

HAPPY CHRISTMAS!



See Page 2

AMERICANS *Becoming* TODAY

NO. 1 IN COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG



Dunmore Rocks!
See below

December 1774 Newsline

- December**
Local Committee of Safety elected; Grand Jury reports for the judicial law courts
- December 1**
Continental Association goes into effect ending the importation of British goods
- December 3**
Birth of Lady Virginia
- December 4**
Return of Lord Dunmore from the Indian Wars in the West
- December 12**
The James City Committee is the first to order an auction of imported British goods at the Raleigh Tavern on January 19, 1775
- December 12**
Fair Day for Williamsburg
- December 13**
General Court's oyer and terminer court meets to try criminal cases
- December 16**
End of Trinity term at the college
- December 17**
Four young Shawnee braves arrive in Williamsburg as hostages to the good faith of their tribe's agreement to meet with treaty negotiators in the spring of 1775
- December 23**
Freeholders of Williamsburg elect a committee for the city
- December 25**
Christmas Day
The first day of the Christmas season and one of four times during the colonial year when the Lord's Supper is celebrated at Bruton Parish Church, and elsewhere in Virginia. Secular observance of the season includes entertaining at home.
- December 26**
St. Stephen, first Christian martyr In England and Virginia, the first day of the 12 days of Christmas, which extend through January 6.
- December 27**
St. John the Evangelist
Minutes of the Williamsburg Lodge of Freemasons show that local Masons celebrate this day annually in the 1770s with great ceremony. Wearing the insignia of their order and walking in the proper rank, they process as a group from the Lodge to Bruton Parish Church for a sermon. Afterward, they host a dinner and ball to which the ladies of the town are invited.
- Twelfth Night**
The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies Twelfth Night as Twelfth Day eve, the evening before Twelfth Day (Epiphany, January 6). The word *night* in this usage suggests "to spend the night in enjoyment or reveling," as in "to make a night of it." This definition is consistent with the tradition of making the eves of religious feasts the occasion for secular revelries (debaucheries in the eyes of the authorities who sought to control such excesses).

Governor Returns from War Four Shawnees Arrive at the Palace



[Winchester]—Wednesday, December 7th, 1774

Saw Four Indian Chiefs of the Shawnees Nation Who have been at War with the Virginians this Summer, but have made peace with them, and are sending these people to Williamsburg as Hostages.

They are tall, manly, well shaped men, of a Copper Colour with Black Hair, Quick piercing Eyes, and good features. They have rings of Silver in their nose and bobs to them which hangs over their upper lip. Their ears are cut from the tip, two thirds of the way round and the piece extended with Brass wire till it touches their Shoulders, in this part they hang a thin silver plate wrought in Flourishes about 3 Inches diameter, with plates of Silver round their

arms and in the Hair which is all cut off except a Long Lock on the top of the head, they are in whitemens dress except Breeches which they refuse to wear, instead of which they have a girdle round them with a piece of Cloth drawn through their Legs and turned over the girdle and appears like a short apron before and behind. All the Hair is pulled from their eye brows and eye lashes and their Face painted in different parts with Vermilion. They walk remarkable straight and cut a Grottesque appearance in this mixed dress.

Lincoln MacVeagh, ed., *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774-1777* (New York: Dial Press, 1924).

Tar and Feathers and Freedom? The Association and Committees of Safety

From its inception, the county committees in Virginia assumed an authority that extended well beyond . . . strict regulation of all commerce. At the election of the James City committee on November 25, 1774, freeholders agreed that the resolutions of the Continental Congress would be "the sole rule of their conduct, in all matters respecting their present political engagements." By January, William Carr reported that many county committees exceeded the instructions of the Continental Association, and in Norfolk James Parker complained that "Every thing is managed by Committee."

The committees* in Virginia quickly became far more than local boards for the administration of the association; they became the principal institutions of local government. The formation of committees at the same time that the county courts relinquished many of the most important powers allowed the local political elites to maintain their authority in the counties at the same time that they isolated and subverted royal government. By Christmas, Governor Dunmore was denouncing the assumption of power by committees that supervised every aspect of merchants' business and raised independent militias "for the avowed purpose of protecting" the committees' authority. When the governor tried to cultivate appointed officeholders on the local level he discovered that nearly every justice of the peace was also a committee member and that by closing the county courts, the local political leadership united itself with the yeoman planters. Dunmore was convinced the arbitrary proceedings of the committees and the scarcity of basic supplies would breed popular dissent. Until his wishful predictions were fulfilled, however, the governor could only recommend that Parliament aggravate existing shortages by blockading ports and shutting off all American commerce.

Bruce A. Ragsdale, *A Planters' Republic: The Search for Economic Independence in Revolutionary America* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1996).

*Note: Committees were made up of former burgesses and justices of the peace.

Early 19th-Century Interview with Jeremy Prophet

Jeremy Prophet was a slave owned by John Washington, the brother of George Washington. This account describes Jeremy's crossing the York River on December 4, 1759, carrying the trunks for Washington's wedding to Martha Custis.

"I went along wid de gin'ral when he go down to get married.

"When we got to de ferry, all de boats, de horse-boat and de foot-boat, gone t'oder side. It was dark den—de gin'ral he walk

back and forward to keep warm—he blowed de conchy, and we hollered, and at last we see de foot-boat a coming over—de river look mighty ugly, all white, and de wind blowing like great guns, and it was a freezing hard, I tell you. . . .

"Come on dark night afore de horse-boat come over, and dar we war, no star—ebery ting black but de river—six hours in de boat,

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What Will Happen in the New Year?

In December 1774,
Virginians are wondering . . .

African Americans

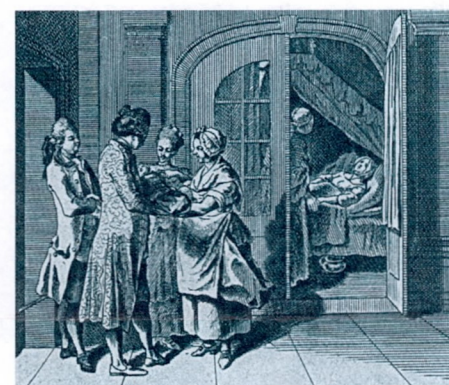
There's much talk about freedom in the colonies. What about me? Will the master keep my family together?

European Americans

Are we giving up freedom in order to gain freedom? Will there be war with Britain?

Native Americans

Will our people be able to survive? Can we trust these Europeans? What do they really want?



Williamsburg, December 8

LAST Saturday Morning the Right Honourable the COUNTESS of DUNMORE was safely delivered of a Daughter, at the Palace. Her Ladyship continues in a very favourable Situation, and the young Virginian is in perfect Health.

Sunday last, in the Afternoon, his Excellency the Governour arrived at the Palace in this City, from his Expedition against the Indians, who have been humbled into a Necessity of soliciting Peace themselves, and have delivered Hostages for the due Observance of the Terms; which cannot fail of giving general Satisfaction, as they confine the Indians to Limits that entirely remove the Grounds of future Quarrel between them and the People of Virginia, and lay a Foundation for a fair and extensive Indian Trade, which, if properly followed, must produce the most beneficial Effects to this Country.

We hear that four of the principal Shawanese Warriours are expected here in a few Days, and that twelve Headmen and Warriours of the Delaware and other Tribes are left at Fort Dunmore, as Hostages. The Indians have delivered up all the white Prisoners in their Towns, with the Horses and other Plunder they took from the Inhabitants, and even offered to give up their own Horses. . . .

To his Excellency the Right Honourable John Earl of Dunmore,
His Majesty's Lieutenant and Governor General of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia, and Vice Admiral of the same:
The humble ADDRESS of the City of Williamsburg.

My Lord,
WE his Majesty's most dutiful and loyal Subjects, the Mayor, Recorder, Alderman, and Common Council, of the City of Williamsburg, in Common Hall assembled, beg Leave to embrace the earliest Opportunity of congratulating your Lordship on the Conclusion of a dangerous and fatiguing Service, in which you have lately been engaged, and on your Return to this City.

It is with Pleasure we hear your Lordship has been able to defeat the Designs of a cruel and insidious Enemy, and at the

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NEWS



Palace Posting

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same Time that your Lordship has escaped those Dangers to which your Person must have been frequently exposed.

Permit us also, upon this Occasion, to express our Congratulations on the late Addition to your Family by the Birth of a Daughter; and to assure you, that we wish to your Lordship every Degree of Felicity, and that we shall contribute towards its Attainment, as far as lies in our Power, during your Residence amongst us.

Virginia Gazette Supplement (Purdie and Dixon), December 8, 1774.



Churching of Lady Dunmore

Did she or didn't she—go to Bruton Parish, that is, for “The Thanksgiving of Women after Child-birth,” commonly called “The Churching of Women”? We don't know a lot about the practice in Virginia, but the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England includes this ceremony which signals a new mother's re-entry into the full life of the church after her lying-in. The opening rubric of the rite reads:

The Woman, at the usual time after the Delivery, shall come to the Church, decently apparelled, and there shall kneel down in some convenient place, as hath been accustomed, or as the Ordinary [Bishop] shall direct.

In England, the “usual time after the Delivery” meant a minimum of 30 days. “Decently apparelled” could indicate the wearing of a veil. “Some convenient place” was often just inside the church door. The short series of prayers and psalms occurred at the beginning of the Communion and included these words.

O Almighty God, we give thee humble thanks for that thou has vouchsafed to deliver this woman thy servant from the great pain and peril of childbirth.

[Submitted by Bob Doares]



THE HOLLY AND THE IVY

For most of the 18th century, Christmas traditions in Virginia were indeed simple. No trees, no Santa, few gifts, no “stockings hung by the chimney with care.” Many of our favorite customs came along later—most in the 19th century. In colonial Virginia, Christmas was an entire season, not a single day—the 12 Days of Christmas stretched from December 25 to Epiphany on January 6.

Dinners, balls and other social occasions were arranged throughout the 12 days. Weddings too often took place at this time of year (the Jeffersons' and the Washingtons' are just two examples). Twelfth Night parties, usually held on the evening of January 5, signaled the end of the season.

New Year's Day was often noted in diaries of the period with sentiments like “Another Year is gone!” but New Year's Eve parties were not common. Twelfth Night gatherings seemed to have served much the same purpose as ours on December 31.

Philip Vickers Fithian's diary for 1773 and '74 gives us an unusually detailed look at Virginians' holiday practices. For example, on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas morning, Fithian noted that guns were fired—presumably as a means of sending greetings to faraway plantations. They also seem to have functioned as a release of the high spirits brought on by the season. Fithian wrote that the household slaves at Nomini Hall solicited gifts [see below].

Among Anglicans in Virginia, Christmas, the Feast of the Nativity, was a major religious holiday, second only to Easter. Therefore, attendance at service on that day was expected. It was one of the three or four times in the year that Eucharist was celebrated. In rural parishes short on clergy, church services may not have been possible on December 25 itself, so folks in the countryside observed the holiday on the Sunday closest to that date. In 1773, for example, Christmas fell on a Saturday. . . .

Unfortunately, there is little evidence about how denominations other than Anglicans celebrated. Fithian spent the Christmas of 1775 in western Virginia as a Presbyterian “missionary” to the Scots-Irish settlers there. That holiday was very different from previous ones at Nomini Hall. He wrote, “Not a Gun heard—Not a Shout—No company or Cabal assembled—To Day is like other Days every Way calm & temperate—People go about their daily Business.”. . .

After church on Christmas Day, dinner was the next order of business. Most people tried to get more and better things to eat and drink for the holiday. For the gentry, of course, this presented no problem at all. Fithian described his meal at Nomini Hall on Christmas Day 1773: “Our Dinner was no otherwise than common [that is, it was just like their dinner everyday], yet as elegant a Christmas Dinner as I ever sat Down to.” Those lower down the social scale, of course, had fewer choices of food and drink. Preparing and serving these meals, whether elaborate or simple, required work, so housewives, slaves and servants probably worked as hard or harder on the holiday than at other times. Especially when guests were included, their duties must have been much more onerous.

The custom of decorating churches has been traced to the Old Testament lesson appointed for the Anglican service on Christmas Eve. The 13th verse of Isaiah, chapter 60, reads, “The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir-tree, the pine-tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary.”

John Brand's *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, first published in 1777, includes the following rhyme, specifying not only the kinds of foliage to use but where to place the decorations and even the types of containers to hold the greens in 18th-century English homes:

*From every hedge is pluck'd by eager hands
The holy [holly] branch with prickly leaves
replete
And fraught with berries of a crimson hue;*

*Which, torn asunder from its parent trunk,
Is straight way taken to the neighboring towns,
Where windows, mantels, candlesticks, and
shelves,*

*Quarts, pints, decanters, pipkins, basons, jugs,
And other articles of household ware,
The verdant garb confess.*

Coins, small toys and educational books were typical holiday presents—and were just as likely to be given at New Year's as at Christmas. In the 18th century gifts were not exchanged but bestowed by a superior upon an inferior—parents to children or masters to slaves, servants or apprentices.

The local newspaper in December 1738, for example, advertised a new book, *The Church Catechism Explain'd*, as “very proper for a New-Year's Gift to Children.” Robert Wormeley Carter of Richmond County “gave 12/6 [12 shillings, sixpence] to my five children & 10/ [10 shillings] to Mrs. Carter” on December 25, 1769. In 1770, Yorktown resident Martha Goosley sent two Christmas turkeys to John Norton and his family in London.

St. George Tucker's relatives in Bermuda sent him “a pair of silk Stockings for a Christmas Box” on January 4, 1773. Palace kitchen accounts show that two shillings sixpence were sent as a “Christmas box to the millar's servt.” on January 23, 1770.

House slaves at Nomini Hall expected tips from Fithian on Christmas morning 1773. His expenditure totaled “five Bits” when he had given something to one who served him. Fithian could not pay up completely until the middle of the next month.

Emma Lou Powers, *The Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* (Fall 1999).

PUTTING SLAVIN' ASIDE

As usual, our sources are biased toward the gentry and upper middling sort. There is no information about how poor whites and free people of color celebrated Christmas in early Virginia. For some of them, the religious aspects of the holiday probably prevailed. With limited incomes, of course, material manifestations of the season—gifts, special meals, decorations, and so on—were simply not possible.

We know more about slaves' treatment at this time of year because of letters, diaries and other documents written by the masters, mainly gentry planters. A February 1726/7 law that established patrols to guard against invasions and insurrections mentions that slaves usually congregated in some numbers at the three main yearly festivals. As part of the rationale for the patrols, the legislators called to mind the “great danger [that] may happen to the inhabitants of this dominion, from the unlawful concourse of negroes, during the Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide holidays, wherein they are usually exempted from labour.”

Lorena Walsh's research on plantation management in the colonial Chesapeake shows that slaves were allowed three to five days' holiday at Christmastime. In 1786, for example, George Washington noted on December 29, “The hollidays being over, and the People [slaves] all at work, I rid to the Ferry, Dogue run, and Muddy hole Plantations.” A Christmas respite must have been allowed to field hands more readily than to domestics; house servants had more work than usual when guests were in the house for extended visits or if the master and mistress expected special meals and entertained during the holidays.

Traditionally, slave owners allowed their workers to have alcohol during the Christmas break. Some masters actually made gifts of rum and other spirits to their bondsmen. This

CHRISTMAS

Jeremy Prophet

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half leg deep in water—come on darker and darker . . . I was scared, but I keep up—de water splash over de boat. . . . De people seed we didn't come, and got skeered. . . .

“When we go to shore, I feel glad, I tell you—twas Christmas Eve, an I was most froze. . . .

“As we pass de winder, I see in, and I seed de gin'ral in de big chair, . . . and dare was de lady . . . an' he had de lady's little daughter on he lap. Aha! You feller, say I to mysef, dat what you come for trough de cold, eh!

“Presently madam come out to de door, wid de maid wid her candle. She call de servant, and he come. . . . She say, take dem men in and treat um well. . . . And so we went into de laundry and den you may depend de tortoise shell bowl come. . . .

“I went out to see my horses, and I was in fair misery for de water had frozen on um. . . . De gin'ral he come out. . . .

“Well,' says he, 'Jeremy, stay rest yourself long as you please, and take holyday. . . . if I want a carriage, I can borrow de lady's to go to Williamsburg. But do you stay and rest.'

“Oh,' says I, 'I no want rest. I got wife at home. I rather go spend Christmas dare. I got notting but wheels to take back, and so I tink to go home tomorrow.'

“Says he, 'Jerry, hold your hand.'

“He put he hand in he pocket. I hold one hand, he full um. When I see dat, I hold t'oder—he full dat, too. And when I go to de stable, I count it out in my hat. Aha! D'ye mind me, sir! He had gin me pounds.”

James Kirke Paulding, *Letters from the South*, vol. 1 (1817; reprint, 1835), 191–205.

was a very manipulative move and not offered strictly for the slaves' benefit and enjoyment. Frederick Douglass and others explained that slave owners actually encouraged drunkenness at Christmas and a few other occasions to keep slaves from running away. Some individuals, it was said, drank so much that they could not enjoy their temporary freedom. Holiday imbibing troubled certain slave owners. James Gordon, an “Old Side” Presbyterian in Lancaster County, Virginia, recorded in his diary on Christmas Day 1759, “Some of our negroes got drunk, that has given me some uneasiness.”

Naturally, what a master could give, he could also take away. On the last day of 1774, Colonel Landon Carter congratulated himself for his wisdom in suppressing the slaves' celebration at Sabine Hall that year: “I can't but fancy that I have been quite happy in not letting my People keep any part of Christmas.” Carter thought his strictness had averted a slave revolt.

Emma Lou Powers, *The Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* (Fall 1999).

