A Salem Six for Science

Because Moravian pastors and teachers might receive calls to multiple stations during their life of church service, Henry Muhlenberg’s correspondence with Pennsylvania Moravians would extend to North Carolina as botanizing friends moved there. When Muhlenberg finally published his catalog of 3670 North American plants in 1813 (Catalognum Americanum Septentrionalis), he cited the help of 28 contributors of specimens or seeds. Nearly one fifth of those individuals would have connections to Salem, NC. After his death Muhlenberg friends bought his personal herbarium, which included plants gathered by the Salem six listed below, for more than three hundred dollars. It was placed at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia to serve as a national plant reference collection. Five of the Salem six had direct ties to Pennsylvania schools, while a sixth taught in Salem.

*13th. Mr. August Gottthold Vernier and Mr. Orelli from Savannah came, and the former remained here until the 16th. On the latter day he botanized with S.K. and took a number of plants from here to Mr. Muhlenberg in Lancaster.*

Mrs. Susannah Halloween’s Diary of Visits to Salem, October 1810, Moravian Archives

Samuel Kramsch (1756-1824)

Born the son of a Lutheran minister in Silvis, after his father’s death he was placed in a Moravian school, where he learned Latin, Greek, and French. At 16 he wanted to pursue medicine, chemistry or natural history, but the Moravian Brethren wanted him to study theology. After a short stay in an apothecary shop, he felt the call to ministry. The church assigned him to teach in children’s schools, from which in 1783 he was called to the new United States to teach children in Bethabara. In 1785 he was appointed as teacher at Hatzel Haus, and in 1789 he was made first director of the Salem Youth School. In 1792 he became a long-suffering pastor of the congregation at Hope, near modern Clemmons, NC, with a four-year mandate from 1802-1806 as the first principal at Salem Academy. Illness and painful unsuccessful surgery forced him to give up his pastoral and keep him from enjoying collecting as he once did. His memoir notes that in his last year of life he got to see his daughter marry the son of his "first friend in America, Jacob Van Vleck.

Gustav Heinrich Dahlman (1777-1867)

Though a few of his plant specimens are found in the Hatzel Haus herbarium, Dahlman also contributed to the Linnaean herbarium in Laramis. His biography is largely known through his church service. Kramsch’s records have him arriving in Salem from Germany in 1799 to work at the boy’s school and the small boys house. There are mentions of his occasional preaching at churches. In 1806 his brother Jan from Neuwied on the Rhine paid two hundred Silberschilling to cover the cost of sending him back to Europe, an amount paid to him as $150. He taught at the little boys’ school in Niesky, Saxony, for several years, connecting with Lewis David de Schweinitz, before being called in 1810 to Stockholm, Sweden, to do similar work there. In 1834 he married, and left church service and records thereafter.

Christian Friedrich Denke (1775-1838)

Born in Bethabara, PA, Denke entered Nazareth Hall at age ten. A calculating schoolboy at 13, he wrote a major study of ancient languages and love of botany, led him in 1797 to stay on at the school as a teacher. From there, he collected for Muhlenberg and others, and while there, he drew inspiration from a talk by David Zeisberger (1721-1808), about his mission work among the Delaware tribe in 1809, he accepted a call to meet Zeisberger in Ohio to study the Delaware language, then went to the Delaware mission at Fairfield in Upper Canada (Ontario) to begin an education for David’s two sons, Chippewa. He had modest success with the Chippewa, but strong support from the Delaware, for whom he translated the Gospel of John into their language. Throughout he sent letters and specimens of local plants to his botanizing friends. During the War of 1812, on October 5, 1813, American troops turned down Fairfield, though Denke, his wife, mission partner John Steinmetz and most natives escaped. Following a two-year wandering exile cut off from Moravian communication, Denke and the Delaware rebuild the mission in 1815 across the river from its old site. Reputedly still present in Bethabara in 1816, Denke came to Salem in the summer of 1820, where he was introduced to his congregation at Hope “by his dearly beloved Brother Jacob Van Vleck.” After 1822 he oversaw construction of a new church at Fruitdale. His memoir states that he retired to Salem in 1831 to “pursue with more vigor his love for the study of the science of plants.”

Anna Rosina Kliest Gambold (1762-1821)

Upon her mother’s death, fourteen-year old Anna Rosina was raised in the girls school in Bethlehem. In 1788 she was called to be a tutoress in the famous Seminary, where she served for sixteen years as the best loved instructor at the school. She was especially able to inspire with words, composing poems for memorization and performance, sending evolutions to former students and to future missionaries. She was allowed to travel painting there, and was bold of taking her students on excursions, giving lessons in practical aspects from the world around them. In 1803 she traveled as secretary to George Loskot (1740-1814) on a trip to Galien, Ohio for a meeting of Anna Moravian missionaries. In 1805 she married Salem widower John Gambold (1760-1827) and agreed to serve with him at the Sprague Place mission to the Ojibwes in what would become northwest Georgia. The Salem church supervised the mission, and annals and correspondence about Gambold’s mission work and botanical interests there are at the Archivist.

Christian Friedrich Denke to Lewis David de Schweinitz, October 24, 1798, Schweinitz Papers, Moravian Archives

Lewis David de Schweinitz (1780-1834)

A great grandnephew of Zinzendorf and son of a church administrator, Schweinitz was born and raised in the Bethlehem Gemeinschaft, the church meeting place and home for married clergy and family. On a tour of Nazareth Hall at age seven, Samuel Kramsch showed him a fitches specimen, and his curiosity over its finger-like projections sparked an interest in botany during eleven years of schooling there. In 1798 he entered theological study at Nazareth, in the Upper Lusatian district of Saxony. While there he partnered with one of his teachers, Barry trained Johannes Baptista von Albertini (1769-1831), to survey local species of fungi. Fungi were then considered part of the plant kingdom, but not often studied by Linnaean flowers, examining botanists. The two published “A Survey of Fungi in Upper Lusatia” in 1805 (Conspectus Funginarum in Lusatiae Superioris) with 1330 species, including 93 newly described, and twelve illustrated plates of sample species. It was the most comprehensive book on fungi classified at that time. He worked as teacher at the Nazareth boys school, then pastor and taught at two other locales before coming to Salem in 1812 as church administrator, where Muhlenberg sought out his advice.

Jacob Van Vleck (1751-1831)

His memory, a type of spiritual testimony stored in many church members at the Archives, notes that his father was a shipping merchant who retired after befriending Moravian missionaries waiting on better sailing winds. Born in New York, and raised in Nazareth and Bethabara, Van Vleck left in 1772 for theological studies at Barry in Saxony, site of the church’s natural history collection. In the 1780s he led the Single Brothe Choir at Bethabara, helping members with spiritual and practical problems. In 1790 he began two decades of work as a school administrator, leading the Female Seminary from 1790-1800 and serving as principal of Nazareth Hall from 1802-1808. The friendship of this father figure was a strong influence on the others, even at a distance. He was called to Salem in late 1812 to be president of the church leadership there, then retiring to Bethlehem in 1822. His activities and decisions on church matters frequent the Archives’ official records.

I am corresponding with four and soon five botanists... Henry Muhlenberg, Lancaster, Beni. Smith Barton, Phila., William Hamilton, Philad., Jac. v. Veelk, Beth., and Gustav Dahlman, Salem.”