

Perspectives

An Old Salem Christmas

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What does Christmas mean to you — plastic Santa Clauses, blinking holiday lights, unnaturally sweet candy canes? Not if you live or work in Old Salem.

In Old Salem, Christmas is still celebrated in the same manner that it was 200 years ago. Moravian stars, hot apple cider and hand dipped candles usher in a traditional Christmas celebration.

It is little wonder that the Southeast Tourism Society named Old Salem Christmas one of the Top 20 Events in the Southeast, for nowhere else can one enjoy an authentic Moravian Christmas celebration.

Moravians settled in Salem, N.C. in 1766, after fleeing from Europe to escape religious persecution. The Moravians had initially lived in an area that became the Czech Republic before immigrating to Germany and finally arriving in the New World. They brought to America a heritage grounded in both Czech and German cultures.

The town of Old Salem replicates the customs of the original Moravians not only at Christmastime, but year-round. The buildings, trades and authentic costume of the workers reflect Moravian culture.

Each year from early November through the end of December, Old Salem holds a multitude of holiday events for the community. Each activity is guided by interpreters wearing traditional costume and working in one of the nine restored buildings.

During the Christmas season, the buildings exemplify anything but the stark life of the 18th century. Evergreens garnished with paper roses, as well as apples, decorative cookies and natural wreaths, help to bring a touch of warmth to the 18th-century structures. Guests can decorate wooden pyramids with candles, greenery, fresh fruit and Bible verses. Making hand-dipped candles, paper nativity sets and Moravian stars are also options for visitors.

The Winkler Bakery — Old Salem's shop for authentic baked goods — uses its wood-fired beehive-shaped oven to create Christmas specialties such as stollen, a sweet German bread containing fruits and nuts. The Old Salem Shop and the T. Bagge Merchant Store

The simplicity of Moravian traditions endures in Old Salem and at the university during the holiday season



The restored Moravian village in Old Salem hosts many Christmas activities for the community. Festivities include candle-making, Moravian song performances and sampling of baked goods.

sell Moravian stars and beeswax candles, so that visitors can bring a bit of the Moravian celebration to their own homes. Buildings are open from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Sunday.

On December 20 the celebration will culminate in a parade, when Moravian brass bands will wander through the village, entertaining

visitors with their tunes.

One of the most significant Moravian traditions of the entire year is the Moravian Lovefeast, held during the Christmas season.

Lovefeasts began as the first Christian gathering after the Easter holiday. Although the lovefeast originated in the first century, it was not until the 18th century that the Moravians revived the simple

ceremony. Moravians began holding the lovefeasts in Saxony, which today is a part of Germany. The ceremony represents the union and equality of its participants and is still observed by Moravians worldwide to mark occasions of deep spiritual significance.

The modern lovefeast consists of a song service and a simple meal shared by all present. There are no rules governing what kind of food should be served, except that it should be simple and easily distributed.

Dieters, women wearing white dresses and bonnets, serve the feast from wicker baskets, after which men, known as sacristans, serve beverages in large mugs. The feast usually consists of a lightly sweetened roll and coffee with sugar and milk already stirred into it.

The Moravians who settled in Salem began to hold Christmas Lovefeasts in which they incorporated Christmas songs into the service.

Each year the university holds its own Moravian Lovefeast, a tradition which began in 1965 when a sophomore student arranged to hold a small lovefeast in Davis Chapel.

The student, Beth Stroupe, '68, was Moravian and felt that a Christmas Lovefeast would provide

the university community with a unique opportunity to celebrate the Christmas season together. Stroupe invited Moravian women to attend the first feast to serve the rolls and coffee.

As the university lovefeast became more popular, two feasts — one at 5 p.m. and one at 7 p.m. — were held in Davis Chapel. Eventually the lovefeast relocated to Wait Chapel to accommodate the growing number of attendees. In recent years, the university concert choir has performed at the lovefeast.

Chaplain Edgar Christman describes the university event as "a unique coming together of the community."

"There is a mystical powerful affirmation about it that is appropriate for the season," Christman said.

According to Christman, some Moravians claim that the event held at the university is the largest indoor lovefeast in North America.