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HOLIDAY BULLETIN 2020

Christmas 1781 Meets Christmas 2020: Interpreting the Holidays at Colonial Williamsburg

*Concept and interviews by
Christopher Glick and
Erikka Clarke*



Brandon Lyles, Lead Interpreter, at the Roscoe Cole Building.

The holiday season holds a special place for many of us. But imagine celebrating this season amidst the backdrop of Williamsburg in 1781. The siege of Yorktown was only a few months removed, the Governor's Palace burned three days before Christmas and the threat of continuing war most likely had a profound effect on the people of Williamsburg as they celebrated the Christmas season that year.

Given the difficult year we have had, Christmas in the year 2020 is also one that will profoundly impact our lives as we trade family gatherings for virtual ones and respond to ever-changing pandemic guidelines. For Colonial Williamsburg, it means foregoing some holiday traditions and offering fewer programs to ensure the safety of our employees and guests. Yet, in spite of the pandemic, wreaths still hang on the doors of our historic buildings, and our interpreters are bringing the Christmastide season to life.

Since the Historic Area simultaneously exists in the 18th and 21st centuries we have many holiday-themed stories and traditions to choose from. We focus on the 1700s for the most part, but we can very easily incorporate many other stories ranging from the 1700s to the modern day: from the presence of French Catholics, Anglican Virginians and Lutheran Germans in the 1780s to Dr. Charles Frederick Ernest Minnigerode bringing the first Christmas tree to Virginia in 1842 and the story of how wreaths replaced electric lighting on buildings along DoG Street in the early 20th century.

For our interpreters, choosing among these stories can be daunting. Talking with lead interpreter Brandon Lyles and Nation Builder Mark Schneider, who portrays the Marquis de Lafayette and the Comte de Rochambeau, provides some insight into how they interpret the holiday season for guests.

Whether leading groups on Decoration Walks—lovingly referred to as Dec Walks here in the Historic Area—or interpreting the French Catholic traditions of the season, both interpreters start their programs by contrasting how we celebrate ▶

Christmas today with traditions followed in the 18th century.

Lyles and Schneider explain the buildup to Christmas in Colonial America as an advent leading to the day Christians mark the birth of Christ. The days preceding Christmas Day were solemn and reflective while Christmas Day and the 12 days that follow were filled with jubilation and merriment consisting of drinking, dancing, hunting and celebrating, not meant for children. These traditions were different from our modern view of Christmas celebrations and are, perhaps, difficult for many of us to imagine.

Lyles digs deep into research to tell stories of Christmas celebrations spanning the 18th century to today. His interpretation focuses on people rather than events because it's easier to connect with his audience that way. Selecting from nearly 250 years of holiday traditions, he describes how they grow, change and adapt as the town itself evolves over time. For example, Lyles points out that decorations were simple and reserved in the 18th century and grew more dramatic in the 1920s when the town installed electric lighting, before the establishment of wreaths as a Colonial Williamsburg tradition.

Williamsburg's wreaths are a perennial favorite among guests and employees. The wreaths are part of the charm of the holiday season here at Colonial Williamsburg, and for Lyles, their story helps him establish deep connections with guests. So, along with doing the historic research, he also interacts with our landscaping and decorative teams to understand the natural elements that make their way into each one.

The wreaths, much like our interpreters and buildings, tell a story. During the 1920s, our town had grown accustomed to more modern lighting and Christmas celebrations. However, this modern intrusion into the 18th-century storyline the Foundation was beginning to portray was quite disruptive to people interested in a Colonial-era experience. The wreaths and natural elements became the compromise that led to the tradition we know and love today. Each of the wreaths either tells an 18th-century story about the building on which it is hung or represents the building or trade there. Walking by the wigmakers, for example, we find a wreath adorned with wig pins and minute hair pieces.

Lyles reminds us that, despite the solemn lead-up to Christmas Day and the following 12 days of celebration, we must be cognizant that the holiday was not joyous for all people. This was a town that was half enslaved, and for the enslaved population, this season meant extra work, perhaps even longer hours and a recognition that these might be the last days they had with their families as the new year brought the ▶



Mark Schneider as General Rochambeau interpreting to guest about a Catholic Christmastide at the Wythe House in the year of 1781.



prospect of being rented or sold. We must remember that this is part of the story too, and we must be aware that these aspects are also part of the interpretive and historic narrative.

Schneider's interpretations of Rochambeau and Lafayette highlight French Catholic Christmas traditions observed in the former Anglican capital of Virginia. Schneider interprets Rochambeau's transition from training to become a member of the clergy to training to be a soldier when his oldest brother dies. After the victory at Yorktown in October 1781, Washington commanded Rochambeau to stay in Williamsburg until June 1782. On Dec. 15, 1781, the king of France ordered that a mass be held to celebrate the victory at Yorktown in conjunction with a mass at Bruton Parish Church. Imagine the juxtaposition of a Catholic mass being held in an Anglican church. Of course, there was the Christmas mass as well, which then led to dances, fires and celebratory moments commonly associated with the period—celebrations were occurring even amidst the backdrop of difficult times.

While we cannot be certain of how Rochambeau's troops celebrated Christmas in 1781, we do know there was a mass. As is the case today, the Catholic tradition in France was the midnight mass, and it is one that most certainly everyone would have attended. After mass, families would return home to eat a late supper of rich foods and a yule log cake. While the flavors of home might not have been available to the French here in Williamsburg, there is reason to believe they celebrated the Christmas season in their own way.

As our interpreters demonstrate through our programming and decorations, even amidst uncertainty there was still much to celebrate in 1781. This year has been a challenge for all of us and uncertain times continue, but trend and tradition still grow in our hearts, and we will find ways to celebrate Christmas in 2020.

Happy holidays.
And a prosperous and
healthy new year
to you and your family.