

# *This Month in Moravian History*

A monthly newsletter published by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, commemorating events from Moravian History

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## Leonhard Dober, the First Moravian Missionary

This month we commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> birthday of Leonhard Dober, one of the first two Moravian missionaries sent out from Herrnhut.

Leonhard Dober was born on March 7, 1706, in Mönchsroth, a small village in Franken (now part of Bavaria, Germany). Like his father, Johann, Leonhard was trained as a potter. In 1725, when he was nineteen years old, Leonhard walked 315 miles to join his older brother, Martin, in Herrnhut. We do not exactly know how Martin had heard about Herrnhut, the community founded by Protestant refugees from Moravia just a few years earlier. The Dobers were not the only non-Moravians living in Herrnhut. In 1727 about half of the population of Herrnhut (ca. 300) came from other parts of Germany. Other members of the Dober family soon joined Leonhard and Martin in Herrnhut: their parents, Johann and Anna Barbara, in 1730 and their younger brother Andreas in 1733.

An important event in Leonhard's life took place in 1731 when Anton, a former African slave from St. Thomas, visited Herrnhut. Zinzendorf had met Anton in Copenhagen, Denmark, where he was employed as a servant. Anton, who was baptized, impressed Zinzendorf and his traveling companions with his accounts of the situation on St. Thomas where Africans lived under the harshest of conditions. Zinzendorf sent Anton to Herrnhut where he told the congregation about his sister on St. Thomas who was "eager to learn about Christianity if only God would send someone to teach her". Leonhard felt he should be the person to go to the Caribbean island and tell the slaves "about their Saviour". The Church, however was not quick to rush into such an enterprise, and it took another year until Dober and David Nitschmann, his fellow missionary, received permission for travel to St. Thomas. August 21, 1732, the day they left Herrnhut, marks the beginning of mission work of the Moravian Church.

Dober and Nitschmann arrived on St. Thomas on December 13, 1732. Nitschmann returned to Europe four months later; Dober remained until 1734 when he was called back to become General Elder, a position he would hold until September of 1741.

Dober served the Moravian Church in many places. He worked in Amsterdam where he tried to evangelize the Jewish inhabitants of that city (1738/39). He was

appointed head of Moravian activities in the Netherlands (1741-45), in England (1745-1746) and later in Silesia (1751-58). He was also ordained a bishop of the Church in 1747. After Zinzendorf's death Dober became a member of the Directorate of the Unity - a position he held until he passed away in Herrnhut on April 1, 1766.

Dober lost his first wife, Anna Schindler (1713-1739), after only two years of marriage. He remarried in 1743 with Anne Gertraut Engel (1713-1787).

The Moravian Archives in Bethlehem owns a portrait of Dober which is a bit of a mystery. The Bethlehem portrait, executed by the Moravian painter Johann Valentin Haidt, appears to be a copy of Dober's portrait in Herrnhut by the German painter, Johann Georg Ziesenis. Ziesenis painted the original in Germany around 1765, when Haidt had already been living in Pennsylvania for more than a decade. How was Haidt able to make this copy? The Moravians must have supplied Haidt with a rendering of the original image of Dober to duplicate so that a portrait of this important Moravian would be available here in America.



The Unity Archives in Herrnhut, Germany, is publishing a book on Leonhard Dober this Spring. You can pre-order this German (!) book from the Bethlehem Archives, by sending us a check for \$17.50 (incl. shipping).

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