

The Origin of Watch Night

It's been documented that the first New Year's Eve service was held in 1733 by the Moravians, a small Christian denomination in what is now known as the Czech Republic. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Movement, later adopted the practice, naming it a Covenant Renewal Service.

The first Methodist Covenant Renewal Service in America took place in 1770 at Old St. George's Church in Philadelphia, a church of which Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was a member. It is thought that after Allen incorporated the service in the AME Church, other denominations followed suit, establishing the tradition in African American churches.

Another theory of Watch Night relates to slavery times. White property owners tallied their debts at the end of each year. If they hadn't earned enough to pay them, they sold tools, land, and even human beings on January 1 to cover the losses.

On the last day of the year, enslaved families huddled together in cabins, praise houses, and in the woods as they awaited their fate, knowing that come tomorrow they may be separated, never to see each other again. One of the spirituals they sang, "This May Be the Last Time", is still sung in African American churches today, 154 years after the end of the Civil War.



"Slaves Waiting for Sale" by Eyre Crowe. 1861.

The following quotes are from The Slave Narratives:

Julia Williams, Chesterfield County, Virginia

New Years was the big auction day. All day hollering on the block. They come from all over to Richmond to buy and sell the slaves.

Mary James, James River, Virginia

On New Year's Day everybody was scared as that was the day that slaves were taken away or brought to the farm.

Silas Jackson, Ashbie's Gap, Virginia

On New Year's Day we all were scared, that was the time for selling, buying and trading slaves. We did not know who was to go or come.

Others believe that Watch Night began during the Civil War. Taking a political turn, it became known as “Freedom’s Eve”. In September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln offered the rebel states a chance to lay down their weapons and reenter the Union. If they refused, he threatened to free all slaves in the Confederate States January 1, 1863. The Confederate government kept fighting, refusing his offer. On December 31, 1862 people across the nation were hard-pressed to learn if the President would uphold his promise and sign the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in the rebel states. When the proclamation was signed, some African American churches began conducting “Freedom’s Eve Services”, celebrating emancipation and reading excerpts from the proclamation.

Time brings on changes and Watch Night Service is among them. Most churches now hold regular, church-centered services at 7 p.m. on New Year’s Eve, ending early so that everyone can be safely home by 12 o’clock. But old habits die hard and I still kneel in prayer to welcome in the new year. I end my petition by asking God’s protection from resounding gunfire, not only from the New Year revelers, but daily across America, knowing that because of the ready access to firearms, we really *don’t* know what tomorrow might bring. The refrain from the old Negro spiritual is as true today as it ever was: “This may be the last time we break bread together... may be the last time, I don’t know....”



Slaves on New Year’s Eve, fearing separation on New Year’s Day.