

Persecuted Christians Settled in North Carolina

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I have a friend who is originally from Burke County, North Carolina, and currently lives in Nagoya. He told me about a small town called Valdese, NC with a population of 4,490, inhabited by a Christian sect called the Waldenses. He recommended that I do some research into why the Waldenses settled in this rural town, as it is interesting to know the story behind why they settled there. Here is the report.

Valdese, located in Burke County, was founded in 1893 by immigrants from the Cottian Alps in Piedmont, northern Italy. Today, the town is home to the largest Waldensian Christian church in the United States. The church is known as the Waldensian Presbyterian Church. There are 20 other churches in Valdese. As I will explain later, Waldensians are said to be the first protestants and the founders of the oldest evangelical movement. They were evangelicals before Martin Luther, the central figure of the Reformation.

The Waldensians are followers of a church tradition that began as an ascetic movement in Western Christianity before the Reformation. Originally known as the Poor of Lyon in France in the late 12th century, the movement spread to the Cotti Alps near the current French-Italian border. The Waldenses were founded by Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant who gave away his fortune around 1173. Waldo gained followers by preaching that "apostolic poverty" was the perfect way of life.

Waldensian congregations came into conflict with the Franciscans, a sect of the Catholic Church at the time, because the Franciscans objected to

"apostolic poverty" and did not recognize the privileges of the local bishop. As a result, by 1215, the Waldenses were declared heretics, excommunicated, and discrimination began.

Pope Innocent III decrees that the Waldensians will have the opportunity to return to the Church. They return to the Church, but are called "Poor Catholics." Many of them continue to practice apostolic poverty, and so they face severe persecution over the next few centuries, systematic and widespread.

The most severe persecution occurred on April 24, 1655. This persecution and massacre became known as Piedmont Easter. It is estimated that about 1,700 Waldensians and residents were massacred, and the massacre was so brutal that it caused outrage throughout Europe.

One of the Waldensian pastors expelled from Piedmont in the early purges was Henri Arnaud. He returned from the Netherlands and delivered an emotional appeal at a meeting in the town of Roccapiatta, winning the support of the majority in favor of armed resistance. The Waldenses prepared for battle when the truce with the persecutors expired on April 20.

On April 9, 1686, the Duke of Savoy, who ruled Piedmont, issued a new decree ordering the Waldenses to disarm and leave the town within eight days. The Waldenses fought bravely for the next six weeks, but 2,000 Waldensians were killed. Many more converted to the Catholic theology of the Council of Trent. Another 8,000 were imprisoned, and more than half of them died within six months from deliberate starvation or disease.

However, the Waldensians who still resisted were called Vaudois, and about 200 to 300 Vaudois fled to other territories. Over the next year, the Vaudois began a guerilla war against the Catholic settlers who came to the land they occupied. These Vaudois were called the "Invincibles" and

the Duke of Savoy finally gave in and agreed to negotiations. The "Invincibles" won the release of their imprisoned comrades and the right to travel safely to Geneva.

The Duke of Savoy then demanded that the Vaudois leave immediately or convert to Catholicism. With this decree, about 2,800 Vaudois left Piedmont and crossed the Alps for Geneva, but it was said that only 2,490 of them survived.

Later, poverty, social discrimination and racial prejudice led the Vaudois to migrate to the French Riviera and Switzerland as seasonal laborers. Their homeland in the Italian Waldensian Valley was overcrowded with an ever-increasing population since the end of the wars in 1690. Family farms had been divided and re-divided over the generations, leaving little land for future generations. The decision was made to look for land in other countries, such as South America and the United States.

Around 1892, two advance parties of Waldensians came to North Carolina to see if they could settle there. The land was about 10,000 acres in size, and one of them thought it would be suitable for a new settlement. The other thought it was terrible, with too many rocks and not enough fertile soil. In fact, the latter view was correct, but the Waldenses decided to buy the land collectively.

In 1893, a small group of 29 Waldensian settlers, led by pastor Dr. Charles Albert Tron, decided to emigrate from Italy to the new land of North Carolina. They traveled from Italy to France by rail, then boarded the steamship Zaandam for New York. They were filled with memories and nostalgia for their homeland, but also with hopes of rich and fertile farmland. From New York, they traveled by train to North Carolina. They arrived in their destination state of North Carolina on May 29, 1893. A group of 18 new settlers arrived in Burke County in June 1893, another group of 14 in August 1893, and a group of 161 in November 1893.

However, their dreams of rich farms and prosperity were dashed by the reality of cold winters, poor housing, and rocky soil.

Through their strong faith in God, hard work, and perseverance, they overcame these obstacles and established a community in North Carolina. That is what Valdez is today. Every summer, Valdez hosts an outdoor drama called "From This Day Forward." The drama depicts the long persecution and difficult religious life of the Waldensians.

Today's scholars of religion explain that medieval Waldensians can be considered the prototype of Protestantism. The Waldensians aligned with Protestantism and eventually became part of the Calvinist tradition. Waldensians in Europe almost disappeared in the 17th century and were absorbed into the Presbyterian Church.

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