

# Heritage echoes down through Christmases

Chorus of cherished rituals arises from immigrants to the Carolinas

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For tens of thousands of German and Scots-Irish pioneers - all heading south in the 1750s - the Great Wagon Road stretching from Pennsylvania to the Carolina Piedmont was the pathway to land and religious liberty.

These Lutherans, Moravians and Presbyterians, many European-born, brought with them their rituals, their foods, their traditions - and their different ways of celebrating Christmastime.

Today, on this happiest of holidays, when Christians of various backgrounds unite in their celebration of the coming of a divine king, you can still hear modern echoes of those long-ago colonial Christmases:

At Charlotte's Little Church on the Lane, Moravians and their guests ushered in Christmas on Thursday the same way those first Carolina Moravians did more than 250 years ago: with "lovefeasts," festive services with hot coffee, sweet buns and hymns of joy.

Over at St. Mark's Lutheran, German-born worshipers attending a candlelight Christmas Eve service shared, just as their 18th-century counterparts did, the story of Jesus' birth in their native tongue.

At the Charlotte Museum of History next month, descendants of the Scots-Irish Presbyterians who started Mecklenburg County's first seven churches will dress like their ancestors and mark Twelfth Night, the end of the Christmas season, with cake, card games and even a little dancing. Who brought the joy of Christmas to the Piedmont?

That would be the Moravians, musical Protestants also known for their food, their decorations, their pacifism and their fellowship - they called each other "brother" and "sister." They fled their homeland (now part of the Czech Republic) looking for religious freedom. They found it in Bethlehem, Pa., and, starting in 1753, in a 100,000-acre tract later called Wachovia (now part of Forsyth County.)

They had come to North Carolina, as a church-centered community, to evangelize the Indians, but shared their Christmas spirit - punctuated by horns and trombones - with other settlers, too. Centuries later, the Moravians are still happy hosts at Christmastime. Every Christmas Eve, non-Moravians arrive early to be part of the packed houses for the lovefeasts at Moravian churches in Mecklenburg with names like Peace, New Beginnings and Little Church on the Lane.

"I've learned from the people who come that they're looking for simplicity, they're looking for what's at the heart of Christmas," says the Rev. Steve Wilson, pastor at Little Church on the Lane for the past 15 years. "This is really what the celebration of Jesus is about."

Moravian lovefeasts are so popular that some other, non-Moravian churches - including Myers Park Baptist and Myers Park United Methodist - have put on their own in recent weeks.

Queens University of Charlotte, once known as Presbyterian Female College, has a lovefeast just before final exams. It's orchestrated by the students and draws people from nearby neighborhoods. Even some of the school's former employees return for it.

"I wouldn't underestimate the value of community gathering, beyond the family meetings in our homes," says the Rev. Diane Mowrey, the chaplain at Queens. "It's about taking time to share the love of Christ with the folks around you."

### **Baptists, Methodists, Catholics**

In and around Charlotte, those whose spiritual ancestors dominated the colonial Piedmont after that first great migration are now outnumbered by members of other denominations.

By Baptists, white and black, who began multiplying and dividing in the years before and after the Civil War, inspired by their belief in autonomous congregations and in spirit over seminary degrees in their pastors.

By Methodists, white and black, whose numbers were spurred by circuit-riding preachers on horseback and by freedom-loving ex-slaves who started the AME Zion Church, now headquartered in Charlotte, and other predominantly African-American denominations.

By Roman Catholics, transplants and immigrants, who powered a second great migration, in the 1980s and '90s, as they chased jobs and sunny climes in a South that had been transformed into a welcoming place by the civil rights movement.

### **Germans are still arriving**

This latest wave of newcomers and immigrants is also boosting attendance at Charlotte's Protestant churches - including some with a spiritual and cultural kinship to those long-ago colonial Christians.

St. Mark's Lutheran in Myers Park, Deutsche Evangelikale Lutherische Kirche - German Evangelical Lutheran Church - holds German-language services for some of the 20,000 German immigrants in Charlotte.

The 18th-century German pioneers were also immigrants who worshiped in their mother tongue. For language and cultural reasons, they tended to keep to themselves, settling and starting churches in Cabarrus, Rowan and, eventually, Mecklenburg counties. Most were farmers and Lutherans, members of the church named for the German priest/theologian who started the Protestant Reformation.

At Thursday's afternoon Christmas Eve service, St. Mark's sanctuary was dark except for the light from candles. And those in the pews sang "Silent Night," composed by an Austrian priest, in its original German language.

"Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,  
"Alles schläft; einsam wacht..."

The Rev. Matthias Bechert, the pastor, who hails from the Frankfurt area in Germany, sounds as grateful for his Christmas in the Carolinas as the 18th-century immigrants.

"A very welcome place," he says.

### **Presbyterians bring Twelfth Night**

In the 1750s, the Germans' celebration of Christmas was exuberant compared with the Scots-Irish Presbyterians who settled Mecklenburg.

Like the Puritans of New England, they took a stern, Calvinist view of attempts to turn this religious holiday into a festive occasion.

After the Reformation, they came to believe that such frivolity, especially in church, was unbiblical. Christmas carols? Those were for the English Anglicans, whom Presbyterians considered "first cousins to Catholics," says the Rev. John Todd of Hopewell Presbyterian Church, started in 1762.

Christmas was a day to go to church - the simpler the service, the better, Todd says - and maybe have a quiet dinner with family. It was a slower time in the agricultural year, so there was an opportunity for some leisure. As long as you didn't overdo it.

But even Scots-Irish Presbyterians had to have a little fun sometimes. The occasion to let go was Twelfth Night on Jan. 5 or 6. For Christians, it marks the arrival in Bethlehem of the Magi, or Three Wise Men. It also concludes the 12 days of Christmas, offering an excuse for secular merrymaking.

"Twelfth Night was probably the biggest celebration party time," says Leslie Kesler, historian at the Charlotte Museum of History. "It was somewhere between your office party of today and New Year's Eve."

On Jan. 5, the museum will throw its annual Twelfth Night party, with participants dressed in colonial garb. Among the highlights: hot cider, open-hearth cooking and a Twelfth Night cake. The person who gets the slice with the bean inside is deemed king or queen for 2010.

Mortgage banker Jim Heffner and his two children will be there, decked out in the kind of clothes his Scots-Irish ancestors, the Alexanders, wore when they attended Sugaw Creek Presbyterian - one of the county's oldest churches.

Says Heffner: "I used to tease the Alexanders (including his grandmother) that the Scots-Irish Presbyterians saw how much fun the Lutherans were having at Christmastime, so they invented Twelfth Night."

### **Patchwork grows more colorful**

In the 21st century, the Piedmont's religious scene - even within Christianity - is increasingly diverse.

Baptists dominated for most of the 19th and 20th centuries, partly because of the appeal of their decentralized approach to governance: Each congregation answered only to itself - and God.

In recent years, the growth has come mostly from Catholics. They now outnumber even Southern Baptists - still America's most populous Protestant denomination - in Mecklenburg County.

One result of all this variety: Churches are weaving an ever-bigger patchwork of local yuletide scenes.

They include traditions that originated in Europe - the first Moravian lovefeast dates to 1727, in Germany - as well as customs cherished by newcomers.

Just as old - though new to Charlotte - are Christmas traditions brought here by Latin American immigrants.

At Pineville United Methodist Church, Hispanics and Anglos from four churches recently presented "Las Posadas," a re-enactment, with song, of Mary and Joseph's search to find room at the inn in Bethlehem.

Though most of the skit, long a staple in Catholic Mexico, was in Spanish, English-speakers in the pews didn't really need a translation.

"We know what the story is," says the Rev. Tom Stinson-Wesley, pastor at Pineville United Methodist. "It was Christians coming together around the Christmas story."