

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 75  August 2012

Zinzendorf Arrested in New York



Two hundred seventy years ago, on August 26, 1742, Zinzendorf, his daughter, Benigna, and another Moravian were arrested in Hurley, New York, for breaking the Sabbath. After paying a fine of eighteen shillings the three Moravians were released and continued their journey.

Zinzendorf arrived in Pennsylvania in December of 1741. He had high expectations of the New World. Here he thought to unite the true children of God and overcome the divisions that existed between the established churches in Europe. He held meetings with representatives of different denominations and founded Bethlehem as the center of this ecumenical movement. He also wanted to lead the Native American population to Christ. Not only did he send out missionaries, he also went on several trips himself.

On August 10, 1742, Zinzendorf left Bethlehem on his second visit among the American Indians. His daughter Benigna and Bethlehem elder Anton Seifert accompanied him. On Sunday, August 12, he attended two services in the Dutch Reformed church in Minisink, eight miles south of Port Jervis, New York. During the evening of August 14, Zinzendorf and his companions crossed the Hudson River at Kingston. Through Rhinebeck and across "a terrible wilderness full of bogs" they reached Shekomeko at one o'clock at night on August 16.

Shekomeko was a Mohican village in what is now Dutchess County, New York. Two years earlier, the chiefs of Shekomeko had invited a Moravian missionary to live among them. Even though the Mohicans soon changed their minds, the Moravian missionary did not give up. In 1742 the first Indians from Shekomeko were baptized and the Moravians were very hopeful about their prospects.

On Saturday, August 24, Zinzendorf's company traveled across Stissing Mountain to Rhinebeck, across the Hudson River, through Kingston, until they reached a house west of Hurley, where the owner reluctantly let them stay the night as well as the next day.

August 25 was a Sunday and according to his diary, Zinzendorf spent most of the day alone in the woods. In the evening, having returned to the house, Zinzendorf sat down with his daughter. The count was writing in his notebook, while Benigna was copying a hymn for him. Suddenly the door opened and the justice of the peace walked in. He flew into a fury when he saw the Zinzendorfs writing. He accused them of working on a Sunday which he forbade them from doing in the name of the King. The justice then left in great anger.

At five o'clock the next morning a constable came to arrest Zinzendorf, Benigna, and Seifert and took them to

Hurley. Here they were found guilty for breaking the Sabbath; each was sentenced to a fine of six shillings.

The questioning took place with open doors and windows. When the bystanders asked one of the Moravian Indians who were present if he did not want to see what was going on, he replied: "Why should I want to watch such nonsense?" After the three Sabbath breakers were released, they continued on their journey and returned to Bethlehem on August 30.

The incident is an example of how the colonial government tried to put pressure on the Moravians. The Moravians were suspect for various reasons. They were German speakers in an area of New York that was predominantly settled by the Dutch and the English. It was also unclear what they were teaching. Only a few years earlier the Dutch Reformed had been warned against the Moravians. Thirdly, their dealings with the American Indians were highly suspicious. People feared Moravians were secretly Roman Catholics who banded together with the French and the Spanish to turn the Indians against the English. In this climate of growing suspicion and fear, the justice of the peace in Hurley may have tried to intimidate the Moravian leader by confronting him with the arm of the law.

Sources

All dates are new style. Image: Zinzendorf and the Indian Chief, by C. Schmauk. ca. 1930. Zinzendorf's travel diary Aug. 1742, MAB; *Büdingische Sammlung* 3 (1744), 332-6; K.-W. Westmeier, *The Evacuation of Shekomeko* (1994); L. Fisher, "I Believe They Are Papists!" *New England Quarterly* 81 (2008).