

Interpreting Christmas at Museums and Historic Sites



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INTERPRETING HISTORY

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Interpreting Christmas at Museums and Historic Sites

Edited by
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and
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Introduction

*Kenneth C. Turino and
Max A. van Balgooy*

For many house museums, historic sites, historical societies, and museums, December—with its holidays, Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanza—can be the most visited times of the year (and most profitable). The Christmas tree stands proudly in the parlor, glistening with ornaments and surrounded by colorfully wrapped gifts, and carolers outside are singing “Away in a Manger” and “Jingle Bells.” But are these scenes appropriate for every setting? A colonial farm in New England? A Spanish rancho in California? An antebellum plantation in Louisiana? An Italianate mansion in St. Louis? The Gilded Age home of a Jewish family in San Francisco? While these holidays are widely celebrated, not everyone observes these holidays in the same manner. Americans celebrate holidays for cultural, historical, religious, and social reasons, including the traditions of myriad ethnic groups that have settled in the United States over the centuries. These holidays hold a vital place in American culture, serving as moments for reflection, celebration, and bonding with others. History museums and historic sites offer ideal settings to experience and appreciate these rich traditions.

While this book focuses on Christmas, it is not a history of Christmas in America. Despite the significant social and economic impacts of Christmas both in the United States and globally, it is a topic often overlooked by scholars.¹ Even with the wealth of books and articles on national and regional Christmas celebrations, there remains ample room for further research on its history.

Likewise, interpreting Christmas is a vast subject that cannot be fully covered in a single volume. Nevertheless, we hope it can inspire ideas on how sites and museums can leverage this and other holidays to engage innovatively with their communities. For instance, El Museo del Barrio in New York City caters to the needs of its Puerto Rican and Latin American community through its exhibitions and programs. For nearly fifty years, the museum has hosted a Three Kings Day celebration. Held twelve days after Christmas on January 6, Three Kings Day, or the Feast of the Epiphany, commemorates the arrival of the three kings—Balthazar, Melchior, and Gaspar—in Bethlehem to worship the newborn Christ child. This day is a cherished holiday tradition in Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and many Latin American countries.

As a profession, we value diversity and inclusion, so we have included Christmas celebrations in different regions of our country by different people over time. To expand the

opportunities, we incorporate chapters on other holidays in December—Hanukkah and Kwanzaa specifically—as well as case studies of museums with events and programs that include these and other cultural traditions. We encourage all historical organizations to closely examine their communities and consider their unique ethnic and religious celebrations. While many historic sites are focused on a period of significance, it should not prevent them from broadening their interpretation to better represent the diversity of their communities. Our previous book *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions* focused on using new models for historic sites and museums to engage with their communities in a more relevant, inclusive, and creative manner.² Holidays offer yet another way to do this.

Visitors trust museums to offer reliable glimpses into the past, and with history museums and historic sites forming the majority of museums in the United States, it is crucial that Christmas programs are presented accurately and meaningfully. The challenge lies in equipping staff and volunteers with the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully research, plan, and host Christmas events or activities and to expand these to include some of their communities' traditions. Christmas has continually evolved over time and will continue to do so. As public historians and museum professionals, it's our responsibility to adapt and evolve alongside it.

How to Use This Book

Board members, staff, and volunteers involved in the management, research, and interpretation at house museums, historic sites, history museums, and historical societies across the United States will find this book provides a wide range of perspectives on Christmas and offers practical guidance for planning, research, interpretation, and programming at historic sites or museums. Moreover, it will inspire fresh ideas and approaches to your programs and activities. For faculty and graduate students in public history, museum studies, and heritage studies programs, it provides a focused case study on interpretation and presentation of popular culture. The diverse disciplines and experiences of the authors provide a broad look into the public celebration of a major holiday—and they will not all agree with each other.

A key principle in this book is that there is no one-size-fits-all interpretation of Christmas for all history museums and historic sites in the United States. Every organization is unique, with its own collections, resources, audiences, community, mission, and goals. Effective interpretation involves finding the right mix for your situation.

We encourage you to start by identifying your goals for interpreting Christmas: what do you want your visitors to know, feel, or do as a result of participating in your event or program? If you are successful, what do visitors say to their friends and family? How do you want to improve or enhance the quality of life of your visitors or the community? What do you want to do better or differently? Or perhaps you have internal goals for attendance, membership, or income? Write them down and share them with others in your organization to ensure everyone is in agreement.

Next, reflect on your organization's mission, vision, values, and capacity as you start planning. Your Christmas event or program should align with your mission, advance your vision, reflect your values, and be sustainable. House museums should also consider the history of their site and the culture, faith, and traditions of former residents and neighbors. Not every family, nor every museum, should feel obligated to celebrate Christmas, even if it is popular or historically accurate.

Reinterpretation can seem daunting, but it becomes manageable by reducing the scope of work and breaking it down into phases. You do not have to accomplish everything in one year. Start small, perhaps by clarifying your goals and making small adjustments to your existing programs. Or you could focus on researching Christmas traditions in your region; conducting visitor research; reorganizing how your event is planned and implemented; or building a partnership with a part of the community whose holiday traditions you would like to include. Each year, you can build incrementally toward your goals.

Use this book to spark ideas about topics, methods, processes, and principles that will elevate your organization's interpretation of Christmas. While some ideas may be ready-to-use, others may need to be scaled, modified, adapted, combined, or rearranged to best fit your situation.³

Contents and Organization

Interpreting Christmas at Museums and Historic Sites is divided into four sections: Research, Different Traditions at Different Times and Places, Planning, and Public Programming.

The first section explores the process of researching Christmas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from different perspectives. House museums, historic sites, and historical societies, many of which are housed in historic buildings, will find this particularly useful for developing content and themes. The first chapter, “Creating a Merry Christmas” by Kenneth C. Turino, examines the history of Christmas through the elements that are most visible at house museums, such as the tree, decorations, and stockings. It is followed by a series of essays exploring research techniques and approaches. Max A. van Balgooy shares a four-part process for researching state and local history using Christmas in California as a case study in “I’m Dreaming of a Warm Christmas.” In “Unwrapping the History of Christmas: The Women Who Redefined a Holiday,” Mary A. van Balgooy explores how a group of women in Boston used a national and international network of women committed to abolishing slavery and inadvertently shaped modern Christmas traditions. Her chapter emphasizes the often-overlooked roles of women and how museums and historic sites can offer a more nuanced history of Christmas. Curator Gregory Weidman describes research techniques and sources to recreate historically accurate period rooms for “Holidays at Hampton,” an annual event at a National Historic Site in Maryland.

Christmas was celebrated differently at different times and places, and the next section provides several dramatic examples. Karen Trahan Leathem describes New Orleans’ traditions at Christmas, focusing on *réveillon*, a family and religious tradition centered on food that contrasted with the boisterous public celebrations and revived in the 1980s to boost tourism. Many plantation tours focus predominantly on festive decorations of white,

slaveholding families, often neglecting the stories of the enslaved. Emmanuel Dabney urges us to dispel romantic illusions about Christmas during slavery in “Presented Me as a Christmas Gift.” Erik Greenberg’s “We’re Getting a Rocket for Christmas!” examines the significance of Christmas gifts during the early Space Race and suggests ways museums might create exhibitions about historical Christmas gift-giving practices and how they connect to national issues. Andrew R. Dunn’s “Christmas behind Barbed Wire” explores how Japanese American families during World War II balanced the preservation of their cultural heritage with the pressure to assimilate. Despite incarceration and adversity, maintaining traditions, especially at Christmas, offered a crucial link to their cultural identity and a display of patriotism.

We include two chapters that go beyond Christmas to consider holidays that also occur in December and how they might affect interpretation in museums and historic sites. These are not written to be comprehensive descriptions of these holidays nor intended to ignore other ethnicities, cultures, or traditions, but to highlight the value of diversity and inclusion in popular programs and events. Martha B. Katz-Hyman’s “Not Everyone Celebrates Christmas: Expanding Your Holiday Horizons” discusses the challenge faced by historic sites and museums during Christmas: attracting visitors while avoiding exclusion of non-Christian audiences. She suggests reevaluating holiday programming to reflect the diversity of the community, including the celebration of Hanukkah, a Jewish festival commemorating divine intervention and the miracle of the oil at the Temple in Jerusalem. Kelly Elaine Navies’s “Kwanzaa: A Teachable Moment for All Ages” discusses Kwanzaa, a nonreligious holiday created by Dr. Maulana Karenga during the Black Power Movement and how the National Museum of African American History and Culture uses Kwanzaa’s core principles to create dynamic educational programming highlighting African American culture.

The third section of the book focuses on the practical aspects of planning and programming. In “Twas the Year before Christmas: Planning Your Event and Protecting Resources,” Laurel A. Racine gives a curator’s perspective, guiding readers on how to balance festive celebrations with the protection of resources through effective planning and training. Andrew H. Hahn, at Campbell House in St. Louis, discusses the importance of proper planning and collaboration with staff and volunteers for acquiring, installing, and storing Christmas decorations in “Decking the Halls: All You Need to Know to Decorate Your Historic Site.” In “Decorating for Christmas: Collaborating with Garden Clubs,” Lenora M. Henson discusses the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site’s annual “Victorian Christmas” event. The site collaborates with local garden clubs to decorate the historic home, requiring careful planning and cooperation to protect the historic resource while creating a festive atmosphere. In “The Ghost of Christmas That Never Was,” James A. McKay and Patricia West discuss how strategic planning and evaluation at Lindenwald transformed their annual candlelight event into a “Winter Celebration” that resulted in the protection of resources, engaging historical presentation, and freshness for attendees. Susan A. Fletcher, Barbara Franco, and Melody Smith, members of the American Association of State and Local History’s (AASLH) Religious History Affinity Group, address a delicate issue: religion. They have developed a set of best practices for navigating this potentially sensitive aspect of holiday programming.

Interpreting Christmas at Museums and Historic Sites concludes with an exploration of popular programs and events through examples from across the country and overseas. These chapters not only provide inspiration for various interpretive methods and formats, but also options when a historically accurate Christmas is not possible. In “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas Festival,” Sandra Smith explores how museum and historic site festivals can build new traditions and attract audiences. By balancing consistency with novelty, these festivals can become successful annual events. In “Not a Twinkle Out of Place,” Sara Bhatia discusses how living history museums, with their extensive grounds and facilities, can create multifaceted holiday experiences. The museums profiled—Old Salem Museum and Gardens, Strawberry Banke, and Conner Prairie—each offer unique Christmas celebrations, providing both financial benefits and opportunities to attract new visitors and donors. In “A Feast for the Senses,” Katie Knowles discusses the evolution of Christmas programming at National Trust properties in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Moving toward year-round opening, these sites now offer creative, sensory experiences rooted in the history of each location, an approach that has significantly increased visitor numbers during the festive season. In “Joy to the World,” Stacia Kuceyeski and Carla Mello discuss the Ohio History Connection’s Cultural Traditions program, which features various holiday traditions celebrated in Ohio, including Christmas, Hanukkah, Chinese New Year, and Kwanzaa. The program enhances cultural competency and represents a diverse community, emphasizing the importance of authentic voices and cultural partnerships. In “A Christmas Card to the Community,” Jeannie Giroir Luckett discusses how a holiday shopping event evolved into a weekend festival for a multigenerational audience, becoming a meaningful and enriching experience for West Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In “The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: Placing the Future in Holiday Programs,” Anna Altschwager argues for a shift in historical public programs to focus more on inclusivity and the future. She suggests that programs should prioritize guests and their experiences, creating spaces for their stories. Altschwager emphasizes the importance of understanding motivations, setting clear goals, and fostering earnest engagement within the team. She reminds us, “We do our work for people, so push inclusivity in new ways to make sure people can see themselves in everything we do. Let us do work for people, not about people. Let us be graceful and share space. Let us know that stories will surprise, challenge, and delight us.”

To close the book, an extensive bibliography emphasizes books and articles on the history of Christmas in the United States published since 2000. Although it is not exhaustive, it provides a valuable starting point for historic sites, house museums, and historical societies looking to enhance their Christmas interpretations.

However, there’s still a world of Christmas history waiting to be explored. From theater and music, to food and decorator show houses, to multi-site partnerships and Twelfth Night celebrations, there’s plenty of ground to cover. Not to mention the untold Christmas stories of places like military forts or urban tenements, or regions such as the Northwest and the Rockies. So, if you are an expert in these areas, why not share your knowledge at conferences, on blogs, in webinars, or in publications like *History News*? Your insights could help paint a fuller picture of America’s Christmas past.

Interpreting Christmas at Museums and Historic Sites would not have been possible without the generous contributions of all the authors as well as several people who served as

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Notes

1. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Philip Hancock and Alf Rehn, “Organizing Christmas,” *Organization* 18, no. 6 (November 2011): 737–45.
2. Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. van Balgooy, *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
3. There are several books to guide rethinking, including *Thinkertoys: A Handbook for Creative-Thinking Techniques, Second Edition* by Michael Michalko (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2006) and *Creativity in Museum Practice* by Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014).