

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 78  November 2012

Spangenberg's Departure from America

Two-hundred-fifty years ago August Gottlieb Spangenberg left America where he had served for many years. After Zinzendorf's death in 1760 Spangenberg's leadership was needed for the worldwide church. He left Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, on June 22, 1762 and arrived in Herrnhut on November 12. With Spangenberg's departure from Bethlehem an era for the Moravians in America came to an end; his arrival in Herrnhut, Germany, marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of the Moravian Church worldwide.

August Gottlieb Spangenberg arrived in America for the first time in April of 1735 when he accompanied a group of Moravian colonists to Savannah, Georgia. A year later he went north to Pennsylvania, where he made contacts with many likeminded settlers and laid the groundwork for a later Moravian community. By the time Moravians arrived in the Lehigh Valley Spangenberg had already returned to Europe but he came back to Bethlehem in November of 1744. During the coming years he and his wife were in charge of Moravian work in America. Spangenberg was also the mastermind behind the "General Economy," the communal household that existed in Bethlehem.

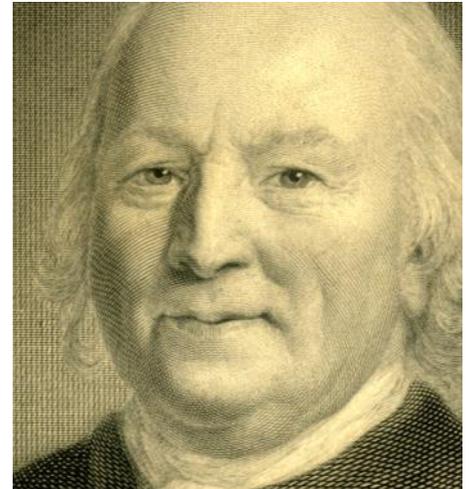
Spangenberg was a great organizer. In a letter to Zinzendorf from 1754 he writes: "In a congregation like Bethlehem we need to keep order: we need to feed the cattle and milk the cows, we need to plow, harrow, and sow; we need to grow, dry, and bring in hay and aftermath; we have to crop, sheaf, and harvest. Children need to have their food on time, as well as their labor and their free time. The tanner needs to take

out his leather from the lime or else it will spoil. And a hundred more things like that occur each day! Therefore we organize the day so that we can keep an eye on everything at the same time."

Spangenberg's organizational talents were recognized throughout the church. When the Moravian Church needed new leaders after Zinzendorf passed away, he was soon called to Europe. When Spangenberg arrived in Herrnhut the congregation was in church to prepare for next day's Elder's Festival. Many Herrnhuters were so surprised to see the Spangenbergs unexpectedly step into the church that they were moved to tears.

During the following decades Spangenberg was a member of the Unity Elders' Conference, the board that was installed to oversee the church after Zinzendorf's death. During these years the Moravian Church was reorganized in many ways and Spangenberg played an instrumental role in these efforts. The Moravian Church was able to transform itself into a mainstream Protestant denomination and to successfully distance itself from its controversial past. Debts from earlier decades were paid off. Moravian schools were frequented by many non-Moravians. The Moravians were especially well respected by many because of their extensive mission work.

In 1775 Spangenberg completed an eight-volume biography of Zinzendorf. In this book he depicted Zinzendorf as a pious leader, not without weaknesses, but he purposely left out aspects of Zinzendorf's personality and theology that outsiders would not appreciate. In 1777 he published his *Idea Fidei Fratrum*, a theology of the



Moravian Church that stressed the commonalities with the other Protestant churches. Much of Zinzendorf's theology and language was intentionally omitted.

Spangenberg remained a member of the Unity Elders' Conference for nearly three decades. He attended meetings until he was 87 years old. A month before his death, Spangenberg was carried out into the fields where a few farmers were reaping grain. As they stood before him in a circle he spoke to them about how he and his brethren had worked the fields in America many years prior while singing songs of praise. He ended his speech by singing "Now Thank We All Our God" and then was taken back to his room. He passed away a few weeks later on September 18, 1792. He was 88 years old.

Sources

G. Reichel, *August Gottlieb Spangenberg, Bischof der Brüderkirche* (1906).