennsylvania who wanted to see the Inuit. Earlier that year, Johanen, Matthes, and Judith were presented to the Princess of Wales in London. In July of 1749 they finally returned to the mission station of New Herrnhut in Greenland.

Stach left the Greenland mission for good and returned to Germany in 1771. By then he had served almost thirty years of his life in Greenland. However, he was not ready to retire yet. The following year he was called to Bethabara in North Carolina. For five years he and his wife Rosina were in charge of the day schools. Stach died on December 21, 1787, in Bethabara.



Sources

Images: The Five Greenlanders, by J. V. Haidt (Unity Archives, Herrnhut); Matthäus Stach, lithography (Moravian Archives, Bethlehem). K. Müller, *Der Weg des Matthäus Stach* (1926); Bethlehem Diary; Peucker, “Aus allen Nationen,” *Unitas Fratrum* 59/60 (2007).

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