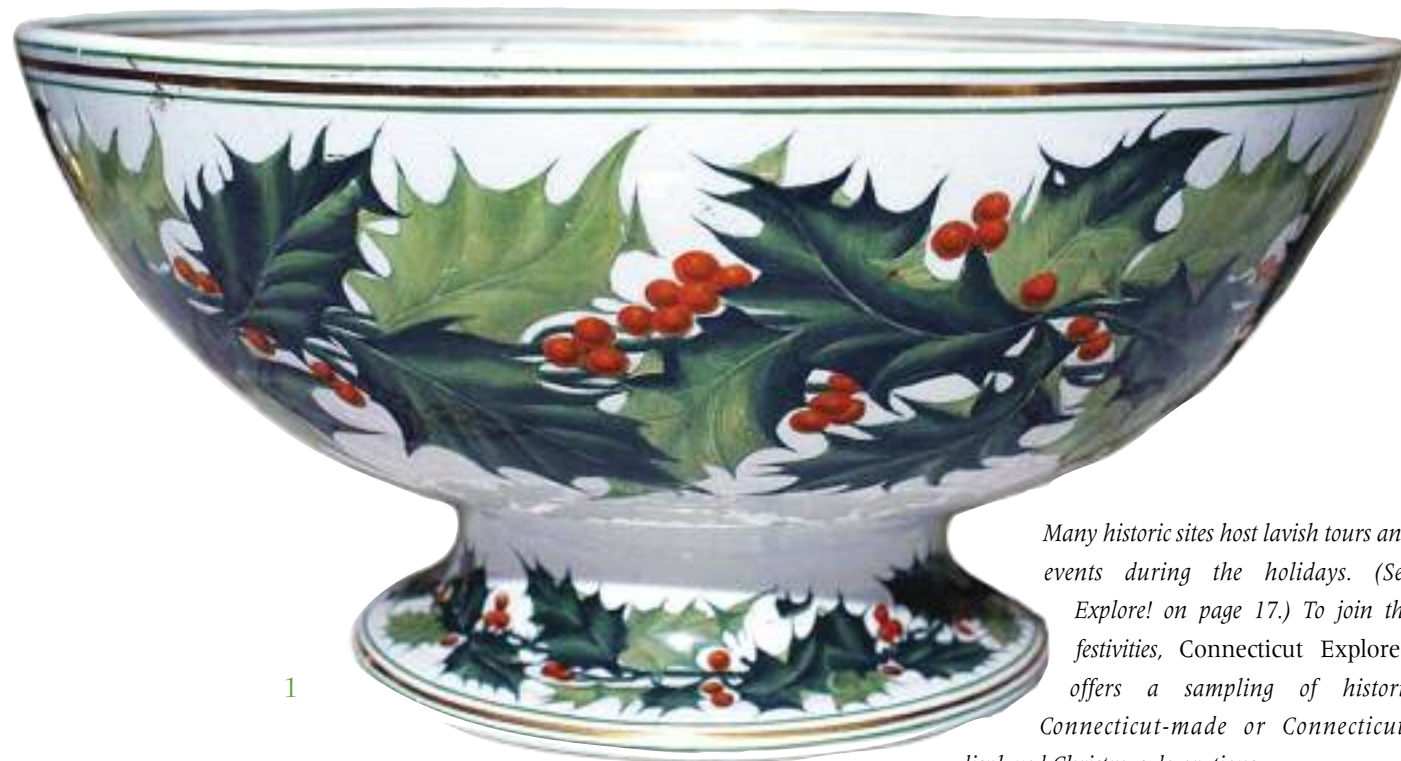


By Elizabeth J. Normen

CHRISTMAS IN CONNECTICUT



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Many historic sites host lavish tours and events during the holidays. (See *Explore!* on page 17.) To join the festivities, Connecticut Explored offers a sampling of historic Connecticut-made or Connecticut-displayed Christmas decorations.

Christmas in New England was not always the affair it is today. The Puritans, in fact, tried their best to stamp it out during the Colonial period. According to Stephen Nissenbaum in *The Battle for Christmas* (Vintage Books, 1997) in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681 it was illegal to celebrate the holiday. Even where celebration was allowed, it wasn't universally embraced. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Poganuc People* about life in a town much like Litchfield circa 1818 (the year Connecticut disestablished the Congregational Church as the church of the state) draws a wonderful portrait of young Dolly, the Congregational minister's daughter, and her secret longing to celebrate Christmas as the Episcopalians did. She is delighted when her Episcopalian aunt sends her a Christmas present of a red dress and red shoes, which she is allowed to wear to church (where she heard her minister father excoriate the celebration of Christmas) covered up by a dark woolen overcoat and boots.

The Puritans objected mainly to Christmas's pagan roots in winter solstice festivals and to the nature of its subsequent secular celebrations. For centuries, those near the bottom of the social order had marked Christmas by letting off steam through, as Nissenbaum notes, "rowdy public displays of excessive eating and drinking, the mockery of established authority, aggressive begging (often involving the threat of doing harm), and even the invasion of wealthy homes." Violence and destruction of property became a real problem. Both the Puritans' efforts to ignore the holiday and the Episcopalians' efforts to layer religious observances on the day failed to contain the revelry. Nissenbaum asserts that it was the introduction of St. Nicholas to America in 1810 by John Pintard of the New-York Historical Society and the publication of Clement C. Moore's poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in 1822 that spurred the impulse to bring the holiday inside, domesticate it, turn its focus on giving presents to children, and commercialize it.

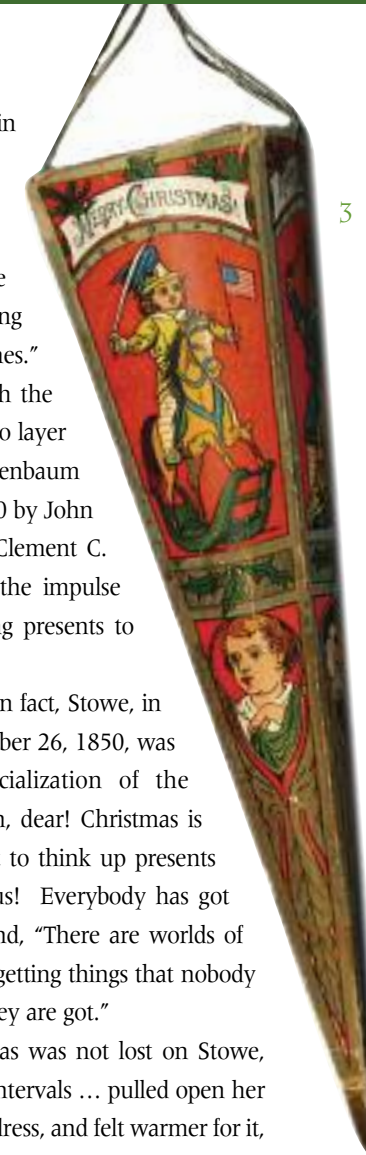
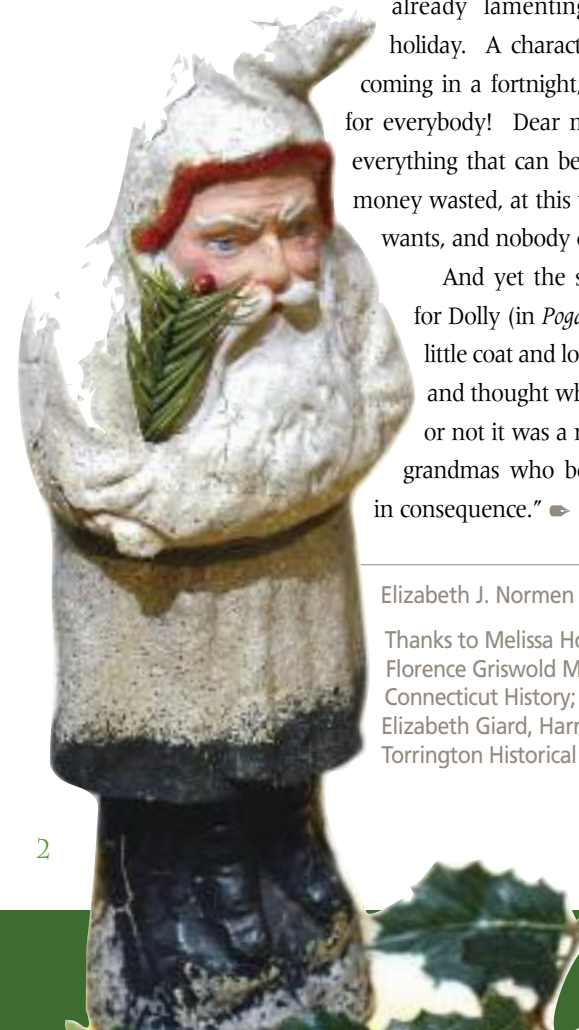
By the mid-1800s the reformation of Christmas was complete. In fact, Stowe, in "Christmas; or, The Good Fairy" published in *National Era* on December 26, 1850, was already lamenting the commercialization of the holiday. A character remarks, "Oh, dear! Christmas is coming in a fortnight, and I have got to think up presents for everybody! Dear me, it's so tedious! Everybody has got everything that can be thought of!" and, "There are worlds of money wasted, at this time of year, in getting things that nobody wants, and nobody cares for after they are got."

And yet the spirit of Christmas was not lost on Stowe, for Dolly (in *Poganuc People*) "at intervals ... pulled open her little coat and looked at the red dress, and felt warmer for it, and thought whether there was any such day as Christmas or not it was a nice thing for little girls to have aunties and grandmas who believed in it, and sent them pretty things in consequence." ➡

Elizabeth J. Normen is the publisher of *Connecticut Explored*.

Thanks to Melissa Houston, Barnum Museum; Tammi Flynn, Florence Griswold Museum; David Corrigan, Museum of Connecticut History; Cynthia Cormier, Hill-Stead Museum; Elizabeth Giard, Harriet Beecher Stowe Center; and Gail Kruppa, Torrington Historical Society for their contributions to this story.

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1 Punch bowl, Copeland, c. 1850s. Owned by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center

2 Santa Claus decoration, papier-mâché and cardboard, late 19th century. Provenance unknown. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center

3 Cone-shaped tree ornament, paper, late 19th century. The cone likely would have been filled with nuts or sweets. Another example in the collection was made by Cornell & Shelton in Derby, Connecticut. The Torrington Historical Society



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4 Penny postcard, c. 1910s. In addition to the toys hiding in the Christmas tree, holiday greeting cards and personal calling cards would have adorned the branches. Penny postcards (so called because they cost a penny) were popular from 1907 to 1915. Most were printed in Germany until World War I; after 1915 most were printed in the U.S. or England.

— Melissa Houston, Barnum Museum

5 Porcelain doll, German, c. 1880s. As the celebration of Christmas gained popularity and manufacturers' capacity to mass-produce toys increased in the late 1800s, the act of gift-giving blossomed. Small toys such as this bisque doll would have been nestled into the boughs of the Christmas tree. In 1880 these popular porcelain dolls were largely produced in Germany and often dressed to match the fashionable women's styles of the day. The Barnum Museum owns a pair of dolls dressed in hand-stitched clothing, probably replacing the dolls' original attire.

— Melissa Houston, Barnum Museum

(images 6 & 7) The artists who stayed at Miss Florence Griswold's boardinghouse (now the Florence Griswold Museum) were like family and often exchanged handmade greeting cards. The museum holds a sizable collection of these works of art. Each year during the *Magic of Christmas: A Holiday Celebration* a few of the cards are on display in the Griswold House. Christmas is a particularly special time at the Florence Griswold Museum because Christmas Day was also Miss Florence's birthday.

— Tammi Flynn, Florence Griswold Museum

6 Everett Warner, greeting card, early 20th century. After a brief visit in 1909, Warner spent much of 1910 at the Griswold House. He returned to Old Lyme on and off for the next 25 years.

Lyme Historical Society Archives, Florence Griswold Museum

7 George Bruestle, greeting card, early 20th century. Bruestle, an early member of the Lyme Art Colony who later owned a summer home in the Hamburg section of town, was best known for his small and intimate paintings of the Lyme countryside.

Lyme Historical Society Archives, Florence Griswold Museum

(images 8, 9, & 10) Connecticut's industrial manufacturers contributed to the commercialization of Christmas by manufacturing decorations, tinsel, and lights. The Museum of Connecticut History has mid-20th-century strings of lights by Good-Lite Electric Mfg. Co. of Bridgeport, electric candles by Wellmade Electric Mfg. Co. of Torrington, and these holiday decorations—including a table-top tree that was not much of a stretch for the Fuller Brush Company of Hartford/East Hartford (this example may have been made after the company's 1973 move to Great Bend, Kansas).

8 Santa on a reindeer, Starlite Products Co., Bridgeport, 1960s. Museum of Connecticut History

9 Miniature tree, Fuller Brush Company, c. 1970s. Museum of Connecticut History

10 Double-Glo Extra Length Icicles, Paper Novelty Mfg. Co., Stamford, c. 1950s. Museum of Connecticut History

Explore!

Please check with the museums for times, admission fees, and reservations for these holiday events.

Barnum Museum. **Celebrate the Season**, November 26, 2010-January 2, 2011. Follow the evolution of Christmas celebrations in the U.S. from 1850 through 1900. Galleries and period rooms adorned with festive decorations and costumes from the museum's collection. 820 Main Street, Bridgeport. (203) 331-1104; www.barnum-museum.org.

Connecticut Landmarks. Bellamy-Ferriday House & Garden. **Bethlehem Christmas Town Festival**, December 3-4. The house is festively decorated; games, prizes, and surprises for children; refreshments. Phelps-Hatheway House & Garden, Suffield. **Home for the Holidays**, December 3-5. Community partners deck the halls; preview event; tours. The Butler-McCook House & Garden, Hartford. **Victorian Christmas** in the manner of the McCook family, December 2. (860) 247-8996; www.ctlandmarks.org.

Connecticut River Museum. 17th Annual **Holiday Train Show**, through February 13, 2011. A fully operational model railroad with interactive components designed by train artist Steve Cryan. 67 Main Street, Essex. (860) 767-8269; www.ctrivermuseum.org.

Connecticut Trolley Museum. **Winterfest & The Tunnel of Lights**, Thursdays through Sundays, November 26-December 19, 5-9 p.m. Take a trolley ride through the "Tunnel of Lights." The Visitor Center features model trains, displays, and refreshments. 58 North Road, East Windsor. (860) 627-6540; www.ct-trolley.org.

Fairfield Museum & History Center. **Holiday Express Train Show**, Weekends December 3 through January 2; daily between Christmas and New Year's. Model trains in a miniature winter wonderland setting. 370 Beach Road, Fairfield. (203) 259-1598; www.fairfieldhs.org.

Florence Griswold Museum. **The Magic of Christmas**, through January 9, 2011. Festive Fantasy Trees and the iconic Palette Tree in the galleries; historic decorations in the Griswold House. 96 Lyme Street, Old Lyme. (860) 434-5542; www.florencegriswoldmuseum.org.

Governor's Residence. **Holiday Open House Tour**, December 3-5. 999 Prospect Avenue, Hartford. Holiday decorations in the 1909 mansion and entertainment by community music groups. Information: Carol O'Shea (860) 524-7355; www.ct.gov/governorrell.

Hill-Stead Museum. **An American Collector's Christmas**, November 23, 2010-January 2, 2011. The 1901 house is decorated with rarely shown objects from family archives and collections. **Meet the Family** circa 1921, Sunday, December 5, noon-4 p.m.; interpreters play family members, staff, and guests. **Holiday Boutique** featuring 25 exhibitors, Saturday and Sunday, December 4-5, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. 32 Mountain Road, Farmington. (860) 677-4787; www.hillstead.org.

Hotchkiss-Fyler House Museum. **Victorian Christmas**, December 11-25. The mansion is decorated for the holidays with a tree, garlands, wreaths, and flowers. Display of antique ornaments and toys. 192 Main Street, Torrington. (860) 482-8260; www.torringtonhistoricalsociety.org.

Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum. **Victorian Holiday Open House**, December 12. Featuring period-style decorations, musical performances, hot chocolate, and holiday treats. 295 West Avenue, Norwalk. (203) 838-9799; www.lockwoodmathewsmansion.com.

Mark Twain House & Harriet Beecher Stowe Center. **A Victorian Holiday at Nook Farm**, Sunday, December 12, 5-8 p.m. Tour the festive first floors of both museums, take a horse-drawn carriage ride, visit with Santa, enjoy cocoa and other seasonal sweets, shop for gifts, and sing along with musicians and carolers. Mark Twain House: 351 Farmington Avenue, Hartford, (860) 247-0998, www.marktwainhouse.org; Stowe Center: 77 Forest Street, Hartford; (860) 522-9258, www.stowecenter.org.

Mystic Seaport. **Lantern Light Tours**, November 27, December 3-4, 10-11, 17-19, 26-27. Immerse yourself in a festive holiday village on Christmas Eve, 1876. 75 Greenmanville Avenue, Mystic. (860) 572-5315; www.mysticseaport.org.

Noah Webster House. **Gingerbread Day**. Make your own gingerbread house on Friday evening, December 3, or Saturday, December 4. Registration required. 222 South Main Street, West Hartford. (860) 521-5362; www.noahwebsterhouse.org.



Hand-made Santa suit, early 20th century, and sled, American, c. 1900.
Hill-Stead Museum

Every year, the Pope family's chauffeur was pressed into service to wear the Santa suit at the annual Christmas party for the Popes' employees and their children. The small American-made wooden sled would have been pulled by a pony or large dog. Based on family letters, photographs, oral histories, and turn-of-the-century magazines, Hill-Stead Museum decorates in a manner appropriate to the eras when the Pope and Riddle families lived there (1901 to 1946).

— Cynthia Cormier, Hill-Stead Museum