



Our Colonial Christmas

Discovering old-fashioned fun in Colonial Williamsburg

BY MARTHA STEGER



The author's granddaughters, 8-year-old Helena (in front) and 14-year-old Sophia, join a costumed interpreter to learn about yesteryear's yuletide celebrations in Colonial Williamsburg, where holiday decorations are simple and handmade.

"No Christmas tree in Colonial Williamsburg?"

8-year-old Helena exclaimed, as we walked along Duke of Gloucester Street.

The question didn't surprise Tom and me, now grandparents who once acted as costumed guides in Colonial Williamsburg and nearby Jamestown Settlement 50 years ago.

"The holidays in early America were very different from ours today," I explained, drawing on the weeks of reading and quizzing I'd enjoyed as a docent-in-training for Colonial Williamsburg. "Remember, Williamsburg existed before America was a country. Everyone had a lot of difficult duties every day without adding special tasks for holidays. You would put some evergreens in the windows, go to church, have a special dinner, enjoy dancing, and visit with friends and family. That was Christmas."

"No shopping or baking cookies or writing cards?" Helena asked. "What about hanging stockings and getting gifts?"

"No stockings," Tom told her, "and your gifts would have been a book or two and perhaps a few sweets. The entertainment people enjoyed—balls and foxhunts, for example—was for adults, nothing special for children. It was all very simple,

and over quickly; but you got to see people you hadn't seen in a while."

"Like now—with you and Grandmom."

She was right about that. Helena, her 14-year-old sister, Sophia, and their parents—our son, Michael, and his wife, Anya—traveled from New York last December to join Tom and me for a three-night holiday in Colonial Williamsburg, the living history museum re-creating 18th-century life in the city that served as Virginia's capital from 1699 to 1780. Stores, restaurants, craft shops, and residences—either dating from the 1700s or reconstructed to the period's specifications—line the equivalent of 37 city blocks in the 300-acre area.

We'd booked accommodations at the Williamsburg Woodlands Hotel and Suites, adjacent to Colonial Williamsburg's Visitors Center and only a 10-minute walk from the heart of the old city. We wanted to immerse ourselves in the period and minimize modern distractions. For three days, we experienced the holidays as our forefathers and foremothers might have. Little did we know we might learn lessons to inform our 21st-century lives as well.

LOUISA PRESTON (2)



Buildings dating to the 1700s or reconstructed to the period's specifications line Duke of Gloucester Street, where some signs, such as this one for Hartwell Perry's Ordinary, take the form of a rebus. Along the way, visitors might strike up a conversation with interpreters about 18th-century events.

History is Served

As we walked along, I called attention to a sign above a tavern no longer in operation: Hartwell Perry's Ordinary. The sign had no words, just a rebus—a picture representing words. This one depicted a brick well with a hart, or deer, in a pear tree. I explained that an alcoholic beverage made from pears was a *perry*.

"I get it!" Helena shouted: "Hart-well-perry." Ordinaries were taverns that offered lodging and meals, and in an age before public education, signs with pictures made identifying businesses easier.

We proceeded to Chowning's Tavern for dinner. On the second floor, we sat at a square, wooden table lit by candles under glass, with wooden chairs on either side. Sophia laughed at the huge, white napkins tied around the necks of all the restaurant patrons.

"I guess they didn't want to take any chances of food accidentally dropping on those handmade clothes," she said, "not to mention having to clean them without washers and dryers when they were dirty."

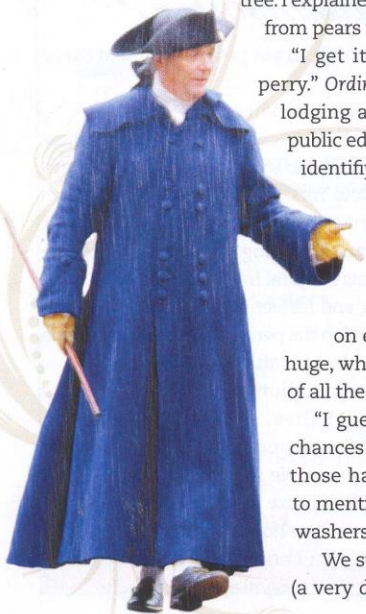
We started off with Virginia apple cider (a very dry, hard cider for the adults who

chose it) followed by appetizers, including Welsh rarebit, a dish with origins in the 18th-century British Isles. In response to Helena's question about whether it contained rabbit, the waitress said the ingredients were only cheddar cheese, a mustard-spiced beer sauce, and seasonings.

Both Helena and Sophia looked up when musician David Gardner, in 18th-century garb, began playing the fiddle. The girls are serious musicians in New York, Sophia having performed on violin at Carnegie Hall, and Helena, recently accepted as flutist in the Manhattan School of Music. After playing a few tunes, including Tom's special request, "Danny Boy," Gardner pulled out what he called a pocket fiddle.

"This fits nicely in your saddlebag if you're traveling in colonial times," he said. "Thomas Jefferson owned one. If a musician wasn't present in a dining room like this one, guests often performed songs themselves. Some colonists made their own simple instruments."

When he asked if anyone played a fiddle or violin, Sophia raised her hand. Gardner invited her forward to play a few bars on the pocket fiddle, accompanying him. Even with her performance background, Sophia blushed at the applause that followed.



Fifes and Drums

Williamsburg's costume shop, which outfits all docents. Sophia and Helena thought it was so neat that they persuaded Michael and Anya to head for the visitors center to rent reproduction 18th-century costumes for them for the remainder of their visit. Simpler in design than the originals, these dresses didn't require the hours of fittings that I had taken pride in for my three outfits—one to wear, one to have as a backup, and one to go to Colonial Williamsburg's dry-cleaning shop.

We dashed into tradesmen's shops, and at the Press/Bindery, we watched the printing of a *broadside*, or newspaper, on the printing press. We visited the blacksmith's forge, where the smiths make locks and tools from iron and steel.

As darkness gathered, we watched colonial men light cressets for street lighting. Our three generations marched with Colonial Williamsburg's Fifes and Drums. We all reveled in the stirring sounds as we followed the musicians from the Capitol to the Palace Green along Duke of Gloucester Street.

Weary from the full day, we returned to our hotel. At dinner across the courtyard at Huzzah BBQ Grille, we began with a rousing "Huzzah!" toast to the day—and to how much

we'd enjoyed learning together. As we talked, more questions arose.

"Were the Venetian blinds at some of the windows authentic?" Anya asked. Another bit of my old training burst forth, as I explained that blinds predated Colonial Williamsburg—they were popular in Italy and France as early as the 1750s. Some housewives owned small looms on which they wove tapes for their wooden blinds.

No rest for Sophia and Helena after dinner. As music students, they practice daily, even on vacation: We enjoyed a concert in our hotel room, along with Christmas cookies made by Grandmom Martha and Granddad Tom. It seemed fitting—after all, before television and iPads, families created their own entertainment. Together, the girls played an arrangement of the Largo from Dvořák's "Symphony No. 9, the New World Symphony." Perhaps those Colonial Williamsburg residents had the right idea—the holidays are best celebrated in simple ways in the company of loved ones. ❖

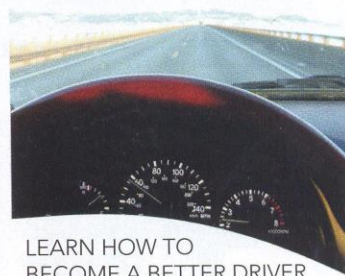
Martha Steger's 2013 Tidewater Traveler cover story about Virginia's top ice cream places was one of two articles that garnered her first place in travel writing in the 2014 National Federation of Press Women's Communications Contest.

You can stroll the streets of Colonial Williamsburg for free, but some houses and other sites require admission. Tickets give you access to all the historic sites, museums, and trade shops. Single-day tickets cost \$43.95 for adults, \$22 for children 6–12; multiday tickets cost \$51.95 for adults, \$26.95 for children 6–12. Children 5 and younger are free. Annual passes offering unlimited admission for a year cost \$64.95 for adults, \$32.50 for children 6–12. More information about Colonial Williamsburg is at (855) 296-6627; colonialwilliamsburg.com.



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Our three generations marched with Colonial Williamsburg's



(Clockwise from right) The family marches with the Fifes and Drums and, inspired by a photo of the author in her docent days, try on period costumes (the author's son, Michael, fitting his mom for a hat). At evening's end, Sophia and Helena serenade.



Street Theater

After leaving the Powells' home, we strolled the Colonial Williamsburg streets, encountering more interpreters. We ran into Lydia Broadnax, a slave in the household of George Wythe.

"Master Wythe was a signer of the Declaration of Independence," she told us. We noted the irony of his being opposed to slavery, yet owning slaves. Wythe eventually granted the real Lydia Broadnax her freedom.

We liked the unevenness of the cobblestones and admired buildings' steps made from paving blocks that had come to American ports as ballast in ships. Everywhere we looked were whitewashed shops and homes with holiday decorations of all-natural materials on their doors. In back of the houses were cold-weather plantings such as cabbages in vegetable gardens. Stately, red-brick buildings and people riding by in horse-drawn carriages added richness to the scene. We watched women in long skirts and mob caps get their aprons soiled by sweeping front stoops or building fires under iron pots. This was not dry textbook history, but the whirling mix of daily 18th-century life.

I shared with the family an old picture of myself in one of the period dresses handmade in Colonial

Party like it's 1799

If you want the complete immersion experience, book your lodging at one of the 18th-century **Colonial Houses**, which have canopy beds or fireplaces or private courtyards. Rates: \$185–\$485 per night. You can also rent rooms in the **Brick House Tavern** and **Market Square Tavern**; tavern rooms range from \$135 to \$235 per night. Lodgings at the **Williamsburg Woodlands Hotel and Suites** feature a contemporary façade and interior and a convenient location near the visitors center. Rates: \$70–\$205 per night. All Colonial Williamsburg lodgings include preferred reservations at the spa, golf courses, and restaurants, along with shopping delivery services and complimentary shuttle service.

As soon as you've arranged lodging, book lunches and dinners around the activities in which you plan to participate. Times for programs such as the **Christmas Decorations Walking Tour** are online, and you'll receive the printed weekly calendar at check-in.

Help children get into the experience by renting reproduction 18th-century costumes for them, available (sadly, only for children) at the visitors center and outdoor booths in Market Square. The rental cost is \$24.95 per day, plus a \$75 refundable deposit.

To cook some of Colonial Williamsburg's authentic dishes at home, check out the historic and contemporary versions of recipes at recipes.history.org/recipeindex.

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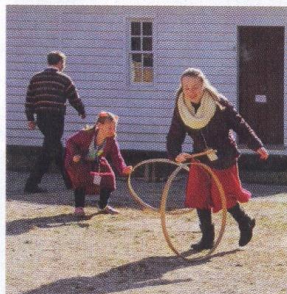
Keys to Colonial Christmas

The next morning, we were off to help the Benjamin Powell family get ready for the holidays. Throughout Williamsburg, living-history interpreters take on the personas of real, historic figures. The real Powell was a carpenter who became a successful *undertaker*, i.e., one who undertook the construction of buildings—what we would now call a contractor; in 1774, Powell served with several men of stature on a committee that enforced an embargo on select British goods.

The interpreters were already at work in the Powell household when we arrived, and they invited the girls to grab a rag, broom, or feather duster to clean—and to say, “Happy Christmas,” not “Merry Christmas,” as was the custom of the day. We were preparing for Twelfth Night on January 6, more celebrated by colonials than Christmas Day, which was treated as a holy day. Even on holidays, no fireplaces were lit unless needed. “No conspicuous consumption in the 18th century,” one interpreter said. “The hearth not only uses up fuel but also throws dirt into the room, a big disadvantage.”

In the parlor or game room, younger children played with building blocks while Sophia played chess. Michael and Anya looked over Helena’s shoulder as she tried her hand at Mancala, a popular African game in the 18th century played on a wooden board with holes carved in it. Out in the kitchen, separate from the main house, we saw slaves (approximately half of Williamsburg’s population then) roasting duck on a spit and preparing boiled, buttered onions for onion pie; mashing carrots for carrot pudding; and making sweet breadsticks called Naples biscuits. Anya and the girls learned about slicing the carrots that would be cooked for mashing.

Sophia and Helena happily threw *scrapings*, or crumbs, from the kitchen to the chickens in the Powells’ barnyard. In the home’s courtyard, all of us used up lots of energy on the game “hoops and sticks,” in which we kept large wooden hoops rolling as far as possible using only wooden sticks. The game produced a humorous family competition as even Anya and Michael failed to keep up with the girls.



(Above, clockwise from top) The girls learn about 18th-century cooking and play Mancala and hoops and sticks. (Below) Visitors can tour the grounds by horse and carriage.



LOUISA PRESTON (4)