

# *This Month in Moravian History*

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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## David Roentgen: Moravian Cabinetmaker

*Imagine today a person being excluded from the Moravian church for being too prosperous! Seems unlikely, doesn't it? This month we remember such a Moravian, the cabinetmaker David Roentgen, who died 200 years ago on February 12 in Wiesbaden, Germany. Today his furniture is on display in the most prestigious museums around the world.*



David Roentgen was the eldest son of the likewise very famous Moravian cabinetmaker, Abraham Roentgen. David was born August 11, 1743 in the Moravian community of Marienborn, Germany. His father joined the Moravian church in 1738 as a young man living in London. He married and lived in Moravian communities for the rest of his life. David's mother, Susanna, came from a Pietist family and was reputedly very devout. As a child, David lived apart from his parents (as was the Moravian custom) while being raised and educated entirely at Moravian schools in Marienborn, Lindheim and Niesky. In 1759 he transferred to the Moravian school in Neuwied, the town in which his family had settled and his father had established a very successful cabinetry workshop. Soon David asked the church's permission to train with his father, which was granted. In 1761 David joined his father's workshop and began training under his father's expert tutelage.

David Roentgen excelled as his father's apprentice, and soon showed not only skill as a cabinetmaker, but also as a very astute businessman. The Moravian church leaders could not tolerate his growing ambition, calling him the *Bösewicht* [villain] of the Roentgen family. Finally they excluded him from church membership at the end of the 1760s. What bothered Moravian leaders at the time was David's overt ambition. They perceived him as "acting for gain" rather than serving God, and disliked the habit of allowing debts to rise in order to pay for up-front costs and materials. David's father Abraham was also chastised by church leaders periodically, but never possessed the business acumen of his son. On the verge of bankruptcy in 1769, Abraham allowed his son to stage

a public lottery in order to sell off unused stock to pay off debts. The lottery was a tremendous success in terms of David's career; in terms of his relationship with the Moravian church it was a disaster.

In 1772 David Roentgen took over his father's workshop, which he expanded over the next two decades. In 1774 he built a spacious new home and workshop in Neuwied. By 1779 David employed 24 men and collaborated with at least six more. During the 1780s he opened another workshop in Paris and counted Marie Antoinette and Catherine the Great as satisfied clients.

David Roentgen never turned his back on the Moravian church. During these decades of prosperity, he continued to reapply for church membership despite frequent denials. He even sought church approval for his marriage to Dorothea Scheuer in 1773. He was only readmitted to the church in 1791 after being after stripped of his worldly success following the onset of the French Revolution.

In spite of his problems with church leadership, David Roentgen seems to have conducted his dealings fairly according to Christian principles. His workshop ran smoothly and remained loyal to him despite long absences. He even tried to proselytize Catherine the Great, who complained that Roentgen while visiting had attempted to *Herrnhut*-ize the entire Hermitage. Here was no callous materialist. In today's world David Roentgen would be lauded as a Christian businessman with talent, creativity and will to make use of the talents God gave him.

Sources: Fabian, Dietrich. *Abraham und David Roentgen: Von der Schreinerwerkstatt zur Künstmöbel-Manufaktur* (Bad Neustadt 1992). Fabian, Dietrich and Ekkehart Fabian. *Roentgenmöbel aus Neuwied: Leben und Werk von Abraham und David Roentgen*. (Bad Neustadt 1986). Huth, Hans. *Roentgen Furniture: Abraham and David Roentgen, European Cabinet Makers*. (London 1974).

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