

Starry celebrations and grass-roots galas

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From neighborhoods to small towns to the heart of uptown Charlotte, residents celebrated America's 233rd birthday Saturday with Elvis suits, costumed cats and the urge to party like it was 1776.

Fireworks lit the sky over Memorial Stadium, where the Red, White & Boom festival drew thousands to the center city for a sparkling display. Crowds also gathered for WBT's SkyShow at Knights Stadium, and other spectacular shows at Carowinds and the U.S. Whitewater Center.

But before the big sky shows, homegrown celebrations gave off sparks of their own.

Elizabeth gets involved

Dressed as Uncle Sam, Charlotte mime Hardin Minor had his dog in one hand and a trumpet in the other as he kicked off the Elizabeth neighborhood parade.

Minor has led the annual parade for 16 years, with his mother, Kassie, now 87, riding along in a 1970 Mustang convertible.

Minor's son Massie, 23, wore a spangled blue jumpsuit and Elvis wig, while Mecklenburg County commissioners' chair Jennifer Roberts waved an N.C. flag as she strolled.

"Usually we don't have any spectators, because everybody's in the parade," Hardin Minor said, as about 75 residents of the neighborhood near uptown walked Clement Avenue wearing everything from seersucker suits to hats shaped like hot dogs.

Cousins Lila Gibbs and Miller Baldwin, both 1 year old, rode in a red wagon. Their grandmother Ann Baldwin and neighbor Carlson Willyard carried an American flag that once draped the coffin of Willyard's mother, a Navy nurse who served in World War II.

There were dogs in bandannas, kids riding skateboards – even a cat named Rosie wearing a red, white and blue bow.

Afterward, residents gathered in Minor's back yard for hot dogs, prizes and a reading from the poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

Crispy fried croaker

Nearby in the Cherry neighborhood, children slid down a giant inflatable slide in the parking lot of Pleasant Hill Baptist Church.

For more than 39 years, church members have celebrated July 4 with a fish fry, sack races and other games.

"They come from everywhere to eat," said church secretary Gloria Smalls, dishing up a plate of crispy fried croaker and slaw for one of the several hundred visitors.

Hoops and shirts

Overlooking Shamrock Drive in east Charlotte, girls in long linen skirts and boys in knee britches used sticks to push hoops across a hill.

This is what July 4 might have looked like in 1776 at the home of Hezekiah Alexander, one of the signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

Alexander's three-story stone house stands on the grounds of what is now the Charlotte Museum of History. Visitors Saturday watched children in colonial clothes play games such as marbles, hoops and rounders.

“It's like colonial baseball,” 11-year-old Phillip Calhoun said of rounders. “Except you run backwards, and there are no strikes or fouls.”



Emma Gardiner-Parks, 13, of Charlotte plays an old-fashioned game of hoops Saturday July 4th at the Charlotte Museum of History. Kids dressed in colonial clothes and played games kids would have played in the Charlotte area in 1776 as part of the July 4th celebration at the Museum of History. DIEDRA LAIRD - dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

Politics and ice pops

The Hickory Grove community's 41st annual parade turned a bustling chunk of W.T. Harris Boulevard into an old-fashioned small town.

Several hundred people in lawn chairs lined the sidewalk to watch a kazoo band, kids on bikes decked with streamers and a juggler in flag suspenders riding a unicycle.

Nearly everyone in the parade threw candy, which children scooped up like it was Halloween. Democratic mayoral candidate Anthony Foxx one-upped them by handing out frozen treats.

“You see all the notables,” said John Burns, 42, playing an antique trombone accompanied by Alan Davis, 63, on accordion. “But it's a very unassuming kind of thing.”

Staff writer Andrew Dunn contributed.