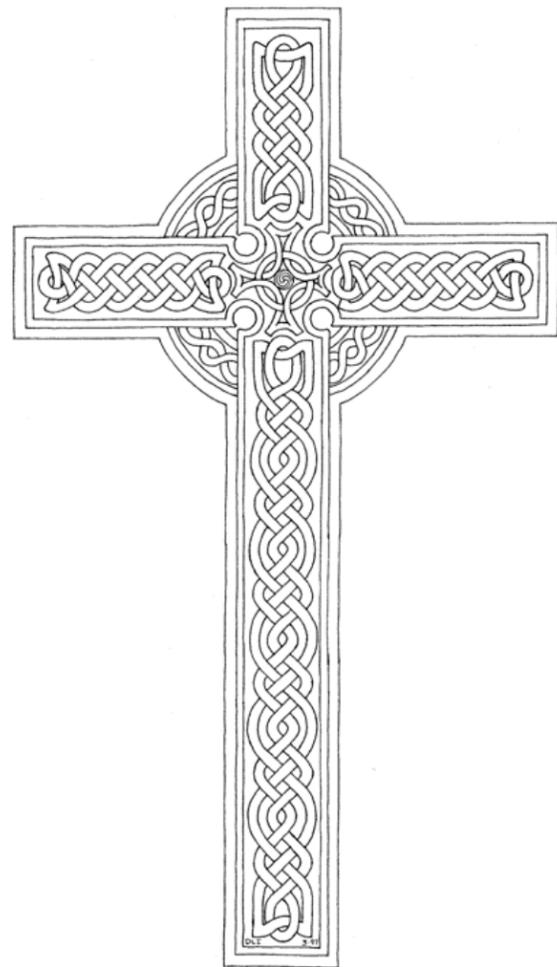


# Kirkin' o' the Tartan

## A Celebration of Heritage



## First Presbyterian Church of Highlands

### Celebrating Our Scottish Heritage

As far as scholars can tell, the Kirkin' o' the Tartan is a purely American tradition that celebrates Scottish heritage. It was begun in 1941 at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC by the great Presbyterian minister and chaplain of the U.S. Senate, Dr. Peter Marshall.

By contrast, popular legend has it that the Kirkin' o' the Tartan began in the years following the great defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden in 1746, when tartan was banned. Families supposedly took small scraps of cloth to church (the kirk) to surreptitiously have them blessed during the service. However, no historical evidence has ever been uncovered to lend even the slightest validity to that myth.

The point of today's event is to honor the heritage of Scottish Americans, plain and simple. Of course, the history of Scotland is anything but simple. It goes back to the Stone Age (8300 B.C.). The Gaelic language was introduced around 750 B.C. The various Norse dialects, French, and English have played their roles as well. Recorded history in Scotland began about 80 A.D. when Roman soldiers invaded.

Out of this tradition and heritage came the Presbyterian Church. In 1572, the "Golden Act" was established which gave form to Presbyterianism. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries many immigrants came to America from Scotland (many by way of Northern Ireland). Some eventually came to Pennsylvania and down the Shenandoah Valley, settling in the mountains of Western North Carolina. They brought their Presbyterian religion and culture with them, remnants of which can still be found today throughout much of Appalachia.

### The Clan

Mention the word clan and most everyone thinks of Scotland. The original word in Gaelic means offspring or descendants. But clan meant far more than just a family or a tribe. The clan was the basic social unit in the Highlands of Scotland, providing a governmental, social, religious and economic system. The harsh, often hostile nature of the land itself contributed to the creation and development of the clan (and later the feudal) system. In the isolated and even violent lands of Northern Scotland and its isles being part of a clan was the difference between survival and extinction.

In reality, belonging to a clan did not result so much from kinship but was more a result of the circumstances of geographic isolation. Clans were made up of "native men," those related however distantly to the chief, and "broken men," those who had no direct blood relationships. Today, the notion of belonging to a clan has more to do with the distant family connections than survival or loyalty. Today's clan has many "septs" or branches and not all are directly related by blood. Some septs represent surnames connected with the clan by marriage or appropriation, while others represent those families that formed military or economic alliances with certain clans hundreds of years ago, but will now forever be known as a sept of this clan or that.

As civilization gradually crept north from the lowlands of Scotland, the tribal-based subsistence agriculture of the clans evolved into a mixture of urban industrialization and estate-based animal husbandry. Once proud but uncouth clan chiefs were gradually replaced by lords of the manner. Where once the clan held lands in common, chiefs gained titles to large estates and clan members became tenants. Those new lords, however, retained at least the symbolic title of chief of their clan, titles that are still handed down today through general heredity (although some clans now elect their chiefs).

Many Scottish names, both lowland and highland, derive from combining the given name of a famous ancestor with a prefix or suffix meaning "son of." For example, the now common prefix of "Mc" is a contraction of "Mac" and is Gaelic for "son of." It is used in both Scotland and Ireland. The Anglicized version of "son of" mostly appears as a suffix, as in Anderson.

### Tartans and the Clans

Tartans, or plaids, may well be ancient. A piece of black and white checked fabric appears to date back to Roman Britain. But evidence is sketchy and it is unclear when or how the earliest of these distinctive patterns came into being. Likewise the association of a particular tartan with particular clans is often equally murky.

There is some evidence that people living in certain areas wore similar colors in the late Middle Ages, based on writings from the period. However, today's association of a specific tartan with a particular clan or family most often goes back no further than the mid-1800s. For example, only a handful of tartans can be traced to a specific clan or family prior to 1745.

Many Tartans today are, in fact, modern inventions, having been designed in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, many ancient tartans were not associated with either clan or family, but were most likely derived from a certain region or community where particular colors or patterns proved popular. They are known as District Tartans. While clans often have several (sometimes many) different tartans, it is the clan chief who decides which ones are official and which are not. There are no tartan police, however, so what one wears is largely a matter of personal choice – or astute marketing on the part of a crafty vendor.

The distinctive, often extremely intricate, checkered patterns of the tartans so cherished today represent the epitome of the weaver's and dyer's skill. Each Tartan has its own characteristic sett, or pattern, represented by a certain number of one color thread, followed by another (or perhaps a color repeated), and so on until the whole is either repeated or reversed at a specific pivot point. The same order of threads appears both vertically and horizontally in the cloth (the warp and weft of a loom), creating the checked pattern. Many tartans appear to look alike at first glance, often because of the color used. However, closer examination will reveal that the order in which they appear is very different. True tartan is almost always woven of wool, but the weight of the thread used can vary. While most tartan today is commercially woven by machine, originally the fabric was the product of a thriving cottage industry through Scotland.

### Highland Dress

The distinctive manner of "Highland Dress" has been constantly evolving over hundreds of years to what we see today. For much of its early history, it probably remained basically unchanged. Its most famous element, the kilt, began as a single long piece of fabric worn as an outer garment, or wrap, over a long linen shirt. This great wrap, or feileadh-mor in Gaelic, made of unfinished heavy wool, also served as a raincoat and an overcoat for ancient Scotsmen tending sheep or other livestock out in the field. For convenience it came to be belted or tied around the waist with cord. The bottom half was probably hand pleated to help reduce the bulk of the cloth and allow more freedom of movement. The top

half was often pinned or tied in such a way as to make large pockets under the arms, perfectly concealing all manner of things.

Wearing Highland dress was banned in the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, following the third Jacobite rebellion. Banned also were the playing of the bagpipes (great pipes), carrying weaponry, and other behaviors associated with war. However, there is some evidence that these measures were not fully enforced, particularly on the wealthy who supported the winning side.

Still, whether due to proscription (repealed in 1762) or the cost of the fabric, the wearing of the tartan appears to have become largely unfashionable for more than half a century. The early 1820s brought a rebirth in interest in Highland dress, when King George IV (and later Queen Victoria) became enamored of Scotland and all things Scottish. As chiefs and lords scrambled to be appropriately adorned in their family's traditional tartan for state affairs, royal visits and the like, many weavers and suppliers were not always scrupulous in pulling the right bolt of cloth (ells) from the shelf. It was during this period that many official clan tartans were born.

It was also during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that the kilt (probably from the Danish word meaning pleat) evolved into what is usually seen today, a highly tailored garment. As Scottish regiments were recruited and outfitted in tartan kilts for the service of the British Empire, it gradually became apparent that the great kilt did not lend itself to "modern" warfare. The top portion was eventually removed to make for cooler wearing in sub-tropical climates.

The loose pleating below the waist came to be sewn in and refined until the pleats formed a specific pattern of one color of stripe or another (known as pleating stripe). That would be taken a step further when tailored kilts for civilians became popular (for those that could afford them) around the turn of the 20th century. Clever tailors began pleating the back of kilts "to sett," so that the pattern seen from the back matched the pattern of the front aprons.

### Items of Highland Dress

Kilt – Today a tailored male garment worn at the waist and pleated in the rear made of woolen tartan. The kilt should extend from just about the knee cap to the navel. Women wear pleated skirts, not kilts.

Arisaid (Eraaid) – A wide mantle of cloth (usually tartan) worn by women. It is contemporary with the feileadh-mor, but still worn.

Plaide – From the Gaelic meaning blanket (not the tartan itself, as in plaid). A large piece of tartan usually worn folded over the arm or shoulder when not in use. It represents the top half of the feileadh-mor.

Sporran- A leather or fur pouch or purse worn in front on a belt or chain strapped around the hips for the purpose of carrying things (kilts have no pockets).

Sgain-dubh (pronounced "skeen du") – In Gaelic, "black knife." A small knife carried in the top of the hose, usually on the right leg, and held in place by the garter. A hold-over from Victorian times.

Bonnet – A Balmoral is a flat woven cap of wool derived from the old broad bonnet worn centuries ago. The Glengarry is a military style cap, shaped much like a boat, with two bows with tassels or ribbons in the back. Crest badges or feathers (including a chief or leader) are often attached to one side of the bonnet.

Hose – Long knit stocking that rise nearly to the knee, held in place by a garter or tartan flashes.

### Scottish Thistle

According to legend, sleeping parties of Scots soldiers were almost set upon by an invading band of Vikings and were only saved when one of the attackers trod on wild thistles with his bare feet. His cries raised the alarm, rousing Scots, who went on to defeat the Danish invaders. In gratitude, the plant became known as the Guardian Thistle and was adopted as the national symbol of Scotland.

### The Great Pipes

Among the Scots and Irish, the bagpipes have a long tradition as a military instrument in battle, a device for calling the clan together, and a herald for ceremonial occasions. The instrument most recognized as a bagpipe today are really the great pipes or Highlands Pipes (as opposed to the much smaller and mellower lap pipes played for dances and entertainment).

The bagpipe is one of the world's oldest instruments. It can be seen in Babylonian carvings from before 1000 B.C., and it is mentioned in the Old Testament. Roman Legions were known to carry bagpipes, and probably brought the instrument to Britain. They were certainly a common part of Scottish culture by the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thousands upon thousands of Scottish soldiers (and later British regiments) have marched into battle to the skirl of the pipes. Incidentally, the great pipes were never intended to be played indoors.

### What is the Beadle?

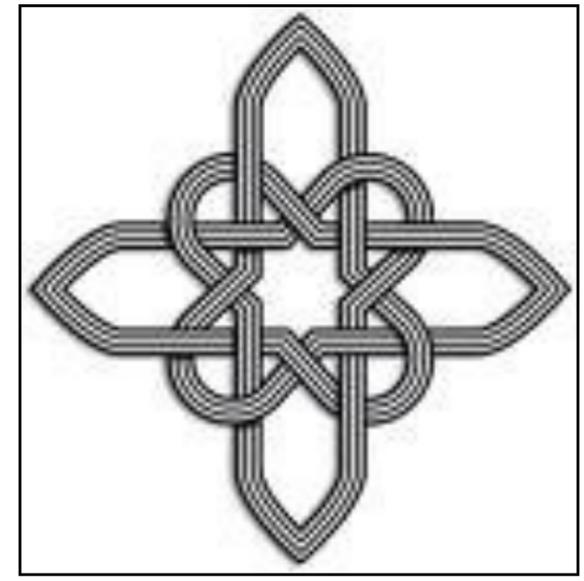
Traditionally the beadle was the parish official employed to usher and keep order during the service. Part of those duties may have included securing the Bible when it was not being used. During the Middle Ages all books, including Bibles, were rare and highly prized objects. Today, the role of the beadle is entirely ceremonial. The beadle carries the Holy Word into the sanctuary at the start of the service, leading the procession of banner carriers and piper. Following the benediction, the beadle leads everyone out of church.

### The Scots Confession – A.D. 1560

The Scots Confession is the first Reformed confession in the English language. It has been called the charter of Presbyterianism. The Scottish Parliament, at the conclusion of 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.

### Who Was John Knox?

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



*The information contained in this guide was compiled by Skip Taylor, former USA representative of the Scottish Tartan Society, former board member of the Tartan Cultural and Educational Society, charter member of the Friends of the Scottish Museum, Franklin, North Carolina, and from a wide variety of sources specifically for First Presbyterian Church of Highlands, NC.*