

**Letters, 1798-1811, to Gotthilf
Heinrich Ernst (Henry) Muhlenberg
1798-1811
Mss.B.M89.d**

American Philosophical Society
105 South Fifth Street
Philadelphia, PA, 19106
215-440-3400
manuscripts@amphilsoc.org

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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Creator	Denke, Christian Frederick, 1775-1838.
Title	Letters, 1798-1811, to Gotthilf Heinrich Ernst (Henry) Muhlenberg
Date [inclusive]	1798-1811
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Location	LH-B-21-4 (Interfiled in Series I, B M891)
Language	English
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Abstract	These letters concern botanical matters, with special reference to descriptions and identification in Denke's herbarium.

Background note

Christian Frederick Denke (1775-1838) was a Moravian minister, missionary, linguist and amateur botanist. He sent numerous letters and botanical specimens to the noted American botanist Gotthilf Henry Ernest Muhlenberg (1753-1815, APS 1785). Having studied the language of the Delaware Indians with the Moravian missionary David Zeisberger, Denke worked among them and the neighboring Chippewas at Fairfield in Upper Canada.

Denke was born on September 8, 1775, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to Jeremiah Denke and his wife Sara Test. His father Jeremiah Denke, a native of Langenbielau (Bielawa), Poland, was a prominent Moravian minister in Bethlehem. Christian Frederick Denke began his education at the age of ten, when he entered Nazareth Hall, the Moravian Academy in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. His studies included classical and other languages, theology and management, but he took a deep and special interest in botany. He later became a teacher at the Academy, and sent many letters and botanical specimens to Gotthilf Henry Ernest Muhlenberg, the famous American botanist. While teaching at Nazareth Hall Denke felt called to preach as a missionary to native Americans. At Nazareth he heard Zeisberger speak about the Delaware Indian mission at Fairfield in Upper Canada, as well as plans to broaden the ministry to the nearby Chippewa Indians. With a background in languages, Denke set out to learn the Delaware and Chippewa languages in order to translate the Bible and preach to the Indians in their own languages. He was ordained a deacon in the Moravian church on April 27, 1800, and accompanied another Moravian missionary, John Heckewelder, to the field. At Goshen, near Gnadenhutten, Ohio, Zeisberger instructed him in the Delaware language before he left to minister among the Delaware in Fairfield, Canada. On August 7, 1803, Denke married Anna Maria Heckedorn of Litiz, Pennsylvania, who joined him in the field.

At Fairfield, Denke was charged with converting the neighboring Chippewas. His endeavor was ultimately unsuccessful, and in 1806 he and his wife returned permanently to Fairfield to devote more than a decade to Indian missions and educational work. The War of 1812 threatened to destroy the work of Denke and the Moravians among the Indians in Fairfield. Denke and his fellow minister John Schnall, committed pacifists, attempted to keep local native American tribes neutral in the new conflict between American and British forces. Nevertheless, some of the Indians joined the British. After the American victory over the British at the battle of Moraviantown on October 5, 1813, they burned Fairfield, torching the Moravian church there first. As a result, Schnall returned home to Bethlehem in Pennsylvania, leaving the Denkes to lead the Indians to a safe haven near Burlington Heights, Canada. For two years Denke, unable to communicate with the Moravian authorities in Bethlehem, had full responsibility for the Indians, albeit receiving some assistance from the government of Upper Canada. In addition to 183 Indians at their winter camp in Dundas in late 1813, Denke also took charge of the spiritual needs of whites in the area the following spring. Over a year later in May, 1815 the Denkes and their Indian charges made an 18 day journey on foot to Fairfield to rebuild the church and village, now called New Fairfield on the other side of the Thames River. The experiences of the war and responsibilities of reconstructing the community compromised Denke's health, and caused him to develop a drinking problem. Consequently, in November of 1818 he was relieved by John Schnall, and allowed to return to Bethlehem with his wife. After two years Denke accepted a call to Hope church in Salem, North Carolina. His wife Anna Maria died in nearby Friedberg, where Denke had built a new church, in 1828.

He subsequently married Maria Steiner and continued his ministry in Salem. Denke died in Salem, North Carolina in 1838.

Scope & content

This collection consists of nineteen letters written by the Moravian missionary Christian Frederick Denke to Gotthilf Heinrich Ernst Muhlenberg in 1798 and 1799, and in 1811. The letters are in German. Denke, who signed his name in the Anglicized Denkey, corresponded with Muhlenberg mostly about botany. All of the letters include lists of plants; they may have accompanied shipments of specimens. Some of the letters also mention Denke's excursions, including the one dated July 1, 1799, in which he describes a journey to the Delaware.

This collection has been incorporated into the Muhlenberg Family Papers, B.M891, interfiled in Series I.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Presented by Frederick A. Muhlenberg and accessioned, 1890.

Indexing Terms

Genre(s)

- Foreign Language

Personal Name(s)

- Muhlenberg, Henry, 1753-1815

Subject(s)

- Botany.
- Herbaria.
- Natural History
- Religion

Other Descriptive Information

The APS has approximately nineteen letters written between Christian Denke and Gotthilff Muhlenberg, one of the sons of Henry Muhlenberg. Gotthilff followed his father's calling and was a prominent religious

and cultural leader. Muhlenberg served as a pastor of Lutheran Church in Lancaster and became a prominent educator, serving as President of Franklin College – now Franklin and Marshall. The APS has a large amount of Muhlenberg's papers, including a large and detailed collection of his journals from the early republic; all of which are in German or occasionally Latin. Muhlenberg had a keen interest in natural history, especially botany, and much of his work is detailed in these journals, as are regular daily activities. The Denke correspondence is part of this larger collection of Muhlenberg papers.