

This Month in Moravian History

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Georg Neisser, First Moravian Historian in America

Georg Neisser was one of the first Moravians to come to America. He was also the first historian of the Moravian Church in America. Throughout his life he kept the memory of his roots in the Czech lands alive. This month a new finding aid of Georg Neisser's personal papers was completed and published on the Archives' website.

Georg Neisser was born in the village of Söhle (Zilina) in Moravia on April 11, 1715. When he was eight years old, his parents Georg and Susanna decided to leave for the recently founded community of Herrnhut in Saxony.

Georg Neisser was a member of the first group of Herrnhuters to be sent to Savannah, Georgia, in 1735. After the Moravian community in Savannah broke up, he moved north to Pennsylvania in 1740 where he was witness to many events that formed the Moravian Church: he helped with the construction of the Whitefield House in Nazareth and the first houses of Bethlehem; he was secretary to Count Zinzendorf during his visit to Pennsylvania in 1742; and when a Moravian school was begun in Germantown in 1742 he became one of the schoolteachers. Neisser was also the first person to keep the diary of the Moravian congregation at Bethlehem. Apparently Neisser, who by then was 27 years old, had a talent as a chronicler. Later in life he would devote much of his time collecting historical information.

In 1743 he went on a visit to England and Germany when Zinzendorf's group returned to Europe. A few months after he came back to Bethlehem in October of 1744 he married Catherina Theodora Medler. Her parents immigrated from Württemberg to America when she was six years old.

In 1748 Neisser was ordained a minister of the Moravian Church. With his wife he served in many places: in West Jersey, New York City, Maryland, and in Pennsylvania: Heidelberg, Nazareth, Lancaster, Lebanon, York, Warwick, and Philadelphia. In York, New York, and Philadelphia he served more than once.

Neisser was a Moravian minister but during his free time he was a devoted historian. The Neisser papers cover the early immi-

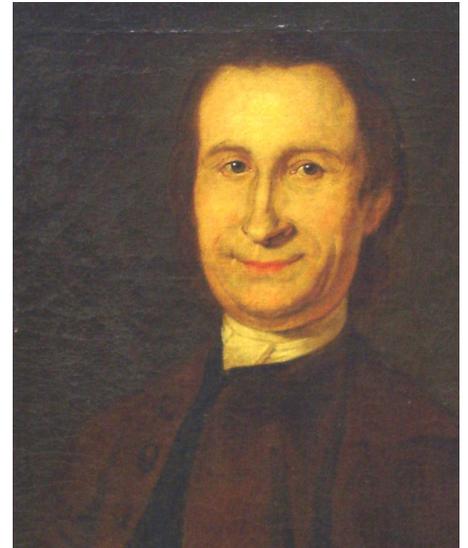
gration from Moravia to Herrnhut, the early history of *Unitas Fratrum* and the hymnody of the church. His hymnological materials consist of several tunebooks with hundreds of hymn tunes in use by the Moravian Church during his lifetime, tunes of hymns from Czech hymnals, and also copies of choral music. A surprising find is a copy of the last two choruses of Handel's *Messiah*: "Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain" and "Amen." The first American (partial) performance of the *Messiah* took place in New York in 1770, where Neisser was minister at the time. Had he perhaps attended one of the performances?

Neisser made lists of bishops and pastors of the *Unitas Fratrum* from 1467 on, and lists of places in Bohemia and Moravia where congregations of the Unity used to exist. He included memoirs of members of the Moravian Church who had emigrated to Herrnhut. He also collected various notes on general church history, Czech church history, on Comenius and his works, and the history of the Renewed Moravian Church.

Neisser started to compile his historical notes in the early 1750s. At first he collected material on the hymnody of the Ancient Bohemian Brethren in 1753. The bulk of his notes, however, were collected later in life when he was Moravian pastor in New York in the 1770s.

From Neisser's notes one can deduce his interpretation of Moravian history. Neisser believed that the Moravian Church in the 18th century directly descended from the Unity of the Brethren as it existed earlier in the Czech lands. This was according to the official history of the Moravian Church, but Neisser thought his fellow Moravians were not sufficiently aware of the early period of the church.

Shortly before Neisser began his work an official history of the Moravian Church, written by David Cranz, was published. Although its title was *Ancient and Modern History of the Brethren* only 106 of the book's 870 pages were dedicated to the Ancient Unity. Neisser did not think this was adequate. He shared his disappointment with Johann Böhner, missionary in St. Thomas and fellow



refugee from Bohemia. Böhner and Neisser corresponded about the history of the Ancient Unity and Böhner communicated his recollections of stories of refugees to Neisser. Is it a coincidence that Neisser's notes on Moravian history began in 1772, soon after Cranz's *History* came out and Neisser and Böhner began their correspondence?

Neisser developed a new identity through his historical work. Far away from the land of his birth Neisser became aware of his roots. National identities were not strong in the 18th century (nationalism was typical for the 19th century), but Neisser knew where he came from. He found his identity within the church that he served. The history of his church was also his personal history. Through his historical work he was able to uncover this part of his identity and to place himself in this tradition.

Neisser died in Philadelphia on November 1, 1784. After his death the Moravian Church purchased his valuable papers for the Archives.

Source

Image: portrait by J.V. Haidt in MAB. Albert H. Frank, "George Neisser, an Early Moravian Historian," *TMHS* 23/2 (1979): 1-11.

www.moravianchurcharchives.org