



November 7

Commemoration: John Christian Frederick Heyer, 1873, missionary

*(b Germany, 1793; d Philadelphia, PA, 7 Nov 1873)*

John Christian Frederick Heyer was the first missionary sent out by Lutherans in America. After his confirmation his parents sent him to relatives in America (Napoleon was then active in Europe). He studied theology in Philadelphia, and in 1814 went back to Germany, to the University of Goettingen. Back in America, he was licensed as a lay preacher (a home missionary) and preached in Pennsylvania, western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Missouri.

In 1819 he married; in 1820 he was ordained; and for twenty years he preached, established Sunday schools, and taught at Gettysburg College and Seminary.

When, after 20 years of marriage his wife died, Heyer decided to become a missionary.

Commissioned at the age of 48 in 1841, Heyer was sent to Guntur, India, by the Ministerium of Pennsylvania as the first foreign missionary of the American Lutheran churches. He learned a little Sanskrit, a little medicine — and then sailed for India, where there were already Lutheran missions at Tinnevely, Tranquebar, and Madras. He spent fifteen years (1842-1857) founding missions in the region of Andhra, where his followers fondly called him, “Father Heyer”; he founded a congregation in Baltimore, Maryland, while on furlough; and briefly (!) took time out to obtain an M.D. degree from what was later Johns Hopkins.

Because of failing health, Heyer returned to the U.S. to become a traveling missionary among Germans in Minnesota where he organized the Minnesota Synod. He later established new home mission congregations throughout the Mississippi Valley before returning to India in 1869 at the age of 77 to reorganize the Rajahmundry, India, mission. His personal example renewed the spirit of the mission.

He returned to Philadelphia to serve as chaplain of the new Lutheran seminary there until his death at age 80 on 7 November 1873.

A biography of Pastor Heyer’s life was published in 1942 by the Muhlenberg Press in Philadelphia and entitled: “They Called Him Father: The Life Story of John Christian Frederick Heyer.”