

## Christmas in the Colony

by Susan Wilkinson, HSMC Director of Marketing and Communications

Before heat pumps and fleece and without electric lights and ovens, it must have been difficult to appreciate the stark beauty of winter--never mind cranking up the energy and appropriate wattage to engineer a holiday bash. But the middle of winter has been a time of celebration for much of history. Before Christ, ancient people knew that the winter solstice meant the worst of winter was past.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, Christ's birth was made a mid-winter holiday by decree. Church officials encouraged the melding of pagan and Christian celebrations in what may be one of the cleverest co-optings of history. Historians have speculated that this may be a reason why the eventual conversion of England to Christianity ran as smoothly as it did. A few hundred years later, church officials sanctioned twelve days of Christmas, from Christ's birth until the day the Wise Men arrived bearing gifts. By the twelfth century Christmas had become the most important religious festival in Europe. From time to time, church leaders lamented the subjugation of the religious to more worldly pursuits during the festival. Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century propagandist William Prynne gave voice to the Puritans revolt against religious feast days, including Christmas, particularly the "reveling, epicurism, wantonness, idleness, dancing, drinking, stage-plays, masques, and carnal pomp and jollity" that were served up in large doses during the holidays.

Although we have scant written record and no images documenting Christmas in early Maryland, the colonists must have loved their traditions as we do ours. It is likely the English immigrants would have done their best to re-create the celebrations they knew at home with one notable addition--the Calverts and the Catholic colonists were free to worship openly.

While the Puritans in New England were working on banning Christmas, original documents suggest the season proceeded festively in Maryland with visiting, food, and drink. Charles Calvert wrote on December 30, 1679 of business matters that would receive his attention "when my howse is Cleere from the Crowd of people which this Christmas I have with me." Proceedings of the Council of Maryland at the end of the century confirm that Christmas was a time when servants and slaves had time off. There was concern that Irish Papist indentured servants and slaves, free to travel and gather during the Christmas season, might consider rebellion.



Maryland's colonists celebrated the Feast of the Nativity in 1633 on the journey to Maryland. Father Andrew White reported "Wine was consumed in order that this day might be better celebrated, and those who enjoyed it too intemperately were seized by fever the following day. . .about twelve died..." A jollier holiday celebration was enjoyed by Mssr. Durand, who recounted his travels through the mid-Atlantic region in 1686. While accompanying a Roman Catholic companion intent on passing Christmas day at a Catholic church in Maryland, they were sheltered by one Col. Fitzhugh at his house on the shores of the Potomac. Here they found "the largest hospitality. He had store of good wine and other things to drink, and a frolic ensued. He called in three fiddlers, a clown, a tight rope dancer and an

acrobatic tumbler, and gave us all the divertissement one would wish. It was very cold but no one thought of going near the fire because they never put less than the trunk of a tree upon it and so the entire room was kept warm. . . the frolic continued well into the afternoon of the second day. . .” Beyond these references to Christmas in the colony, we can only make educated guesses about what the season held based on descriptions from the homeland and what we know of life in the colony.

Holiday revelers have feasted through the ages, the menu tempered by budget and foods available. The notion of adding music to the program was introduced to England from Italy, and the 16<sup>th</sup>-century lords and ladies of the land enjoyed great madrigal feasts. Servants were left to humble pies, which they composed from the leftover organ meats, or humble parts, of deer after choicer cuts were reserved for the gentry. By the 17th century, humble pie had become a standard Christmas food, outlawed in England by Oliver Cromwell’s Puritan government along with minced meat pies and other Christmas traditions. In the colony, the diet of the lower echelons was less humble than it had been in the motherland. Fresh game, finfish, and shellfish were available to all . The end of December was the time livestock were slaughtered, so red meat was abundant.

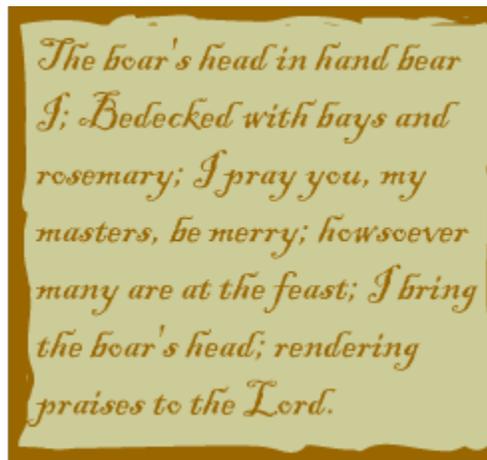
Local fare was supplemented by stores recently arrived with the tobacco fleet. Planters would be trading their crops for rum, citrus fruits, and sugar from the West Indies as well as manufactured goods from the continent. In addition, most wine and beer made during the year was finally fermented and ready for drinking. Wassailing is mentioned in texts dating as far back as the 14th century. The custom of drinking “to your health” may be derived from the ancient tradition of baptizing fields and orchards with fermented drink after the harvest to bless them for the coming year.

Today’s madrigal dinners generally feature other long-standing customs that were likely familiar to the colonists. The burning of a Yule log was a common practice by the Middle Ages, having been introduced to England by Norse invaders. According to legend, the ceremonial burning of a decorated log (in some cultures a log first used as a May Pole) through the Twelve Days of Christmas brought good luck to the house in the New Year. The practice of inverting social order during festivals dates back to the ancient Romans and Persians, through the Middle Ages, and into the Victorian era. A Lord of Misrule, often a commoner with a flair for the outrageous, was allowed to play the boss for a while or masters waited on servants. Even churchmen played the game, anointing a boy bishop for the holiday season.

Plants that magically remained green through the bleakest times have held a special significance through history. Ancient Romans formed evergreens into wreaths to honor their god of agriculture; Egyptians brought rushes into their homes to celebrate the imminent healing of their sun god; and in Northern Europe greens were hung over doors and windows to drive away witches. The Druids believed mistletoe healed everything from infertility to indigestion and to Scandinavians it represented their goddess of love. Some references indicate church officials suggested decorating with holly, whose branches came to represent the crown of thorns and its berries the blood of Christ, in place of mistletoe with its pagan associations. Eighteenth-century English prints of Christmas decorations show mistletoe remained in favor along with holly and bay. With the quantity of these raw materials easily found in Maryland’s winter landscape, it’s easy to imagine the colonists brightening their homes with boughs of holly. Don’t entertain the notion of including a Christmas tree in your vision—the *tannenbaum* notion didn’t become popular on these shores until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Carols and the crèche were introduced in the Middle Ages as a means of illustrating the Christmas story to those who were unable to read. In 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>- century England, traveling musicians and town-sponsored itinerant musicians sang the hours and carols, popularizing these tunes. The lyrics make fascinating reading, offering insight into the mindsets and celebrations of the day, the religious and the secular. *The Boars Head* carol, published in 1521, was a popular song and has been sung at Queen’s College, Oxford as the traditional dish is served since the 17<sup>th</sup>-century. George Calvert and his son,

Cecil, attended Oxford and must have been familiar with the song, which acknowledges both faces of the Christmas season:



*This article first appeared in The River Gazette, a publication of St. Mary's College of Maryland.*