

The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/22/nyregion/antiques-holiday-traditions-in-homes-of-yore.html>

ANTIQUES

ANTIQUES; HOLIDAY TRADITIONS IN HOMES OF YORE

By Frances Phipps

Dec. 22, 1985



See the article in its original context from
December 22, 1985, Section CN, Page 11 Buy Reprints

[VIEW ON TIMSMACHINE](#)

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home
delivery and digital subscribers.

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.

CHRISTMAS was not celebrated in colonial Connecticut, a stronghold of Puritanism. Declaring a holiday and observing the Yuletide by bringing in decorative evergreens, having a festive dinner and giving presents was considered pagan. But by the 19th century in the towns and cities, if not as yet in all rural areas, this attitude changed.

Three historic houses, two in Hartford and one in Wethersfield, all within easy travel distance of one another, are decorated today as they were in 1830, 1850 and 1870. The authentic decorations are based on travel journals, diaries and letters of each period.

The earliest setting, recreating Christmas as it was in 1830, is at the Isaac Stevens House, 215 Main Street in Old Wethersfield. The Stevens House is one of three 18th-century museums, all on Main Street, that are owned and maintained by the Society of Colonial Dames.

The decorations there are based on the description of a New England Christmas written by Harriet Martineau, a traveler who reported her experiences and impressions of the United States 155 years ago. The Stevens House display will be open through Dec. 28, except on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M.

"I was present," Miss Martineau wrote, "at the introduction into New England of the spectacle of the German Christmas tree. My little friend Charley and three companions had been long preparing for this pretty show. The cook had broken her eggs carefully in the middle for some weeks past, that Charley might have the shells for cups; and these cups were gilded and colored very prettily."

Following Miss Martineau's description, the tree set up in the Stevens House today is just three and a half feet high and is set in a tub covered with green.

"We were all engaged in sticking on the last of the seven dozen of wax tapers, and in filling the gilded egg cups and gay paper cornucopia with comfits, lozenges and barley-sugar. The tree was the top of a young fir, planted in a tub which was ornamented with moss. Smart dolls and other whimsies glittered in the evergreens and there was not a twig which had not something sparkling upon it.

"I have little doubt the Christmas tree will become one of the most flourishing exotics of New England."

Although the children must have known there would be a tree - after all, Charley had helped to color and gild the eggshell cups - it was decorated secretly, according to Miss Martineau. The children, walking around it in awe, soon discovered that it held "eatable sweets." They were told they might have anything they could reach without burning themselves. The adults, Miss Martineau reported, helped the children by taking "good things" down from the higher branches for them.

Comfits were sweetmeats made of small pieces of fruit or flavorful roots such as ginger that had been preserved in sugar. Other comfits might have been small, round or oval sugarplums made of boiled sugar that often was flavored and colored. Lozenges originally were tiny diamond-shaped sugar cakes, and barley sugar was a confection made of sugar boiled in a decoction of barley.

The Stevens House parlor is set up with a tea service of the 1820's and a plateful of coriander and ginger cookies, baked in accordance with early 19th-century recipes.

When visitors step into the parlor they will hear songs popular in the 1820's and the 1830's, including "Boston," "Judea" and "The Boston Brigade March," as it was played in honor of General Lafayette's visit in 1824. Better-known songs include "Home, Sweet Home," written in 1830, and "Bethlehem," perhaps more easily recognized as the carol that begins, "As Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night."

By 1850, Miss Martineau's prediction that Christmas celebrations would flourish in New England, at least among city dwellers, was proven true. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister and the wife of a Presbyterian theologian, had a Christmas tree for her family.

The first "fairy doll" used at the top of the Christmas tree set up by Mrs. Stowe's family in their cottage, as Mrs. Stowe described the house at 77 Forest Street, Hartford, was sewn by the famous author herself.

Mrs. Stowe's teen-age daughter, in a letter telling of the tree the family decorated in 1850, wrote that the doll was dressed in white gauze "with gilt spangles and a gilt band around her head and a star on her forehead and a long gilt wand with a star on the end and gauze wings spangled with gold. She was placed in the top of the tree with her wand pointing to the presents on it."

A six-foot fir tree is set up before the rear window in what was the Stowe family's back parlor. It is decorated with 19th-century ornaments and, at the top, a fairy doll as Mrs. Stowe's daughter described it. The Christmas setting at the Harriet Beecher Stowe House will be on view until Jan. 6.

The McCook family, who lived in what is now the last 18th-century residence in Hartford, celebrated Christmas in the 1870's with a day that began early in the morning, "when the older children with difficulty feasted upon their Christmas goodies only with their eyes," according to the diary of the Rev. John J. McCook. This was because they had first to drive by sleigh or buggy, depending on the weather, across the Connecticut River to take communion. Their father, Mr. McCook, was rector of the East Hartford Episcopal Church.

According to the diary, each child on awaking found a stocking, tied at the top with brown string, that "bulged" with a lump of sugar, a candy cane, an apple or an orange, an animal cracker, and always, a small "mystery package."

The tree in the north parlor of the Butler-McCook House, at 396 Main Street, is set on the same box-stand that was first used by the family in the 1870's. As it was then, the box today is covered with brown paper. The small tree is decorated with handmade ornaments and tiny candles, and at the top, a small star. Only after dinner, served at about 2 P.M., did the children all "march in" by twos, followed by parents and servants, to the parlor to enjoy the excitement of the tree and the toys spread out beneath it.

The Butler-McCook House, headquarters of the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society, will be open today from noon to 4 P.M.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section CN, Page 11 of the National edition with the headline: ANTIQUES; HOLIDAY TRADITIONS IN HOMES OF YORE