Worcester Historical Museum

presents

Home for the Holidays Through the Years
OCCUPANTS: The house was family occupied for nearly 80 years, 1772 to 1851: Stephen 1772-1797; Stephen & Elizabeth 1797-1829; Widow Elizabeth 1829-1851. After that, it was occupied by rental tenants.

After the last Stephen's death, it became the property of Worcester Art Museum. It was eventually sold to the organization today known as the Worcester Center for Crafts. In the 1950s a group of local individuals formed the Salisbury Mansion Associates (SMA) to acquire the house to save it from further modifications or razing. From 1980-1984 WHM restored it to reflect life in Worcester in the 1830s. The museum assumed ownership in 1985 when SMA merged with the museum.

In 1929, WAM moved the mansion from Lincoln Square to their current location, formerly the Salisbury family orchard. The service ell, which had been added on the north side, was torn down. The small 1790 “wareroom” (warehouse) next door was also moved. The new location placed the buildings next to Stephen II’s 1838 Greek Revival mansion.

SALISBURY MANSION

Salisbury Mansion was built in 1772, one-third house and two-thirds store. It measures 60 x 38 feet and faces due south. The west end is the original house—sitting room (originally the kitchen)/parlor on the first floor with two chambers above. All other rooms date to remodeling of the former store space in 1819/20. ARCHITECTURE: The exterior and west-end rooms are Georgian in style (1720s-1770s). The 1829/20 rooms and south porch are Federal (1780s-1820s)
CHRISTMAS IN NEW ENGLAND

To be clear, the Salisbury family did not deck their halls for the season. New England Puritans rejected all holidays on the Anglican calendar. To observe December 25 in Plimoth Colony was a punishable offense. But immigrants who crossed on the Mayflower and in subsequent voyages also included Anglicans and the holiday slowly made its way into regional culture.

Diaries attest that December 25 remained an ordinary workday at least through the 1820s for most New Englanders, and far longer for many. But in 1827, the New England Farmer—a nearly universally read publication—extolled the traditions of an Old English Christmas—lighting the “Christmas log” followed by “the feast, dance, and song—and then the grave reflect on the glorious occasion; and the gay rejoice with mirth and gladness, and gifts. . . .” By the 1830s, some diarists wrote of Christmas dinners shared with extended family.
Christmas as we know it

The Christmas traditions we celebrate today actually were invented in the early 19th century, and only gradually caught on. They reflect the responses of urban, propertied upper- and middle-class households to the changed social and cultural conditions that accompanied industrial development and the influx of large numbers of Irish Catholics.

What in the old world was once a bawdy, outdoors, free-wheeling season of misrule rooted in pagan traditions was transformed by a handful of influential gentlemen into a child- and family-centered domestic Christian holiday.

SANTA—Clement Clarke Moore wrote “A Visit from Saint Nicholas” in 1822, giving us “our” Santa Claus—the jolly old elf and bearer of only good things. Thomas Nast’s famous rendition of the ruddy cheeked, cheerful man with a large belly and flowing white beard remains the best loved personification.
PRESENTS—Store advertisements in 1825 feature traditional New Year's gift books. But by mid-century expectations had grown and gift giving had shifted to December 25. In 1850, author Harriet Beecher Stowe lamented through a fictional character: “Oh, dear Christmas is coming in a fortnight, and I have got to think up presents for everybody! Dear me, it's so tedious! . . . There are worlds of money wasted at this time of year, in getting things that nobody wants, and nobody cares for after they are got.” One Worcester newspaper on December 21, 1834, advertised: “Christmas & Thanksgiving/ Francis Blake/ No. 3 Salisbury Buildings /NOW FOR SALE: Raisins, currants, citron, ginger, almonds, walnuts, filberts, jars of fresh Malaga grapes, Carolina potatoes.”

CHRISTMAS TREES—French traveler Harriet Martineau provided the first known written account of a Christmas tree in New England in 1835, a table tree put up by German intellectual Dr. Charles Follen in Boston. It was illuminated with 84 candles and bedecked with tiny treasures—candy, small toys, fruit, dolls, paper ornaments. “I have little doubt the Christmas tree will become one of the most flourishing exotics of New England,” she concluded.

Worcester Historical Museum’s annual Home for the Holidays celebration at Salisbury Mansion began in 2008, the brainchild of then Worcester Garden Club president, Kathy Michie, and the museum’s executive director, William D. Wallace. Arrangers were asked to draw inspiration from objects or architectural features in the house.

The bold and big wallpaper in the northwest chamber (bedroom) inspired this designer.
This designer played with the ruffles on Stephen's shirt in his 1789 portrait by Christian Gullagher, which hangs in the parlor above his c. 1772 Chippendale Boston-made standing desk.

The fancy gilt looking glass topped with urns and an eagle—believed to have been owned by Stephen and Elizabeth Salisbury—inspired this whimsical top-heavy arrangement. The looking glass hangs in the southwest chamber (“glitter room” so named by a staff member for the sparkling wallpaper).
Here the designer drew inspiration from the colors in the carpet in the southwest chamber to create a colorful centerpiece.

The bunches of flowers that decorate the wallpaper in the library gave rise to this quixotic mantel arrangement.
This late-in-life portrait of Stephen Salisbury painted by Gilbert Stuart—a handsome gentleman with rosy cheeks—inspired a very proper, balanced arrangement with lots of white to play off his shirt. It hangs in the south (front) drawing room.

This designer drew inspiration from the harp Elizabeth Tuckerman brought to Worcester when she married Stephen Salisbury in 1797. It stands in the corner of the north (back) drawing room.
**Change of Direction**

After several years it became apparent that ephemeral floral arrangements, while exquisite and evocative, did not last long enough to capture the spirit of the entire season for visitors. The focus shifted to dried arrangements and other kinds of decorations, and the museum developed themed interpretations to help inspire decorators. Ultimately, *Home for the Holidays* turned to vignettes of Christmas from times gone by. One of the most popular was in 2013, the theme of Christmas 1960s/1860s, playing off an exhibit at Worcester Historical Museum. In the front drawing room, Visitors were entranced, some even lying on the floor to watch the color wheel go around and resurrect childhood memories.

Bloomers partners Ken Bositis and Michael Allen featured an artificial tree—the latest rage in the 1960s with a rotating color wheel.
At the same time upstairs in the “glitter room” (so named for the sparkling mica wallpaper, but more properly called the southwest chamber), Judi Vaillancourt of Vaillancourt Folk Art created an 1860s version of a candle-lit tree.

The mantel held more attic treasures: President Kennedy memorabilia, and small wax holiday figurines, all equally familiar to many visitors.
Judi Vaillancourt's 1860s-appropriate confections including hand-made barley candy.
Decorators, in this case Sally Jablonski who annually decorates the library, typically surround their trees with decoratively wrapped “packages” to evoke the feel of holiday presents.

In 2018, Judi Vaillancourt of Vaillancourt Folk Art provided the supplies for museum staff to re-create a version of the first known Christmas tree in New England in the mansion parlor.
Salisbury Mansion’s parlor sideboard holds an array of holiday desserts that match Eliza Leslie’s recommendations in her 1848 cookbook, *The Lady’s Receipt Book*—plum pudding, miniature mince pies, lemon custards, and shortbreads created by Sandy Levins, Historic Faux Foods.

Worcester’s first municipal Christmas tree was on Worcester Common in 1913. It was 50 feet tall with thousands of little lights and was lit Christmas Eve to New Years. “The success of the Christmas Tree is due to the untiring energies of Mrs. John Denholm and the corps of official women with which she surrounded herself,” the Telegram reported.
Every year Kathy Michie festoons the railing in the through hallway—created in the 1819/20 renovation of the old store space.

And every year staff decorates a “Salisbury” tree in honor of the family.
THE YEAR OF CHRISTMAS CAROLS AND SONGS

One particularly successful year, decorators were asked to choose a holiday carol or song for a vignette. While most chose popular songs over traditional carols, it was an opportunity for staff and docents to share some history and local ties.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”, while not chosen, has a Worcester connection. The words were written by Boston native Phillips Brooks in 1868 (and set to music by Lewis Redner), and are believed to have been inspired, in part, by the recent din of the Civil War…“how still we see the lie.” The rector of Worcester’s All Saints Church, Rev. Dr. Huntington, requested permission to print the carol in his Sunday-school hymn and tune book, called The Church Porch.

“It Came Upon A Midnight Clear” was chosen by decorator Sally Jablonski who created her vignette in the library. The carol was written 1849 by Edmund Sears reportedly at the request of the pastor of the United First Parish Church in Quincy. His feelings about the recently concluded war with Mexico and the revolutions of Europe in 1848 influenced his view of the world as a dark place when he wrote the carol.
Decorator Donna Johnson chose “Jingle Bells” for her vignette in the southwest chamber.

“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” is based on a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Written in 1863 in response to the Civil War and his son having been wounded in Virginia, it was first published in February 1865. The poem was not set to music until 1872. Decorators Ann Marie Amorello and Olivia Amorello chose this song for the parlor.

“Jingle Bells” (originally titled One Horse Open Sleigh) was written by James Lord Pierpont in the summer of 1857. It was published in Boston in September 1857 where the world premiere performance reportedly took place in Washington Street. Although not intended as a Christmas carol, through the years it became associated with the holiday.

Decorators Ann Marie Amorello and Olivia Amorello chose “Jingle Bells” for her vignette in the southwest chamber.
Bloomers combined a medley of popular tunes—you can guess from the photo that one of them was “Rocking around the Christmas Tree.” Michael and Ken have been faithful participants from the beginning of *Home for the Holidays*. Their favorite room of choice is the south (front) drawing room.

Salisbury Mansion docent Linda Dattis transformed the sitting room into a sumptuous display of “The 12 Days of Christmas.”
Museum exhibit coordinator Vanessa Bumpus created the kid-favorite room of the year—“You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch” in the middle chamber.

“Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer” was the subject for the northwest chamber, decorated by MaryEllen O’Brien, editor of Flower Show Flowers.
One year, when all decorations were by then-house manager Harry Albert, featured a pink tree decked out in valentines in the parlor, a tribute to Worcester’s own Esther Howland and her cottage industry of valentine making.

And also a “rat” tree in the front hallway by a cellar access door, a nod to the persistent problem the Salisburys and others faced with rats in cellars, especially after the Blackstone Canal opened and people began using the waterway as a garbage dump.
In yet another nod to past realities, Harry Albert re-imagined a holiday repast of oysters, which were extremely popular in the 1830s.

In 2019, decorators were asked to let their imaginations run to whimsy and fun. What a burst of artistic creativity resulted! Judi provided the supplies for Vaillancourt Folk Art staff to create a vignette about Christmas morning—gifts opened, sweets and treats laid out to eat, all in the setting of exquisite Victorian-inspired decorations.
Museum exhibits coordinator Vanessa Bumpus turned the middle chamber into a ballerina wonderland. Her theme: “Christmas en pointe.”
Assistant to the Executive Director Lynn Soucy turned the southeast chamber into a veritable 20th-century toy store.

And Lynn even decorated the doll house, a replica of the four original living spaces that date to 1772. Miniature decorations were made by Julie Lapham.
Ken Bositis and Michael Allen of Bloomers once again bedecked the front drawing room with wonderful attic treasures, playing on the nostalgic theme “Over the River and Through the Woods …”

Below Stephen Salisbury’s fire buckets in the through hallway, staff decorated a tree to honor all of Worcester’s brave firefighters.
We hope you have enjoyed this walk through Salisbury Mansion and past celebrations of *Home for the Holidays*.

Although it could not happen in 2020, we look forward to reviving this tradition in 2021.

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_Happy Holidays!_