

# This Month in Moravian History

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## Zinzendorf's Arrival on St. Thomas

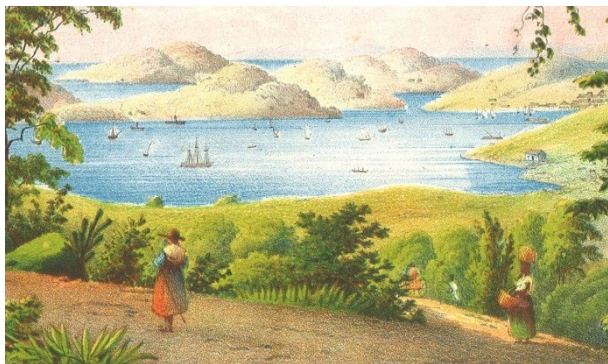
*In late January of 1739, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf landed on the island of St. Thomas to find the resident Moravian missionaries imprisoned by Danish colonial authorities. His timely arrival in 1739 brought about the missionaries' freedom, thus allowing the Brethren to carry on their very first mission in the Americas.*

Moravians first came to St. Thomas in 1732. Friedrich Martin, a native of Upper Silesia, first arrived in March 1736 to assume leadership of the young Moravian mission here. Matthäus Freundlich arrived to assist him in December 1736.

In the span of a year, the two Brethren converted over two hundred slaves. Accounts indicate that hundreds of enslaved

Africans gathered at times to hear Martin deliver sermons. In August 1737, the Moravians acquired an estate at auction through the help of Johan Carstens, a director of the Danish West Indies Company who was sympathetic to the Moravians. Also in 1737, Martin received a written ordination sent from Moravian leaders in London, allowing him to administer sacraments, and thus to baptize slaves.

Many Europeans in St. Thomas were hesitant about the Moravians' activities. Some plantation owners feared the Moravians were capable of inciting slaves to rebel against their masters. Dutch Reformed Pastor Jan Borm—an open critic of the Moravians—took it upon himself to examine the converted slaves and concluded that they lacked any fundamental knowledge of Christianity. This did little to affect the long-term standing of the missionaries, but the critics' attacks continued nonetheless.



On May 4, 1738, Martin consecrated the marriage of Freundlich and Rebecca Shelly, a former slave, further extending local disapproval towards the Moravians in St. Thomas. Pastor Borm petitioned the Danish Governor Friedrich Moth to strip Martin of his right to baptize, administer communion, and officiate marriages, because Br. Martin had

failed to have his ordination countersigned by the Danish crown. Matthäus and Rebecca Freundlich's marriage was therefore called into question. After the petition was acknowledged, the missionaries were put on watch. To make matters worse, they were implicated in an unrelated robbery attempt, which brought them into the Danish court for further questioning. Because the Moravians refused to testify under oath, they were jailed in the capital fortress. After four weeks, because of his severe illness, Br. Martin was released on bail; the Freundlichs, however, remained in jail.

Travelling together, Zinzendorf, Valentin and Veronica Löhans, and Georg and Maria Elisabeth Weber arrived in St. Thomas at dusk on January 29, 1739. Upon anchoring Zinzendorf asked his travel companions, "What if all of our Brethren are now deceased?" Veronica Löhans, who would go on to serve the church twenty-six years in the

Eastern West Indies, responded with a jubilant spirit in faith, "So we are here." By the time of their arrival, however, the Freundlichs had already spent fifteen weeks in confinement; their suffering and starvation had nearly killed them. Because Zinzendorf had left Europe before incoming distress letters from St. Thomas arrived, he and his companions were unaware of the dreadful state of the mission and its missionaries.

Lodging at Carstens's house, Zinzendorf received word of the Freundlichs' fate. Aggravated by the situation and unable to travel under nightfall, he immediately sent word to Governor Moth demanding their release. In an unexpected turn of events, presumably through Zinzendorf's clout with the Danish royalty, the governor released the Moravians the next day. When he came to call on Zinzendorf the governor delivered the count his sincere apologies. A contemporary account reads that "Martin's joy was indescribable. He forgot his sickness and [lack of] sleep." Zinzendorf declared the mission "a greater wonder than Herrnhut," and later renamed the plantation "New Herrnhut."

Br. Freundlich returned to Europe in February of 1742 and passed away shortly thereafter while travelling to Herrnhut. Br. Martin married Maria Barbara Leinbach in Bethlehem in 1742 and continued to serve in the Eastern West Indies until his passing in St. Croix on January 1, 1750.

### Sources

Image: View of St. Thomas by L. T. Reichel : C. G. A. Oldendorp, *Historie der Caribischen Inseln* (2002); J. T. Hamilton & K. G. Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church* (1967).

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