

# This Month in Moravian History

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## Loskiel and His History of Moravian Missions in North America

*This month marks the two-hundredth anniversary of the death of Brother Georg Heinrich Loskiel. He is remembered for his service to the Moravian Church as both a bishop and church historian.*



Georg Heinrich Loskiel was born on November 7, 1740, in Angermünde, a small village in the Duchy of Courland (now Latvia). Born to Eleonora Christina (nee Hofmann) and a Lutheran preacher, also named Georg Heinrich, Loskiel was interested in theology from a young age. From age eight to nineteen, he was tutored by a personal teacher, Br. Johannes Hüffel, who introduced him to the Moravian Church. Following his father's guidance, Loskiel attended the Moravian seminary in Barby, Germany, in 1759, devoting his time to the study of theology and medicine. He was accepted into the Moravian congregation there in December 1759 and became a communicant less than a year later.

In September 1765 Loskiel began teaching medicine in the Paedagogium in Niesky, Germany. He continued to teach in Neuwied, Germany until 1768 when he left to serve as minister in Marienborn. From this point forward, he dedicated his life to the ministry of the Moravian Church. Ordained a deacon in Zeist, Netherlands, in May 1768, Loskiel was soon after called to serve as minister to the Amsterdam congregation. On June 27, 1771, he married Maria Magdalena Barlach in Zeist. After ordination as a presbyter in Barby on March 19, 1775, he served until 1781 as a minister in Kleinwelka, Germany.

Upon his return to Barby, Loskiel was commissioned by the Unity Elders' Conference in September 1781 to write a history of the church's Native American missions; in his own words, "...a History, so replete with happy instances," to document the outstanding efforts of the missionaries. This would prove to be a difficult task for someone who had not once stepped foot on American soil. Relying entirely on reports, diaries, and letters from those who had first-hand interaction with Native Americans – such as David Zeisberger and August Spangenberg – Loskiel spent the next seven years writing this history while serving the church in Russia. The Moravian printing office in Barby began official publication of his revised manuscript in 1789.

Modern ethnohistorians recognize Loskiel's text as a pioneering foray into the fledgling discipline of ethnography. Its subsequent translation into English by Christian Ignatius Latrobe in 1794 increased readership across the globe. Readers are met with vivid representations of Native American culture – topics ranging from medicinal

recipes to religious beliefs – as well as interactions between Native groups, with missionaries, and other Europeans, and lastly with primary accounts of Moravian missionaries serving in the newly-created missions of North America. It is still considered to be an important early study of Iroquoian and Algonquian peoples.

In 1801, Loskiel was called from Herrnhut to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to serve as president of the Provincial Helpers' Conference. After his consecration as a bishop on March 14, 1802 in Herrnhut, Loskiel departed and arrived in Bethlehem on June 23, 1802. Bishop Loskiel also served as the presiding pastor in Bethlehem from 1802 to 1812, during the time in which the place of worship now called Central Moravian Church was constructed from 1803 to 1806. In addition, the first Moravian theological seminary in America was established under his oversight in 1807.

Bishop Loskiel departed this life on February 23, 1814, in Bethlehem, at the age of 74. His mission history is currently available in several languages in hundreds of libraries worldwide, while some of his devotional hymns continue to be used in Moravian Church services today. He is buried in God's Acre in Bethlehem, as is his wife Maria Magdalena, who passed away in Bethlehem on May 12, 1826, at the age of 81.

### Sources

Image: water color by A. R. Kliest (MAB). C. F. Feest, "Moravians and the Development of the Genre of Ethnography," in *Ethnographies and Exchanges*, ed. A. G. Roeber (2008); M. Meyer, "Georg Heinrich Loskiels Lebenswerk," introduction to Loskiel, *Geschichte der Mission* (reprint 1989); *Brüder Bote* (1874).

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