

This Month in Moravian History

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“Candle burning, my heart yearning” 250 Years of Moravian Christmas Candles in America

For 250 consecutive years this December candles have been part of Moravian Christmas Eve services in America. This tradition first began in Europe in 1747 in the Moravian community of Marienborn, Germany.



In the year 1747 Br. Johannes von Watteville conducted a Christmas Eve service for the children in which lit candles tied with a small red ribbon were distributed to those assembled. The candles were used to illustrate the lesson of Christ's sacrifice and crucifixion, which had ignited “the blood-red flame of love in every heart, which would burn forever to His joy and our salvation.”

Candles were first used in a similar manner in America at the 1752 Christmas Eve service for children in Bethlehem. This occasion was recorded in the Bethlehem Diary: “Br. Graff held a service for the children in which a small burning candle was distributed to each child. Their hearts and ours rejoiced with play and song over the birth of our Savior.”

Although effective and memorable, the use of candles was not immediately established as a yearly Christmas tradition in Europe or America after their initial appearance. The candles were only one of several different gifts distributed to children at Christmas. In Europe children received gifts such as apples or nuts, and candles were not distributed yearly until 1760. In Bethlehem children received fruit in 1751, and apples in 1754. They also celebrated with illuminated paintings and signs printed with text related to Christ's birth.

In 1756 it appears the distribution of candles was established as a yearly tradition in Bethlehem. That year

the children's service was conducted by Peter Böhler. The Bethlehem diarist recorded the occasion: “The children gathered in the Gemein-Saal at 8 o'clock for their Christmas Eve vigils. After a choir solo of the old Christmas hymn, From heaven high I come to earth, I bring good tidings of great mirth, Br. Petrus [Böhler] took the opportunity to explain the remarkable story of Christ's birth in a very charming manner. He stood before the children's illuminated Christmas Eve painting, around which the daily text for the past few days had been written: Holy bridegroom, innocent Lamb! Who left his throne to save all men. The children offered their own Christmas verses, singing with particular feeling and liveliness: Oh! A shepherd's luck to catch a glimpse, for that I'd walk a thousand miles. They then received a gift while also remembering the very greatest and most beautiful gift that the Savior himself gave us. At last each child received a wax candle, which had been lit while singing the verses, Jesus send your little flame here and My heart burns, this I feel. Before you knew it, over 250 candles were burning! This created a charming sight and also a sweet scent by which to sing the verse: How bright appear the starry wounds! Finally Br. Petrus dismissed them with the wish that their hearts, like the candles, burn for the Christ-child. And so they cheerfully went home carrying their burning candles.”

Sources: Bethlehem Diary, December 24, 1752 and December 24, 1756; Adelaide L. Fries, *Customs and Practices of the Moravian Church*, Winston-Salem, NC: Board of Christian Education and Evangelism, 1973; Paul Peucker, “250 Jahre Christnachtskerzen,” *Herrnhuter Bote* 1997.

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