

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

December 2009

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Christmas Then and Christmas Now by Heather Dunn

“Saturday 25, 1773

I was waked this morning by Guns fired all around the House. The morning is stormy, the wind at South East rains hard Nelson the Boy who makes my Fire, blacks my shoes, does errands &c. was early in my Room, drest only in his shirt and Breeches! He made me a vast fire, blacked my Shoes, set my Room in order, and wished me a joyful Christmas, for which I gave him half a Bit.—Soon after he left the Room, and before I was Drest, the Fellow who makes the Fire in our School Room, drest very neatly in green, but almost drunk, entered my chamber with three or four profound Bows, & made me the same salutation; I gave him a Bit, and dismissed him as soon as possible.—Soon after my Cloths and Linen were sent in with a message for a Christmas Box, as they call it; I sent the poor Slave a Bit, & my thanks.—I was obliged for want of small change, to put off for some days the Barber who shaves & dresses me.—I gave Tom the Coachman, who Doctors my Horse, for care two Bits. & am to give more when the Horse is well.—I gave to Dennis the Boy who waits at Table half a Bit—So that the sum of my Donations to Servants, for this Christmas appears to be five Bits...”

Philip Vickers Fithian, tutor at Robert Carter’s Nomini Hall, was a guest to Virginia culture and tradition. Because he is from New Jersey, the observations of day to day activities and conversations found in his diary provide an excellent window into 18th century Virginia life from the eyes of an outsider.

Fithian’s description of Christmas morning, 1773 is far from what we experience today. There are however a number of similarities between 18th



CHRISTMAS IN THE COUNTRY .

1791

century Christmas and current traditions. As the season approached in the 18th century it was met with excitement and preparation. Homes and churches were decorated with whatever greens were available. This included holly, ivy, mountain laurel, and mistletoe. Reverend George Herbert, an Anglican clergyman from Maryland, wrote “that the church be swept, and kept clean without dust or cobwebs, and at great festivals strewed, and stuck with boughs, and perfumed with incense.” Church was a traditional activity on Christmas Day. In 1770-1772 records show the Washington’s attended Christmas services at Pohick Church and St. Pauls Church in New York City the first year of his presidency.

CARLYLE HOUSE
Jim Bartlinski, Director
Sarah Coster, Curator
Heather Dunn, Curator of Education



Just as today, colonial Virginians anticipated the social aspects of the holidays. On December 18th 1773 Fithian writes, “the young Gentlemen ... conversed til half after six; Nothing is now to be heard of in conversation, but the Balls, the Fox-hunts, and fine entertainments, and the good fellowship, which are to be exhibited at the approaching CHRISTMAS.” At these social gatherings food and drink would be plentiful as guests danced and sang into the early hours of the morning. Popular Christmas carols of the time included “Joy to the World,” “The First Noel,” “God Rest You Merry Gentlemen,” and “I Saw Three Ships.”

The exchange of gifts was a notable difference in the 18th century to how we celebrate Christmas today. Gifts were just as likely exchanged on New Years, as they were at Christmas. Gifts were also only exchanged one way, from master or parents to their dependents. Children received gifts from their parents and as Fithian notes in great detail in his diary entry, masters and other whites, gave gifts to the slaves. It was common practice to give ones servants and slaves a “Christmas Box” which might be money, as Fithian had set aside, or extra provisions and alcohol, as the man “neatly in green displays.” It came to be expected by children and servants that gifts, food, and drink would be handed out on Christmas or New Years. In one account a surprised visitor to New York revealed, “for they fired several musquet shot, knocked rudely at the door, and threw stones against my windows. ... Mr. Lynch got up and came into my chamber to tell me that these people certainly meant to do me honour,



and get some money from me. I desired him to step down and give them two Louis; he found them already masters of the house and drinking my landlord's rum. In a quarter of an hour, they went off to visit other



1775

streets, and continued their noise till daylight.”

This wild behavior was expected and in 1790 George Augustine, nephew of Washington and manager of Mt. Vernon wrote, “Christmas being a time that requires more attention than any other to preserve order in a large Family I thought prudent not to absent myself during that time...”

Servants and slaves had more time off than usual to disrupt order. Washington’s overseer at Muddy Hole Farm in 1786 reported that the slaves were given a four day holiday, “it being Christmas.” This appears to be an average holiday for workers both enslaved and paid. An employment contract at Mt. Vernon with a new gardener in 1787 stated, “George Washington doth agree to allow him...four Dollars at Christmas, with which he may be drunk 4 days and 4 nights; two Dollars at Easter to effect the same purpose...” Families prepared for this by having servants stock them up on necessities such as firewood.

The Christmas season ended on Twelfth Night, January 6th. A visitor to Virginia, Nicholas Cresswell described a Twelfth Night Ball in his diary, “Last night I went to the Ball. It seems this is one of their annueal Balls supported in the following manner: A large rich cake is provided and cut into small spieces and handed round the company, who at the same time draws a ticket out of a Hat with something merry wrote on it. He that draws the King has the Honor of treating the company with a



Ball the next year, which generally costs him Six or Seven Pounds. The Lady that draws the Queen has the trouble of making the Cake. Here was about 37 ladies dressed and powdered to the life, some of them very handsome and as much vanity as it necessary...This is a sociable, but I think it looks more like a Bacchanalian dance than one in polite assembly. Old Women, Young Wives with young children in the lap, widows, maids and girls come promiscuously to these assemblies which generally continue till morning. A cold supper, Punch, Wines, Coffee and Chocolate, but no Tea. This is a forbidden herb. The men chiefly Scotch and Irish. I went home about two 'oclock, but part of the company stayed, got drunk and had a fight.

As all other aspects of colonial society Christmas celebrations varied greatly depending on your sex, social status, and wealth. With fox hunts and drunken balls, children were not the focus of the colonial Christmas. They enjoyed presents but many of the social events of the season were less family oriented than we imagine today. It was not until the 19th century as paper became more available for holiday cards and the Christmas tree was introduced to America that the traditions we are familiar with today begin to form.

Works Cited:

- <http://www.history.org/almanack/life/xmas/xmasqa.cfm>
- <http://www.mountvernon.org/visit/plan/index.cfm/pid/355/>
- <http://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Holiday06/seasons.cfm>

*Merry Christmas and
Happy Holidays!*

*~Jim, Heather
and Sarah*

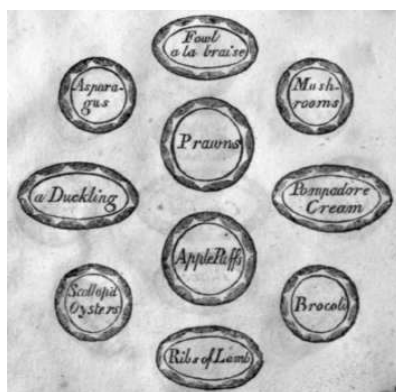


Winter Dining Table

“This Month much Meat will be roasted in rich Mens Kitchens, the Cooks sweating in making of minced Pies and other Christmas Cheer, and whole Rivers of Punch, Toddy, Wine, Beer, and Cider consumed with drinking. Cards and Dice will be greatly used, to drive away the Tediousness of the long cold Nights; and much Money will be lost at Whist Cribbage and All fours.” From the December page of the Virginia Almanac, 1772.

As Heather’s article explains, the Christmas holiday, though different from how we celebrate it today, was still a time of celebration. John Carlyle’s marriage to Sarah Fairfax occurred in the period between Christmas and Epiphany, or “Twelfth Night.”

To “drive away” these long cold nights, John Carlyle and his second wife Sybil West might have had hosted elaborate meals with friends, family and Alexandria neighbors. This year we have recreated such a feast.



From John Farley’s *The London Art of Cookery*.

Dinner was typically served around 4:00 pm. Carlyle most likely employed the *service a la francaise* or “French Service,” which reflected the hierarchy, balance and symmetry

admired during this period. An odd number of dishes were preferred, usually numbering between 5 and 9, though it could go up considerably depending on number of diners and the wealth of the host.

Wine, cider and punch would line the sideboard and the host or hostess would enquire about her guests’ choice of wine and ask the footman to bring it from the sideboard.



The dining table will be set up on December 8th and feature the following:

Coffin Pastry with Veal

Centuries ago, pies, tarts, and tartlets were all characterized by having a filling in a pastry crust or “coffin.” Pies were often filled with meat. Hannah Glasse, who wrote *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* in 1747, gives recipes for pies filled with veal, lamb, ham, egg, mutton, beefsteak, pigeon, etc. In all this recipes, she tells readers to “make a good puff paste crust” and after pouring the ingredients to “put on a lid.” “The larger the pie” she says “the finer the meat eats. Our coffin pastry could be filled with veal, a very popular meat choice of the 1700s.



The bird decoration on the pastry comes from a print by Thomas Rowlandson of *The Rainbow Tavern*, 1788.

This center dishes were often raised in height with a dish stand, dish cross, cup or salver. In 1768 Charles Carroll orders “something proper to raise a middle dish on table of either glass or china...”

Oysters

This very popular shellfish shows up in stew, bread, stuffing, and the classic half shell presentation. They were not an expensive dish and were available throughout the year, eaten by the rich and poor alike.

Roasted Pigeons

In 1806, Etieene Lemaire (Jefferson’s maitre d’hotel) buys two to three dozen small birds. In his accounts we see guinea hen, pheasant, and pigeons.

Fine Patties (Meat Pies)

Jane Carson describes meat pies in her book *Colonial Virginia Cookery*: “Sliced or chopped, any parts of any kind of meat in any combination were considered suitable for meat pies; feet and

heads, tongues, sweetbreads, hearts, livers inferior cuts and leftovers. The humble pie, originally suitable only for servants was dressed up with spices and wine and served to guests.”

Hanna Glasse includes many meat pies but the fine Patties included turkey, lamb or chicken with equal parts of veal or sirloin of beef. Added to the meat was parsley, thyme and lemon peel and pounded fine in a marble mortar. The pies were baked in a puff pastry folded into a triangle.

Fricassee

A fricassee is a stewed dish made with poultry, rabbit or veal which is cut into pieces and stewed with gravy and cream.

Green Beans and Pickled Beets

Beets are noted as being available from June-March in the Virginia/Maryland area in research done for *Thomas Jefferson’s Garden Book*. Pickling was a common way to preserve vegetables. The process for beets was boiling until tender and storing in a covered jar filled with cold vinegar.

FIRST COURSE.

Chickens.	Dish of Fish.	Veal Collops.
Pigeon Pie.	Chin of Lamb.	Almond Tort.
Harrico of Mutton.	Gravy Soup.	Ham.
	Roast Beef.	
	Dish of Fish.	

SECOND COURSE.

Wild Fowls.		
Peas.	Damson Tarts.	Ragoode Lobsters.
Sweetbreads.	Crocant.	Fried Piths.
Crawfish.	Maids of Honour.	Fried Artichokes.

Baked Ham

Ham was an extremely common dish in eighteenth-century Virginia. Glasse suggests it as a first course dish for several months of the year.

Shad

Shad was a very common fish in the Potomac. In 1772 Washington’s fishery netted more than one million herring and shad, most of which he sold to the Alexandria firm of Robert Adam & Company, in return for 184 pounds sterling.

Lemon Punch

Punch most likely originated from the Orient. The earliest references date to 1665. By 1696 we see bowls being made specifically for punch.

The drinking of punch was often competitive and



masculine in nature. After the meal, men would remain in the dining room to drink punch.

The following poem on punch appeared in the 1774 Massachusetts Spy:

*“As the bottle is big and the liquor is rough
Four lemons, I doubt will be little enough;
For sugar, you know it depends upon taste
But ‘twill take, in min, half a pound at the least;
Let your water be boil’d; and when it is cool
Pour in just two quarts- an infallible rule-
Then stir it three time; the business is done.
(If you have not a ladle, make use of a spoon)
Fill your glasses all round; and-you know what
should follow-
Long life and good health to the sons of Apollos!*



Other Scenarios: Various cakes and desserts will be displayed in the servants’ passage to show the slaves and servants readying the food for the next course. A small number of winter greens will adorn the house. Carlyle’s study will depict “Christmas boxes” or tips for the slaves and servants being counted out.

All of this information and more will be available once the table is on display. During December, it’s a good idea to come in early to check the table out before giving a tour. The staff is here to answer any and all questions you have.

Our gratitude goes to Carole Smith and Janice Magnuson for their help in researching and installing our dining table.



STUMP THE STAFF

Would men and women take their wigs off in the house or were they kept on continually? (I had not realized that women wore wigs as commonly as men did).
~Linda Greenberg



Nicholas Boylston c. 1769 by John Singleton Copley

It seems it was actually women like Queen Elizabeth who helped popularize the wig in the 16th-century. Louis the XIV of France then made them fashionable for men. Both men and women in the 18th-century wore wigs, though often women would use their natural hair, combined with

extensions, with the whole thing powdered. Men would certainly remove their wig in the privacy of their own home, though probably not while entertaining guests or business associates. They would probably wear a cap to keep their head warm when the wig was removed. The new miniseries John Adams shows some good scenes of him removing his wig upon arriving home.

Education News and Notes

As we are nearing the Spring Semester school tours will begin to pick up. I just want to thank everyone for their patience and flexibility. If you are in the house with a school tour please give them the right of way. The school tours have specific rooms and objectives that they need to meet. Please clear the way and apologize to your visitors. Thank you for your understanding. If anyone is interested in being a museum teacher or lead girl scout programs let me know!