



# The Spy-Glass

Fall 2011

Raynham Hall Museum

(516) 922 6808

20 West Main Street, Oyster Bay, New York 11771

[www.raynhamhallmuseum.org](http://www.raynhamhallmuseum.org)

## From Decking Halls to Decorating Trees: Colonial and Victorian Christmas Traditions

by Dara Shore

*As the fall and winter seasons approach, many of us draw on the happy holidays of our past to inspire our plans for the current year. This year, why not look even further back for inspiration? While every family has its own Christmas traditions, many widespread traditions still in use today date back to the Colonial and Victorian eras.*

### Colonial Christmas

Several beloved Christmas mainstays date to the years before the creation of the United States. Colonial American Christmas traditions were almost as varied as the founders of the colonies themselves. Indeed, some colonies did not celebrate Christmas at all! In the New England colonies, Puritan distaste for pagan customs led to the banning of all Christmas celebrations. From 1659 to 1686, those individuals caught engaging in any sort of merriment on December 25<sup>th</sup> would have incurred a five shilling fine, as well as the scorn of their peers. It was not until new immigrants to New England brought with them Christmas traditions from Europe that the holiday became more widely accepted.

Elsewhere in Colonial America, Christmas was celebrated in many of the same ways prevailing in Europe. The Dutch residents of New Amsterdam, for example, brought with them stories of Saint Nicholas, who would distribute toys to children on his Saint's Day of December 6<sup>th</sup>. It is believed that the modern conception of Santa Claus represents a merger of Saint Nicholas and the jolly English gift-giver Father Christmas, a combination that most likely occurred after New Amsterdam passed into British hands.

While gift-giving was practiced in the colonies at Christmas, the format of this custom differed greatly from its modern counterpart. Colonial Christmas gifts would have been given by a person of superior rank to dependants, servants, and slaves. Usually, only one gift would be given to each person, and no return gift was made by a dependant or

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### Victorian Christmas

While several beloved Christmas customs originate in the Colonial era, it is to the Victorians that we owe most of our traditions. These traditions include that most ubiquitous of holiday sights, the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree itself was not an invention of the Victorians, as trees have served as symbols of renewal during winter holidays for countless centuries.

Nevertheless, it was the German *Tannenbaum* that inspired the Christmas trees that appear in homes today. This German custom was brought to England with Prince Albert, and quickly became an institution for Queen Victoria and her family. After an 1848 etching of the royal Christmas tree at Windsor Castle was republished stateside in 1850, Christmas-tree-mania swept both England and the United States. The first Christmas tree in Oyster Bay is said to have been set up and decorated on a table in Raynham Hall's window, so passers-by could take a look! Early Victorian Christmas trees would have been adorned with home-made decorations, including gingerbread men and garlands of holly or popcorn. Within a few years, however, imported German decorations became highly desired. This tradition of decorating the Christmas tree remains largely unchanged today.

With this introduction of a Christmas staple came a shift in the holiday's focus. Indeed, Victorian emphasis on motherhood and the importance of the family caused many of the activities performed by Colonial Americans to fall out

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*"Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childish days; that can recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth; that can transport the sailor and the traveller, thousands of miles away, back to his own fire-side and his quiet home!" ~Charles Dickens, The Pickwick Papers, 1836*

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*The mission of RHM is to enable visitors to the nearly three-hundred-year-old Townsend family home in Oyster Bay to experience what it meant to be prominent merchants and heroic patriots and to become engaged in the worlds of espionage, domestic life and the decorative arts.*

## Raynham Hall Boasts a New Garden Building

*by Theresa Skvarla*

Raynham Hall is happy to have a new utility shed that was built on the grounds in the mid-nineteen century vernacular – all courtesy of Eagle Scout candidate Nick LaRosa of Troop 253. Raynham Hall had longed for a place to store such 21<sup>st</sup> century necessities as garbage cans and garden supplies in a location that did not diminish the beauty of the Victorian building. Nick LaRosa, fellow Boy Scouts, and Board Member John Collins to the rescue!

As Raynham Hall is owned by the Town of Oyster Bay, Nick LaRosa and John Collins teamed up to secure the proper permissions to get the job done, having applied to the Landmarks Preservation Commission of the Town of Oyster Bay. A resolution was passed on March 16, 2011 allowing the construction of the building and John Collins was off to work personally designing the structure. The Townsends undoubtedly had outbuildings on the property but unfortunately we do not know their exact location. The utility shed was designed to look Victorian, of the same style as the 1851 renovation of Raynham Hall. The shed is located near the office entrance of the museum.



Eagle Scout candidate Nick LaRosa at work on the garden shed

The shed was built by Nick LaRosa, Matt LaRosa and upwards of 20 Boy Scouts, with supervision and help from Nick's parents, Arlene and Mario (it is forbidden for Boy Scouts to use power tools). Working in teams of 5 to 8 people, the shed was completed over several weekends with John Collins checking in during each phase.

In addition to Nick LaRosa, Raynham Hall would like to thank Kleet Lumber for donating half the lumber, Newton Milham for providing the custom forged hinges and hasps, the incorporated Village of Bayville for donating the locust posts for the foundation and the Oyster Bay Rotary for underwriting the cost of all other materials.

When asked how he thinks the project turned out, Nick stated, "I learned valuable lessons in leadership from this project, and it is something I can come back to in 20 years and be proud of." The staff and the members of the Board of Trustees are very proud of you too, Nick! We wish you much success with your next two merit badges on the way to Eagle Scout.

# Halloween Fun at Raynham Hall

Raynham Hall, considered one of the most haunted places on Long Island, has a tradition of celebrating the supernatural. On **Saturday, October 29<sup>th</sup> from 7 to 10 p.m.**, the museum welcomes Shawn Schildgen, Metaphysical and Paranormal Specialist, who will conduct a “how to hunt ghosts” investigation. Shawn has been actively working in the paranormal field for the last 16 years and has most recently worked with the paranormal group S.I.G.H.T. (Suffolk Investigative Ghost Hunting Team). Shawn is currently working on a series of books that include accounts of personal encounters and a field guide to paranormal research. Shawn will be presenting a paranormal session video along with a compilation of his group’s findings at Raynham Hall along with colleagues Scott Becker and Steve Linthwaite, who will assist with an actual paranormal investigation at Raynham Hall that night. At 10pm, a live stream will begin and go on throughout the night for viewers to watch for activity while the museum is closed to see what goes bump in the night. Trigger objects will be placed to entice the spirits’ curiosity. This link can be found on the museum’s website, [raynhamhallmuseum.org](http://raynhamhallmuseum.org).

Visitors will also be treated to a “Haunted Tour” of the Museum, during which visitors will be regaled with legends and stories of reported hauntings at Raynham Hall. Stories of Museum staff and visitor sightings as well as historical facts relating to the ghostly encounters will be highlighted. There is also a chance to connect with “the other side” by having your choice of tarot card or crystal ball readings by Mike Goudket.



Volunteer Mike Goudket dressed for Halloween at Raynham Hall

Then, on **Sunday, October 30<sup>th</sup> from 3 to 7 p.m.** several of Oyster Bay’s not-for-profits have banded together to present a Haunted Tour of Historic Oyster Bay. There will be a complimentary ride on a horse-drawn carriage, which will make stops at three allegedly haunted locations. The charge for admission to the three haunted locations is \$10 for adults, \$5 for students and free for children shorter than 48 inches. Visitors can pick up the carriage at Sweet Tomato Healthy Eatery (91 Audrey Ave.) and travel to the Oyster Bay Historical Society (20 Summit St.), proceed to Raynham Hall Museum (20 West Main Street), and then to the old Oyster Bay Railroad Station (future home of the Oyster Bay Railroad Museum, on Audrey Avenue), before returning to Sweet Tomato for refreshments including free Halloween cupcakes for kids under 48 inches in height!

Activities include an author’s book signing (“Ghosts of Long Island”) and tarot card readings at Sweet Tomato; a witches’ cauldron and face painting at the Oyster Bay Historical Society, with special appearance by Charles Wightman; ghost stories by story-teller Janet Demarest from 5 to 7 p.m. at Raynham Hall Museum, as well as ghost hunter Shawn Schildgen presenting his findings from his latest ghost hunt at the Museum from 3 to 7 p.m.; and apple dunking and other surprises and fun at the old Oyster Bay Railroad Station.



Tomb of David Townsend in the Fort Hill Cemetery

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worker to a superior. One aspect of gift-giving, and indeed of the entirety of colonial Christmas celebrations, that appears to be missing is a focus on children. During this period, common Christmas festivities included balls, hunts, Church services, and rounds of visiting, all activities not suited for children. It was not until the nineteenth century that a focus on children developed during Christmas.

Overall, colonial Christmas traditions bear one major similarity and one major difference to those of today. During the harsh winters experienced by many colonial Americans, very few plants would have been in a presentable-enough state to serve as Christmas decorations. Indeed, many of the plants associated with Christmas today, such as evergreens and holly, derive from their use during the Colonial era. Many favorite holiday dishes, such as roast ham and goose, also stem from the frequent winter-time practice of slaughtering animals for food.

Perhaps the biggest difference between these seemingly timeless ways of celebrating Christmas today and during the Colonial era has to do with the length of the holiday's observance. Unlike today, in which Christmas marks the close of a long holiday season, colonial Christmas was only the beginning of twelve days of merriment and celebration. These twelve days, immortalized in a well-known carol, culminated in the Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

For a taste of colonial Christmas festivities this year, we invite our members to Raynham Hall's annual Twelfth Night celebration on January 5. Keep an eye on our website for details!



Volunteer Mike Goudket helping a young fan coax a few notes from his harp at last year's Twelfth Night celebration

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of favor, to be replaced by ones that would allow the participation of children. Among these activities, one of the most popular was caroling, an English tradition that quickly spread to the States. Adult-oriented Christmas balls were replaced by events for the whole family. The entire house would be festooned in holly and mistletoe, and ornate family Bibles and scrapbooks would be proudly displayed for all to see.

One such scrapbook is the centerpiece of our exhibit this year, "A Scrap-Book for the Ages," which includes the following Christmas artwork drawn by Alice Delano Weekes in 1868:



The Victorians are also responsible for the enduring tradition that is the Christmas card. While schoolboys during the Colonial era would occasionally create decorative paper pieces for the holiday, the first true Christmas card did not appear until 1843. When Sir Henry Cole surprised his friends with pictorial cards in lieu of traditional letters, he started a tradition that quickly blossomed into a full-blown industry. While Victorian Christmas cards were almost as varied in style and subject matter as the cards of today, a few themes were stressed over others. By far the most prominent of these themes was that of charity, another reflection of the preoccupations of well-to-do Victorians on both sides of the Atlantic.

Whether you find yourself among family or friends this holiday season, learning about the origins of Christmas customs can make for a merry time for all. To learn more about Christmas in Colonial and Victorian Oyster Bay, feel free to come for a holiday visit to Raynham Hall.

## Mark Your Calendars...

<p>A Scrap-Book for the Ages: Four generations of Alices of the Weekes Family of Oyster Bay.</p>	<p>Exhibit now open through August 15, 2012</p>
<p>Halloween at Raynham Hall. Participate in a "how-to" session on ghost hunting and a discussion of paranormal activity. Come on a haunted history tour, including your choice of tarot or crystal ball reading. Appropriate for teenagers to adults. \$12 members, \$10 for members and students.</p>	<p>Saturday, October 29, 7-10 p.m.</p>
<p>Halloween Family Fun. Ghost rides via horse-drawn carriage through Historic Oyster Bay. Rides beginning at Sweet Tomato Healthy Eatery and travel to the Oyster Bay Historical Society, Raynham Hall Museum, and the The Oyster Bay Railroad Station. The ride ends with refreshments at Sweet Tomato Healthy Eatery. Appropriate for families. \$10 pp, \$5 children (under 48 inches in height free).</p>	<p>Sunday, October 30, 3-7 p.m.</p>
<p>Etiquette for the Holidays: For young ladies and gentlemen. Learn the all-to-often forgotten basics of table manners, answering a phone, and greeting acquaintances. Make your parents proud! Appropriate for ages 7-12.</p>	<p>Consecutive Mondays, November 7 &amp; November 14, 6:00-7:30 p.m.</p>
<p>Delicious and decorative holiday chocolate workshops presented by Raynham Hall and Oyster Bay's own Chocolate Lady. For children and adults.</p>	<p>Afternoon of Saturday, December 10th.</p>
<p>Colonial 12th Night Celebration. A free event for friends and members on the 12th night following the Christmas holiday. Live period musical performance.</p>	<p>Thursday, January 5th</p>
<p>Scrapbooking and découpage workshops for children and adults.</p>	<p>Schedule to be confirmed.</p>

*For information on upcoming events and schedules, please call Raynham Hall at 516.922-6808 or visit Raynham Hall online at [www.raynhamhallmuseum.org](http://www.raynhamhallmuseum.org)*



## DUST OFF THOSE DANCING SHOES

and

## PENCIL US IN...

Raynham Hall's  
Annual Valentine's Day benefit  
party

Friday, February 10th, 2012,  
at The Creek

## BECOME A MEMBER

*— Help bring history to life!*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Please clip this out and return it to us by mail with your check,

Or call us at (516) 922 6808 and join as a member today!!

### Membership Levels

Individual	\$35
Family	\$45
1740 Society	\$125
Culper Spy Ring	\$250
Victorian Society	\$500
Raynham Society	\$1,000

## Look inside for information on upcoming events!



Raynham Hall Museum  
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Oyster Bay, NY 11771

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