

Shober, Gottlieb ^[1]

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by James S. Brawley, 1994

1 Nov. 1756–29 June 1838

Gottlieb Shober, industrial and business pioneer, lawyer, state senator, postmaster, and church official, was born in Bethlehem, Pa., the son of Andreas and Hedwig Schubert Schober. His grandfather, Johannes Joubert, lived in France, then moved to Germany where his name became Schober. In Silesia, Johannes was associated with the Unitas Fratrum ^[2]. Andreas Schober also became active in the church, and after his marriage in 1743 to Hedwig Regina Schubert at Marienborn, the couple immigrated to Bethlehem, Pa., an established Moravian ^[3] settlement, where Gottlieb was born.

Young Shober received his early education at Nazareth Hall in Bethlehem and at age thirteen was sent with a group of boys to the Moravian settlement of Bethabara ^[4], N.C., with a letter of instruction from his parents that he be taught a suitable trade. In his first winter in Wachovia ^[5], he was apprenticed to a leather maker in the newly established town of Salem ^[6], where he began to demonstrate his opposition to church control over the secular affairs of the community. While working in the leather store he accepted outside work, thereby drawing church disfavor. In 1779 Shober was appointed instructor in the Salem school, a position he held for three years. In 1782 he became an assistant in the Salem store and sold leather breeches that he made. As assistant, he made frequent trips to Charleston, S.C., to trade for articles not produced in Salem.

In 1785 Shober left the leather store to learn the trade of a tinsmith, and in 1786 he opened a tinware shop in Salem. In 1787 he added house painting to his services, and in 1789 the Aeltesten Conferenz (the group that oversaw the religious affairs of the congregation) gave him permission to erect and operate a paper mill ^[7]. He hired Christian Stauber and sent him to Ephrata, Pa., to learn papermaking. Shober went to Raleigh and obtained a loan from the state for £300 without interest for three years to build the mill. In 1791, when the mill began operating, he made Stauber a partner, but in 1793 the partnership was dissolved. The mill, the first of its kind in North Carolina, was located west of Salem on Peter's Creek near where it crosses Academy Street. The superior quality of his product is evident by the fact that one of his customers, the editor of a Salisbury paper, apologized in November 1826 for the inferior quality of the newsprint "last week and this week as the regular supply was exhausted." Shober purchased the land on which the mill was located in 1824 (before this date the church owned all the land in Salem) and continued to run the mill until 1836, when it was sold to Charles Blum. The mill operated until 1874, when it burned. In 1884 another paper mill was erected on the site of Shober's mill.

For some years Shober studied law on his own, and in 1794 he was admitted to the bar in Stokes ^[8] and Rowan ^[9] counties. As the only lawyer among the Moravians ^[3], he handled their legal affairs and was appointed Salem's justice of the peace in 1802. His principal role as a lawyer, however, dealt with the Wilkes County ^[10] land question. In 1769 the Moravians thought that they had secured the deed to two tracts in Wilkes County along the Yadkin River known as the Mulberry Fields and therefore sold it to Hugh Montgomery of Salisbury. However, due to the land confiscation acts ^[11] passed during the Revolution, some of the land titles acquired from Englishmen were invalid. Litigation of this sort was vexing indeed. Over a ten-year period Shober made frequent appearances in superior courts at Morganton, Statesville, and Raleigh to obtain for the Moravians a clear title to the land. The suit was presented in the state supreme court for the seventh and last time in 1828, but its final disposition was not effected until 1856.

While Shober was serving as counsel in the land case, his friends urged him to run for the General Assembly ^[12]. After obtaining tacit permission from the church, he ran for the state senate and was elected in 1805 and again in 1808. In the senate, his efforts on behalf of the land suit did not put an end to the legal controversy. Shober did, however, continue to fight for title until 1810, when he resigned from the case.

His work within the Moravian church was rewarded in 1800, when he was named a member of the Helfer Conferenz, a group no longer in existence, which oversaw the religious and secular affairs of the community. Shober, who had learned to play the organ ^[13] at age fourteen, became one of the church organists for the Salem congregation. In May 1799 he was appointed one of three musicians to direct the music of Salem following the departure of Frederick Peter. He served in this capacity until his resignation in 1802. During this period the church also named him overseer of the beggars who went to Salem.

Shober became a land speculator in 1795, when he purchased through state grants a 40,000-acre tract in Surry County ^[14], 14,800 acres in Stokes County ^[8], and at least 5,000 acres in Yadkin County ^[15] along Deep Creek. These purchases totaled more than 100,000 acres and were for pure speculation. Shober failed to realize any profit in the venture and was forced to sell off as much as he could; the remaining acreage he gave to the Gettysburg Seminary and to his son Emanuel ^[16]. Other land that he purchased included 1,133 acres, acquired in 1813, which he later gave to his son Nathaniel and on which the present town of Kernersville is located. He also owned land in Maryland that he had obtained from the Nanticoke Indians and that he devised to Emanuel "if it can be recovered."

When a post office was established in Salem in 1792, Gottlieb Shober was selected as the first postmaster and served until his son Nathaniel assumed the position in 1805 by appointment of the postmaster general. Shober took over again in 1810 and served until 8 Jan. 1833, when his son Emanuel became postmaster. In this way Shober, with his two sons, kept the postmastership in the family for fifty-two years, except for a three-year period when it was filled by Christopher Reich. Shober's house was used as the first post office.

When only seventeen Shober had felt the call to serve as a minister. However, as the Moravian church then decided such questions by lot, and the lot went against him, he turned his attention to other fields. Shober later wrote that he "was always anxious to live a life devoted to the Lord and I knew that He often made Himself manifest to me." At the mature age of fifty-five his interest in the ministry was rekindled when he journeyed to South Carolina with his friend, the Reverend Charles Storch, a Lutheran minister from Rowan County ^[9]. The following year he determined to obey the impulse that had followed him from his youth, and on 21 Oct. 1810, during the eighth annual convention of the North Carolina Synod, he was ordained a Lutheran clergyman at Organ Church, Rowan County. His action did not preclude his membership in and support of the Moravian church, for he was permitted to retain his home in Salem, to attend the services, and after a period to play the organ at services. For the Lutherans he served as supply minister to small churches in present Davie, Davidson, and Forsyth counties. A historian writing of Shober's work observed that "the congregations in Forsyth County ^[17] near Salem were greatly built up by the efficient labors of the first pastor, the Rev. Gottlieb Shober."

His greatest influence within that church came from his position of leadership in the Lutheran hierarchy. He was the synod's secretary for eight one-year terms (1810–20), its first treasurer (1812–31), and president for nine terms (1821–31). In 1817 he was asked as secretary to prepare a book containing a history of the Reformation together with Martin Luther's writings and an explanation of what they meant. The manuscript was read and approved by the synod, which promptly ordered that 1,500 copies be published. Popularly known by the short title Luther ^[18], it became a source of rupture in the synod that convened in Lincolnton in 1822. Feelings ran high for and against Shober, causing one group under David Hinkle to separate and subsequently form the Tennessee Synod. The two groups remained apart for a century before the fracture was finally healed and the two were rejoined. Into this controversial book on Luther, Shober injected his own ideas for the growth of the church universal. He believed in cooperating with other groups and denominations even though this might call for compromise on the questions of doctrine within the Lutheran church. Shober worked untiringly, often unwisely, for a united Lutheran church and a united Protestantism in America. Hinkle, on the other hand, was equally unyielding in his opposition to any change in the doctrinal position of the early reformers of the church.

Pursuing his idea for an ecumenical movement, Shober along with two other ministers presented a "Plan of Union" at the meetings of the Lutheran Synod and the Episcopal Convention in 1821. The plan called for delegates of the two churches to attend the yearly meetings of the other. Both Episcopalians and Lutherans implemented the proposal, but after 1823 nothing more appears concerning the fraternal relations of the two ecclesiastical bodies. Through his work in helping to organize a general synod of the Lutheran church, he was named by that body to a committee to prepare a hymn book and to translate Luther's catechism. He was also appointed a director of the Gettysburg Seminary, an institution he helped to form and to which he gave funds obtained from land sales in North Carolina.

Shober was instrumental in establishing one of the first, if not the first Sunday schools ^[19] in North Carolina. On 1 Sept. 1816 he conducted the first such school at Hopewell Church, four miles from Salem, for twenty-five children and young adults. He proceeded to establish such schools in other churches under his charge, and his influence extended to other denominations. In 1828 he helped to form a Stokes County Sunday School Union and served for four years as its first president. In his will he devised to each Sunday school in "existence at my decease" ten dollars each for "increasing their reading libraries."

On 17 Dec. 1782 he married Maria Magdalena Transou, the daughter of Philip and Magdalena Gantor Transou, and they became the parents of seven children: Nathaniel, Johanna Sophia ^[20], Emanuel ^[16], Anna Pauline, Hedwig Elizabeth, Benjamin, and Maria Theresa. Mrs. Shober died on 13 June 1835, three years before her husband. Maria and Gottlieb Shober were buried in the Moravian Cemetery, Salem.

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