

Moravian Moment #63...  
Rebekka Freundlich Protten: A Woman of Faith

Today we begin to look at a woman of faith in the Moravian Church. She was born in Antigua, sometime around 1718 as a woman of mixed race. She came to the Danish West Indies at an early age. There she became involved in the Moravian Missionary movement, that involvement carried her to other islands of the Caribbean, to Europe and finally to Africa. She was Rebekka Freundlich Protten, a woman of great faith.

At the beginning of her life she was simply known as “Rebekka” or the “mulatto Rebekka.” She was kidnapped from her home in Antigua sometime around 1724 and taken to St. Thomas where she was sold as a slave.

The young mulatto girl was purchased by Lucas van Beverhount, a prominent planter of St. Thomas, and raised as a part of his family, evidently as a house servant or attendant. As a consequence of that close relationship, the most important event in her life occurred at an early age- she learned to read. Once the world of books had opened to her, she read the Bible and other works, thereby taking her first halting steps into the world of Europeans. Equally important, she received her freedom from Adrian van Beverhount, Lucas’ son, around 1730.

Early in life, she developed an intense interest in religion.

Her attempts to become a Christian, however, were thwarted by the prevailing social circumstances, for neither the official Lutheran Church nor the Dutch Reformed Church allowed non-whites to be baptized at that time. Occasionally, itinerant Catholic priest would visit the Danish islands and sometimes they baptized a few Blacks. Rebekka appealed to one such Priest and he baptized her.

Some time later, in 1732, missionaries from the Moravian Church arrived in St. Thomas for the express purpose of proselytizing among the slaves. The young Rebekka heard of the work of a Moravian named Friedrich Martin and went to see him. When she expressed a concern about the validity of her earlier baptism by the Catholic priest, Martin, as well as his visiting colleague, the noted Bishop Spangenberg, reassured her. Thereafter she began to visit the Mission of the Brethren regularly, with the consent of her employer. Martin immediately saw in Rebekka a genuine spirituality as well as a potential worker for the mission. And Rebekka sensed in Martin and in the brethren, acceptance and sincerity on a level lacking in the other Europeans, she had known to that point in her life.

In several months’ time, she became a dedicated worker for the Mission, attending to the spiritual needs of slave women both black and coloured. Her literacy and ability with languages, as well as her spiritual commitment, made her the ideal person for the task.

By 1737, the Moravian Mission on St. Thomas was still struggling for its survival. Understaffed, overworked and threatened by hostile forces in the European community, the mission did not appear to have favourable prospects at that time.

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