

This Month in Moravian History

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Johannes Herbst (1735-1812), Moravian Minister and Musician

As several men and women were singing hymns at his sickbed Johannes Herbst “gently” passed away in Salem, North Carolina. It was January 15, 1812, and Herbst had only served seven months as minister of the Salem congregation when he fell ill (“dropsy”) and died. Thus Herbst concluded a long life of service in the Moravian Church.

Johannes Herbst was born in Kempten in Bavaria, Germany, on July 23, 1735. When he was only seven years old, he was sent to live with an uncle who lived in Hirschberg in Silesia (now Jelenia Gora in Poland). We do not know why his parents were not able to raise their son. Johannes’s uncle, however, was unable to keep the boy and placed him in the boarding school in Herrnhut. From then on, the Moravian Church became Herbst’s family.

While Herbst was training as a clockmaker in Herrnhut he was also able to develop his musical talents. As a young man, he lived in various Moravian communities. In 1759 he experienced the attack on Neusalz by Russian troops. Together with the other members of the Neusalz congregation he fled the burning town. He later served as organist in Kleinwelka and even taught in Moravian school in England for four years.

After his return to Germany he married Rosine Louise Clemens in Herrnhut on June 30, 1768. During these years he was a bookkeeper for the administration of the worldwide Moravian Church. After his ordination Herbst served as warden of the Moravian congregations in Neudietendorf and Gnadenfrei until 1786, when he received a call to America. After a three-month sea journey, during which they were



chased by a Algerian pirate ship, Rosine and Johannes, together with a group of ten single brethren, arrived in Philadelphia on September 15, 1786. In their luggage was Johannes’s collection of Moravian music. After they had recovered from their journey, they traveled to Bethlehem, where the new arrivals were welcomed with a lovefeast on September 26th.

Herbst first went to Lancaster, Pa., where he served as minister of the Moravian congregation. While living in Lancaster Herbst would often go to Lititz where he directed music on special occasions in the church. For example, he composed an anthem for the dedication of Lititz Moravian church on August 13, 1787. In 1791 Herbst and his wife were called to Lititz. In addition to his duties as pastor Herbst was active with the music of the congregation. He directed the music and played the organ when needed, he composed many anthems, and made copies of new music coming from Europe.

His music library, now kept at the Moravian Music Foundation in Winston-Salem, N.C., contains over five hundred manuscripts. One scholar calls it “a microcosm of the Moravian sacred vocal repertoire.” From Herbst’s correspondence with Jacob van Vleck, minister and principal of the boarding school for girls in Bethlehem, we learn how Herbst expanded his collection. He asked van Vleck to send him new

compositions, Moravian and non-Moravian, that he copied during the long winter evenings in Lititz. In the summer, copying was difficult, he said, “because of the great heat.” Sometimes Herbst complained about the poor quality of the paper that allowed the ink to bleed through to the other side. It is unclear if all these pieces were actually performed in Lititz; according to official church policy only “carefully selected compositions” by non-Moravians were to be used.

In 1811, after Herbst had served in Lititz for twenty years, he was called to Salem, N.C. Johannes was consecrated as a bishop on May 12, 1811, shortly before the Herbsts left Lititz. In their luggage was also his extensive music collection. Only seven months after their arrival in Salem, Johannes fell ill on January 1, 1812. As long as he was able, Johannes joined in with the hymns of the waking people at his sick bed. On January 15 he passed away.

Sources

Lebenslauf in *Gemeinnachrichten* 1816, vol. 3 suppl. 29; account of sea journey 1786 in *Bethlehem Diary*; A. Caldwell, “Moravian Sacred Vocal Music,” in N. Knouse, *Music of the Moravian Church in America* (2008); Herbst’s correspondence in *FemSem* 553.1; *Synodalverlass 1782*; M. Gombosi, *Catalog of the Johannes Herbst Collection* (1970).