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Local History Sketches

The Moravians and Richard Conner

by Patricia Schott Sawyer

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Many prisoners were taken by the English and their Indian allies to Detroit at the time of the American War of Independence. Among them were the **Moravian** missionaries, or teachers as they were called by the Indians, and their Delaware converts under the leadership of **David Zeisberger** and **John Heckewelder**. The Christianized **Delaware Indians** initially occupied a strategic location in the Ohio Valley between the British and American forces. On various occasions Heckewelder traveled at great personal risk to persuade surrounding Indians to remain at peace. However, while remaining neutral, the Moravians at times supplied the Americans with information about the movements of hostile **Iroquois Indians** supported by the British.

After suffering the loss of all they owned at the hands of the Indians and the British, the missionaries and their converts were acquitted of the British charge of treason and spent a winter of near starvation in the Ohio wilderness. In the spring, 96 Christianized Indians returned to their homes without the missionaries to salvage what they could. All, except one young boy who escaped unharmed and one who was scalped but lived, were massacred by a group of American militiamen on March 8, 1782.

The Moravian missionaries were brought back to Detroit by the commandant, **Major Schuyler DePeyster**, who was concerned for their safety after the tragedies that had befallen them. It was proposed that the Moravians settle east of Detroit on the **River Huron** (now called the **Clinton River**) above Detroit, in an area apart from the path of warring Indians (approximately at **Moxon Drive**, immediately south of the **Hillcrest Country Club**).

David Zeisberger kept a diary as required by the church, and Heckewelder wrote more than one account in German and English of their experiences in Ohio and Michigan. The Zeisberger Diary includes the years 1782-86, when the Moravians built and lived in the settlement of **New Gnadenhütten**, across the river from the site of the future Mount Clemens. The diary is a humble account of wilderness life. The problems encountered by the Moravians had to be faced in the same environment by the settlers who came ten or so years later to High Banks (now Mount Clemens). Although not a lasting community, it was the first in Macomb County and might well have endured had it not been a Christianized Indian settlement on a semi-starving wartime frontier.

David Zeisberger recorded the missionaries' arrival on the River Huron:

Monday, [July] 21, [1782]: "In the evening, we came to the place appointed for use to settle in, and encamped, but were welcomed by mosquitoes and so badly treated that we had little rest, although we made a fire round about us, so that the air was filled with smoke and steam. Thus far we have found no place satisfactory to use, for all the land we have seen is too low, swampy, and exposed to overflow, though we landed several times and examined

several places. Besides we did not dare to settle within a distance of eight miles from the lake, for the land both sides of the river belongs to some Detroit merchants. We examined the 22d, [July, 1782] further up the creek, and found on the south side of the river a fine place to lay out a town on a height, not inferior to that at Schönbrunn [Ohio] and it has the same slope, according to the compass, and the course of the river, which Schönbrunn had."

Tuesday, [July] 23 [1782]: "We found many traces that a long time ago an Indian town must have stood on this place, for we saw many holes in the ground, which were now indeed filled up, but quite recognizable, in which Indians have even now the custom of keeping their corn and other property."

In other entries, Zeisberger described their way of life, how easy it was to become lost in the bush, the habits of **Chippewas** following game and the arrival of visitors from Detroit.

Zeisberger also mentions the arrival of "**Brother Conner**" on Tuesday, March 25, 1783, "to build himself [and his family] a house." Conner was the only white man ever allowed to live with the Moravians and seems to have taken up residence simultaneously with **William Tucker**. Zeisberger describes Tucker on May 2, 1783, as "a white man, our neighbor, who settled several weeks ago on this river below us." Tucker took along a letter to Detroit from the Moravians in which the missionaries discussed their difficulties with the Chippewa Indians who wanted the Moravians to leave. Zeisberger records that Heckewelder saw Tucker again on Tuesday, May 6, 1783: "Br. Heckewelder went eight miles down the river to Mr. Tucker, whom he met on the way here to us. He was sent by the major with a letter for Br. David, an answer to his letter of the 2d Inst. In this he told us to continue our labor undisturbed and to plant; that we should be without anxiety, he would arrange the affair with the Chippewa Indians to our satisfaction."

There was little food for either the Moravians or Chippewas, who resented having to share their hunting grounds and especially with Christianized Indians. The settlement at Detroit was also in severe want during the spring and summer of 1784, and the people had to live mainly on weeds which they cooked. The problems with the wolves increased and many cattle were lost. The only animals taken in hunting were raccoons. This famine, which had been preceded by three years of hunger, did not end until the bountiful harvest of September, 1784.

Despite the harvest, the Chippewas continued to voice their discontent that the Moravians were living on their lands. After much consideration, the Moravians determined to remove in the spring of 1785, although they were afraid that they must always live as pilgrims if New Gnadenhütten could not remain a permanent settlement. The black belt of war was passed among the Indian nations during the summer of 1785, and the Moravians decided to remain at New Gnadenhütten a while longer.

On March 4, 1786, three years after the end of the Revolutionary War (when the English should have left Detroit), **Major Ancrum**, the new English commander at Detroit, and **John Askins**, a loyal English merchant, "each of whom had a grant from the king of 2,000 acres, [and] wished to have it taken up here for them" bought the Moravian settlement. New Gnadenhütten had been much admired for several years by surprised visitors, mostly from Detroit.

Also in March, 1786, the first road to Detroit from the future Mount Clemens area was cleared. Sunday, 19 [March, 1786]: "The brethren who have helped make the road, came home and it has been found to be twenty-three and one half miles from our town to Detroit, straight through the bush."

The Moravians left New Gnadenhütten on Thursday 20 [April, 1786]: "After we had early, for the last time, assembled in our chapel, we loaded our canoes, and all went away together in the afternoon. None of us remained behind, save Conner's family, who himself knew not whither to go, nor

what to do."

The Chippewas did not agitate for the removal of the Conner family. Certainly the entire family had a special knowledge of Indian customs and dialects. **Richard Conner**, who was born about 1718 in Maryland, was 68 years old when the Moravians departed. His wife, Margaret, had been captured by Indians at the age of four. Conner had bought her freedom and then made her his wife, no doubt considering her suitability to the life he led as a trader and interpreter among the Indians. As part of the bargain, according to tradition, the Conners were obliged to give their first-born child, James, to the Indians. Several years later they were able to redeem him. Their son, Henry, was later highly respected and influential among the Indians. Their daughter, Susanna, may have been the first child of English-speaking parents to have been born in Macomb County. In 1807, she married **Elisha Harrington**, who had settled in the neighborhood the year before. Some of the Conner land later became part of the city of Mount Clemens and Conner descendants still live in Mount Clemens.

For more information about the Moravians, we recommend:

- Bliss, Eugene F., trans. and ed. *Diary of David Zeisberger, a Moravian Missionary*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Robert Clarke & Co. for the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, 1885.
- Bush, Mary. "The Moravians of Michigan," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 28 (1900), pp.133-137.
- Day, John E. "The Moravians in Michigan," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 30 (1905), pp.44-51.
- Fleming, Bill. "The Moravians: Trailblazers of Macomb County," *Macomb Daily*, September 24, 1970 p.3A.
- Ford, Henry A. "[The Old Moravian Mission at Mt. Clemens.](#)" *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 10 (1886), pp.107-115.
- Rodabaugh, James H. *Schoenbrunn and the Moravian Missions in Ohio*. Columbus, Oh.: Ohio Historical Society, 1956.
- Follow this link to read more about [Clinton Township history](#) and the Moravians