

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

'Twas the Night Before Christmas

By Lacey Villiva

So many holiday traditions we are celebrated today hearken back to pagan winter solstice celebrations. Others, like “Christmahanukwanzaakah,” are modern innovations. Some of our American traditions originated during and around the Civil War. This article will describe a few of these traditions, with a focus on food, beginning in earlier eras and going through the Civil War, as well as their modern renditions.

One tradition that we are very familiar with is the Christmas tree. We decorate them with twinkling lights, glass balls, garlands, handmade ornaments, and, these days, even motorized gadgetry. The tradition of bringing a pine or fir tree into the home began with Germanic peoples celebrating the winter solstice. While individuals of German descent, such as those living in the Shenandoah Valley and the Pennsylvania Dutch (Dutch coming from Deutch, or German), likely held onto these traditions during colonial times, the practice of decorating a tree inside was not widespread in America until the middle of the 19th century.

The popularization of the Christmas tree among Anglo-European peoples occurred in part thanks to Queen Victoria and her marriage to the German Prince Albert of Hanover. In 1848 an engraving of the royal family and their Christmas tree appeared in the *London Illustrated News*. The same image was published in *Godey's Lady's Book*, a publication similar to *Better Homes and Gardens*, in 1850 and again in 1860 with a few key changes. In both these images Victoria no longer wore a crown and Prince Albert appeared clean-shaven. These changes, and a caption identifying the prince as a doctor, altered the image into an appropriately upper-middle class

American family.

Many of the other Christmas traditions that began to change, or appeared, around the Civil War concerned food. Celebrations often center around



Queen Victoria's Christmas Tree as it appeared in the December 1860 edition of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Courtesy of the Accessible Archives

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food, using what was available at that time of the year. Cookbooks often offer assistance on building menus based on seasonal availability. It wasn't until the Civil War that cookbooks really touted "Christmas Recipes." That may be, to some extent because the genesis of today's Christmas celebrations had its roots in the time around the Civil War.

One such source is a wonderful parody of the much beloved, "The Night Before Christmas," In December of 1861, *Godey's Lady's Books* featured the lengthy poem. The parody's sixth stanza gives us a glimpse into Christmas dinner:

Now Turkey, now Studding, Plum Pudding,
of course,
And Custards, and Crullers, and Cranberry
Sauce;
Before outraged nature, all went to the wall,
Yes – Lollypops, flappedoodle, Dinner and all;

Like pellets which urchins from popguns let
fly
Went figs, nuts and raisins, jam, jelly and
pie...

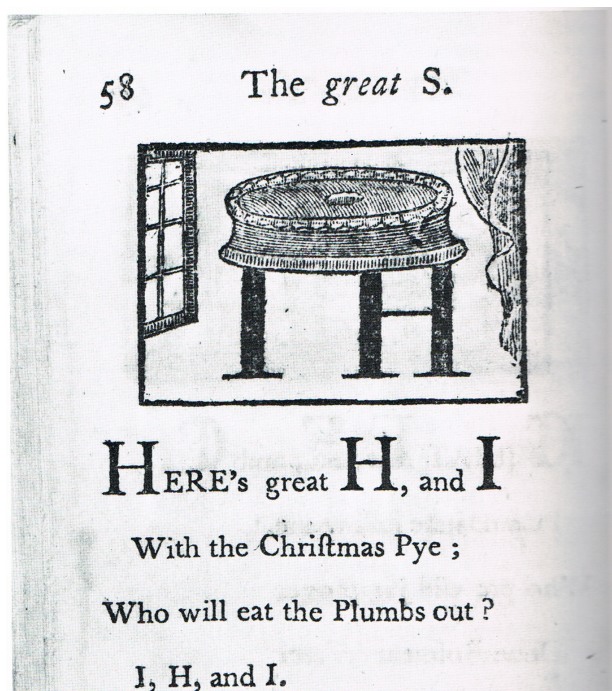
The meat of the matter, as stated in the poem, was turkey. This was a change from earlier eras when the Christmas bird was usually a goose. Those familiar with Charles Dickens, may remember that



Hospital Dining Hall decorated and set for Christmas Dinner, during the Civil War in City Point, VA. From We were Marching on Christmas Day.

the Cratchits, in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), dined on goose for their Christmas dinner. Turkey was one of the many food items that migrated from the New World to the Old. It took time, however, for turkey to become the Christmas bird in America.

Meat pies were also common on the Christmas table during the Civil War. Coffin pastry, solid, inedible pastry, from the 18th century makes an appearance in the 19th century, renamed a "standing pie." The 1847 edition of *The Carolina Housewife*, by Sarah Rutledge, contains a recipe for "Christmas Pie." It begins with the cook making "the walls of thick standing crust, to any size you like, and ornamented as fancy as directs..." Other meat pies included mincemeat, which today sometimes contain no meat. An 1844 recipe, "The Best Mince-Meat," calls for a large fresh [beef] tongue" and "three pounds of beef suet," as well as the more recognizable dried fruit and spices used in modern pies.



An image of a standing pie, or coffin pastry, from a children's book. From Table Decoration and Dessert in America, 1650-1900.



Reproduction Springerle gingerbread mold. These cookie molds are still in use in Germany today.

Many of the other recognizable Christmas traditions come in the form of sweets, from the sugarplums in the “Night Before Christmas,” to cookies and the dreaded brick of fruitcake. Some of the following items were made year round and have since become associated with the Christmas seasons thanks to lore. Others likely appeared in cookbooks because they were only made once in a year, and required a yearly reference.

cookies would have been shaped with a wooden mold. It wasn't until the early years of the 19th century however, that gingerbread houses came into fashion at Christmastime. This was likely in large part because of the publication of the brothers Grimm fairytales, namely Hansel and Gretel. Artists and craftsmen were employed to build and decorate what became incredibly lavish miniscule homes. Evidence suggested that these pastry houses traveled from Germany to the newly formed United States, where they live on in American tradition today.

Another Christmas food that appears frequently in literature written around the time of the Civil War is Plum Pudding. While plum pudding and the tradition of eating it at Christmas carried over from earlier periods, it was only in the mid-Victorian period when cookbooks included recipes for Christmas Plum Pudding. An English author first recorded the name Christmas Pudding in 1858. In 1862, the December edition of the *Godey's Lady's Book* included a recipe for “Christmas Plum Pudding,” a “Rich Christmas Pudding,” and a “Good Christmas Pudding,” all of which contain very

One particularly remarkable holiday treat is the gingerbread house. Early gingerbread belonged to one of two types, honey or molasses based. The honey-based gingerbreads are more associated with the continental European traditions, particularly those celebrated in Germany where it was, and is today, called Lebkuchen. The molasses-based tradition came from England and Scotland molasses-based shortbreads. The first gingerbread men are attributed to that British tradition and the court of Queen Elizabeth I, “who favored important visitors... with charming gingerbread likenesses of themselves.” Rather than being cut, these



The Christmas Pudding being delivered to the table. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

similar instructions and ingredients for a pudding containing sugar, spices and dried fruits, such as currants and prunes. As with modern mincemeat pies, these puddings contain no actual plums. Originally the word plum referred to dried plums, or prunes, but later the word was used for many kinds of dried fruit. Those might have included some of the goods that Alexandria grocer Edgar Speiden stocked in his shop the Christmas following the Civil War, including raisins, prunes, currants and citron.

Sugarplums, as mentioned in the “Night Before Christmas,” also frequently did not refer to plums. A sugarplum, in the same way as the “plums” in Plum Pudding, was a word for sweet. This was a Victorian change in terminology for a sweet that, in earlier eras, was called a “comfit.” These were candied seeds and dried fruits, which were coated with several layers of melted sugar, forming a sweet, crunchy shell. By the Civil War these were sold by enterprising merchants who had the specialized tools to make them. They were likely also available at Grocer Edgar Speiden’s store, as “Candies – Fancy and Plain...”

During the war, not everyone might have had access to the Christmas goodies they were used to having during that season. As the war raged on many things became exceedingly hard to come by, even in Union cities, like the occupied town of Alexandria. Sara N. Sawyer, a nurse at Prince Street Hospital wrote to a friend in New York about her Christmas experience in December of 1863. A package from that friend included pickles, both cucumbers and tomatoes, which enlivened the Christmas Dinner of the men ensconced there. Sawyer also mentions baking savory pies, as well as two cakes, and getting cranberries from Washington for that same meal. These treats were made available to everyone in the hospital, including those not able to leave their beds. Even without any of our recognizable food traditions, it is clear they celebrated the season to the best of their ability.

Alexandria Gazette
Dec. 26, 1865

The Holidays.

EDGAR SPEIDEN,
GROCER,
de21-1w NO. 12, SOUTH FAIRFAX ST.

FOR THE HOLIDAYS—Just received,
Paper Shell Almonds, Layer and Bunch
Raisins; Prunes, Currants, Citron, French
Chocolate, Mince Meat ready for use, Salad
Oil, Sardines, Worcestershire Sauce, Tomato
and Walnut Catsups, for sale by
de 21-1w EDGAR SPEIDEN.

CANDIES.—Fancy and Plain, in 6 and 25 lb.
boxes, for sale by
de 21-1w EDGAR SPEIDEN.

BECKER'S FOUR
PRINCIPAL FRUIT FLAVORS,
(Extract of Vanilla, Extract of Lemonpeel,
Extract of Orangepeel and Extract
of Almonds, put up in
two oz. bottles for
Family
use.)
These flavors have been for years the only re-
liable ones in use by confectioners. The Vanilla
is the finest for cakes. The Lemon and Orange
are distilled from the green peel, and the Bitter
Almond is free from any injurious acid. They
are decidedly the best in the market. For sale by
de 21-1m EDGAR SPEIDEN.

Advertisement placed in the Alexandria Gazette by Grocer Edgar Speiden on December 26, 1865.

References:

An A-Z of Food and Drink by John Ayoto

The Christmas Cook by William Woys Weaver

The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 by Alfred W. Crosby

The Food Timeline, www.foodtimeline.org, Accessed online Aug, 26, 2011.

Godey's Lady's Book, 1860-1862

Oxford Companion to Food by Alan Davidson.