

This Month in Moravian History

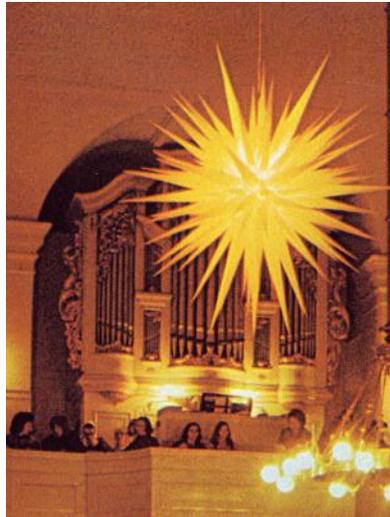
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Who Invented the Moravian Star?

Every year, thousands of Moravian stars decorate homes and churches during the Advent season. Although the star has become one of the most recognizable symbols of the Moravian Church, the name of the maker of the first star was not known until recently. The biggest surprise, however, may be that this discovery was not made in the archives in Herrnhut, Germany, but in the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem.

Moravian stars were traditionally made in Moravian boarding schools during the Advent season. From the schools they spread into Moravian homes and later into the churches as well. Because of the connection with the boarding schools, historians assumed that the making of stars was connected to math lessons where students learned to draw and make geometrical shapes.

"It has been known for many years that the earliest star we know of was used as a decoration at the fiftieth anniversary of the Moravian boarding school for boys in Niesky, Germany, in January of 1821," says Bethlehem archivist Paul Peucker. The report of the anniversary mentions an illuminated, multi-colored star of 110 points hung outside the school building. "What we did not know," continues Peucker, "was if this star was a new invention." This summer a discovery at the Bethlehem archives has brought to light new information on the origins of the Moravian star. "As one of our project staff was getting ready to organize the papers of Georg Friedrich Bahnson (1805-1869), I realized Bahnson was a student in Niesky at the time of the anniversary in 1821. I checked his diary and yes indeed, Bahnson mentioned the star in the diary he kept as a fifteen-year old boy." The diary



noted on January 4, 1821: "In the courtyard the large star with 110 points from the Brethren's House was displayed."

Initially this looked like another reference to the earliest display of a multi-pointed star. Peucker: "At first it seemed to be a confirmation of something we already knew." However, a close reading of the short entry revealed new information. "Bahnson did not write 'a large star was displayed'; the use of the defined article the suggested that the star was referring to something that was already known to the author." So when Peucker went back through the diary he found another reference to the star a week earlier. On December 27, 1820, Bahnson describes how he and his fellow students went over to the Brethren's House: "In the afternoon we all drank and like yesterday, some of us went to see the star in the Brethren's House of 110 points, made by Madsen." This entry not only indicated the star was made as a Christmas decoration in the Niesky Brethren's House (and not specifically for the

anniversary of the school), it also revealed the name of its maker!

Christian Madsen was born on May 25, 1800 in Herrnhut, Germany. When he was seventeen he took a job in the hardware shop in the nearby Moravian town of Niesky. As a single man he most likely lived in the Brethren's House. This is where he constructed his star of 110 points in December of 1820. When the Niesky boarding school celebrated its fiftieth anniversary the week after Christmas, it was decided to include Madsen's impressive creation in the festive decorations. Madsen returned to Herrnhut in 1834 where he married Ernestine Henriette Schreiber the next year. After his first wife died Madsen married Auguste Charlotte Bischoff in 1851. He was head of the tobacco factory in Herrnhut until 1879, the year of his death.

So was Madsen the inventor of the Moravian star? "For many years we have considered the 1820/21 star the earliest Moravian star we know of. Now we also know the name of its maker." It is possible new information will be uncovered at some point.

Georg Bahnson, the writer of the diary, was called to America in 1829. He served as a minister in congregations in North Carolina (Bethania, Salem) and Pennsylvania (Bethlehem, Lancaster) and died in Salem in 1869.

Sources

Diary of Georg Bahnson, Bahnson Papers in Moravian Archives; D. Theile, *Morning star, or cheering sight: the Moravian star and its history* (2008).