

THE VOICE

of the *Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society and
Cobb Memorial Archives*

SUMMER QUARTERLY MEETING IN LAFAYETTE, ALABAMA

On Saturday, July 19, at 10:00 am CDT (11:00 am EDT), Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society will host its summer quarterly program in downtown Lafayette, Alabama. Last summer, we held our first-ever off-site meeting in downtown West Point's outdoor pavilion alongside the Chattahoochee River. An informational and entertaining program on the history of West Point was followed by a walking tour of historic downtown. According to CVHS President Jason Williams, "We had so much fun we decided to make our summer meeting an annual off-site event! This year our program will be held at "The Venue," located at 9 Alabama Ave E, on the northside of the Courthouse Square. We so appreciate owner Kim Langley for hosting our upcoming meeting and supporting historic preservation in Chambers County."

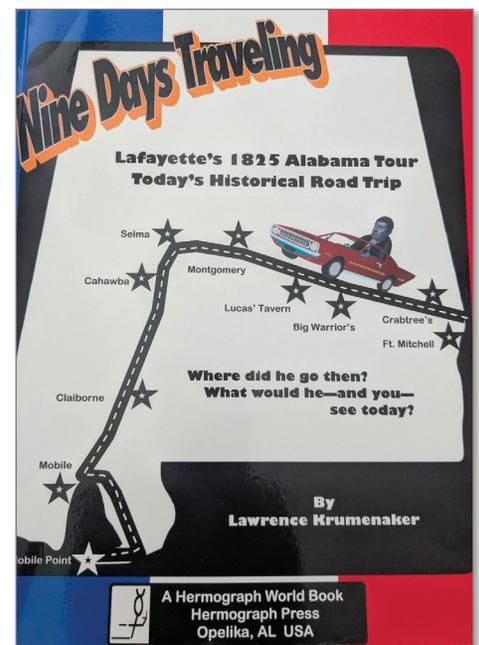
Larry Krumenaker will be presenting the program this quarter, focusing on the life of the most famous French aristocrat to ever visit the United States, the Marquis de Lafayette, for whom the county seat of Chambers County is named. An expert on this subject, Krumenaker's research is the basis for his book, *Nine Days Traveling: Lafayette's 1825 Alabama Tour, Today's Historical Road Trip*. Copies of his publication will be available for sale at the meeting.



The July Meeting of the CVHS will be hosted at The Venue in Downtown Lafayette.

Lafayette was only 20 years old when he sailed across the Atlantic to the "colonies" to volunteer his services to General George Washington, who was impressed with the young Frenchmen and his love of liberty. After the war Lafayette returned to France, taking part in the French Revolution. Fast forward to 1824, when Lafayette-the last remaining Revolutionary War general- was invited by President James Monroe to return to the United States to tour all 24 states. It was during this period that Lafayette traveled through the current state of Alabama.

By the spring of 1825, Lafayette crossed the Chattahoochee River at Columbus, Georgia, into Creek Indian territory. Even though Alabama had become a state in 1819, a portion of the land between the state of Georgia and Montgomery had



continued on next page

THE CHATTAHOOCHEE VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY MEETING

Saturday, July 19th, 2025

11:00 AM (EDT)

Downtown Lafayette

SUMMER QUARTERLY MEETING IN LAFAYETTE - continued from previous page

been delegated to the Creeks as a reservation. A busy but primitive "Federal Road" ran from Columbus to Montgomery, and for nine days the Marquis de Lafayette and his entourage made their way westward. This intriguing chapter in Alabama and Native American histories is often overlooked.

Afterwards, CVHS newsletter editor Ron Williams will lead a walking tour around Courthouse Square, talking about the courthouse and the early days of the city of Lafayette. CVHS members and the general public are invited to attend both the program and walking tour.

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MERRY CHRISTMAS IN JULY!!!

This quarter we are celebrating Christmas with a special extended edition of *the VOICE!* Christmas has always been special in the Valley! From a child's eyes lighting up in the Toy Room at Kessler's and the special visit to sit on Santa's lap in Downtown West Point to the Merry Go Round, the Madonna in

lights, and the Nativity scene in Langdale Meadow there are many special memories of Christmas! While we know there will be no dashing through the snow, and it is too hot to roast chestnuts over an open fire, we do invite you to sit back and enjoy a visit with the ghost of Christmas past.

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Jason Williams

Merry Christmas! It may seem odd to say that but, given that this is a very special anniversary year for the CVHS and that our Christmas Traditions make up a very important piece of our history in the local area, we thought it would be fun to share some of the stories you have shared of memories celebrating the season in *the VOICE*. From the Merry Go Round/Carousel to the Madonna and Child and Nativity or the festive lights and time spent with family and friends, there was something for everyone to enjoy. We hope you will join us this summer for our anniversary meeting and thank you once again for your continuing support!

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The VOICE is a quarterly newsletter of the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society, Inc., P.O. Box 718, West Point, Georgia 31833

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Find us on Facebook and visit our website at <https://cvhistoricalsociety.org/>

MISSION STATEMENT: As a non-profit membership organization, the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society seeks to preserve and promote the history and heritage of Chambers County, Alabama, West Point, Georgia, and the greater Chattahoochee Valley area. CVHS produces and sells historical books and media, publishes a quarterly newspaper, and presents programs with speakers on historical topics of local and regional interest.

VISION STATEMENT: Having been in continuous operation since its founding in 1953, the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society strives to uphold the vision of its founders while posturing the organization for growth in the 21st Century.

CHRISTMAS IN CHAMBERS COUNTY

1 – The number of Silver Dollars given to each child in their Christmas package from the mill company.

1956 – The year that the eyes of the children of the Valley began to shine. This was the first year that the Merry Go Round was put up.

50 to 60 – The number in thousands of rides given on the Merry Go Round each year. The total is well over a million rides since the tradition began.

15 – The number of women (and maybe more) who volunteered to stuff and create the original figures for the Nativity scene in Langdale.

1961 – The year of the last big flood in West Point, and the year that the sheep in the Nativity Scene had to be rescued from the Chattahoochee River.

1400 – The number of lights plus some that are required to create the Madonna in lights. Our very own “stained glass window” has been delighting travelers along Highway 29 since 1961.

5 – The age of Jim Tom Crowder when he attended the first Christmas Tree at the home of Mr. Tom Lang in 1893. It was the first time that many of the mill village children saw real glass Christmas ornaments which had been brought over from England by the Langs. He received a bag of fruit, candy, and nuts as well as a tiny cap pistol, which he treasured. Mr. Crowder attended every Christmas Tree in Langdale for the rest of his life. He attended his last when he was eighty years old.

18 – The day in December 1933 that little Nadine Earles died. She was four years old. The only thing she wanted that Christmas was a doll house. Her parents, Julian and Alma Earles, fulfilled her dream and built her doll house over her grave at the Lanett City Cemetery. It is one of the most well-known sites in East Alabama and has received world-wide attention.

8 – It was an 8-point buck that Lawrence Causey shot in a pasture off the Lafayette Road. This made the front page of *The Chamber County News* on December 12,

In the background: Mr. Tom Lang came to the Valley in the late 1800's to manage the mills in the lower Valley. The community of Langdale is named after this beloved man. Mr. Lang started the tradition of the Christmas Tree and could be considered the father of all the precious Christmas traditions in the Valley.

1946. Chambers County men were travelling far out of the area to deer hunt, and they were surprised to hear that this big buck was quietly grazing among the cows. Deer hunting is a December tradition in many families.

13 – The day in December 1959 that Nella Jean Chambers did not show up to teach her Sunday School Class at Hopewell Methodist Church. The members of her class took advantage of her absence to take up money for her Christmas gift. As members of the church sang of peace on earth and good will toward men, they were unaware that the bodies of Nella and her father, James Edward Chambers, lay dead in their rural farmhouse. Fear spread across the Valley as Christmas approached in 1959. The murders were never solved.

20 – The price in cents for shredded coconut at the Cash Grocery Company in West Point, Georgia, as advertised in the *West Point News* on December 4, 1941. No doubt ladies were preparing to make delicious Coconut Cakes for Christmas! Ironically, a group of sailors with a Navy ship in the background danced across the top of the add with the words, “Ship ahoy! Here are gobs of food bargains.” Three days later on December 7, 1941, Japan would attack American ships at Pearl Harbor bringing the United States into World War II and casting a shadow of worry over the Christmas of 1941.

6 – The number in dollars for canaries according to an advertisement in the *Chattahoochee Valley Times* on December 21, 1930. The Fairfax Green Houses (Phone No 20) stated “It was a special Christmas price for Beautiful Yellow Birds in full Song.”

✦ COTTON MILL CHRISTMAS



Everyone loves Christmas! But Christmas in the Valley is special! I remember how excited I was to catch a glimpse of the Merry Go Round as a child as well as the Nativity and the Madonna! I have heard my mother speak about picking pecans in the old Reid Orchard near Lanett Mill. The mill would buy them from the kids. She said some of those pecans made their way into the giftbags that the mill gave to all the children each Christmas. I also remember the excitement of the Christmas parade in West Point and scurrying for the candy thrown from the floats. What a special place that we live in!

In 2008 a cast of Valley characters composed of young and old performed “A Cotton Mill Christmas” at the Langdale Auditorium. Randy Moon, of Cosmic Groove Music,

wrote this special song. (To view a recording of the event, go the YouTube and search “Cotton Mill Christmas.”)

Randy wrote, “I had never written a song for a play, but I was certainly willing to give it a go. We needed a title song, so I channeled my inner Oscar and Hammerstein or Bernstein and Sondheim and came up with ‘Cotton Mill Christmas’. It was actually one of the easiest songs I’ve ever written.”

“Since I grew up in Langdale, I had experienced everything that was going to be in the play. The lyrics practically wrote themselves and once I had those, the music just poured out. We had some really good singers in the cast, and they did a wonderful job singing it. The last note gets up there, but we hit it.”

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COTTON MILL CHRISTMAS - continued from previous page



With Randy's permission we share the lyrics:

We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas just like we do every year. Brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts and cousins will all be there. Mama's fixin' chicken and dressing. Then we'll go to the company tree. Get a toy and a bag of fruit and candy and a silver dollar just for me.

We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas. What will we do tonight. We could ride up the highway and see the Madonna shining oh so bright. Or we could go ride the Merry Go Round and listen to the carols play, and we could stop at Santa's Workshop. You know it's on the way.

We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas. Hurry up, we can't be late for the Christmas parade up in West Point. Oh I can hardly wait. There'll be marching bands with floats and a rainbow and people everywhere. You know why I'm so excited dontcha. Santa Claus is gonna be there.

Christmas traditions and memories. That's what this song is about. Family and friends together. It's Christmas in the South.

We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas. Do you think it's gonna snow? Will the Manger scene have a blanket of white like it did years ago? Wise men follow the star shining brightly down where baby Jesus sleeps. Angels watch over Joseph and Mary and the shepherds with their sheep.

We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas. We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas. We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas. We're gonna have a cotton mill Christmas.

This year ...this year ...this year!

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THE FANTASTIC RIDERS

An unusual Christmas tradition was enjoyed by some families in the late Nineteenth Century. They were known as the “Fantastic Riders.” The riders were teenage boys and young men, who would dress up in outlandish costumes and wear homemade mask. On Christmas Eve they would go from house to house in their respective communities where they would receive treats.

GeorgiaEncyclopedia.org had this to say about the tradition: “Early Christmas customs offer a dramatic contrast to today’s commercialized holiday. Along with shooting off firecrackers and guns and competing to first shout “Christmas gift” on Christmas morning, Georgians celebrated in a manner more reminiscent of Halloween or Cajun Mardi Gras. Parties of disguised teenagers, known as fantastics in the daytime and sernaters at night, walked or rode horses from house to house begging for treats and entertaining neighbors. Homemade masks called “dough-faces,” cross-dressing, and pranks were variables; towns like Savannah and Decatur took the more structured approach of costumed parades. Derived from the old British custom of “mumming” or “guising,”

“riding fantastic/sernatin” died out with the coming of the automobile and survives only in the memories of some older Georgians.”

The late Jean Crowder Williams, from Langdale, wrote a book of Christmas memories that she titled “And the Greatest of these is Love.” Chapter four contains a few paragraphs about this practice:

“The sight of the snowman and the Santa cause me to recall the stories Mama delighted in telling about Christmas celebrations that she remembered when she was a small girl living out in the country near Standing Rock, Alabama. Her father and the other young men and older boys in that community of Chambers County and round about the countryside, would put on “doughfaces,” which were homemade masks usually made of flour paste, paper and rags, and old clothes or women’s clothing, strange hats, anything to make them look bizarre or grotesque and disguise their identity. I guess you could say these were early versions of Halloween costumes even though they were worn on Christmas Eve night.”



Photograph of Fantastic Riders in northern Chambers County in the 1890's. From the Horace McLean Holderfield Collection.

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THE FANTASTIC RIDERS - continued from previous page

“On prior arrangement, one would start out from his home on horseback and go to the next farm. There he would be welcomed by the women and children of the house and given refreshment. The man, or men of the home would join the first rider, and the procession would begin. They would ride around the country roads stopping at every farmhouse serenading the elders and calling out Christmas greetings, often sending the youngest children scurrying behind mama’s long skirts. The men and boys, from around the age of 14 years and older, at each house would join the others to add to the excitement and merriment.”

“By the time, the “Riding the Fantastics,” as it was called back then, was over it would be late into the night and the men would be filled with jolly, good spirits, and the countryside would be rife with Christmas cheer.”

Special thanks to the Facebook page “Historic West Point and the Chattahoochee Valley” and Debbie Morgan Williams for sharing information about this Christmas Tradition.

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Seven-year-old Deborah Gaither adorned the cover of the December 1956 edition of *The Westpointer*, a publication for the employees of the West Point Manufacturing Company and its subsidiary companies. Deborah lived in Shawmut. Her parents were listed as Gussie and Carl Gaither, Jr. She wanted a bicycle, a doll, and a toy typewriter for Christmas.



You will not find a star to guide you. You will not find shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. And don't try making reservations. There is no inn.

I am not talking about that Bethlehem.

The Bethlehem that I am speaking of has almost been forgotten. It was the name of the community that sprang up around the Bethlehem Baptist Church, located on the corner of River Road and Whites Mill Road. It was later called Glass and finally was engulfed by Fairfax.

There are a lot of differences between the two localities, but they had one thing in common—people found Jesus in both places.

That was what the thirteen men and women intended when they gathered on the 23rd day of October 1835, to form a church. At that time, the church was located on

the ferry road located south of Fairfax near the present Grace Baptist Church.

Basil B. McGinty recorded the story of the church in *The History of the East Liberty Baptist Association*.

He wrote, "They built a log church at that place which they used for a few years; then the location of the church was moved to the site now occupied by Fairview Cemetery, formally known as the Old McGinty Cemetery. They built a house here which they used until a member of the church, Deacon Felix Shanks, gave a lot of land to the church on which to build again... The building was begun in 1870 and completed in 1872 and is an example of good construction built from the excellent material which was plentiful in that day."



The Bethlehem Baptist Church was at one time believed to be the oldest building in the City of Valley.

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O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM - continued from previous page

I have loved that old church all my life. I admire it every time that I drive by, and sometimes I stop to just soak up the atmosphere. It is a place lost in time.

The traffic zooms by, but the church yard looks as if wagons would be more at home there. The only congregation is a hive of bees in the west wall. They are faithful; they haven't missed a Sunday, and their buzzing has replaced the Sacred Harp, or Fa So La music, of the Primitive Baptist Church.

The building may be a little pretentious for people that clung to simple ways. Four columns stand proudly out front. The church held as prominent a place in the landscape as it should have in the lives of its members.

They were called "Hard Shell," but some said, "Hardheaded," and I can say that because many members of my family worshiped there. They stood firm on their beliefs.

"The Bethlehem Baptist Church was strongly missionary," related McGinty, "from the very first. One person attempted to swerve them into an anti-missionary group in the early days, but his attempt failed."

Three preachers were ordained at the church: William H. Harrington, who was one of the foremost preachers of his day, Dr. H. H. McGinty, who held many fine pastorates, and the well-known Reverend B. B. McGinty.

The community that sprang up around the church boasted a school, a cotton gin, and the Sunnyside Peach Farm owned by Mr. John Parnell.

An article titled "Bethlehem News" appeared in *The Lafayette Sun* in the 1880's and 1890's. On Christmas Eve 1884 the article related a humorous story: "One of our little boys went out on the river one morning this week in search of wild geese. On his return, his mother asked, 'How many did you bring back, Charlie?' He looked depressed and then suddenly brightened up replied, 'If I had the one that got drowned and the one that got crippled, I would have two.'"

In 1892, the article stated, "Our school near Riverview is flourishing. Thirty-six names have been enrolled, and the list is being excelled almost daily. The cold snap last week damaged vegetables considerably and it was feared by many that the peach crop was almost entirely destroyed, but it is believed, now, that we will bear a great deal of fruit."

Just after the turn of the 20th century, the community was beginning to be called "Glass" after a prominent family in the area, but the work at Bethlehem continued until 1938.

Fairfax was thriving then and as the saying goes, "They shattered our Glass."

Late in 1938, an article was placed in the local paper. It read, "The Bethlehem Church building in the Glass Community at Fairfax is for sale, the proceeds to be added to the building fund of the Fairfax Baptist Church, with which organization the Bethlehem Church has recently been consolidated..."

And so, Bethlehem passed from the scene, but I have noticed that the bees are not the only ones who have been buzzing around the old building. The valley Historic Preservation Commission has taken on this project.

They are making the foundation sure. That seems fitting for a place that was used for over a century to tell people about the Sure Foundation.

Editor's Note: This article was written many years ago and appears in the book "Past Times" by Ron Williams. Since this writing, the Bethlehem Baptist Church has sadly been torn down.

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CHRISTMAS DURING THE DEPRESSION—OUR CHRISTMAS VISIT TO THE WOODS *by the late Marjorie Dixon Wheeling*

Some of the best Christmases I ever experienced occurred during the Great Depression when as the only child of a middle-aged couple I was growing up on a farm in Alabama. Whether that was due to my youth, innocence, and ability to see mystery and wonder in simple things or to my parents' determination to make Christmas a joyful event in our quiet and simple way of life, I cannot say. Perhaps it was a combination of both things. Whatever the reason, I now recall those times with fond remembrance.

About ten days before Christmas my parents and I would go into the woods in search of the perfect Christmas tree. This tree needed to be round on all sides and the exact height to reach almost to the ceiling in our front hall. The star, which I suppose was a leftover item from my parents' earlier times spent in town, needed to just miss touching the ceiling.

Only sunny day when the weather was as warm as it as it was likely to be in December, we went into the woods with axe, saw and a sack to hold our natural decorations, nuts and other bounties of nature which the woods still provides to those who seek them.

One of the first things that went into our sack was the burr of the sweet gum tree. We referred to these as sweet gum balls and they made very nice ornaments for the tree, especially if one could find, in some dark, forgotten corner of the barn, a few cans of partly used paint and perhaps a small, used brush. This paint and brush, in the hands of a devoted and resourceful parent, could

turn these natural ornaments into colorful man-made treasures which rivaled those of our town kinfolk.

These same sweet gum trees, now thought by some to be a waste of the land upon which they grow, also provided us with gum for chewing during winter months and a fantasy of color in autumn. Those, of course, are other stories.

Usually, not altogether by accident, we would pass by several hickory trees as we searched for the perfect Christmas tree. My parents, who in those days spent time in the woods during the course of the year, apparently kept out a watchful eye for such things as would bring joy during a Christmas season of little money and little means of transportation to town. Somehow, they always knew the best paths to take in our search for treasure. Perhaps their feet had already traced these steps at an



CHRISTMAS DURING THE DEPRESSION - *continued from previous page*

earlier time, and I may have been innocently in their company on some summers day when a child's mind was on swimming holes and watermelons and certainly not on anything as far as in the future as Christmas.

Hickory nuts are a delicious and exotic addition to cakes and candy. They can transform ordinary fare into a confectionery delight which will be pleasing to children and adults alike. Usually, we just happened to pass beneath several of these trees on our Christmas visit to the woods. Some hickory nut trees are prolific and some are not. Some produce large, fat nuts and others produce small, scrawny nuts. My parents, along with the squirrels, seemed to know where the best trees grew. Oftentimes, having been alerted by my father, who was an experienced hunter, we would surprise some enterprising family of squirrels as we came as quietly as possible upon their favorite tree. Then we had entertainment on our trip, and we watched the squirrels scurry away when they heard the sound of dry leaves crackling and crunching under human feet.

The woods not only gave us our Christmas tree and sweet gumballs for decorations and hickory nuts to enhance our Christmas cooking, but also, we found there mistletoe to hang in the doorways, holly with red berries and the scarlet berries of the sumac bush. A bouquet of red sumac berries nestled in a vase of cedar made a feast of color for the eyes unsurpassed by the store-bought poinsettias which sometimes adorned the houses of my cousins who lived in town.

When at last we found the perfect tree, it needed to have, growing on it, a few brown formations which I was later told are caused by an insect infestation. Those brown formations served no particular purpose except to make our tree somehow unique, and I suppose we looked upon them as a sort of built in decoration.

When the tree was cut and we were satisfied that we had gathered the best Christmas treasures to be found in our woods we would haul everything home and the tree would be set up in our front hall on a wooden stand built by my father. If enough time remained before dark and we were not too tired from our long trek in the woods, we would place the star in the top of the tree.

After supper we sat around the fire and planned to make homemade ornaments to decorate our tree the next day when the glass window in the front hall would admit sufficient light for us to be able to see how to do our work.

After making exciting plans for the next few days of Christmas preparations I was put to bed with glorious visions of the magnificent tree dancing in my head.

From the book, "Memories of the Great Depression," published by the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society, Inc., Publication No. 17, 1993, Edited and Illustrated by Randall Allen.



THE FIRST CHRISTMAS IN CHAMBERS COUNTY

Chambers County, Alabama, was created on December 18, 1832, a mere week before Christmas. It has been said that the area was an unbroken wilderness of oak and cedar. A squirrel could go from tree to tree from the Chattahoochee River to the Tallapoosa River without ever touching the ground. Herds of deer could be seen in the far distance as there was no undergrowth in the vast forest. Native American villages dotted the landscape, and the inhabitants must have been concerned at the thought of the influx of settlers preparing to make their way into the new county. While I feel we can be certain that no stockings hung from mantels on that first Christmas in 1832, I feel certain that the Christmas story was shared and that Luke 2 was read in the Old Southwest, as the area was called. No doubt Rev. John Hurst, among the first settlers of Fredonia, Alabama, prior to the formation of the county, read "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord," and Robert Rogers, who was listed as a Cherokee Missionary in the 1832 Census of the Cusseta Tribe on Osanippa Creek, proclaimed the birth of the Savior.

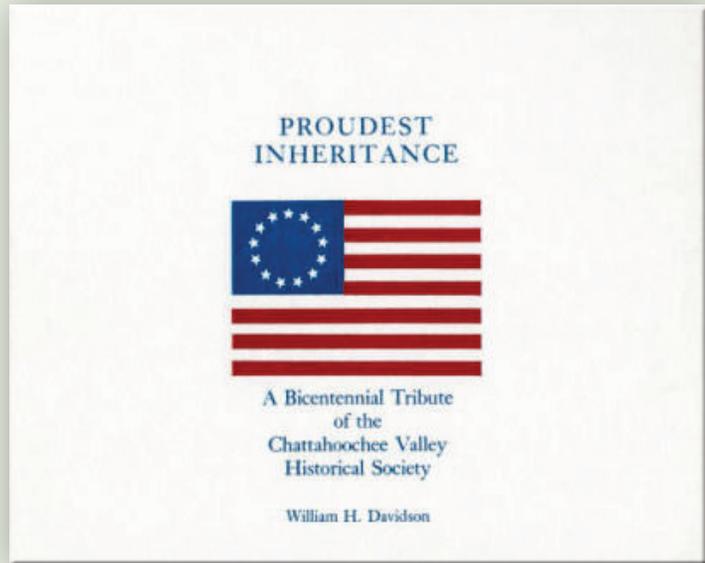
Later, the celebrations would no doubt be grander. A cedar or a holly tree would be brought inside to decorate dog trot cabins, but that first Christmas must have been a simple affair.



Proudest Inheritance

Proudest Inheritance: A Bicentennial Tribute of the Chattahoochee Valley Historical Society. Information taken from records of the Chattahoochee Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, organized in West Point, Georgia, on November 7, 1917, and disbanded December 20, 1933. Also includes text of Captain J.W.F. Little's historic address at West Point on July 4, 1876. William H. Davidson, editor. Copyright 1975. CVHS Publication No.12

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