Christmas in 17th-Century England and Virginia

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Along with their friends and relatives in England, the Englishmen who came to Jamestown in 1607 considered Christmas to be one of the most special times of the year. In England, the season lasted about two weeks, from December 25 to Twelfth Day, January 6. During this period, festivities abounded and little work was accomplished.

The Christmas season evolved from the mid-winter Germanic festival of Yule and the Roman Saturnalia, in which drinking, gaming and general revelry took place, homes were decorated with greens, presents were exchanged and people dressed up in costumes. The English Christmas festivities of the 17th century resulted from the imposition of the Feast of the Nativity upon the pagan mid-winter festivals; Christian and pagan rituals were intermixed.

Contemporary writers shed more light on the secular than on the religious nature of the 17th-century holiday. According to a 1631 account by John Taylor, the festival of Christmas Day began with church attendance. Following that, “some went to cards, some sung Carrols, many mery songs, some to waste the long night would tell Winter-tales … Then came maids with Wassell, jolly Wassell, cakes, white loafe and cheese, mince pies & other meat. These being gone, the jolly youths and plaine dealing Plow swaines being weary of cards fell to dancing to show mee some Gambols, some ventured the breaking of their shins to make me sport – some the scalding of their lippes to catch at apples tyed at the end of a stick having a lighted candle at the other – some shod the wild mare; some at hot cockles and the like.”

English folk prepared for the season by gaily decking their homes and churches with greens – holly, bay, rosemary, ivy and sometimes mistletoe, which was difficult to acquire in some areas. Sometimes in place of mistletoe, Englishmen and women would gather holly and other greens into a “kissing bush” hung from the ceiling. They carried in a Yule log on Christmas Eve, accompanied by great pomp, and lighted the log with a brand saved from the previous year’s log.

At court and in towns and cities, players prepared plays and masques, or performances with dance, song, spectacle and costuming. The Master of Revels at Court busied himself for weeks, choosing the companies of players to perform for the King. The Master also had to be certain that costumes, candles and props were ready for the plays. Masques involved the guests in dances with the disguised performers, and the fine attire of the guests made the masques the most spectacular of all Court revelries.
In preparation for the season, many towns designated a Lord of Misrule, the “grand captain of all mischief,” who, with 20 or more chosen “lusty guts,” decked themselves in yellow and green scarves, ribbons, laces, rings and jewels, and processed through the town on Christmas Day. In the late 16th century, Philip Stubbes, of puritanical leanings, related how this “heathen company” marched “towards the church and churchyard, their pipers piping, their drummers thundering, their stumps dancing, their bells jingling, their handkerchiefs swinging about their heads like madmen, their hobby-horses and other monsters skirmishing amongst the rout.” Stubbes and others argued for an end to the licentiousness and revelry often associated with the Lord of Misrule and his mummers. This custom, however, was so ingrained in the minds of Englishmen of all classes, that even with the rise of Puritans to political power in the 1640s, attempts at controlling Christmas merriment often failed.

Although Puritans objected to the celebration of Christmas as pagan revelry, apparently many made concessions when it came to Christmas festivities. The Presbyterians in Scotland, of puritan persuasion, placed a ban on Christmas in that country in 1583, but such a ban did not take place in England until 1652, and then it was difficult to enforce. Puritans did, however, continue to voice complaints about the use of mince pies and plum puddings at Christmas, considering them to be “popish.” At the New World settlement of Plymouth in 1621, the Pilgrims, when asked to do any work on Christmas day, refused. Later that day, however, when they were found playing in the streets, which supposedly went against their strict religious beliefs, they were told that “if they made the keeping of it (Christmas) matter of devotion, let them keep their houses; but there should be no gaming or reveling in the streets,” according to William Bradford.

Most important to all the Christmas festivities was the feasting. Englishmen loved their food. Thomas Tusser, in his “Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandrie,” wrote:

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Good bread and good drinke, a good fier in the hall,  
brawne, pudding and souse, and good mustard withall.  
Beefe, mutton, and porke, shred pies of the best,  
pig, veale, goose and capon, and turkey well drest;  
Cheese, apples and nuts, joly Carols to heare,  
as then in the countrie is counted good cheare.
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For those who could afford one, the boar’s head formed the centerpiece of the table, cooked and decorated with a lemon in his mouth. Poorer countryfolk substituted brawne, the flesh of the pig, boiled and pickled. Shred, or mincemeat, pies served as a special part of the dinner, as did white bread and plum pudding, made with beef, raisins, currants and bread. A recipe for six “Minst Pyes” in the state papers of James I called for a half peck of flour, a loin of fat mutton, two pounds each of sugar, butter, raisins, currants, six eggs and spices. The English enjoyed turkey, native to North America, ever since the Spaniards introduced it to England in the early 16th century. Spiced ales and wines accompanied meals throughout the festival season.

Certain activities enjoyed by folk of both high and low status included wassailing and mumming, which could be performed at various times throughout the two-week period. Mummers plays and processions on Christmas Eve consisted of costumed characters who went from house to house performing. Wassailers also paraded to the houses in the towns on Christmas Eve, New Year’s Eve and Twelfth Night, traditionally carrying a wassail bowl full of spiced ale, sugar and apples, and singing a wassailing song while passing the bowl:

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Wassail! Wassail! All over the town  
Our toast it is white, our ale it is brown,  
Our bowl it is made of a maplin tree;  
We be good fellows all, I drink to thee.
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Englishmen of this period also observed the custom of wassailing apple trees on Christmas Eve and Twelfth Night, taking a bowl of cider with toast in it to the orchard, placing pieces of toast on the branches and pouring cider on the roots of the trees. They believed this would entice the trees to yield an abundant crop of fruit at harvest time.

Other activities enjoyed during Christmas revels included caroling, dancing and gaming. Carols for the season appeared in the Middle Ages as a derivative of French dance songs. They became songs of the people, and were not necessarily sung by professional choirs. Popular carols took such themes as the boar’s head, wassailing, lullabies and the Nativity. People of all ages enjoyed gambling, including children. In the late 16th century, records show that parents gave small amounts of money to their children for “play.” More active games included “hoodman-blind,” or blind-man’s-buff, “stool-ball,” similar to cricket, and “hot-cockles,” in which a blind-folded player tried to guess who tapped him on his back. Children enjoyed leap frog and the daring game of “snap-apple,” in which a player tried to bite into an apple, fastened at one end of a stick, which had a lighted candle fastened to the other end; the stick was suspended from the ceiling by a string.

Unlike the 20th-century custom of exchanging gifts on Christmas Day, the English in the 17th century presented gifts on New Year’s Day. Everyone from King James to the lowliest peasant received gifts, which varied from foodstuffs to personal items such as jewelry, money, books, gloves, capons, cakes, apples or oranges studded with cloves, spices, nuts and pins; tenants gave their landlords capons; the poor received alms and gifts of food. Thomas Tusser explained:

At Christmas be mery, and thanke God of all:
And feast thy pore neighbours, the great with the small.

Feasting, gaming and revelry continued periodically until Twelfth Day, when special activities such as wassailing, mumming and the eating of a Twelfth cake, loaded with sugar and confections, took place. Twelfth Day, or Epiphany, ended most of the festivities. Some churches held a feast of the star, commemorating the visit of the Magi in Bethlehem, and the day ended with revelry and feasting.

When the first colonists left England to find the riches of the New World, they took with them the culture they had known in England. The travelers to Virginia spent their first Christmas of 1606 on board their ships en route to the New World. Their second Christmas, 1607, most likely was not a happy time. Captain John Smith was being held prisoner for questioning by the Powhatan, chief of 32 tribes in Tidewater Virginia at that time. Smith had gone to trade with the Indians for food. If those first colonists in Jamestown had the desire and interest in celebrating, they might have cut greens and decorated with boughs of holly, ivy and mistletoe. They could have burned a Yule log and sung some of their favorite carols, following a service in the church. They might have cooked a special meal of venison, oysters, fish, oatmeal and peas from their common store if food had not been so scarce. The dinner certainly would have been much different from their traditional meals at home, especially the first Christmas. Without families, and with less than half of the original number still alive, it must have been hard to be merry.

The following Christmas of 1608 found the colonists in desperate straits – sick, hungry and impoverished. Captain Smith and his men left Jamestown at the end of December to find the Powhatan and acquire some food. Inclement weather forced them to stay at Kecoughtan (Hampton) for “6 or 7 daies.” There, “the extreame wind, raine, frost, and snowe, caused us to keepe Christmas amongst the Salvages, where wee were never more merrie, nor fedde on more plente of good oysters, fish, flesh, wild foule, and good bread, nor never had better fires in England then in the drie warme smokie houses of Kecoughtan.”

Nevertheless, despite hardships, the English still seemed to keep Christmas as a religious festival. In 1609, William Strachey, who would become secretary of the Virginia colony, recorded a “true reportory of...
the wracke, and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight: upon, and from the Ilands of the Bermudas.”

Strachey related an incident in Bermuda in 1609: “upon Christmas Eve, as also once before, the first of October; our Minister preached a godly Sermon, which being ended, he celebrated a Communion.” The travelers eventually reached Jamestown in 1610.

Following Decembers at Jamestown continued to be difficult. The winter of 1609, traditionally known as the “Starving Time,” found the few remaining colonists dying in large numbers. Life in the New World was a precarious existence at best. However, Christmas celebrations must have entered the minds of these colonists every December. By the 1620s and 1630s, references to Christmas appear in the Statutes at Large, or laws of Virginia; the Christmas season served as a calendar benchmark for various legislative activities. In 1631, for instance, the laws stated that churches were to be built in areas where they were lacking or were in a state of decay, such action to take place before the “feast of the nativitie of our Saviour Christ.” Christmas still served as a focal point of the year, although there is little in the record as to how it was celebrated in Virginia throughout the 17th century.