

The Significance of Independence in Chapel Hill & Orange County, North Carolina

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CHAPEL HILL, N.C., June 24, 2016 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- Thinking about the Fourth of July reminds us of many good years spent with friends and family, watching a parade, and long afternoons of barbecuing followed by awe-inspiring fireworks at neighborhood locales.

In Chapel Hill, North Carolina and the surrounding Orange County region the commitment to the inalienable rights of the individual goes back centuries, to the very beginning of this great country.

Consider just some of the milestones in this great college town area:

- The Currency Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765, along with higher taxes, led farmers to petition the government. North Carolina farmers urged the British governor to approve tobacco, wheat, and other crops as tax payment. Nearly 900 protestors, known as Regulators, gathered in Orange County to protest.
- In 1788, two hundred and twenty-eight years ago this July, North Carolina delegates met several times—most often in Hillsborough, the County seat—to discuss the newly formed United States Constitution. The Tar Heel State became the only state in the union to neither ratify nor reject the Constitution because of its failure to protect basic freedoms, leading to what would eventually become the Bill of Rights.
- Dissent has been alive and well on the University of North Carolina campus at least as far back as William Gaston, who spoke here for the abolition of slavery in 1832, and UNC professor and alumnus Benjamin Hedrick, who proclaimed himself an anti-slavery Republican supporter in 1856.
- The Journey of Reconciliation challenged Jim Crow seating on interstate buses and trains throughout the upper South. Rev. Charles Jones, a white Presbyterian minister from Chapel Hill gave the Freedom Riders refuge in his home and was threatened by a mob of white cabdrivers for doing so. The Journey of Reconciliation later served as the model and inspiration for the Freedom Rides of 1961.

- On February 28, 1960, a group of students from segregated Lincoln High School conducted the town of Chapel Hill's first sit-in, at Colonial Drug, a West Franklin Street drugstore and segregated lunch counter.
- There was student involvement in a strike by black cafeteria workers at UNC in spring 1969. The newly formed Black Student Movement (BSM) allied with workers to press for improvements in the workers' treatment and pay.
- In 1987, the first openly gay elected official in North Carolina was Chapel Hill Town Councilman Joseph Herzenberg. He gave a passionate speech to the North Carolina Civil Liberties Union a year prior, declaring, "Our nation and state are struggling to cope with the consequences of a tragic new disease, AIDS... The North Carolina Civil Liberties Union believes that we must examine carefully the justifications offered for coercive or discriminatory responses to AIDS, so that we can stop this deadly disease without surrendering our most basic rights as American citizens."
- It was in this spirit that the AIDS Services Agency of Orange County (ASAOC) was created. One of the Agency's first projects was to build a house for people living with AIDS. This would become the Orange House in Carrboro, North Carolina.
- Howard Lee served as mayor of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, from 1969 to 1975. He was not only the first African-American Mayor of Chapel Hill, but also the first African-American to be elected mayor of any predominantly white city in the American South.
- Carrboro, North Carolina (located directly West of Chapel Hill in Orange County) -- was the first municipality in the state to create a domestic partner registry and to extend eligibility for employment benefits to same-sex partners of their Town employees; the first to elect a gay mayor (Mike Nelson 1995-2005) and the first to elect a lesbian mayor, Lydia Lavelle, in 2013.

Orange County, North Carolina has always been on the side of freedom and equality. Now today as you think about freedoms on July 4th, the Chapel Hill/Orange County Visitors Bureau welcomes all to come celebrate in Chapel Hill & Orange County, NC. To plan your visit, see www.VisitChapelHill.org.

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Photo Caption - In Chapel Hill and Orange County, North Carolina, the spirit of independence is celebrated year-round. And for those who love Fireworks, the area comes alive on July 4th. VisitChapelHill.org for a complete list of activities. (Credit – Chapel Hill/Orange County Visitors Bureau)

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