

Simon the Carter, Simon the Tactician The 1727 Letter to Count August

This is a story which has no clear beginning. Simon Dreisbach writes his letter of January 1727 to Count August of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein after the fact, when only his fine remains to be paid. We are left wondering why he received a summons to appear in court, and what the case was about.

Simon's letter of protest was accidentally discovered on February 14, 2013 by Heinrich Imhof, the designated consultant to the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein. It is an isolated document, lacking a specific context, but is in a group of documents which includes court cases against persons who had left or tried to leave Wittgenstein without the Count's written permission.¹

Simon's letter is short on concrete facts. We need to find a context for the letter, and shall therefore look at both Simon's life and the general situation in Wittgenstein. We can start with what we already know about Simon's life from age twenty-two to twenty-nine – from his marriage in 1720 to the January 1727 letter. Next we shall look at the person to whom the letter is addressed, Count August. Thereafter we can plunge into the letter and present our version of its contents. After considering this new information we will try to see how this enlarges our view of Simon Dreisbach. There is no guarantee that we will find all the answers we are seeking.

1. The young Simon Dreisbach, from 7 November 1720 to 15 January 1727.

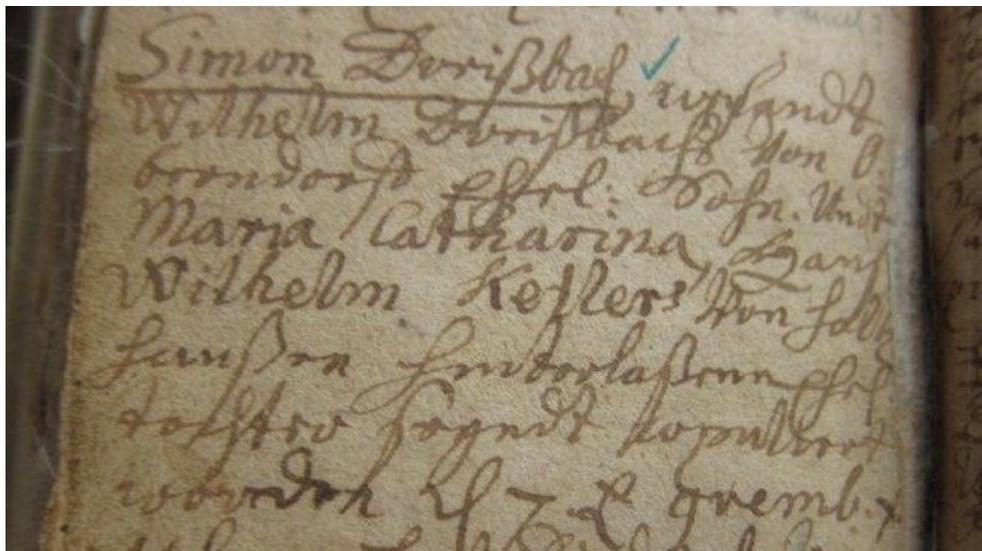


Fig. 1. Marriage record, Feudingen church, p. 168, 5th entry, translation: Simon Dreißbach, the late Wilhelm Dreißbach of Oberndorf's lawful son, and Maria Catharina, Hans Wilhelm Keller of Holzhausen's 'left behind' daughter were wed the 7th day of November (1720). (Thus, both fathers were deceased.) Photo by Marcia Dreisbach Falconer.

¹ Simon's letter is found among many other documents under the designation W 65 I. See Research Notes below.

On 7 November 1720 Simon Dreisbach, age twenty-two, eldest son of twice-widowed Margreth Dreisbach/Wiedt, nee Sassmannshausen, began married life in Oberndorf, in the house "Am Aberge" that he would one day inherit. He brought to the house **Maria Katharina Keller** (known as **Kette**), a young woman from the village of Holzhausen a few miles away. She was two years and a few months older than Simon, and had to fit into a household managed by Simon's mother, only 41, and where the two maternal grandparents still lived, as well as Simon's teenage brothers, **Georg** and **Mannus**.

In the intervening years, up to the time of Simon's 1727 letter, Kette bore four children: Jost (1721), Adam (1722), Maria Katharina (1724) and Alexander (1725). Maria Katharina died at thirteen months in November 1725, just a few weeks before Alexander was born.

There were further family deaths during this period – indeed, all the household members of the older generations died:

- Simon's maternal grandmother **Susanna Sassmannshausen, nee Schneider**, died at 67, in 1721.
- His maternal grandfather, master builder **Johannes Sassmannshausen**, died at almost 75, in 1722,
- Simon's mother, **Margreth Sassmannshausen/Dreisbach/Wiedt**, died at age 47, on 27 April 1726.

By 1727 Simon had become the new *Hausmann* or tenant in fee, after getting the approval of the Count's administration, as it was the Count who owned Simon's house and much of his farmland. Brothers Georg and Mannus were still at home in December 1727, according to a list of the Count's Oberndorf subjects.² Simon however, as we are about to learn, had work which took him away from home. Whether or not Simon's younger brothers had found some sort of work nearby, he would have needed their help with some of the farm work, for Count August and his officials kept increasing the number of days the villagers were obliged to spend working on his farms and in his forests.

To sum up, in this period of about six years, Simon had gone from being a new husband in a house run by the older generations, to being himself the householder, having a sideline of work, three young children, and two grown brothers at home but perhaps already going out to work. Later, we shall examine a more specific period in Simon's life, the spring of 1726.

2, Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein in the 1720's. Good Count, bad Count?



Fig. 2. Detail of a stylized engraving of Laasphe, surmounted by Castle Wittgenstein, seat of the Counts of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein. From here Count August and his administration directed the affairs of Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein, from 1723 until August's death in 1735.³

² Document WA W 51, p. 21b, in the Princely Archive, Laasphe,

³ From a 17th century engraving by Matthias Merian. de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schloss_Wittgenstein.

If you are at the lower-to-middle end of the social ladder, forced to make ever increasing contributions in kind, in labor and in coin to your ruler, then no such ruler is a good ruler. Things could look quite different, of course, from the perspective of the Counts ruling over the two Wittgensteins. Some of their chief concerns were to maintain their elevated status, administer their territories and keep their coffers filled. They could also be clement.

Among those who have found a place in posterity's 'good ruler' category are Count Casimir of the northern house of Wittgenstein-Berleburg (ruled 1712 to 1741), and Henrich Albrecht of the southern house of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, (ruled in Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein from 1698 to 1723). Their positive reputations have much to do with their personal piety, and their religious tolerance in allowing various persecuted religious groups to find asylum in their territories. In addition, the cultural brilliance of Casimir's court at Castle Berleburg added luster to his reputation.

On the other hand, both Counts were impregnated with the principal of absolute rule, and did not look kindly on insubordination. Regrettably, moreover, Henrich Albrecht was not the most efficient or competent of rulers. Though the villagers were required to work hard for these Counts, and though they may have chafed at what they saw as advantages and privileges given to the newly arrived foreign religious radicals, yet Casimir and Henrich Albrecht did have concern for their subjects' welfare, and do not deserve to be placed in the 'bad Count' category. That label must be reserved for Henrich Albrecht's successor, August, the ultimate 'bad Count'.

One could write a novel of intrigue in high places using this younger brother of Henrich Albrecht's as a principal figure. For a number of years August had held an important post at the Prussian court in Berlin. He apparently used his position to misappropriate state funds on a grandiose scale, was finally caught out at the end of 1710 and put in the prison of Spandau, remaining there until May 1711 when he admitted his guilt and offered to make financial restitution.⁴ Upon his return to Wittgenstein in 1719, August became co-regent with Henrich Albrecht. At the latter's death in 1723 August assumed full control of the territory, placing burden upon burden on his over-exploited subjects. In 1724 by court decree he had all his farmer-villagers declared to be serfs in feudal bondage. Wittgenstein researcher Jochen Karl Mehldau has said, "August was the most ruthless ruler Wittgenstein ever had."⁵ August's rule in southern Wittgenstein lasted until his death in 1735. As we follow events in the life of Simon Dreisbach, we would do well to keep in mind how difficult the villagers' lives were under this greedy and exacting Count.

3. Simon's letter of protest and supplication to Count August, dated 15 January 1727.⁶

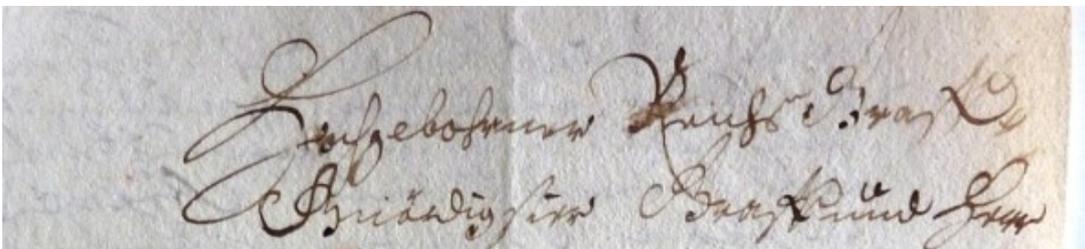


Fig. 3. Addressee at the top of the letter's first page: "High-born Count of the Realm / Most gracious Count and Lord". Photo: Heinrich Imhof (detail).

⁴ http://de.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=ADB:Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein,_August_Graf_zu...

⁵ Message to the author of 4 February 2013.

⁶ Document found in WA W 65 1, Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein, Bad Laasphe.

After the conventional salutation at the top of the page, Simon launches straight into the matter at hand, with none of the expected polite expressions. His letter is not lacking in respect, but it is clear that this is a man who feels he has been wronged.

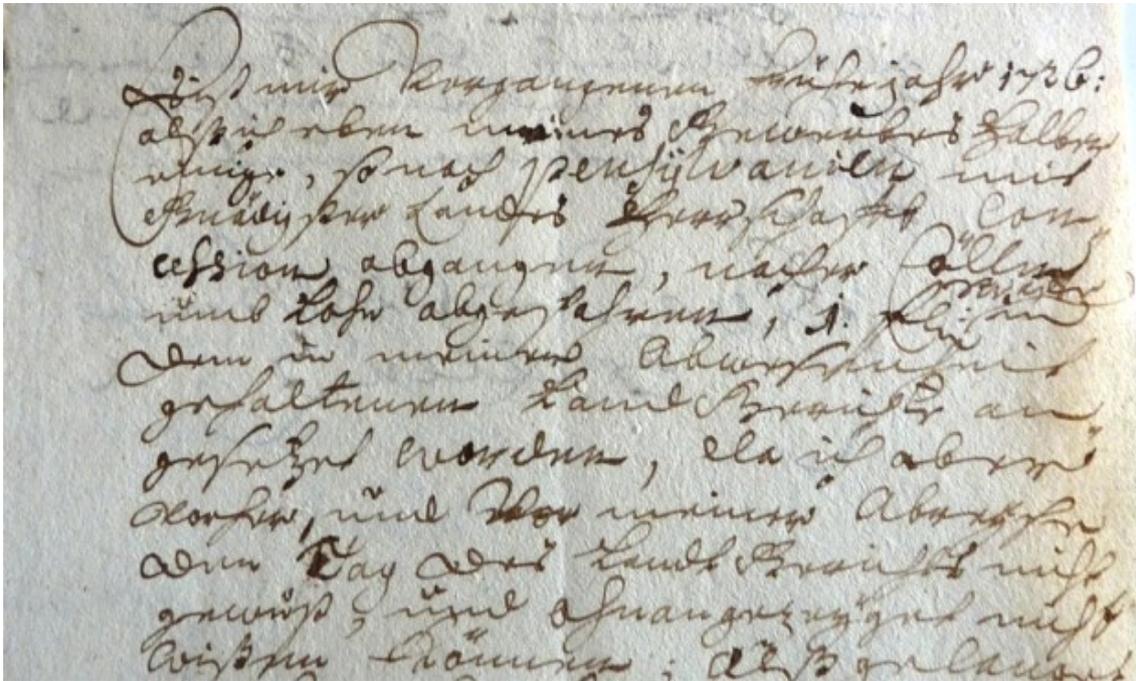


Fig. 4. The first thirteen lines of the letter. They are transcribed and numbered as follows⁷

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Es ist mir vergangenen Frühjahr 1726 | 7. dem in meiner Abwesenheit |
| 2. als ich eben meines Gewerbes Halber | 8. gehaltenen Land Gerichte an- |
| 3. einige, so nach pensylvanien mit | 9. gesetzt worden, da ich aber |
| 4. Gnädigste Landes Herrschaftl[icher] Con- | 10. vorher, und vor meiner Abreyse |
| 5. cession abgangen, nacher Cölln | 11. den Tagh des Landt Gerichts nicht |
| 6. umb Lohe abgefahrenen, 1 fl[orin] straffe in | 12. gewust, und ohnangezeyget nicht |
| | 13. wissen können, ... |

Simon, writing in January 1727, tries to get into one sentence the whole background to his having been fined. His disregard for chronological order is problematic, to say the least. The actual order of events seems to be:

- Some persons left Wittgenstein for Pennsylvania, probably in 1725, but at the latest in early 1726.
- Their leaving was apparently matter for the court session held in Laasphe in the spring of 1726.
- Before the court session, a subpoena was delivered to Simon's house in Oberndorf, but he was not there to receive it, being away in Cologne, delivering bark. The session took place during the period of Simon's absence.
- At some point thereafter, the court decides that Simon is to be fined for not appearing when summoned. Simon is notified, either in 1726 or early 1727 that he must pay a fine of one florin.
- Simon writes his letter of explanation and protest on 15 January 1727.

⁷ I am indebted to Heinrich Imhof of Weidenhausen, Wittgenstein, for invaluable help in correcting my transcription and for suggestions that made sense of the letter's contents. The full transcription is appended.

A literal translation of that first sentence would make little sense to our readers, so a 'reordered' translation is given here. Readers who feel they can provide a more satisfactory translation are encouraged to send us their version. For their benefit (and to the annoyance of everyone else) each segment of the translation below is followed by one or more numbers in parentheses which show from which German line that information was taken. Suggestions and improvements are welcome.

"In the past spring of 1726 (1) in the course of my work (2), I traveled with (a load of) tanning bark (6) to Cologne (5). During my absence (7), I was summoned to appear in court (8), concerning certain persons who had gone to Pennsylvania with the Count's permission (3) (4) (5). I was fined 1 florin (6) for not appearing in court (8) (9), though I had not been informed ahead of time (10) and did not know the date of the session before I left (10) (11), nor could I have known it, not having received notice (12) (13)."

Simon then humbly asks that this fine be remitted, as he could not be deemed answerable for his absence. Further content of the letter will be considered in sections 3. and 4.

From the beginning of this letter we learn something new – at this time Simon was a carter or hauler. As such, he transported goods in a horse-drawn cart. The trip in spring 1726 took him as far as Cologne, on the other side of the Rhine, to deliver his cargo – in this case bark from Wittgenstein's oak forests, destined for some tannery in Cologne. Simon uses the word *Lohe*, which is the term for tanning-bark, the source of tannin necessary for the production of leather. According to the letter, such hauling was Simon's *Gewerbe* (trade), so we can assume that during 1726 and 1727 this was his occupational sideline along with farming the "Am Aberge" property.

The early photo below shows two carts loaded with tanning-bark outside a tannery in the city of Siegen. It was just such a cart Simon would have used for the trip to Cologne. The carts had retained the same form through the centuries, and there was no seating for the carter, who walked the whole way. A trip to Cologne would have required walking for several days in each direction.



Fig. 5. Carts bringing bark to a tannery in the city of Siegen in the early twentieth century. This is the type of cart Simon Dreisbach would have used for the transport of bark to Cologne in the spring of 1726. The wheels are oversized, not only for stability, but so that the carter could grasp the spokes to help move the cart forward where the ground was soft, or on inclines.⁸

A carter's task was physically demanding. He covered long distances on foot on primitive roads, and had no protection from the elements. He had also to be prepared for the attacks of

⁸ From a CD produced by the late Dr, Berthold Stötzel, *Spuren der Vergangenheit: Vergessene Wege und Grenzen im Siegerland*, in connection with an exhibition at Stadtmuseum Freudenberg, September 2008.

brigands when his route took him through forests and uninhabited hilly regions. While transporting a load as unattractive and bulky as bark, Simon's chance of attack was surely minimal. However, we do know from the 1743 list of items Simon had borrowed (discussed in DERR no. 5), that one of the unreturned items was a musket barrel. It is known that larger groups of carters and teamsters who traveled together were armed to ward off brigands. Whether Simon in his carter days transported more desirable cargoes than bark, and whether in such cases he was armed, we cannot say.

However that may be, Simon probably had company on the trip to Cologne. We have evidence in Fig. 5 that the Siegen tannery received more than one cartload of bark at a time. The Cologne tannery, likewise, importing bark from as far away as Wittgenstein, must have had operations of a scale requiring deliveries of more than just one cart load at a time. Simon can thus have been part of a larger transport venture comprising a number of bark-laden carts.

3. Simon the carter tries a tactic

In the latter part of the letter to Count August, Simon seems to be pulling a set of special strings. Having presented his claim that there were no grounds for his being fined, Simon then refers to two of Count August's officials, saying they could give him a good testimonial - *mir guthes zeugnis Beylegen können*. This was a crafty move, as these two were by no means local Wittgenstein officials. We might term them two of August's "cronies" from his years at the Prussian court. They had also held offices in Prussia, though lower than August's. Like August, they had fallen into disgrace and had been imprisoned. Later, August apparently invited them to come to Wittgenstein and administer some of his farming properties and to increase his livestock along the large-scale lines practiced in Prussia. One was Johann Joachim Ackermann, mentioned in Simon's letter as *Herr Camer-Rath Ackermann*, this title indicating that he was a member of August's governing council or Chamber. He was also involved in managing some of the Count's farms. The other is not named, but is mentioned by functions, being called the present administrator of the Count's farm, Schönhut,⁹ and the manager of the Count's farm, Sassmannshausen, in early 1726. This administrator was actually a woman, Anna Sophia Eckard, who seems to have had a determined character and little regard for the villagers she commandeered for obligatory work on 'her' farms. The villagers, already heavily taxed in fees and work-days, had no voice. When they resorted to passive resistance, the only result was that they were punished with large fines for not turning up when ordered to do so.¹⁰

There is no doubt that Simon's putting forward these two "cronies" as persons who could speak favorably to August about him was a strategy worth trying. Simon was surely at times part of the various village groups forced to work on the Count's farms, but as one of a number of field laborers he would hardly be known by name to the Prussian administrators. If, however, the administrators also had some connection with the exporting of bark from the Count's forests to Cologne, then Simon was more likely to have been used by them as an individual carter. This is at present only a supposition, for which archival support has not been found.

⁹ Later known as Augustenhof. We shall return to it as the 1735 scene of pilfering of the Count's produce.

¹⁰ Werner Wied, "Geschichte der herrschaftlichen Höfe im obersten Edertal" in: Werner Wied, ed., *Erndtebrück, ein Heimatbuch des obersten Edertales*, Bd. 2, Jagdgenossenschaft Erndtebrück, 1977, pp. 91-95. For information in detail on the practices of Ackermann and Eckard, see Werner Trossbach, "Widerstand als Normalfall: Bauernunruhen in der Grafschaft Sayn-Wittgenstein-Wittgenstein 1696-1806", *Westfälische Zeitschrift*, vol. 135 (1985), pp. 26-111. See especially pp. 91-98.

We cannot know if Count August ever bothered to ask Ackermann or Eckard about that young carter who did not want to pay his fine. We do know, however, the Count's decision, which has been entered on the reverse side of the letter. It consists of one word: *Abgeschlagen*. (Refused.)

Early traffic code for travelers on German roads¹¹

The road shall be wide enough so that one wagon can pull over to let another pass.

An empty wagon shall give way to a loaded one.

A lighter wagon shall give way to a heavy one.

Whoever can give way most easily, shall do so.

A horseman shall give way to a wagon.

A person on foot shall give way to a horseman.

4. A more nuanced view of Simon Dreisbach

Our view of Simon Dreisbach was previously restricted to what could be learned from church and administrative records. Thus we could picture him as a young father and farmer in early 1727, in a household where his widowed mother, still in her forties, probably held sway. His activities, as far as we knew, would have been limited mainly to farming near the village of Oberndorf, and to the walk to Feudingingen for Sunday church services. We also knew, with regard to the year 1743, that he and Maria Katharina (we did not know then that she went by the name Kette) had seven children. We knew, on the basis of a 1928 letter sent to a Pennsylvania researcher from the Princely Archive in Laasphe,¹² that Simon and his family had left Wittgenstein secretly, in 1743, without the Count's permission. Furthermore, we had proof from the loyalty and abjuration lists in the courthouse in Philadelphia that in September 1743 Simon could sign his name, as could his two eldest sons. That was what we knew before 2011.¹³ Now our view of Simon Dreisbach is much expanded,

We now know that, for a time at least, Simon Dreisbach was a carter, and that his work took him as far as Cologne. We have also learned that in his absence he was summoned to appear at court in the spring of 1726.

This period in early 1726, and the preceding months, had been a difficult one in Simon's family. Little Catharina, their third child and only daughter, died when thirteen months old and was buried on the 16th of November, 1725. Mother Kette was then in the final stages of her fourth pregnancy. We do not know the exact date of third son Alexander's birth, but it was probably in late November, perhaps only two weeks or so after Catharina's funeral. When it was time for Alexander's christening, on 4 December, Simon invited only four sponsors, and one was his brother Mannus, still living at home. It was surely a simpler and more sober christening than those described in the previous DERR. There was one more death to come in this period. Simon's mother, Margreth, died at age forty-seven, on 27 April 1726. We cannot know, but the possibility exists that she died during Simon's absence in Cologne.

We also know that despite the limited schooling available in the Wittgenstein villages, Simon was literate and capable of composing and writing a letter to Count August. That is perhaps more than

¹¹ For source, see note 6.

¹² This will be part of a later DERR telling how American Dreisbachs gradually got to learn about their past.

¹³ See Research Notes below for the documents recently discovered.

one might expect from a young feudal farmer and carter. We can also surmise that Simon had a certain amount of self-confidence, as he did not hesitate to try to involve two highly placed persons in his appeal. However concise Simon's letter may be, he does not neglect the necessary civilities. Simon ends his text with the usual praise of the Count's graciousness, followed by the written equivalent of a sweeping bow – the obligatory closing phrase, "your ... Excellency's most humble and most obedient Simon Dreysbach of Oberndorf".¹⁴

What we do not know is why Simon was ordered to appear in court, and what the case was about, or who those persons were who had gone to Pennsylvania. No record of that individual court session has been found in the Princely archive in Bad Laasphe.¹⁵ That the proceedings had something to do with emigration from Wittgenstein can be inferred.

In future DERRs we will examine various stages and facets of emigration from Wittgenstein, making some new connections and revising at least one widespread but mistaken view. As an early but significant background to later Dreisbach emigration, we shall consider the dramatic history of the first major wave of emigration in 1724-1725. Several Dreisbachs were involved, one of whom was captured after having got across the border with her family – Simon Dreisbach's aunt.

Research notes

- **Documents produced by, or about Simon Dreisbach, discovered by Heinrich Imhof 2011-2013:**

Heinrich Imhof, the designated consultant to the Princely Archive of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein in Bad Laasphe, is doubtless the foremost expert on emigration from Wittgenstein to North America. He has been most generous, sharing his knowledge and his time, not only with Dreisbachs but with many researchers seeking to learn about their Wittgenstein family roots. It was Mr. Imhof who discovered the documents relevant to the life of Simon Dreisbach that form the foundation of these DERR reports. They are, in the order he discovered them:

March 2011: Many pages of proceedings of Count Friedrich's governing Chamber in the years 1743-1745 concerning the property Simon Dreisbach had abandoned when he went to Pennsylvania, and especially the ensuing complications. These records include the testimony of an eye-witness who was at Simon's house on the night when the Dreisbach family left for Pennsylvania. (WA D 53)

January 2013: Two letters written by Simon Dreisbach from prison in 1737. (In WA D I4)

January 2013: Many pages of testimonies in a court case (Adam Milchsack) covering the period 1735-1740. There is a short section from 1735 with testimony given by Simon Dreisbach. (WA P 464)

February 2013: Simon's letter to Count August of 15 January 1727. (In WA W 65 I)

A. D. G., 19 July 2013

¹⁴ "Ew. Reichs Hoch Gräfl[iche] Excellenz unterthanigster und Gehorsamster Simon Dreysbach aus oberndorff".

¹⁵ No mention has been found in the extant court records of 1726 as to what may have been discussed in this unidentified spring session, or which persons may have been involved. (Confirmation of this was received from Heinrich Imhof on 27 June 2013.)

Simon Dreisbach's letter found by Heinrich Imhof on 14 February 2013 in WA W 65 I

*Transcription by Ardis Dreisbach Grosjean,
reviewed and corrected by Heinrich Imhof*

d[en] 15. Jan. 1727

Hochgebohrner Reichs Graff
Gnädigster Graff und Herr

Es ist mir vergangenen Frühjahr 1726
alß ich eben meines Gewerbes Halber
einlige, so nach pensylvanien mit
Gnädigster Landes Herrschaftl[icher] Con-
cession abgangen, nacher Cölln
umb Lohe abgefahren, 1. fl[orin] straffe in
dem in meiner Abwesenheit
gehaltenen Land Gerichte an-
gesetzt worden, da ich aber
vorher, und vor meiner Abreyse
den Tag des Landt Gerichts nicht
gewust, und ohnangezeyget nicht
wißen können; alß gelanget
an Ew. Hochgräfl[iche] Excellenz

mein unterthänigstes Suchen
dieselbe geruhen gnädigst
mich von dieser angesetzten
doch unverschuldeten Straffe
in Hohen Gnaden zu Befreyen
und zu Bezeygung meiner Un-
schuld, wie auch dero Herr
Cammer-Rath Ackermann, wie
ungleichen der ietzige Verwal-
ter Schönhütter, der damahls
eben zu Saßmannshausen
gewesen, mir guthes zeug-
nis Beylegen können.
Ich will diese Hohe Gnade un-
terthänigst erkennen, und
Hochlich rühmen, und Ver-
harre,
Ew. Reichs Hoch Gräfl[iche]
Excellenz

unterthanigster
und Gehorsamster

Simon Dreysbach
aus oberndorff

*(On the reverse, the Count's terse answer has
been written : Abgeschlag[en] = Refused)*