

This Month in Moravian History

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Christian Schussele's *Power of the Gospel*

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the public exhibition of Christian Schussele's epic painting, *Zeisberger Preaching to the Indians* (also known as *Power of the Gospel*), at the 39th Annual Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1862.

The large-scale oil painting depicts the Moravian missionary, David Zeisberger, preaching to a gathering of the Seneca tribe in the village of Goschgoschünk in western Pennsylvania 245 years ago in October 1767. Zeisberger wrote in his diary "that he felt, as never before, the 'Power of the Gospel' as he preached his first sermon in that place, and that this power not only protected him from imminent danger...but he could see it working in the faces of his listeners."

The idea for the painting came from a series of biographical articles written about Zeisberger by Edmund de Schweinitz and published in *The Moravian*. Local historian and artist, Rufus Grider, was particularly inspired by one such article which appeared December 17, 1858, and whose description served as the basis for the painting: "It was night. In the middle of the assembly burnt a large council-fire, whose flickering light fell with a ruddy glare upon the faces of the warriors, upturned in silent expectation to the white man who stood there, calm, collected, – ready to make known the glorious gospel of the blessed God. The scene was ghost-like, until Zeisberger opened his mouth and began to proclaim the gospel." Speaking years later after further research, de Schweinitz admitted that the gathering actually took place inside the council house, and not outdoors in the forest, but said he did not "regret my mistake, for had I not been guilty of it, Mr. Schussele's painting would hardly have

appeared." Further inspiration for the rendering came from a description of the scene published by Heinrich Loskiel, who described "a blind chief, called Allemewi [seated, staring into fire] and also a woman, said to be 120 years old [far left], who at her request, was carried from the lower to the middle village, to hear the good words of her Creator and Redeemer before she died." Zeisberger's guides, Anthony and Papunhank, might be the two figures seated on either side of Zeisberger. The contrasting light and shadow represent the "irrepressible conflict between truth and error." In his own description of the event, Zeisberger reportedly recorded, "Never yet did I see so clearly depicted in the faces of the Indians both the darkness of hell and world-subduing power of the Gospel."

Grider approached his father-in-law, John Skirving, who also thought the article provided good subject matter for a painting. Skirving took the article to Philadelphia and asked several artists to draft proposals. Christian Schussele's proposal was contracted for \$1200 and paid for by four Moravians: Rufus Grider, John Skirving, Rev. Sylvester Wolle and John Jordan. Schussele finished the work in 1859. At that time Schussele had already established his reputation as an accomplished painter of historical subjects. A self-taught artist born in the Alsace region of France, Schussele (1824-79)



first learned lithography and then moved to Paris where he studied under various artists, including Delaroche, Engelmann, Graf and Yvon before moving to Philadelphia in 1848. The painting was first exhibited in Philadelphia in 1862 while Schussele served as president of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. A year later in 1863 Schussele was stricken with palsy in his hand; he later turned to teaching as the first paid instructor at the Pennsylvania Academy, a position he held until his death. In 1876 the painting was moved to Bethlehem and exhibited in various local settings until finding a permanent home at the Moravian Archives in a specially designed space to accommodate its size (nearly 8 x 11 feet framed) in 1930. The painting is now on permanent display in the archives' gallery.

Sources

Edmund DeSchweinitz, "David Zeisberger, The Apostle of the Indians, part IX" in *The Moravian*, December 17, 1858; Bernard Michel, "Christian Schussele: Portrayer of America," *TMHS*, 20/2 (1965); Vernon Nelson, "The Power of the Gospel," information sheet 2002-7, MAB.