



# Long Branch Plantation

## Millwood, Virginia

## Christmas in the 19th Century



*The Christmas Tree, Winslow Homer, 1858*

### 1800s - The birth of modern Christmas traditions

Today it would be difficult for the average American to overlook the Christmas holiday, with displays at most retail stores, Christmas specials on television, pictures of celebrations on Facebook and Instagram, and lights illuminating communities across the country. Many of the Christmas traditions that we follow today began in the 1800s. Read below to learn more!

### Popular Culture

Santa Claus, also referred to as Father Christmas, Kris Kringle, and/or St. Nicholas, is a combination of many different legends and mythical creatures as told through the centuries by a multitude of cultures and faiths. The modern image of Santa Claus had not fully solidified in the public's eye until the later half of the 19th century, when Thomas Nast's drawing of the fat jolly elf with a bag full of presents appeared in *Harper's Weekly*

in the 1870s and 1880s. Popular presents included wooden toys, books, popcorn balls, candy, firecrackers, guns, & horns. Adults exchanged books, notepaper, pens, perfumes, & soaps. Christmas literature of the time period included *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, written by Clement Moore in 1822 and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which was published in America in 1843.

### Decorations



*Godey's Lady's Book, 1850.*

The Christmas tree was first represented in the United States in the popular woman's magazine, *Godey's Lady's Book*, in 1850. The image was an Americanized version of a very popular image of Queen Victoria and her family from the *Illustrated London News*. American's fondness for Queen Victoria helped popularize the idea of having a Christmas tree (originally a German tradition) inside of the home.

Decorations were minimal and often not put up until Christmas eve after the children had gone to bed. Garland, holly, and evergreen boughs covering mantels, pictures, chandeliers, and door and window frames, and sometimes a sprig of mistletoe decorated the homes.

Before the Civil War, many families, including the Nelsons of Long Branch, may have utilized exotic fruits such as pineapples, lemons, limes, pomegranates, and kumquats along with cuttings of holly, bayberry, chinaberry, mistletoe, magnolia, ivy, and pinecones, in their Christmas decorations.

## Dining

*Christmas dinners.*—Mock turtle soup; stewed rock-fish; roasted ham; roasted venison with currant-jelly; boiled turkey with oyster sauce; roast geese with apple sauce; French oyster pie; fricasseed chickens; potatoe snow; parsnips; beets; winter-squash; cold-slaw — Plum pudding; mince-pies; orange tarts; cream cocoanut pudding; Spanish blanc-mange; apple-jelly; vanilla ice-cream.

Then, as now, the holidays were a time for special foods & celebratory meals. A typical menu for Christmas may have included boned turkey, oysters, venison, chicken salad, biscuits, bullion, glazed fruit, plum cake, ice cream, plum pudding, macaroon pyramids, wine, eggnog, hot coffee, and more.

*A Christmas Dinner Menu from: The Lady's Receipt Book; A Useful Companion for Large or Small Families, 1847. By Miss Leslie.*

## Music

**"IT CAME UPON THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR"**  
CHRISTMAS HYMN.  
A. A. STANLEY.  
Allegretto.

Soprano.  
Alto.  
I & II Tenor.

1<sup>st</sup> It came up-on the mid-night clear That glo-rious, glo-rious  
2<sup>nd</sup> Still through the clos-en skies they come With peace-ful, peace-ful

*Music score published by Oliver Ditson, Boston, 1880.*

Music exclusively associated with Christmas was added to songbooks during the 1850s & caroling became increasingly practiced. The type of music, however, contradicted the growing secularization of the season, as most of the carols were sacred in nature or filled with allusions to Christ's birth.

The Nelsons, the family that lived at Long Branch during the 1850s, would have heard the following carols (all composed before the Civil War), "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" (1851), "See Amid the Winter's Snow" (also 1851), "There Came A Little Child to Earth" (1856), and "We Three Kings of Orient Are" (1859).

## Cards



*America's First Christmas Card Designed and Printed by Richard H. Pease, c. 1851 Lithograph, Image courtesy of Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections.*

One modern element that was relatively unknown during the 1850s was the Christmas card. Christmas cards were relatively widespread in England by 1860, but the custom had yet to make it to the USA.

The first such Christmas greetings in the USA are thought to be those issued by a New York engraver in 1851. Richard Pease printed cards, showing a family dinner scene, that read "A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year, to: From: " However, it was not until Louis Prang of Boston introduced a line of cards in 1875 that Christmas cards became widely used.