



A History of Christmas in Four Centuries at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, Virginia

Hugh M. Van Horn

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The way Christmas is observed—at least in the Presbyterian Church—has changed dramatically since America was settled. This book sketches those changes from the perspective of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, Virginia. Constructed in 1775, the Meeting House survived the Revolutionary War, and the Scottish and Scots-Irish members of the congregation played leading roles in establishing the small port town of Alexandria. Located directly across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., Alexandria has had a unique perspective on the development of the United States. Mount Vernon is only seven miles south of Alexandria, and George Washington was a frequent visitor, with many dealings in the town. Members of the Meeting House congregation were among his close friends. Daily life was very different in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and mid-twentieth centuries from what it is in the early decades of the twenty-first. This book notes the changes in living conditions in each of these four centuries as context for the narrative. The Meeting House itself has also changed substantially from century to century, as has the practice of Presbyterian worship in general and the Presbyterian observance of Christmas in particular. In the late eighteenth century, Presbyterian congregations did not observe Christmas in public worship. By the time the nation was poised on the brink of the Civil War, however, Santa Claus and Christmas trees had been introduced in popular culture, although Presbyterians still felt it inappropriate to celebrate Christmas in public worship. By the mid-twentieth century, Christmas services were held both at Alexandria's Second Presbyterian Church and at the Meeting House. And by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first, music and decorations had joined theology and education in prominent places in Presbyterian worship and in the celebration of Christmas.

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