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VIRTUAL VISION QUEST

led by Wanda Patterson, Chair

American Indians Committee

Fielding Lewis NSDAR

December 2024



A 22-pointed Moravian star adorns the mantel of the Chief Vann House as it may have done at the first Cherokee Christmas celebration in 1805. According to the Moravians, the star points in many directions because God is everywhere.

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Moravians minister to the Cherokee

When Chief James Vann completed his beautiful brick mansion in the Cherokee Nation in 1805, he invited Moravian missionaries to celebrate Christmas Eve in his home instead of their small mission station at nearby Spring Place. It had been Vann who found a location for the Moravian mission when they petitioned the Cherokee Council for permission to enter the Cherokee Nation and preach the gospel in 1801. In fact, he purchased the property in the name of the missionaries and allowed them to repay him as they could. (Individuals did not own land in the Nation because all the land belonged to the tribe as a whole. Rather, individuals could purchase the buildings {called improvements} on a piece of land if they wanted to cultivate their holding.) Vann was not a religious man, but he “sponsored” the missionaries with the understanding that they would provide a school for Cherokee children.

The buildings at Spring Place were two small cabins and a shed, hardly conducive to a celebration as important as Christmas, so the missionaries enthusiastically accepted Chief Vann’s invitation and threw themselves into preparations to the event. An entry in their mission journal of December 21 contained the earliest written record of a Christmas tree among the Cherokee. “Today we went three miles in our cart with our pupils to fetch a Christmas tree.” They gathered holly and other greenery to decorate the Vann house, and candles lit their observance. That first celebration was attended by a small group of Cherokees who lived in the area, as well as some of their slaves, plus the Vann slaves. It must have been an unusual multiracial, multinational event because the attendees were white, red, and black; and they spoke Cherokee, English, and German, the Moravians’ native tongue.

When thinking of slavery during pre-Civil War days in America, one pictures men with guns on horseback, guarding slaves. Cherokee slavery was a looser construction with a great deal of autonomy among the enslaved. During the week between Christmas and New Year’s, for example, Negroes were free to go where they wished, visiting family members on other plantations, armed with a supply of brandy to warm their travels. Hence, the Christmas services, as well as weekly Moravian sermons were frequented by Negroes, most of whom spoke English and could understand the missionary message.



The Vann House near Chatsworth, GA, glows by candlelight.

The 1806 Christmas celebration was held at Spring Place with a crowd so large that they could hardly fit into the small cabin which served as home for the missionaries. The mission journal made special note that 19 Negroes attended the service. The Christmas service included a feature of the traditional Moravian celebration called a Lovefeast. Not just refreshments, the wheat cake and hot tea served to the guests was of great religious significance, indicating the love of the congregation, one for another, and the love of God. The school children sang Christmas hymns, delighting the adults in attendance.

The 1807 Christmas observance was thrilling for the students at Spring Place because they each received a number of presents, an unexpected treat for them. Each of the four children received a new cotton shirt, the fabric of which had been woven in the mission weaving hut. Missionary Sister Anna Rosina Gambold sewed the shirts herself. Students who had begun to do arithmetic received the multiplication tables written out and pasted on a little board. Residents of the Moravian town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, had sent each child a printed scripture verse, framed with a watercolored wreath of flowers. The artwork was a grand treasure to the children. Of special delight were gifts of edible treats, including honey cakes, sweet potatoes, dried peaches, walnuts, hazelnuts, peanuts, and chesnuts, primarily grown or collected from the grounds of the mission station. According to the mission journal, "You can easily imagine that their brown

station. According to the mission journal, "You can easily imagine that their brown faces lighted up brightly on receiving so many treasures."

The 1808 Spring Place service was interrupted with the noise of a different type of Christmas celebration. Since a number of Cherokees had intermarried with white traders, they were familiar with Christmas, but few observed the religious aspect of the holiday. Instead, Christmas was a time for dancing, singing, shooting guns, and getting gloriously drunk. Chief Vann owned a couple of trading posts, so he provided barrels of liquor from his inventory, entertaining around 60 Indians who celebrated in his yard. Slaves were invited to enjoy the melee, as well. The party lasted all night, interrupting the Moravian service, keeping the missionaries awake, and continuing through the next day and night after Chief Vann sent out for more "evil spirits." Again, according to the mission journal, "They drank, sang, danced, quarreled, hit each other, and cursed each other using the limited English words they understood since their language did not include curse words."

Following the 1010 Spring Place Christmas observance, some of the older school children wrote a letter to their Moravian benefactors in Salem, North Carolina, thanking them for the gifts sent to the school, including books. In the letter (edited by their missionary teacher, Anna Gambold,) were details of the Moravian Christmas celebration. "After prayer we received a Lovefeast, and sung a Psalm, near the conclusion of which each of us got a lighted wax candle, and a written verse.....We have often heard that you love us poor Indian Children, and pray for us to our dear Savior, that He may make us as happy as He has made you. We humbly thank you for this your great love and entreat you to continue remembering us in your faithful prayers."

The 1812 Spring Place Christmas observance described in the mission journal included appreciation to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, who had sent Bibles and Testiments to the children who could read English. Those who were not yet advanced in reading were gifted with small tracts sent from the church at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Treats for the children included ginger cakes, dried blueberries, various nuts, and dried apple slices. Salem Moravians sent sugar candies and green wax candles, which were used to light the Lovefeast. The mission journal remarked, "A few white people happened to come our way and were quite charmed with the service; and one regretted that the travel money he had with him was not enough to be able to contribute something to the festal joy of these children. They very cordially wished us the blessing of God in our efforts here."

By 1819 the Moravian mission had grown, their little congregation had increased, and their Christmas celebration was a bit more festive with the addition of Christmas Day services. An entry in the mission journal gave some details of the services: "In

Day services. An entry in the mission journal gave some details of the services. In spite of the fact that it was raining and very cold, there were more than 60 of us, old and young of all kinds and colors, at the Lovefeast, and worshiped the Baby Jesus in the manger. . . . On Christmas Day there was first a children's hour, during which four of our pupils recited the verses which they had learned, to the pleasure of those present. We handed out small children's hymnbooks, Scripture tracts, ginger cookies, apple chips, chestnuts, etc. The preaching service, which was numerously attended in spite of the intense cold, was about the joyous song of the angels: 'Glory to god in the highest.'"

In 1821 the mission station included a large barn which doubled as a church on Sundays. The barn was festooned with green branches, according to the Christmas Eve journal. "We celebrated our first Christmas Eve in this place with a brief talk, reading of the Christmas Story, a prayer on our knees, and then a Lovefeast which included the singing of chorales. Twenty-nine young and old people had gathered for this, and the Savior revealed Himself quite graciously among us. The children were very happy when we gave them lighted candles at the end of the service, as well as beautifully decorated verses. The children were very delighted with these and have already memorized them. Our dear brethren and sisters in Salem sent the latter to them. In the festival sermon on December 25 we celebrated the glad tiding of the angel (Luke 2:11): "Unto you a Savior is born." About 100 people gathered and joined us in worshipping the dear baby Jesus in the stable."

"Two Christmas celebrations occurred in 1824 because a second mission station had been opened by the Moravians at Oothcaloga (near present-day Calhoun, GA) in 1822. About 70 people attended the first Christmas Eve service at Oothcaloga, where "We had very sweet Lovefeast." Thirty people returned for the festival sermon on Christmas Day, beginning with a children's service during which they recited memorized scripture verses they had learned "for the edification of those parents who were present."

Meanwhile, at Spring Place the mission journal reported an exciting Christmas Eve. "The celebration took place at 8 P.M. with more than 100 people present. At the conclusion of the Lovefeast, all those present were given burning wax candles, with the wish that Jesus' little flame of love might warm and ignite all their hearts. " Christmas services were frequently times for baptisms and christenings. Two converts were baptized during the 1824 Spring Place Christmas Day service, and "a thousand tears of those present witnessed that the Savior was in our midst and this His good Spirit was working on their hearts."

Christmas services were observed at the mission stations until the Moravian missionaries were forced out of Georgia by the Georgia Guard after 1820 when the

missionaries were forced out of Georgia by the Georgia Guard after 1830 when the government passed laws to rid the state of the Cherokee and open their land to white settlement.

An unusual addition to Christmas decorations in each of the Moravian mission stations was a wooden frame in the shape of a pyramid, containing multiple shelves which were decorated with greenery, berries, and apples which sometimes served as holders for small candles. These constructions may have been precursors to Christmas trees.





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