

The Earliest Known Letter Written at Put-in-Bay, from 1786

by Michael Gora, Middle Bass Island Historian, Lake Erie Islands Historical Society

The letter below is probably the earliest known letter written at Put-in-Bay. In 1786 David Zeisberger, John Heckewelder and others were traveling east on Lake Erie on the sloops Mackina and Beaver, from Detroit, MI to Cuyahoga, OH (Cleveland). The group consisted of a few Moravian missionaries and about 100 Indians all of whom had given up a settlement about 40 miles northwest of Detroit and were on their way to settle in Cuyahoga. They ended up staying on the Lake Erie Islands for about a month, as described in detail in Zeisberger's diary, because they were unable to get a good wind to proceed east. Zeisberger's diary entries and comments about them are contained in my 2008 book **Early Adventures at Put-in-Bay, Middle Bass and Johnson's Island**. Just recently, tracking down more information about John Heckewelder, I found a letter of his that was written in Put-in-Bay during his stay there with Zeisberger in 1786. The letter was sent to Detroit, asking for more provisions for the large group stuck on the islands since April 29, 1786 and unable to continue east because of the winds. A boat had arrived from Detroit on May 28 with some additional provisions, but more were needed. Put-in-Bay was at that time called Hope's Cove. The letter¹, together with a 2nd letter written upon the group's successful arrival in Cleveland, is the following:

Hopes Cove², May 28th, 1786

About a half hour ago Your Barge arrived safe in this Cove where they found both Your Vessels and ourselves lying yet on account of Contrary Winds.

We had but once since our first arrival a middling fair Wind with which we made an attempt for the Grand River, but by the time we had sailed 30 Miles, the Wind turned right ahead again, and we were obliged to run back again to the Islands. We are indeed impatient to get to the main shore where our Indians may get hunting for a great many of them has been out of provision this good while, and had it not been for Captn. Underston³ and Gutterie⁴ supplying us in a great measure with Fish, we would have been certainly in a bad Condition, there being more of us in number than 100 who all want Victuals, and the Children in particular are most troublesome in that respect. I have proposed to both Capts. Whether the Mackinaw Sloop could not set part of Us on Shore at the Mouth of Sandusky⁵, thinking it will speed the voyage in a great measure, and only carry our baggage with a few hands to the Grand River. I hope it will meet your approbation. I thank You a thousand time for Your kindness in sending Us some provision. I had already served what I had of my own out to the hungry Indians. I think it would be to much to agree to Your kind offer in sending us more provision, have consulted Mr. Zeisberger, Edwards and Ball about it, but we are of Different opinions concerning this matter. I should be very sorry, should all this be at your own expenses, but should Government, who indeed has always been very kind and acted as a father to Us do as much more for Us as to send the boat with a little more Provision, we being in a desert place on an Island and not knowing when we shall be off, at least the whole of Us, We shall indeed be very thankful and acknowledging for it. Captn. Understun has had great patience with Us, and deserves much praise, for I assure You so many Indians at all times are no agreeable Cargo in the whole. Your Boat will wait no longer, and the Vessel is getting Clear as quick as possible to return to Detroit. We thank You again for Your indeed parental Care for Us and

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I am and remain Dear Sir,
Your most Obedt. Humble Servt.
JOHN HECKEWELDER

Endorsed.
Mr. John Askin,
Mercht, Detroit.
Sandusky Island⁶, May 28, 1786.
Mr. Heckewelder to Jno Askin
Recd. And Answ. June 5th -----
No. 9

Gajahoga⁷ June 9, 1786

Dear Sir:

I can now inform You that We all arrived safe at this place Yesterday, and the Vessel the Day before. It was indeed lucky for us, that We were got ashore by Hony Point⁸ and did not attempt to go with so many People on Board for this River, which yet, if a Wind had been but favourable while we were at the Islands, We being Ignorant of the difficulty and Danger would have gone, and most probably been knocked to pieces.

Mr. Gutterie indeed deserves much praise for the trouble and care he took, first in making 2 trips to the above mentioned Point, and lastly at this place. He will be able to give You the best Description of this River, and the Danger in attempting to get in, There being not quite 3 feet Water on the Bar ect. I'm sorry to find that nobody from Fort Pitt is on this River, and it seems that Mr. Duncan has not fulfilled his promise as yet, but for what reason I know not. There is a House with about 230 or 40 bags Flower in it 7 Miles up the River, but neither White person nor Indian to be found about the place. I understand the Flower belongs to Mr. Elliot and Colwell.

We think of sending Mr. Bull off to Fort Pitt to enquire for Mr. Duncan and how matters are, since We have also a great deal of Clothing lodged by our Society at Bethlehem⁹ in his hands. You will hear afterwards father by the first Opportunity, In the meantime I and we all acknowledge all Your kind favours to Us, and shall always pray to God to bless You abundantly, I am

Dear Sir
Your most Obedient
Humble Servant
JOHN HECKEWELDER

Endorsed.
Mr. John Askin,
Mercht at Detroit.
Gajahoga, June 9, 1786.
Mr. Heckewelder to
Jno. Askin Recd. The 21 ----
No. 11.

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¹ This letter is contained in the book **Manuscripts from the Burton Historical Collection**, Edited by M. Agnes Burton, 1916. The book consistently spells Heckewelder's name incorrectly as Heckenwelder. It also has other obvious spelling errors that were certainly not in the original. The heavy capitalization of nouns is probably because Heckewelder's native language was German (even though he was born to a German Moravian missionary father living in England at the time). Capitalization of nouns, and sometimes of the pronoun "you", is still normal in German today. Heckewelder also wrote the book **History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States**, published in 1819.

² Hope's Cove: an early name for Put-in-Bay harbor, named after the ship "Hope" that had to send a winter there because of ice on the lake.

³ Captain James Understone, captain of the sloop Mackina, who had acquired 400 acres of lakefront property on Lake Erie near Detroit on June 5, 1784. The Mackina and the Beaver were the two ships carrying Zeisberger's group of over 100 men, women and children, the majority of whom were American Indians.

⁴ James Guthrie, captain of the sloop Beaver.

⁵ the Sandusky River.

⁶ Sandusky Island: A very early name of today's Kelley's Island.

⁷ Gajahoga: An early spelling, perhaps an incorrect one, of Cuyahoga (Cleveland, OH).

⁸ Probably some point on Lake Erie near the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, possibly near today's Whiskey Island. This is definitely not a reference to today's Honey Point on North Bass Island.

⁹ Bethlehem, PA, which is the location of the Moravian Archives in the U.S. today. The original of Zeisberger's diary is located there.