



John Heckewelder (1743–1823), Moravian Missionary
Lithograph; Unitätsarchiv Herrnhut/GDR

A Brief Survey of the Moravian Mission to the North American Indians

by
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The history of the Moravian Mission to the Indians of North America spans nearly two hundred fifty years. It is complex and is usually well documented in its various strands. Even concentrating only on the work among the Eastern Indians, which covers a period of one hundred sixty years, it is possible to give only an outline. We can scarcely touch, let alone linger, on its great events, its continuities and transitions, its great tragedies, its devoted servants, both Indian and white, and its great accomplishments which ended in failure.

In 1732 the Moravian community of Herrnhut was only ten years old and had passed through a common spiritual experience in 1727 that had welded together the religiously intense people who had brought their various backgrounds and loyalties to Herrnhut. Of the population many were recent refugees and descendants of the old *Unitas Fratrum*, the Bohemian and Moravian Brethren, and many were from the various Protestant churches of Europe. The former, already pilgrims in a strange land, were to become the pioneers of the Moravian Mission Movement which exploded on the European Church scene in the decade following 1732. In these years they launched or explored possible missions to St. Thomas, 1732, Greenland, 1733, Georgia, 1734, Surinam, 1735, Lapland, 1734, South Africa, 1736, Gold Coast, 1735, Algeria, 1739, Arctic Russia, 1737, and Ceylon, 1740, and envisioned a further string of missions on into Asia and the Orient.

Not all of these, or those that were established afterward, were successful, but those that did succeed account for the fact that the large majority of the Moravians in the world today are of dark skin and of the Third World.

The first Moravian Mission to the Indians was in the new colony of Georgia, for which the first Moravians set out late in 1734 with the aim to establish a place near the Indians among whom they might work. The work in Georgia was short lived but in the five years there they did establish a school for Creek children above Savannah. Here the Moravians taught the children English and the chil-

dren taught the missionaries Creek. They hoped to go the Cherokees eventually, but the clouds of war broke up the settlement and the Moravians turned toward Pennsylvania where new Indian work was soon taken up again. Among the less than fifty Moravians who had made up the Georgia venture there were two whose names were large in the later Indian mission. John Martin Mack, later a bishop, was one of the leaders of the Mission in New York, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania until he went in 1760 to the West Indian Mission. And young David Zeisberger, a great name in the mission history of all time.

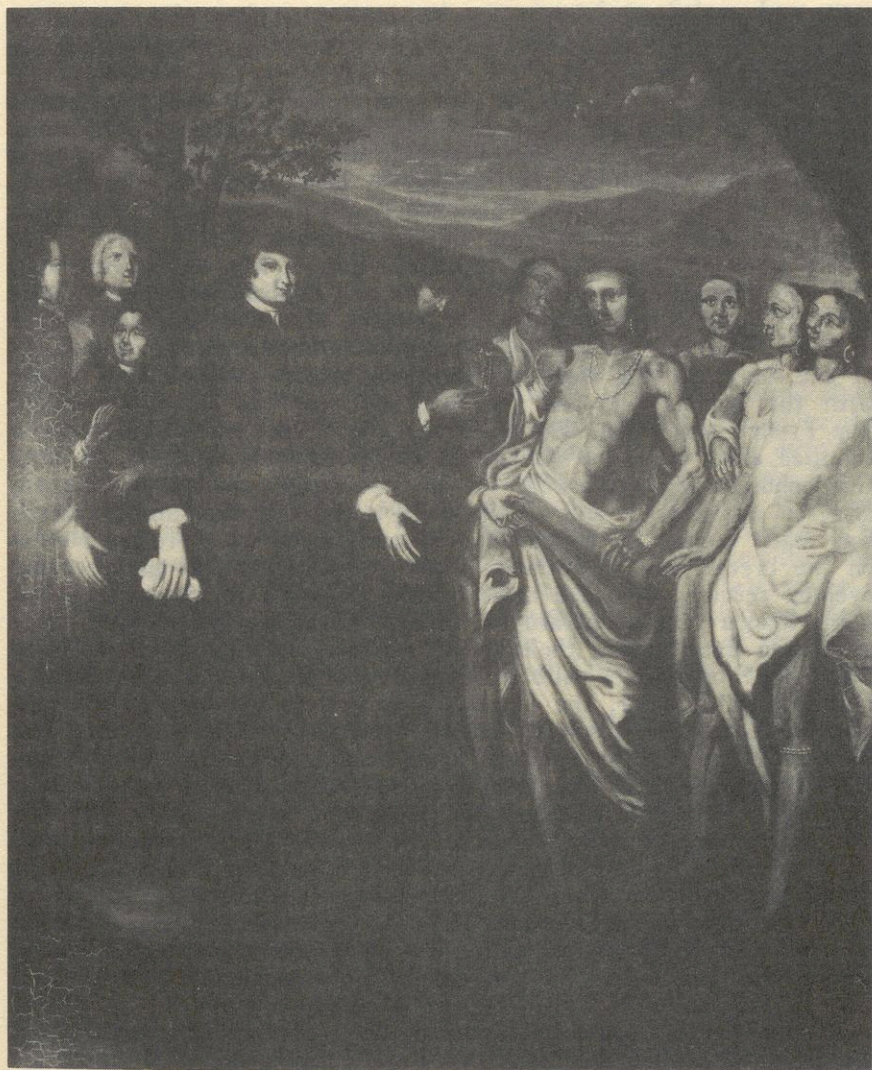
The Mission to the Eastern Indians actually began before the Moravians were permanently established at Bethlehem. In 1740 the twenty-two year old Christian Henry Rauch was sent from Europe to look for an opportunity to minister to the Indians. Soon after arriving in New York he was introduced to Mohican Indians who were there to see the governor. He found he could converse with them in Dutch, and within the month was with them in their village of Shekomeko on the New York-Connecticut border. He found a response and the first congregation among the Indians was established here.

After Bethlehem was established other missionaries came to assist Rauch. Some ventured into the New York wilderness to preach and to study Indian dialects, especially among the Iroquois. Near Shekomeko, mission stations were established at Wechquadnach and Pachgagoch. But the very success of the mission brought the Moravians unexpected opposition. White traders, whose rum business suffered, spread false rumors about them. An extended period of harrasment began and eventually involved the New York Assembly itself.

Because of this opposition, the Moravians decided to move the Mission to Pennsylvania beyond the line of white settlement. The Moravian leader, Spangenberg, accompanied by David Zeisberger, Conrad Weiser, and Schebosch, a native convert, journeyed to Onondaga to secure the assent of the Six Nations. Assent was given but the Christian Indians did not want to move from Shekomeko and the Wyoming Valley was becoming dangerous because of the French.

However, the hostility of the whites encroaching on Shekomeko and the uncertainty of land ownership forced ten Indian families to leave there. The Moravians settled them temporarily on the north bank of the Lehigh and named the place Friedenshütten, Tents of Peace. It was a hopeful name for what would prove to be a long and tragic migration lasting a century. Within the year they moved to a tract of land beyond the Blue Mountain at the confluence of the Lehigh River and Mahoning Creek. The settlement was called Gnadenhütten and by 1748 ministered to five hundred converts, about the population of Bethlehem and Nazareth of that time.

In December, 1741, Count Zinzendorf, the leader of the Moravians, arrived in America and spent the following year, during which he



Zinzendorf, Conrad Weiser, and Indian chiefs of the Five Nations. The original painting, probably by John Valentin Haidt, was formerly preserved in the London Moravian Archives, but destroyed in World War II. The copy shown above is by Anna Arndt; oil on canvas, 93 : 75,5 cm.

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made three excursions into Indian Country. The first, with his daughter Benigna and eleven brethren, was to Meniolagomeka beyond the Blue Mountain.

At Tulpehocken he made a pact with leaders of the Six Nations by which the Brethren could pass through the Iroquois Confederacy territory as friends. The Wampum belt the Indians gave him to seal the pact was useful to the mission in later contacts. The second journey was to Shekomeko. The third and longest was a six week trip to Shomokin (now Sunbury) and the Wyoming Valley.

The work at Gnadenhütten prospered but its life was to be short. The final struggle between the French and English for North America was about to begin and the assistance of the Indians was sought by both sides. In the area of the Moravian settlements in the Forks of the Delaware the Walking Purchase chicanery still rankled deeply with the Indians who felt they had been cheated and dispossessed. The French and Indian War broke and there were massacres of farm families along the Blue Mountains. On November 24, 1755, at dusk Gnadenhütten was attacked, the mission house and village burned, and ten missionaries and a child were killed. The next day Nazareth was made uneasy by the smell of burning wood which reached them on the breeze and in Bethlehem the congregation was gathered for evening service when the news of the massacre reached them. For more than a year afterward the refugee Christian Indians from Gnadenhütten lived among their white brethren and then began to build the village of Nain a mile west of Bethlehem. In this time of war, fear and wild rumor, the Moravians as well as their Indian brethren were often under suspicion among the other whites. In 1763 the Pontiac Conspiracy in the west again brought pressure on the Moravian Mission and the Governor of Pennsylvania ordered the Moravian Indians of Nain and Wechquetank removed to Philadelphia for their own safety. But of the one hundredtwenty-five who reached the city, fifty three died there of small pox and dysentery. The government would not let them return to their former settlements and instead they settled on the Sesquehanna River where the Wyalusing converges with it. Ever hopeful, they called the place Friedenshütten. A second village was founded in western Pennsylvania and called Friedenstatt, City of Peace.

The unrelenting pressure of the advance of the white settlement continued and when the Indians on the Wyalusing received an invitation from the Grand Council of the Delawares in the Tuscarawas Valley in Ohio, David Zeisberger recommended they should migrate. In 1772 they established their new home there and named it Schoenbrunn. The next year the Indians at Friedenstatt followed them to Ohio and called their new village Gnadenhütten in memory of their ill-fated home on the Mahoning. In 1776 a third village was established and called Lichtenau, Meadow of Light, which proved to be in

the path of warring parties and was moved to Salem four years later. Again the Indian life and the mission flourished and again disaster beyond their control overtook them. It was at the very end of the Revolutionary War when the Indians and missionaries were uprooted in September and taken as prisoners to Sandusky without provisions for winter. The missionaries were taken to Detroit to stand trial as spies. They were released but the damage could not be undone. It was a winter of unbearable cold and near starvation.

In early March, 1782, about one hundred fifty Moravian Indians received permission to return to the Tuscarawas to try to salvage what might remain from the last year's corn. At Gnadenhütten ninety Christian Indians were massacred by American frontiersmen out to avenge an earlier massacre by savage Indians. Those harvesting the fields at Schoenbrunn received warning and escaped.

Several years of wandering followed. Many of the scattered Moravian Indians would never return, turned forever from the white man and his religion after Gnadenhütten. But many of them did drift back to their teachers. They could not immediately return to the Tuscarawas and places of their sojourn were named Pilgerruh, (Pilgrims' Rest) and New Salem. New Salem prospered but again threat of Indian warfare made its future doubtful and Zeisberger led the Christian Indians into Ontario where they established a settlement on the Thames River which they named Fairfield. A Mission was begun on the White River but suffered greatly at the hands of the Indians themselves. Several of the converts and faithful old helpers were burned as witches.

In 1797 a number of the Indians from Fairfield, led by the now aged Zeisberger returned to the Tuscarawas and established Goshen but by the 1820's it had dwindled away. Fairfield itself was not to be left in peace and was destroyed in the War of 1812. In 1815 it was rebuilt on the south side of the river and called New Fairfield. It remained in the care of the Moravian Church until 1900 when it was turned over to the Methodist Church in Canada. In 1837 two-thirds of the Indians of New Fairfield, accompanied by the missionary Jesse Vogler, migrated to Kansas to found Westfield. This remnant moved twice more before disappearing as a separate group near Ottawa, Kansas. A Moravian pastor remained to care for the last of them until 1905.

When the Moravians first came to Georgia they wanted to go among the Creek Indians as missionaries, but the way was closed at that time. After they made their settlements in North Carolina in 1753 there was occasional contact with the Cherokee and an interest to begin work, but again the way was not open. It was not until 1801 that they were able to establish their first station at Springplace, Georgia, and another in 1821 at Oochgelogy. The mission, like others among the Indians, flourished at first, but fell victim to the

encroaching whites and the removal of the Southern Indians to Oklahoma and the infamous "Trail of Tears". New Springplace was established in Oklahoma, and other stations as well, but that work was again disrupted by the Civil War and Brother Ward, a native Cherokee minister, was killed by marauding Federals. The work was again revived after the War but the throwing open of the Indian lands in the 1890's disrupted Indian life. The work ceased in 1898.

As the 19th Century came toward its last two decades and the old missions to the Indians were fading, a new interest in mission work was arising among the American Moravians, especially in Bethlehem. It was a challenge to enter two new fields among native Americans. In 1885, having been interested by Sheldon Jackson, they established pioneer work on the Kuskokwim river in western Alaska among the Eskimo called Yupic. One of the first missionaries was John Kilbuck, a Delaware Indian and a descendant of the first converts of the Moravian Indian Mission among the Delaware. This work in Alaska continues today in the autonomous Alaska Province of the Moravian Church which has its full native ministry and native bishop and its own ministerial training institute. It is the one successful on-going work of the two hundred fifty years of Moravian missionary effort among the native Americans, and has celebrated its centennial.

The same decade that saw the work in Alaska begun, saw the beginning of a new mission among the Indians of Southern California. It was called the Ramona Mission after the romantic novel of Helen Hunt Jackson that had drawn attention to these neglected people. There were at one time five small stations but the work did not prosper for various reasons. The economic dislocation of the Indians during the First World War was a major one. However one congregation on the Morongo Indian Reservation continues and is now part of the Pacific Coast District of the Moravian Church. It is still partially supported by the Society for Propagating the Gospel, the Society established in Bethlehem in 1745 to support the Moravian Mission among the Indians.

The Moravian Mission among the Indians, in most of its history through the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, was caught in the relentless forces that shaped America. It was the technologically advanced civilization of one race replacing the primitive civilization of another, the intensive land-use of farming replacing the hunting economy. It was the clash between European forces in America; the English and Spanish in Georgia; the English and French in the French and Indian War; the American and the British in the Revolutionary and the War of 1812. It was the Civil War in Oklahoma and the economic dislocation of the First World War in California.

In the story of the Mission to the Indians there was great faith and much hope and shining moments of success. But there was much tragedy and sadness too. And the failure of the mission to the east-

ern Indians seems to have been one price of the success of the American frontier:

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Herrnhuter Mission unter den nordamerikanischen Indianern
Ein Überblick

Die Geschichte der Herrnhuter Indianermission umspannt faßt 250 Jahre, die Arbeit unter den östlichen Indianern 160 Jahre.

Die Mission unter den nordamerikanischen Indianern begann 1734 mit der nur kurzlebigen Arbeit in Georgia und fand ihre Fortsetzung

in Pennsylvania und im Gebiet von New York und Connecticut, später in North Carolina und Oklahoma. Als Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts ein neues Missionsinteresse erwachte, richtete es sich auf die Yupic-Eskimos im westlichen Alaska und die Indianer in Südkalifornien (heute besteht eine Gemeinde auf dem Morongo Indianer-Reservat).

Die einzelnen Etappen der Herrnhuter Indianermission zeigen, wie diese immer wieder in das erbarmungslose Kräftespiel geriet, das der Entwicklung Amerikas das Gepräge gab: Die technologisch überlegene Zivilisation der Europäer verdrängte die indianische Kultur; die intensive Landwirtschaft verdrängte die Jagdwirtschaft. Hinzu kamen die Auseinandersetzungen der europäischen Mächte auf amerikanischem Boden: der Engländer und Spanier in Georgia, der Engländer und Franzosen im Französischen und Indianischen Krieg, der Amerikaner und Briten im Revolutionskrieg und im Krieg von 1812 und schließlich der Nord- und Südstaaten im Bürgerkrieg. Auch die wirtschaftliche Erschütterung des Ersten Weltkriegs zeitigte negative Folgen.

In der Geschichte der Indianermission begegnen Glaubensstärke, Hoffnung und glänzende Augenblicke des Erfolgs, aber nicht minder Tragödien und viel Leid. Das Scheitern der Mission bei den östlichen Indianern erscheint als ein Preis für den Erfolg an der amerikanischen Front.