CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS
SINCE 1864

SUTTER'S FORT
STATE HISTORIC PARK

A Simple Emigrant Christmas

Welcome to Sutter's Fort and *An Emigrant Christmas*. You will find Fort docents working in various areas and rooms of the Fort. Please feel free to ask questions about what you see and what they are doing.

Christmas was often a regular work day for the people in Sutter's Fort, as shown by the following entries in The New Helvetia Diary, John A. Sutter's log of activities during a portion of his stay here. The following excerpts from The New Helvetia Diary are presented with the spelling and phrasing as used in the original journal:

Wednesday, December 24th, 1845

Rained all day – Started Deswartz up to Mr Cordua's – C. Heath finished the pump – started S. Neal for Feather River & Bute creek – D. Martin rec'd Henge to work –

Thursday, December 25th, 1845

Arr'd Capt Hastings from the U. S. – the people were enjoying a happy Christmas – Started Wm Johnson & S. Kayser for Bear Creek – Mr. Buzzell was trying to raise volunteers to go against some Indians –

Friday, December 26th, 1845

Started W. Buzzell with about 8 men against the Indians who have been stealing cattle – arrd Mr. Nash (Lawyer) one of Capt. Hastings party –

Note: There are no related diary entries for December 1846

Friday, December 24th, 1847

Daylor, Salinas & R. Altamirano left and are crossing Livermores Manada. Mr. Kyburz started for Hock with Brown & the sons of P. Wimmer, likewise the two Baqueros Casiano & Tillili took Yokes of oxen to the farm. – A Canoe arrived with Vegatables from Mimal. Despatched Jeronimo with little Bill to his father at Sagayack. The Women are washing. Daylor returned home after having crossed safe the Manada in the Bushune Rancheria which is the best place to cross. – Mr. Lienhard has pruned the fruit trees and taken the new ones out the Water and put them in trenches. A pleasant day. Mr. Gingery here, stating that they are coming on first rate with scraping and building the Dam. –

The information contained herein was obtained from the following sources:

Christmas in Colonial & Early America, from World Book, copyright 1996; World Book, Inc., copyright 1975; World Book Encyclopedia Inc.

Christmas: Its Origins & Associations, W. F. Dawson, Detroit: Gale Research, c. 1968 394.26 SAW

The Book of Christmas Folklore, Tristam P. Coffin, New York: The Seabury Press 1973 394.26

The Battle for Christmas, Stephen Nissenbaum, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1997 394.2663

Christmas Celebration: Santa Fe Traditions: Foods & Crafts, Richard Clawson, Text by Jann Arrington Wolcott; Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers 1995

The New Helvetia Diary, San Francisco: The Grabhorn Press 1939

Two Years Before the Mast, Richard Henry Dana, Jr.; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc. p. 1840

Happy Holidays from everyone at Sutter's Fort State Historic Park

gift for the child. He gathered some green branches by the roadside. Although the other children laughed at his gift, when he laid them before the manger, brilliant red star-shaped flowers appeared on each branch. In 1826, Dr. Joel R. Poinsett, the first U. S. minister, introduced the plant to his home in South Carolina, where it became know as the poinsettia [poin-set'-tyah] and a tradition shared by all.

Most of the United States did not recognize Christmas as a legal holiday until 1850 or later. Each community decided how it would, or would not, celebrate the day or the season. Philadelphia was the scene of a rowdy promenade from the late 1830's to about 1847 where many people paraded down Chestnut Street and the event was marked by drunkenness and noisemaking.

The custom of giving toys and gifts to children, especially, as a Christmas tradition became more widespread in the settled East later in the 19th century. In 1831, two of the first children's books published particularly to be given as Christmas presents were The American Girl's Book by Eliza Leslie and Lydia Maria Childs' The Girl's Own Book. They contained activities, mostly games that were specifically intended for Christmas.

The Christmas card, so entrenched in modern custom, began in 1843 when Sir Henry Cole in England commissioned a simple greeting produced by an artist named J. C. Horsely. Christmas cards enjoyed a limited popularity until Louis Prang, a German printer, printed his first American cards in 1875 in his shop in Roxbury, Massachusetts. He did more than anyone else to popularize the cards by instituting nationwide contests for the best seasonal designs, which were awarded cash prizes.

C. Clement Moore is credited with writing one of the best known Christmas poems, "A Visit from Santa Claus," often referred to as "T'was the Night Before Christmas." While he wrote the poem for his family to enjoy in 1820, it was published in the Troy, New York newspaper soon after. It was not widely published as a Christmas poem until 1848.

Saturday, December 25th, 1847

Dolosea and Boyle arrived with a Canoe from Nicholas with pumpkins and fowls. Despatched the two Canoes to Hoch with a Wagon, potaetos for seed etc. Wittmer arrived with the Wagons from the Mountains with Lumber for the Mill.—Mr Allen of the Shingel Compy arrived. A Christmas Diner in the Hatter House, given by the tanners and Shoemakers. Mr Smith arrived and left the Launch at the old rancheria, Mr McKinstry arrived the same time coming by land from Montezuma leaving the Sarmiento there coming up here. Yanti arrived in the Night with the news that Anashe's Daughter is death.

Sunday, December 26th, 1847

A great disturbance last Night of a band of Drunkards which continued till Morning. The Launch arrived on the Landing place, three passengers aboard. A fine day.

These historical entries indicate there was some celebrating of Christmas at Sutter's Fort, involving a feast, alcoholic drink, and probably some rowdy behavior, given the entry of December 26th, 1847. They show us that the emigrants who settled around the Fort were busy working, rather than enjoying an extended, relaxed holiday that we often associate with a Victorian-era Christmas. These were hard times and there were few people. Some estimates put the total population of non-Native Americans in all of Northern California at 300 in 1846. In his book, Two Years Before the Mast, Richard Henry Dana, Jr. notes in his diary while moored in San Francisco Bay on December 25, 1836 that

"This day was Christmas, and as it rained all day long, and there were no hides to take in and nothing especial to do, the captain gave us a holiday (the first since leaving Boston)and plum duff for dinner…" Dana's account of an all-male population celebrating the "holiday" in early California makes us think of the similar population at Sutter's Fort 10 years later.

Historical Background of An Emigrant Christmas

Christmas Celebrations in North America and the United States c. 1610 –1850

It is important to understand the simplicity of Christmas at Sutter's Fort in the 1840's, and how the Christmas season was celebrated "back in the States" and in Hispanic North America.

To the Puritans who settled Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts, Christmas Day was just another day to work, unless it fell on a Sunday. These religious pilgrims settled in the New World to escape persecution for their beliefs, chief among them the wish to purify their religious practice of anything not expressly mentioned in the Bible. An edict was passed in 1659 actually prohibiting the celebration of Christmas. While it was repealed in 1681, courts were in session, markets were open and children were in school if December 25th fell on any day but Sunday until as late as 1879.

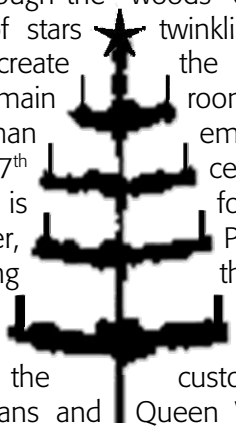
In the Virginia settlements and most of the Colonial South, Christmas was celebrated in the English tradition. By the end of November, the crops were in for the year and work had turned to repair and maintenance of equipment. The plantation owners enjoyed open hospitality at each other's homes from about December 6th until January 6th, and parties were the rule. Slaves were usually given the week between Christmas and New Year's Day off, unless they worked in the owner's home. A Yule log was cut and greenery was gathered to be brought into the main house where the customs started by the Norse continued.

The major event of Christmas Day for most, after some form of religious observance, was a repast at dinner that might include 7 or 8 courses. George Washington is remembered as one of the most gracious hosts of the Old Dominion and an invitation to dine at his home was the high point of any Virginian's Christmas season. By contrast, Thomas Jefferson would make a brief religious note of the day and then go to work in his study. Small gifts might be given on St. Stephen's Day, December 26th, known as Boxing Day in England, or at New Year's.

For the Germanic peoples who settled in New Amsterdam (now New York) and Pennsylvania, the Christmas season began December 5th, and would continue until the Twelfth Night, or the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th. Christmas Day itself was treated as a day of religious significance in the midst of this festive season.

To celebrate St. Nicholas's feast day on December 6th, Dutch children would put their shoes out to receive small gifts from St. Nicholas and his servant, Black Peter. Naughty children received either coal or possibly nothing. A German form of St. Nicholas (Pelsnickel or Belsnickel, meaning Furry Nicholas) would visit homes during the Christmas Season. It is said that he was fierce enough at times to frighten the adults as well as any naughty or greedy children with his threats of a switching.

The Christmas tree, a later version of the Paradise Tree, was brought to the New World by German settlers. Martin Luther is credited with being the first to put lighted candles on a holiday tree's branches. According to legend, he was walking through the woods one winter evening and was awed by the sight of stars twinkling through the branches of evergreen trees. To recreate the scene for his family, he erected a tree in their main room and wired its branches with lighted candles. German emigrants brought the custom to America in the 17th century. The first mention of a Christmas tree in America is found in the diary of Matthew Zahn of Lancaster, Pennsylvania on December 20, 1821, thus establishing the undisputed claim that the Pennsylvania Germans initiated the Christmas tree custom in America. In 1837, Princess Helen of Mecklenberg introduced the custom to France when she married the Duke of Orleans and Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of England first "put up" a tree in 1844 for the royal children's amusement. The first public display of a Christmas tree lit with electric lights was in Finland in 1906.



The Spanish and later the "Californios" celebrated Christmas with church services where a priest was available, and also with re-enactments of either the attempt by Mary and Joseph to find shelter (Las Posadas) or the shepherds' adoration of the newborn Christ child (Los Pastores). Mexico is the origin of the "Flower of Christmas Eve" or the Aztec "Flower of Purity." During the Spanish colonial period, it was associated with Nativity scenes, because it is most colorful during the short days of December and it was called the "Flower of the Good Night." According to legend, a poor boy was heading to his village church to pray at the Nativity when he realized he had no