



Holiday Evening Tours to Focus on Festive Food

Food that figured prominently in the holiday celebrations of 18th- and early 19th-century America will be highlighted on this year's Monticello Holiday Evening Tours, to be offered Dec. 8-9.

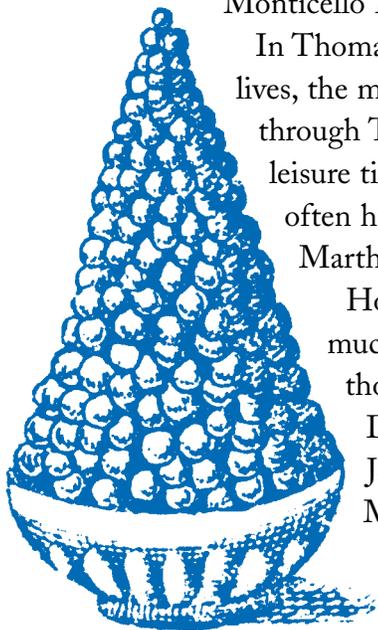
In Thomas Jefferson's Virginia, where most people lived agrarian lives, the merry winter period stretched from before Christmas through Twelfth Night (Jan. 6) and beyond, when families had the leisure time for extended visiting and socializing. Weddings were often held during this season, including that of Thomas and Martha Jefferson (Jan. 1, 1772).

Holiday celebrations were much more modest than those we know today.

During the years of Jefferson's retirement at Monticello (1809-26), socializing and special food would have been the focal points of the

winter celebrations rather than decorations or lavish gifts. The customs that we think of today as traditional ways of celebrating Christmas, particularly the decorating of evergreen trees and the hanging of stockings, derived from a variety of national traditions and evolved through the course of the 19th century, only becoming widespread in the 1890s.

In 1762, Jefferson described Christmas as "the day of greatest mirth and jollity." Although no documents exist to tell us how, or if, Jefferson decorated Monticello for the



This Issue's Other Stories

-  DIGITAL ARCHAEOLOGY ARCHIVE
-  INTERNS RESEARCH
-  JEFFERSON LIBRARY
-  "JEFFERSON LIVES" CAMPAIGN
-  JEFFERSON & WEST CHRONOLOGY
-  JULY 4 EVENT
-  "MANUAL OF PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE"
-  MILLENNIUM TRAIL DESIGNATION
-  MONTICELLO'S PRIVIES
-  PRESIDENT'S LETER
-  "RETIREMENT SERIES" BEGUN
-  SAUNDERS BRIDGE
-  SECRETARY OF STATE
-  SHADWELL AGREEMENT
-  WINTER TOUR

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

© Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., 2000

MONTICELLO



Festive Food

CONTINUED, PAGE [TWO](#),

holidays, he noted the festive scene created by his grandchildren on Christmas Day in 1809, writing of 8-year-old grandson Francis Wayles Eppes: “He is at this moment running about with his cousins bawling out ‘a merry christmas’ ‘a christmas gift’ &c ...”

On the Holiday Evening Tours, displays of faux food will suggest ways the Jefferson family likely celebrated the season at Monticello. Made of museum-safe plastics and resins, the faux food will be custom made, using Monticello recipes as guides, by Sandra Jensen, who has created food displays for Colonial Williamsburg and other institutions.

In the Tea Room, there will be a table of desserts documented in Monticello recipes and displayed in silver and porcelain tableware from the collection. The dessert course of a special holiday meal in the late 18th or early 19th century comprised a spectacular feast for the eyes and the taste buds, with displays carefully arranged for color, proportion, and height, as well as for tempting the sweet tooth.

The display will include sweets known to have been made in Monticello’s kitchen during Jefferson’s life. A few of the recipes exist in manuscripts in Jefferson’s handwriting, including those for ice cream, wine jellies, almond macaroons, meringues, and brandied peaches. As some of them were written all or partially in French, it is assumed that Jefferson brought them back to Monticello from Paris.

Crème brûlée, a recipe attributed to Honoré Julien, Jefferson’s chef at the President’s House, and known to have been made at Monticello, will be featured in the display. In her manuscript recipe book, Jefferson’s granddaughter Virginia Randolph Trist anglicized the name of the dish to “burnt cream.”

Also on display will be “Snow Eggs,” a recipe attributed to Jefferson’s enslaved cook James Hemings. A dish of meringue in a bed of custard, it was a favorite dessert in early 19th-century Virginia.

Visitors also will see smaller displays in the Parlor and in Jefferson’s Bedroom, where, according to one guest at Monticello, he kept “a goblet of water, a decanter of wine, and a plate of light cakes” next to his bed.

The winter holidays affected all members of the Monticello plantation community. For Monticello’s slaves, Christmas signaled a break of several days from their work. During that time, slaves might

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

© Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., 2000



Festive Food

CONTINUED, PAGE **THREE**,

have visited other plantations or nearby towns, and special rations were distributed. In 1808, President Jefferson wrote to his overseer approving a holiday trip to Washington for his slave Davy, whose wife, Fanny, worked as a cook at the President's House: "I approve of your permitting Davy to come at Christmas." For Jefferson's personal servant, Robert Hemings, the holiday season of 1794 was especially significant. On Christmas Eve, Hemings became the first of two Monticello slaves freed during Jefferson's lifetime.

— ELIZABETH CHEW

Elizabeth Chew is associate curator of collections at Monticello.

How a festive holiday table setting might have looked at Monticello.

Courtesy, The Winterthur Library:
Printed Book and Periodical
Collection



COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org