

# Voices from the Vault

Issue 15 November 2011

## Who Invented the Moravian Star?

Every year, thousands of Moravian stars decorate homes and churches during the Advent season. Although the star has become one of the most recognizable symbols of the Moravian Church, the name of the maker of the first star was not known until recently. The biggest surprise, however, may be that this discovery was not made in the archives in Herrnhut, Germany, but in the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem.

Moravian stars were traditionally made in Moravian boarding schools during the Advent season. From the schools they spread into Moravian homes and later into the churches as well. Because of the connection with the boarding schools, Moravian historians assumed that the making of stars was connected to math lessons where students learned to draw and make geometrical shapes.

"It has been known for many years that the earliest star we know of was used as a decoration at the fiftieth anniversary of the Moravian boarding school for boys in Niesky, Germany, in January of 1821," says Bethlehem archivist Paul Peucker. The report of the anniversary mentions an illuminated, multi-colored star of 110 points hung outside the school building. "What we did not know," continues Peucker, "was if this star was a new



invention." This summer a discovery at the Bethlehem archives has brought to light new information on the origins of the Moravian star. "As one of our project staff was getting ready to organize the papers of Georg Friedrich Bahnson (1805-1869), I realized Bahnson was a student in Niesky at the time of the anniversary in 1821. I checked his diary and yes indeed, Bahnson mentioned the star in the diary he kept as a fifteen-year old boy." The diary noted on January 4, 1821: "In the courtyard the large star with 110 points from the Brethren's House was displayed."

Initially this looked like another reference to the earliest display of a multi-pointed star. Peucker: "At first it seemed to be a confirmation of something we already

knew." However, a close reading of the short entry revealed new information. "Bahnson did not write 'a large star was displayed'; the use of the defined article *the* suggested that the star was referring to something that was already known to the author." So when Peucker went back through the diary he found another reference to the star a week earlier. On December 27, 1820, Bahnson describes how he and his fellow students went over to the Brethren's House: "In the afternoon we all drank and like yesterday, some of us went to see the star in the Brethren's House of 110 points, made by Madsen." This entry not only indicated the star was made as a Christmas decoration in the Niesky Brethren's House (and not specifically for the anniversary

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## Special points of interest:

- New information on the origins of the Moravian Putz
- Rev. Vernon Nelson fund will provide grants for researchers
- Archives is facing budget cuts



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## Moravian Star (*cont.*)

of the school), it also revealed the name of its maker!

Christian Madsen was born on May 25, 1800 in Herrnhut, Germany. When he was seventeen he took a job in the hardware shop in the nearby Moravian town of Niesky. As a single man he most likely lived in the Brethren's House. This is where he constructed his star of 110 points in December of 1820. When the Niesky boarding school celebrated its fiftieth anniversary the week after Christmas, it was decided to include Madsen's impressive creation in the festive decorations. Madsen returned to Herrnhut in 1834 where he married Ernestine Henriette Schreiber the next year. After his first wife died

Madsen married Auguste Charlotte Bischoff in 1851. He was head of the tobacco factory in Herrnhut until 1879, the year of his death.

So was Madsen the inventor of the Moravian star? "For many years we have considered the 1820/21 star the earliest Moravian star we know of. Now we also know the name of its maker." It is possible new information will be uncovered at some point. "A big surprise was that this discovery was made in Bethlehem and not in the German Moravian Archives," said Peucker. "Because Moravians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries moved much more frequently between Europe and America than today, our ar-

chives also hold detailed information on other parts of the world." Georg Bahnson, the writer of the newly-discovered diary, was called to America in 1829. He served as a minister in congregations in North Carolina (Bethania, Salem) and Pennsylvania (Bethlehem, Lancaster). For many years he was a member of the Provincial Elders' Conference in Salem and in 1860 he was consecrated a bishop. He died in 1869 in Salem. His granddaughter Elizabeth donated his papers to the Bethlehem Archives in 1959. This summer the papers were organized by Katey Fardelmann, student at Lehigh University, working on a special grant project at the Moravian Archives.



Georg Friedrich Bahnson  
(1805-1869)

## Origins of the Word "Putz"

The Bahnson diaries (see article above) not only reveal information on the Moravian star, they also contain early references to the word *Putz*. A Moravian *Putz* is an elaborate nativity display, consisting of figurines put together in different scenes. Because modern German dictionaries do not list the noun *Putz* as meaning "decoration," some historians have suggested the noun *Putz* is an American Moravian invention.

From the Bahnson diaries we learn, however, that the word *Putz* was frequently used by

German Moravians. Bahnson entered in his diary on Christmas Day of 1820: "There was a *Putz* in every room; the ones in room 4 and 1 were the most beautiful." Apparently, the boys in the Niesky boys' school had decorated their rooms with Christmas decorations and held some sort of competition on Christmas day where they went to inspect the various displays. Bahnson also refers to the festive decorations for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Niesky Boys' School as a *Putz*: "Today is the anniversary of the school. As

soon as I could I went over to see the *Putz*."

Moravians frequently used the words *putzen* and *Putz* as "to decorate" and "decoration." As early as 1756 we find the following entry in Johann Nitschmann's diary: "A room was decorated (*geputzt*) for Anna Nitschmann's birthday." Originally, a *Putz* could be any elaborately decorated display; later American Moravians restricted the term *Putz* to a Christmas display.



1874 Christmas *Putz* in Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem with palm trees, designed by Rufus Grider

## Volunteer Party

On September 28, the Archives honored the many volunteers who donated their time in 2010 with a pizza party. More than 30 volunteers, interns from Lehigh University, and Archives' staff enjoyed pizza from our neighbors at Victory Pizza. Volunteers do many jobs at the archives: cataloging books, preparing exhibits, entering memoirs and obituaries into our computer

database, German transcription and translation, organizing collections and glass plates, preparing mailings, serving at events, recycling, caring for our floral planters, and organizing the annual yard sale. In 2010 we had 49 volunteers donating a total 1,958 hours. With the estimated value of a volunteer hour in Pennsylvania at \$20.51, that amounts to \$40,158 worth of

donated volunteer time! During the party Paul announced the volunteers who logged the most hours in 2010: Phil Metzger, 455 hours; Marsha Fritz, 240 hours; Anne Howlett, 199 hours. No matter the amount, the Archives' staff considers each hour and every task valuable. We rely on your help to fulfill our mission of preserving and promoting Moravian history.

## A Word from the Archives' President

Over the course of the history of our Moravian Archives we have been challenged and blessed. This blessing is evident from the inspiration of our founding members to our current gifted staff, expanding programs and professional organization.

Our challenge is to maintain this high level of service to the public, our church, and its members. Our archive finds new ways to communicate the history of God's people, preserve our heritage, as well as, educate our community and celebrate our faith and its manifestations. Funding the modest budget of our Moravian Archives depends

on four financial legs of support to our mission. Our funding comes from four main sources:

1. the Northern Province of the Moravian Church in America
2. the Friends of the Archives through charitable contributions
3. the Bethlehem Area Moravians organization
4. the endowment of the Moravian Archives

We face a reduction, as do other Moravian entities, in the funding we will receive from the Province for 2012. In addition, the financial climate has our Board of Directors cautious about the resources we can expect from our endowment. The result is a challenge to con-

tinue the progress we have enjoyed in the recent past and maintain the momentum our Archive has benefitted from within the last decade. We are blessed with a Board of Directors who are leading the way in giving their talent and resources. We wish to engage all of our Friends, who are able, to do their utmost to support our mission of preservation, education and accessibility of our unique Moravian heritage. As always, you make all the difference.

On behalf of our Board of Directors, thank you!

Michael A. Long, President



*Michael A. Long,  
president of the Board of  
Directors*

## Rev. Vernon H. Nelson Memorial Fund

In June 2011 the family of the late archivist, Rev. Vernon H. Nelson (1933-2010), established a memorial fund in his honor. Vernon served the Moravian Church for 46 years, first serving pastorates in Wisconsin (Mamre and Lake Mills) from 1958-60. He then became Assistant Archivist for the Moravian Church - Northern Province in 1960, moving to the position of Archivist in 1963, which he held until his retirement on March 31, 2004.

Throughout his lifetime Vernon pursued research on many topics, but especially concentrated on the career of the 18th-century Moravian artist, Johann Valentin Haidt.

The purpose of the Vernon H. Nelson Memorial Fund is to provide grants to scholarly researchers as a contribution toward their travel and accommodation expenses while conducting research at the Archives. Because Vernon loved to travel

and do research in many different locations, we feel this fund is a wonderful way to honor his memory and to promote scholarly research on Moravian topics.

The Archives is actively seeking contributions to this fund. If you are interested in making a donation, please send your contribution to the Moravian Archives, specifying your intent. For more information about the fund, please contact Paul Peucker, the Archives' director.



*Rev. Vernon H. Nelson  
(1933-2010)*

## Wishlist

The Moravian Archives needs the following articles:

- digital camera
- specialty vacuum cleaner for cleaning books and records
- panels for office cubicles
- coffee maker

Let us know if you can help us fulfill a wish!

## Volunteers Needed

The Moravian Archives has received the manuscript of a study on eighteenth-century Moravian art. Before the manuscript can be printed, it needs to be copyedited and formatted. Unfortunately, the author passed away before he was able to do this himself. Anyone with experience in copyediting and willingness to volunteer is welcome to contact us. We also need a volunteer to format the edited text in order for it to be printed. You can do

this work from home, so this is a chance to volunteer at the Moravian Archives even if you live outside the Lehigh Valley. Please contact us before December 15, 2011.



*"Pentecost" by Johann  
Valentin Haidt, detail*

## Newsletter from the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem PA

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## Upcoming Events

German-English Advent Singstunde  
December 6, 2011, in the Old Chapel on the campus of Central Moravian Church  
in Bethlehem, Pa.

"Moravians during the American Revolution"  
January 24 (snow date January 31), 2012, 7:00 pm at the Moravian Archives  
lecture by Dr. Scott Gordon, Lehigh University

book signing at The Apollo, 85 W. Broad St., Bethlehem  
January 26, 2012: Bill Weiner will sign his book *Bethlehem*, a postcard history of Bethlehem  
from the 1900s to 1940s. Proceeds will go to the Moravian Archives.

Friends' Day 2012  
"Moravians and the End of Times," lecture by Paul Peucker (for more information, see below)  
March 11, 2012, 3:00 pm at the Moravian Archives  
*all Friends (and future Friends!) of the Moravian Archives are invited*

German Script Course  
June 4-15, 2012,  
for more information: [www.moravianchurcharchives.org/germanscript.php](http://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/germanscript.php)

Third Bethlehem Conference on Moravian History and Music  
October 11-14, 2012 at Moravian College  
for more information: [www.moravianconferences.org](http://www.moravianconferences.org)

## News and Announcements

### Moravian Academy

Students at Moravian Academy in Bethlehem recently used letters from the Moravian Archives to write a play. During the Civil War James R. Butts, a concerned father from Macon, Georgia, wrote eight letters to Sylvester Wolle, the headmaster of the Moravian Seminary for Young Ladies in Bethlehem. These letters were found by a student among the papers from the Seminary at the Archives. On May 20, 2011, students from Moravian Academy presented a dramatized reading called "Behind the War," based on these letters.

### Blog from our students

Thanks to a grant a group of Lehigh University students was

hired to organize and catalog collections at the Moravian Archives. This summer we asked the students to write a blog about their experiences. You can read the blog online: <http://hiddencollectionmoravianarchives.blogspot.com/>

### Moravians and the End of Times

Recently there has been much talk about the world coming to an end. According to the calendar of the Mayans the apocalypse will come on December 21, 2012. In 2011 a man from Florida got a lot of press attention when he announced the rapture would take place on May 21. At the 2012 Friends' Day Moravian archivist, Paul Peucker, will speak about how

Moravians viewed the end of times. A little known fact is that even Zinzendorf tried to calculate the year the world would come to an end. All Friends of the Archives (and future Friends!) are welcome to join us on March 11, 2012.

### Journal of Moravian History

Issue 10 of the *Journal of Moravian History* contains the following articles: Paul Peucker, In the Blue Cabinet: Moravians, Marriage and Sex; Peter Vogt, Zinzendorf's "Seventeen Points of Matrimony": A Foundational Document on the Moravian Understanding of Marriage and Sexuality; Katherine Faull, Instructions for the Married People's Choir Helpers. Order your copy now from the Moravian Archives!

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