

This Month in Moravian History

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New Herrnhut on St. Thomas



The oldest Moravian church in the western hemisphere is New Herrnhut on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas. It was founded 275 years ago in 1738 after Moravians purchased the land at a public auction. This is an uplifting story of how the first church for enslaved people was founded; it is also the sad story of Moravian involvement in the institution of slavery.

Moravians first came to St. Thomas in 1732 to preach the Gospel to the enslaved Africans. On Sundays, the missionaries visited plantations where they were allowed to hold meetings with the slaves. Beginning in April of 1737 they also held worship services at a place they rented in Charlotte Amalie, described as “two small huts with a dirt floor.”

As their audience grew, the missionaries began to consider purchasing their own plantation. Here they would have more room for their church services and a school. They could also remain undisturbed from the attempts of their opponents to interfere with their work. Furthermore, they would have an opportunity to plant their own vegetable garden, something that was impossible in Charlotte Amalie.

On July 10, 1738, missionaries Friedrich Martin and Matthaeus Freundlich together with his wife Rebecca, asked Johann Carstens, a Danish planter who was sympathetic to the mission, to attend a public auction in Charlotte Amalie. The plantation of the widow Dorothea Salomon, including its slaves, was up for sale that day. The missionaries intended to buy two of the slaves, Anna Maria and Christoph. They were con-

verts and the Moravians wanted to prevent them from being sold to slave owners who may be unsympathetic to the cause of the mission. In March of the same year two slaves—helpers in the small congregation on another plantation—had been separated from their wives and sent away to St. John by their owner in order to pay off a debt. Martin and Freundlich wanted to prevent such a thing from happening again.

While the auction was in progress, so it is told, Rebecca suddenly had an idea. She spoke to Br. Martin: “Listen, since we are oppressed everywhere, talk to Mr. Carstens to buy this piece of land. They ask 300 dollars, without the people who are being sold as well.” Although Br. Martin thought it may be too late for that, he and Freundlich wrote a quick note and sent it to Mr. Carstens. Carstens increased his bid and the plantation was sold to him. Carstens left the plantation to the Moravians, who paid him back the following year. Thus the Moravians became owners of a plantation, including five men, three women, and a girl.

After the auction, Christoph and Anna Maria went to the missionaries to bring them the news. That evening, forty Africans gathered in the mission house for a thanksgiving service. The next morning Br. Martin and Christoph went to inspect the plantation. Coincidentally a shipment of Dutch Moravian hymn books had just arrived from Amsterdam for use in the new congregation; on July 20th the first church council was held. By August the missionaries had completely moved out of their house in

Charlotte Amalie; from then on this plantation was the center of Moravian activity on the island.

The Moravians initially named their plantation *Heerentoetoe*. Moravian historian Oldendorp explains this Dutch creole word means “sea shell of the Lord.” The sea shell could be used as a conch to gather people for church. Modern scholars think it unlikely anyone was allowed to use a conch or even a bell in those years. All sounds of this nature could be interpreted as a fire alarm or as a signal for a rebellion. Another explanation is that *Tutu* is a geographical name. *Tutu* appears on 18th-century maps and is in fact still used as a geographical name for the immediate vicinity of the original plantation. So it may be more likely that the Moravians took the existing toponym *Tutu* and combined it with the prefix *Heeren* (of the Lord), similar as to *Herrnhut*, *Herrnhag*, and the Dutch *Heerendijk*. In 1745 the mission station was renamed *Deknatel* after Joannes Deknatel, a Mennonite minister in Amsterdam who had close contact with the Moravians. In 1757 the mission received its current name, *New Herrnhut*.

Sources

Image: View of New Herrnhut in 1767 by Oldendorp. Source: C.G.A. Oldendorp, *Historie der caribischen Inseln Sanct Thomas, Sanct Crux und Sanct Jan ...*, ed. Gudrun Meier e.a. 4 vol.s Berlin 2000-2002.