

NEWCOMERS TO GUILFORD COUNTY

There are close to 50,000 people in Guilford County who are part of immigrant communities or who speak a language other than English at home. Almost 90 native languages are represented in the Guilford County schools. While this creates some linguistic and cultural challenges for our community, it brings a treasure house of resources for the broader community. It also reflects the heritage of this country. We are an immigrant nation and this heritage contributes to our country's resourcefulness and commitment to civil rights.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND— GUILFORD COUNTY

The first waves of European immigrants seeking religious freedom during the Colonial Period of the 1700s were met by small bands of Native Americans who had immigrated from Asia thousands of years earlier. The religious values of the European immigrant populations helped shape the community ethos regarding immigrants. Religious

tolerance and respect for newcomers became a trait of this community.

Some European immigrants also brought slaves who were forcibly immigrated from West Africa to develop the agricultural economy. Issues of slavery and oppression, religious freedom, economic opportunity, and the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s also contributed to the integration processes of later waves of immigrants.

Guilford County, part of the traditional Bible Belt of the South, has much in common with other areas of the region. However, its unique history also influenced the integration process, both in respect to its historic black population and to the immigrants of the last quarter century.

By the mid-1700s, Friends (Quakers) were settling in Guilford County, moving south from the northern English colonies and bringing with them an ethos of moderation, peacemaking, and equality. The quest for farmland and political and religious freedom brought more European immigrants to the Piedmont throughout the 18th century.

While some migrated inland from Eastern North Carolina, many migrated from Western Pennsylvania and the northern colonies. Large numbers of German immigrants began settling in the Piedmont, including eastern Guilford County, by the 1740s. Many were staunch Lutherans and Calvinists, fleeing war and religious persecution in Europe.

African slaves continued to be brought to the area as tobacco and cotton became key market crops. Moravian Protestants, originally from Germany and Bohemia, migrated south from Pennsylvania with the intent of doing missionary work among the Native Americans and African slaves. The German-speaking Protestants, determined to preserve their customs and culture, clung strongly to their language and faith, had limited interaction with their English-speaking neighbors, and continued to speak German as their official language until 1856.

Scotch-Irish Presbyterians had settled and built churches and schools by the mid-1750s. European immigrants from the British Isles and various other

countries were the primary immigrant flow for the next century.

Religion in various forms shaped the cultural adaptation of the diverse groups. Guilford County, like much of the South, was dominated by a wide range of Protestant churches. Baptists, Methodists, independent fundamentalists, and Pentecostal Holiness churches were part of the fiber of the growing Piedmont community. Values associated with a Protestant ethic – neighborliness, family and community responsibility, suspicion of big government, and self-reliance – were enforced.

By the mid-1800s, however, Irish immigrants began coming to the state in significant numbers, introducing the first sizable Roman Catholic population.

The industrial revolution at the turn of the century greatly affected the Triad and other parts of the South, with textile mills moving from the northeastern United States to be close to the cotton-growing region. These were followed by furniture factories as the railroads opened the mountains to timbering. Lorillard Tobacco Company opened in Greensboro, and RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company opened in Winston. Two textile giants, Cone Mills and Revolution

Mills, were established in Guilford County by two prominent north-eastern families, the Cones and the Sternbergers. These affluent Jewish families brought with them a spirit of philanthropy, justice and altruism that was to influence the ethos of the region. Other members of the Cone family as well as their friends, the Sternbergers, followed suit. Moses Cone Health Care Systems, the largest health care provider in Guilford County, is an outgrowth of Cone altruism. College and university buildings in the Triad, some started by churches, bear the names of the Cones and Sternbergers. A variety of synagogues were built along side of the churches in the community.

The two world wars brought more immigrants, primarily from Europe. The Second World War in particular brought increased numbers of European immigrants who were Lutheran, Catholic, and Jewish. The increase in manufacturing that characterized the economic development of the Triad since the '50s also brought ethnically-diverse migrants from northern states, attracted to job opportunities and a warmer climate.

Guilford County, like much of the state, still had strong ties to agriculture through most of the 20th century. The agricultural

economy relied heavily on migrant laborers, mostly Latino/Hispanic. Because the migrant laborers were not residents, they had limited access to human services and remained largely invisible to the mainstream community.

By the 1960s, the Triad, like the rest of the segregated South, was wrestling with civil rights. Greensboro gained national attention in 1960 when four black students at NC A&T State University staged a “Sit-In” at the local Woolworth’s Department Store in order to get served at the lunch counter. The movement grew to hundreds of students and community supporters, and the store changed its policy. The movement then swept across the South as a strategy for achieving equal rights and desegregation. Black churches served as the organizing front for the movement. White churches, depending on their varied political and religious positions, assumed major roles in shaping white community response. Greensboro became recognized as a center for the emerging Civil Rights Movement. NC A&T, with its strong programs in technology and industrial development, also became a magnet for students from developing countries. African immigrant communities associated with NC A&T were established by the

late 1960s in Guilford County. These emerging immigrant communities remained largely invisible to the mainstream community.

• SOUTHEAST ASIANS

VIETNAMESE After the end of the Vietnam War in 1973, refugees from Vietnam began to settle in the United States. By 1980, the U.S. government had established legislation and a regulatory process through a new Refugee Resettlement Act. Lutherans opened a state refugee resettlement office in Greensboro and developed cooperative agreements with other churches and agencies for the resettlement of refugees. Refugee resettlement agencies used the faith communities as sponsors and volunteers to assist the newcomers. Faith-based organizations took the lead in resettling refugees in the 1980s and integrating them into the broader community.

By the 1990s, two other refugee resettlement agencies had opened offices in Guilford County. The initial refugee population was Vietnamese and was dispersed across the state in response to church sponsor interests. The Vietnamese population was diverse. Some were Catholic, some Protestant, some Cao Dai,

many Buddhist. They included ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese populations. Many were pragmatic and entrepreneurial. Some joined the mainstream churches that sponsored them. Some moved to California or other parts of the country that had significant Vietnamese and Chinese populations to be part of ethnic enclaves. In Guilford County, some remained employed in factories, but also worked toward development of small businesses catering both to the Vietnamese and mainstream populations. An estimated 3,000 Vietnamese immigrants now live in the Guilford County area.

CAMBODIANS Cambodians started coming in large numbers in 1982 through a federally sponsored project to establish a Cambodian cluster in the Triad. The federal government was concerned about the large number of Southeast Asian refugees settling in California, New York and a few other impacted states, who were not becoming economically self-sufficient. The government's measure of successful integration relied almost exclusively on measures of economic self-sufficiency. Guilford County had already demonstrated that refugees were employable and

desired by businesses. The mainstream community, as viewed through the lens of congregational sponsors, was receptive to refugees. By 1985 the Cambodian population had grown to over 500 in the Guilford County area, most people working in factories. A secondary Cambodian cluster developed in Davidson County as migrants were drawn to factory jobs there. Primarily Buddhist rice farmers, the Cambodians settled peaceably into the Guilford and Triad community.

LAOTIANS The Laotian community was initially quite small in the Triad, with only a few families who had not left to join communities in California and New York. However, Lutheran Family Services was awarded a grant from the federal government to resettle interested Laotian and Cambodian families, who were on welfare in impacted states, to Guilford County where they could become employed and self-sufficient. The Laotian community now exceeds 1,000 people. Many are factory workers and several run small businesses. Though most are Buddhist, there are some evangelical Christians.

The Hmong and other hill-tribe peoples constitute a special population from Laos and a

significant Southeast Asian population in the state, with over 10,000 people. They have come mostly as secondary migrants because of job opportunities and the attractiveness of the farm communities in the more rural Western Piedmont region. The few Hmong people living in the Triad are mostly university students. A small Khmu ethnic community from the highlands of Laos lives in the High Point area.

MONTAGNARDS Another Southeast Asian population started to be resettled as refugees in late 1986 with the arrival of about 220 people. Some were also resettled in Charlotte and Raleigh. They are known as Montagnards (a French word for “mountain people”) from the highlands of Vietnam. They include various tribal peoples from Vietnam who fought along side the U.S. Special Forces during the Vietnam War and served heroically for this country. The initial 220 were joined by many more in the '90s, and refugees continue to arrive. The Triad population, now over 3000 people, constitutes the largest Montagnard community outside of Vietnam. The new Montagnard population changed the scope of refugee resettlement in North Carolina.

Montagnards are ethnically and

culturally separate from mainstream Vietnamese. Many are devout Christians. For this reason, many churches got involved with their resettlement. Because of the Montagnards’ relationship with the U.S. Special Forces, the Special Forces Association at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville and other veterans groups have actively served as volunteers to assist with this resettlement process. Businesses, veterans, churches, and a variety of nonprofit organizations have also worked together to assist this special group.

National attention was focused on the resettlement of these “freedom fighters,” and in 1987 a White House Citation was awarded to Lutheran Family Services and the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce for their initial conjoint resettlement effort. It became a “good conduct” medal for the city and improved its image of moderate progressivism. The evangelical Christian war heroes were welcomed and put to work at entry-level jobs in factories across the community.

In 2002, a third group of about 900 Montagnards was invited to come as refugees to North Carolina. They were divided across different areas of the state, but most ended up in Greensboro, the largest settlement area. Some Montagnards were still arriving in

early 2003. This group had a somewhat different story from their predecessors. They were not acting as a resistance force for the United States (though a few had served with the Special Forces). These people were villagers who protested the Vietnamese government’s efforts to take their ancestral lands and close their churches. They were caught in a violent conflict with their government and fled for their lives. This conflict continues in their native Highlands and is well documented by international observers. The government continues to try and eradicate Montagnard culture by land reclamation and destruction of Montagnard institutions.

The churches are the organizing point for cultural preservation. The most recent Montagnard group is still in the early stages of resettlement and faces even more challenges than earlier groups did. Many of these most recent refugees left their families behind as they fled for their lives.

OTHER ASIAN IMMIGRANTS

Other immigrants from Asia have established communities in Guilford County. These include professionals and business people from India and Pakistan, Korea, mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Palestine. Because they

did not come as refugees in large numbers, they have received little public attention. While the Palestinians are technically refugees, most arrived before the establishment of a formal refugee resettlement program and have not been part of the refugee service system.

• AFRICANS

EARLY AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS

African immigrant families from Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leon, have established roots in the Triad going back to the 1960s in association with NC A&T State University. African immigrants, undifferentiated by the mainstream, were classified as blacks or African Americans in demographic research. Like some other immigrant populations who were outside the magnifying glass of refugee resettlement agencies, they received little public notice. African immigrants continued to settle in the Triad through the '70s and '80s, but without much outside community recognition. African churches and ethnic community organizations have been active for a couple of decades. By the 1990s, community awareness of world events and the national conscience began to move African refugees into the

resettlement picture, as the United States began allocating more refugee slots to Africa.

SOMALIS A small Somali refugee community was established in 1994 when members of the Benadir tribe were settled in Greensboro. The Benadir had been a merchant class, sedentary, educated, and different from many of the nomadic tribes that were being dominated by various warlords in the political chaos that had engulfed Somalia. These devout Muslims with strict codes of conduct caused some ripples in the workplace, in schools, and with some of the church sponsors. Resettlement agencies and human relations advocates worked hard to resolve cultural clashes. Additional Somalis from other tribes joined the community.

CENTRAL AND WEST

AFRICANS Other Africans also came as refugees and asylees during this period, especially from the war torn regions of Central and West Africa, including such countries as Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo. Refugees from this region only totaled a few hundred. Most were successfully resettled. Their success attracted other secondary migrants from larger northern cities where they had not found adequate

work or community acceptance.

By the mid-1990s, a few Sudanese refugees and immigrants had resettled in Greensboro and were joined by others. Many came on diversity visas, a special initiative of the U.S. government designed to balance out the historic discrimination against Africans in the U.S. immigration program. Most were Muslims fleeing the ongoing war in the Sudan, even if they did not come as refugees. News of job opportunities and the tolerant attitudes of the mainstream community led to a larger migration. By the turn of the century there were over 2000 Sudanese in Guilford County, although some have now migrated elsewhere in search of better job opportunities. Included in this community is a group of young people from southern Sudan, nicknamed the "Lost Boys." These young Christians attracted international attention with their plight as homeless refugees for over ten years. In Guilford County, Muslims and Christians have worked together in the resettlement of these young men.

Similar phenomena has occurred within other African communities on a smaller scale. African immigrants came to the Triad, especially Greensboro, in

larger numbers. When an African immigrant community, sometimes linked with a refugee population from the same home country, had a positive experience, the word would spread to other immigrants that Guilford County was receptive to their community. Newcomers from Niger, Ghana, and other African countries migrated to the area. Traditional political, ethnic, and religious tensions from the countries of origin were muted by the immigrant commonalities of seeking jobs and housing, finding others who spoke the same language, and locating ethnic grocery stores. The African immigrant/refugee population in Guilford County grew to over 10,000 people by the year 2000. A pan-African community organization, the African Services Coalition, formed in the mid-1990s to promote African unity and cooperation with American Black and White communities.

• EASTERN EUROPE AND THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Refugees from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union had been resettled since the beginning of the formal refugee resettlement

program. Many who were initially resettled in North Carolina moved away to other states, thus no large communities were established in the Triad before the '90s. Ironically, churches had been most interested in resettling Eastern Europeans based on the assumption that white people from industrialized parts of the world where there was religious persecution would be happy to be here and would flourish. Historically, however, many refugees from Eastern Europe tended to migrate to large northern cities where established immigrant communities from their nations and ethnic groups already existed.

Though the Triad did not emerge as a major resettlement area for Eastern Europeans, the Bosnian refugee community in Greensboro grew to a couple of thousand in the '90s, and the population stabilized. Because of internal conflicts and mistrust between the ethnic and national groups within the Bosnian community, a sense of shared identity or organization has not developed. Three different groups—Serbs, Croats, and Muslims—remain divided over nationhood, ethnicity and religion. In addition, many families are mixed, so there is little motivation to start ethnic organizations. Ethnic identity

does not necessarily coincide with political positions regarding the conflict in the region. However, because of the industrialized background of many of the refugees, they have been able to adapt fairly quickly.

A recent population that has resettled in the Triad, principally Greensboro, is the Albanian Kosovars. About 100 have arrived in the last two years and formed a community organization.

A Russian/Ukrainian refugee community has grown to a few hundred in Greensboro through the efforts of Jewish Family Services and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society resettlement agencies. The agencies have focused their attention primarily on settling Jewish refugees from Russia and the Ukraine. The community has remained small and is not quick to acculturate. Many of the approximately 200 refugees are older and retired. However, these refugees are well served by the resettlement agency and the local Jewish community.

• LATINO/HISPANIC INFLUX

In 2000, North Carolina was cited as the number one in-migration state for Latinos/Hispanics. The 2000 Census reported that North

Carolina had 378,963 Latinos/Hispanics in an overall state population of 8,052,313. This is a 4.71% Latino/Hispanic representation in the state and shows a 449% increase of this population from the 1990 Census. The Triad was cited as the third fastest growing Latino/Hispanic region in the United States. Across the state, government agencies, police departments, schools, health care providers, faith-based organizations, and business communities all scrambled to adapt to this dramatic shift in demographics and its implications. Not all Latinos/Hispanics in Guilford County are immigrants. Some are from the Southwestern United States or Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory. However, the cultural impact remains significant.

There has been a long standing upper class Latino/Hispanic population from various South American countries and Puerto Rico that has come here for business purposes or higher education and has remained in the Triad. A few hundred Cuban refugees have also resettled in Guilford County over the last few decades.

The primary Latino/Hispanic community in the Triad and the state is a much larger and different population, one that does not have

refugee or professional status. Many are undocumented or have unclear immigration status. Others may be here as legal permanent residents (LPR) or under various worker contracts or specialized visas. Some are U.S. citizens. Many young children are native-born U.S. citizens, although their parents may have temporary status or no documents.

The 2000 Census reports 10,317 (65%) of the Guilford Latino/Hispanic population to be from Mexico; 3,817 (24%) are classified as "other," but presumably most come from Central America – especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua; 1,274 (8%) are Puerto Rican; and 577 (4%) are of Cuban heritage. The population is primarily working class, young, and predominantly male. Census data probably under-reports the Mexican American portion of the Latino/Hispanic population.

Some Latinos/Hispanics have been in the United States for many years as migrant workers but have settled in the Triad in the last decade because they were able to find work in various construction trades. As a person found work and a place to live, he would tell others from his village and his family, and they would join him and establish themselves. Many have returned

home annually, especially at Christmas time, to visit their families. Typically, Latino/Hispanic construction workers take one to two months off at Christmas to go home. Until the last couple of years, unauthorized border crossings have been relatively simple and commonplace.