



December 2003

Carlyle House

Docent Dispatch

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

18th-Century Celebrations *by Cindy Major*

On December 18, 1773 Philip Vicars Fithian, a tutor to Robert Carter's children, wrote:

Nothing is now to be heard of in conversation, but the Balls, the Fox-hunts, the fine entertainments, and the good fellowship, which are to be exhibited at the approaching Christmas.



Ball Supper
C Watson, England ca. 1805

These festivities sound like those taking place at a fine English country home, but there is some evidence that Virginians' holiday traditions did differ from those of their English brothers.

The inventories of elite families living in the Chesapeake Bay area give ample evidence of elaborate entertaining with fine imported china, glassware and silver. The period between Christmas and Twelfth Night was a quiet time for merchants and plantation owners and afforded them the leisure to indulge in seasonal celebrations. It was also a good opportunity to plan family events such as weddings and christenings.

Christmas was a holy day, and was often observed by a fine meal. George Washington's diaries and letters show him to be at home with family and friends many years on December 25th. In 1751, Washington was returning home from Barbados and wrote of dining on an Irish goose which had been brought on board for the occasion and drinking to the health of absent friends. It seems, even when circumstances were not ideal, an attempt was made to observe the day.

There are some references to Virginians attending church services on Christmas, however, it was not always an option. One Englishman visiting a Virginia Plantation in 1785 wrote:

I lament more and more every Sunday that we have no public place of worship to go to. There is a church to be sure, about three miles off, but unfortunately there happens to be no preacher. Being Christmas Day you miss it more than common, as so universal a day of worship in all parts of the civilized world.

Compared to the English traditions of the *Wassail Bowl*, *Yule Log* and *caroling*, Virginia celebrations must have appeared tame. While staying in Fredericksburg in 1776, the Englishman Nicholas Cresswell noted that Christmas Day was not much observed in this country except by the Dutch.



Twelfth Night

Joseph Cruikshank, London 1794

As in England, some Virginians gave small gifts to servants or slaves on Christmas. Fithian gave a *Bit* to the slave who took care of his clothes and *half a Bit* to the one who tended his fire. Gifts of food, rum and cider are often mentioned by Virginians for their slaves but, by contrast, Landon Carter records in his 1774 diary he is quite happy not letting his people keep any part of Christmas.

Here in Alexandria, John Carlyle may have had more of an opportunity to observe the holidays in the English manner. Certainly going to church services would have been convenient with Christ Church and Presbyterian Meeting House an easy walk from his residence. Virginians did close down their courthouses and businesses on Christmas and Good Friday. However, Virginia clergy complained that those were the only holy days the colonists were willing

to lose their daily labor.

In his journal, Nicholas Cresswell gives an account of attending a Ball in Alexandria on Twelfth Night of 1775. He describes it as “their annual Ball” and goes on to relate how it is determined who will pay for the Ball each year.

A rich cake is provided and cut into small pieces and handed round to 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... The Lady who draws the Queen has the trouble of making the cake.

The English tradition of Twelfth Night was very similar. Here the holy day was second only to Christmas. The purpose was to honor the three

wise men or kings. There was also a cake involved in this celebration. The cake was cut and served to the guests. One piece contained a bean and the recipient of that portion was named “King of the Bean” and reigned over the Ball until midnight.

Another 18th-century traveler, Robert Hunter Jr., a young London merchant, tells of spending Twelfth Night in a Virginia home where he played whist until past nine and then was served “an elegant supper after the Virginia fashion”

Back in Alexandria, Nicholas Cresswell describes the supper he was served on Twelfth Night 1775:

A cold supper, Punch Wines Coffee and Chocolate, but no Tea. This is the forbidden herb.

At the Carlyle House this year, we will display an elegant cold supper in the Virginia tradition. It will include the Twelfth Night cake, and other delicacies including oysters on the half shell and meat pies. Plan to attend the training sessions on December 10th at either 10 am or 7 pm to learn all the details you will need to interpret the Carlyle’s *Twelfth Night* celebration.

Sources

The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell 1774-1777

The Festive Tradition
Louise Conway Belden

Christmas in Colonial Virginia
Mary R.M. Goodwin

The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter
Volume II

Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian