

Kirkin of the Tartan 101

FAQ

What is the Kirkin of the Tartan?

This American tradition was inspired by a Scottish legend that began in the years following the great defeat of the Jacobites (Scottish Highlanders) at Culloden in 1746 by the Kingdom of Great Britain, when tartan was banned. Families supposedly took small scraps of cloth to church (the kirk) to surreptitiously have them blessed during the service.

In 1941 at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC Presbyterian minister and chaplain of the U.S. Senate, Dr. Peter Marshall organized the first official Kirkin of the Tartan. Today's focus celebrates family and remembers the Presbyterian church's connection with Scotland.

What is Tartan?

Tartans, or plaids, may well be ancient. A piece of black and white checked fabric appears to date back to Roman Britain. It is unclear when or how the earliest of these distinctive patterns came into being, but there is some evidence that people living in certain areas wore similar colors in the late Middle Ages, based on writings from the period.

What is the Presbyterian Church's connection with Scotland?

John Knox studied under John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, in Geneva, Switzerland, in the 1500s during the time of the Protestant Reformation. Upon returning to Scotland, Knox wrote the first Book of Church Order and established the Presbyterian Church there.

The Scottish Parliament, after a civil war, invited John Knox and five colleagues to prepare a confession of faith for the church and the nation. They did their work in just four days. The style of the document bears the marks of haste, but the content was not hastily conceived. Scots Reformers had been preparing themselves and their thoughts for a long time. By August 17, 1560 they had written a confession that would solidify Scotland politically and ecclesiastically.

The church spread to Northern Ireland during the plantation movement of the 1600s, and later to America when Presbyterian immigrants came to the New World in droves.

What are the Highland Games?

These are events held in spring and summer in Scotland and other countries as a way of celebrating Scottish and Celtic culture, especially that of the Scottish Highlands. Certain aspects of the games are so well known as to have become emblematic of Scotland, such as the bagpipes, the kilt, and the heavy events, especially the caber toss. While centered on competitions in piping and drumming, dancing, and Scottish heavy athletics, the games also include entertainment and exhibits related to other aspects of Scottish and Gaelic culture.

The first historical references to the Heavy Events were during the reign of King Malcolm III (1057-1093). The Ceres Games of Fife, Scotland, are considered the oldest, continuous Highland Games, beginning in 1314.