

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Christmastime 1882

Not until 1870 did the U.S. Congress declare Christmas a federal holiday, but only in the District of Columbia, home of the nation's Capitol. In 1885, Congress extended Christmas as a federal holiday nationwide. Now a tradition for more than 130 years, Americans all across the country celebrate the joyous Christmas season.

Of all the Christmas symbols, the Christmas tree is arguably the most familiar. Originally a German custom, Americans began falling in love with the Christmas tree craze by the mid-1800s. But the concept of decorating a tree for Christmas was slow catching-on. Writing about this in 1995, Penne Restad claimed, "By 1900, one American in five was estimated to have a Christmas tree." The other side of that math is that about 80% of households did not have a Christmas tree.

It would be well into the 1900s before Bucklesberry showed itself a leader in Christmas tree production. On November 16, 1916, *The Daily Free Press* of Kinston reported, "Hundreds of trees passed up in former years will fall prey to the lure of gold this season....The 'crop' is in beautiful condition....The production this year is said to be superior in Lenoir County; about 500 trees in the Bucklesberry section are reported to be the finest in the region...."

In addition to trimming the tree, Christmastime in modern America is characterized by scurrying for the right Christmas gift, social gatherings, exquisite foods, and the like. All the seasonal activities and trappings today that typically culminate on Christmas Day, however, are quite different from what was happening in the late 1800s. So different, that we probably wouldn't recognize it as Christmas at all, compared to current day standards.

In short, Christmas in the latter part of the 19th century had nothing to do with tree trimming and partying. Folks back then were fully aware of Christmas and that Jesus was the Reason for the season. But they celebrated Christmas with whatever means they had. Jessica Azar, writing for *The Southern Weekend* in 2015, identified a number of Southern Christmas traditions, both edible and decorative, which stretch back to the 1800s: ambrosia, coconut cake, magnolia and pine decor, oysters, pecan pie, poinsettias, and deep fried turkey.

As for describing Christmastime events, local newspapers in rural areas tended to report on what was important to folks and the activities that reflected their lives at the time. In particular, they published items that related to traditional values, including the livelihoods of their subscribers.

The Daily Journal of New Bern provided a glimpse of Christmastime in Bucklesberry in 1882. In five separate reports from December 20–29, two themes emerged on Bucklesberry happenings during Christmas week—farming and poultry:

1882, December 20: "Joe Sutton [Josiah Sutton, Jr., 1835–1902] stands second best on heavy hogs. One killed on Friday the 8th. inst., weighed 528 lbs." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

1882, December 20: "Bucklesberry farming—W. R. Benton made 8 bales of cotton, averaging over 500 lbs, on 11 acres of land. Wiley Sutton [ca. 1849–unknown] (colored) made 8 bales on 10 acres, averaging over 500 lbs. Wright Lassiter [ca. 1839–unknown], a colored man, and a subscriber to the Journal, made 9 bales of cotton averaging over 500 lbs and about 100 barrels of corn with one horse. The above was all done on the lands of Thomas Sutton, Esq., [1826–1894] in Bucklesberry. Noah [Sutton, 1855–1903] and Joshua Sutton [1857–1941] in the same section made near 16 bales of cotton on 18 acres, averaging about 500 lbs." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

1882, December 23: "Mr. Wm. Hollister gets in this morning a lot of dressed poultry—turkies, chickens, etc., from La Grange. So all who have not secured their Christmas turkey can now come in. We know something about the 'Bucklesberry turkey,' and if some of that breed is in the lot, somebody in New Berne will have a nice Christmas dinner." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

1882, December 24: "A nice snow fell on Sunday night....Many of the farmers in this section have not finished sowing wheat. It is quite late, and the weather just now is unfortunate for that business." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

1882, December 29: "We noticed on yesterday a lot of wild geese and ducks being shipped by Express to Richmond by Mr. W. S. Edmunds. Mr. Edmunds is a fine sportsman, having measured strength with the Bucklesberry Sporting Club and proven himself to be their equal." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

This world would probably be better off, and we might be able to celebrate Christmas and the birth of our Savior with greater meaning, if we could eliminate some of the hoopla and frenzy of Christmastime as we know it today. Wishful thinking, perhaps.