

This Month in Moravian History

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First missionaries to St. Croix - 1733

On an official visit to the fledgling mission in the Eastern West Indies in 1739, Zinzendorf was dismayed to learn of the high casualties associated with the mission there. Upon reaching land, Zinzendorf worried no missionaries would be found alive. He asked his travel companion and missionary, George Weber, "Suppose that the brethren are no longer here; what shall we do in that case?" Weber replied, "In that case we are here." It is this steadfast, persistent attitude that characterized the founding of the St. Croix mission, begun 275 years ago this summer in 1733.



After sending out the first Moravian missionaries in 1732 to the island of St. Thomas, the Moravian Church received an unusual offer in 1733 from the Danish Privy Councillor and Senior Chamberlain von Pless to settle and cultivate his plantations on the newly acquired Danish island of St. Croix. In their role as overseers of the plantations, Moravians would be allowed to proselytize to the slaves there. Zinzendorf hesitated to approve, rightly believing that this dual role of overseer-missionary would create conflicts and distract the missionaries from their purpose to bring souls to Christ. However, Moravians in Herrnhut were so eager for this new opportunity to preach to slaves, a deal was struck with von Pless, and eighteen missionaries left Herrnhut for St. Croix and St. Thomas in August 1733.

Unfortunately this eager start led only to severe hardship in the years that followed. The fourteen men and four women who left from Herrnhut were relegated to a room on ship only fifteen feet square and so low they could not even sit upright. The ship was forced to winter over in Norway, causing some to live outdoors in caves

through the harsh winter. By the time the ship reached its destination almost a year later, all were debilitated by lack of provisions and fresh water, and several suffered from scurvy. In addition, disharmony crept in among the group over the long voyage, and a sense of mutual love and purpose could not be regained. Many succumbed to illness and death as a result of strenuous work, poor nutrition, and rampant disease in the tropical climate. Eleven additional missionaries were sent as reinforcements in 1735, but even these could not staunch the tide of failure. Altogether seventeen missionaries died. Nine reduced by illness returned to Europe (three were lost at sea on the journey). Timotheus Fiedler remained on St. Croix as an overseer, but lost his association with the mission. Matthäus Freundlich, the single faithful remaining missionary, joined the mission on St. Thomas in 1736.

Over the next two decades the gospel message on St. Croix was kept alive by the slaves themselves, along with sporadic visits from subsequent missionaries from the nearby island of St. Thomas. Twenty-two years later, in 1755, Christian slaves at last had the opportunity to celebrate Easter in their new church at Friedensthal. The St. Croix mission is a testament to the promise that much fruit is born from adversity suffered in Christ's name.

Image: View of the Harbor at Basin, St. Croix, water color by L. T. Reichel, 1859. Sources: Oldendorp, *History of the Mission...on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, 1987 trans.; Hutton, *A History of Moravian Mission*; Hamilton, *A History of the Missions of the Moravian Church*.

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