

Docent Dispatch

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Christmas Tradition: Candles in the Windows

By Colonial Williamsburg

Since the first organized Christmas celebration drew visitors to Colonial Williamsburg in 1936, nothing quite matches the excitement, sights, smells, sounds, and grandeur of the Christmas Season in Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area. But how did the celebration evolve?

No one really expected anyone to visit newly restored Colonial Williamsburg during the holidays in 1934, but colored lights were strung on ten evergreen trees in the Historic Area. Foundation president Kenneth Chorley was not very pleased with the effort and directed the research department to find authentic historical practices that could be revived.

The historians came up empty, as Christmas was not much of a holiday in colonial America. Most Virginians were members of the Anglican Church, and as such, observed the season of Advent, a time of fasting and repentance, followed by a celebratory meal Christmas Day. Letters and diaries refer to church services and a nice meal. Servants were sometimes given a half day off and a coin. Discouraged but not daunted, Chorley was determined to find a festive way to celebrate the

season.

Landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff recalled a practice his family had begun in Boston in 1893 and suggested placing a single lighted candle in the windows of the four buildings open to the public in those days. The candles were lit from 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. between Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. Louise Fisher, who was in charge of flowers, decorated the doors and windows of the Palace and the Raleigh Tavern with simple fresh greenery.

Nervous about fire, Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin, rector of Bruton Parish Church, insisted the candles be placed in a dish of water. Four janitors were paid \$1.00 apiece to light the candles and guard against fires. With the availability of electric candles, the practice gained in popularity throughout the community, to the point that visitors to Colonial Williamsburg wanted to purchase the candles to take back to their own communities. In 1941, local department stores sold their entire stock of 600 electric candles by Christmas Eve. Today, the practice has spread all across America and is attributed to Colonial Williamsburg, even though the Foundation made it clear it was not a historically accurate holiday practice.