

## Confirming Our Faith for 160 Years—Part 3

Rev. Johan Storm Munch's Missionary Visit to Houston



If I may begin with a quote from the *Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 1*:

During the early years they had to rely on the benevolence of those Pastors willing to embark on a missionary trip to Minnesota...(whose) visits were limited to one or two times a year, and our invaluable Ministerial records faithfully list the dates and services performed: a goodly number of baptisms, communions, and one confirmation. Worship services were held, but not recorded.

Conspicuously absent from the records are the names of any of the officiating clergy, and it took a long time to identify just who blessed our early members between gaining official status as a congregation in 1855 and the arrival of our first permanent pastor in 1859. (We will share that curious journey of discovery at a later time.)

— *Well, now is the time:*

To begin with, the knowledge that Rev. U.V. Koren was the first Norwegian Lutheran minister to visit our area in 1854 and also helped to organize the congregation in 1855 was clearly propelled by the collective memory of our congregation. His picture and the story of his contributions appear in church anniversary articles in the *Houston Signal* from 1909 on, as well as each of our four Anniversary History Books which also include his picture. That is a very good thing since (as stated above) Koren's name appears nowhere in the Ministerial records, and unlike St. Peter's, we have no organizational records for the Stone Church — *the people remembered*.

As you can imagine, any information about those very first years is hard to come by, but there is corroboration (not that it's necessarily necessary) of Koren's first visit in his wife's diary, published in English as *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren, 1853-1855*, in which she mentions her husband "Vilhelm's" absence during one of his "missionary trips" to Minnesota at the same time as the first Ministerial acts were recorded here. (During my first reading of her book back in 1985, I was more than a little amused at the thought of a minister going on a "mission trip" to our area. It just sounded odd when you'd grown up hearing so often about our Christian Missionaries' trips to *foreign lands*.)

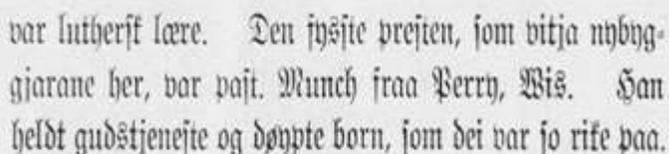
In a somewhat recent development Rev. U.V. Koren's Journals # 1-3, 1853-1860, long thought by many to be lost, were translated by Rev. Don Berg of Decorah, Iowa. It now makes any speculation about Koren's whereabouts and pastoral activities in those early years irrelevant since he recorded all of his travels, an essential primary research source for dozens of congregations in NE Iowa and SE Minn. The Journals note visits to Houston in 1854, 55, 56, & 58.

On the other hand, information about Rev. Johan Storm Munch's visit to Houston in the early years was almost nonexistent. Probably the first mention of his name in popular print was in Vol. 17 of the *Telesoga* which was published in 1913.\* Torkel Oftelie, saga writer for Telelaget of America (a group organized in 1907 and dedicated in part to the preservation of the history and culture of the people from Telemark, Norway and their activities in the US) spent several days in the Houston area in February of 1913 visiting the many people with roots in Telemark and recording their stories.

For some reason our Rev. E.E. Jaastad, who came to Houston 15 years after his visit, was convinced that Rev. Munch was the first Norwegian Lutheran minister to come to our area. This information was passed along to Torkel who included it in his article, so naturally I was both interested and concerned the first time I read it, back in the 1970s. At that time very few of the old *Telesogas* had been translated and the extensive article about the *Telers in Houston* was one of the main reasons I learned to read Norwegian, and of necessity the old fraktur or Gothic script in which it was printed, and *man* was that a long process!

On page 24 we find:

“The first Pastor, who visited the pioneers here, was Past. Munch from Perry, Wis. He held services and Baptized children, with which they were so richly blessed.”



Robert

It was very important that this conflicting information be resolved while Josie Brevig,

Jore and I were researching and writing the 1980 Church History Book. (I hadn't read Elisabeth Koren's diary at that time.) After a surprisingly small amount of research we soon realized that this could definitely not be the case, since our Ministerial records for the Stone Church begin in October 1854 and Robert found that Rev. Munch and his wife Caja didn't come to America until 1855.

However, since Rev. Munch's name was mentioned as visiting Houston in those first years it was important to find out more about him, if possible. At some point I became aware of a book [called \*The Strange American Way\*](#), a collection of Caja Munch's letters back to Norway from Wiota, Wisconsin 1855–1859 (with two of Johan's letters included) translated and published by their grandson Peter A. Munch in 1970. The next question was where I could find one.

*(Continued next month.)*

\* This was 54 years after Munch went back to Norway—*those old Norwegians were “good to remember!”*

— Jim and Shelley, *Cross of Christ Archives*, February 2020