

Christmas Long, Long, Ago

WHAT was Christmas like in England, the United States, France, two centuries ago? A good idea of how far Christmas customs have evolved since then is obtained by studying the annals of perhaps the most famous old residence now standing in New York City. It is a Georgian-style mansion that goes back to the 1760s.

Those were times when Yule log lighting rites, "decking" with red-berried holly, Della Robbia wreaths and evergreen garlands, dancing, and feasting were cherished customs during a fortnight of celebration which ended with a Twelfth Night festival and Epiphany dinner.

The gaily decorated and candlelit Christmas tree did not become a fixture in homes until the 1840s, after the custom had been transplanted to England from Germany under the influence of Queen Victoria's consort, Albert of Saxe-Coburg.

A specially cut and seasoned Yule log was supposed to be kept burning the whole of the festive season. When the log had kept its cheery radiation of light and heat for twelve days, a bit of the charred wood was saved in accordance with tradition.

*Part must be kept wherewith to tend
The Christmas log next year;
Where it is safely kept, the fiend
Can do no mischief there.*

The English Christmas customs followed in New York in the 18th century were animated by influence of the seasonal festivities of the old Dutch families of the original Colony, New Netherland, whose observances proceeded from St. Nicholas' Day, Dec. 6. To young folk it was the biggest day in the season, for then Sinter Klaas, a rosy-cheeked, dwarf-like man, with a slouched hat, large nose, and long pipe, and a

switch, appeared with all sorts of Christmas gifts for the "good" children. The switch was to give a couple of preliminary whacks to those deemed "bad" on occasion. It was the boy who didn't get whacks who felt hurt. Sinter Klaas became the pattern for Santa Claus through the writings of Washington Irving and C. C. Moore and the drawings of Thomas Nast.

Irving and Moore knew in boyhood the beautiful house whose rooms, grounds and surrounding streets echo today the happy sounds of nearly two centuries of Christmases—the mansion referred to earlier, which was completed about 1768 for Roger Morris. When he came home from the French and Indian War he had a bride, the former Mary Philippe, heiress of a Hudson River Dutch patron family. Mary had rejected the suit of Col. George Washington of Virginia to bestow her large dowry upon

Washington's friend and fellow officer in the English forces.

The Morris estate stretched from Hudson River to East River "with Fishing, Oystering and Clamming at either end."

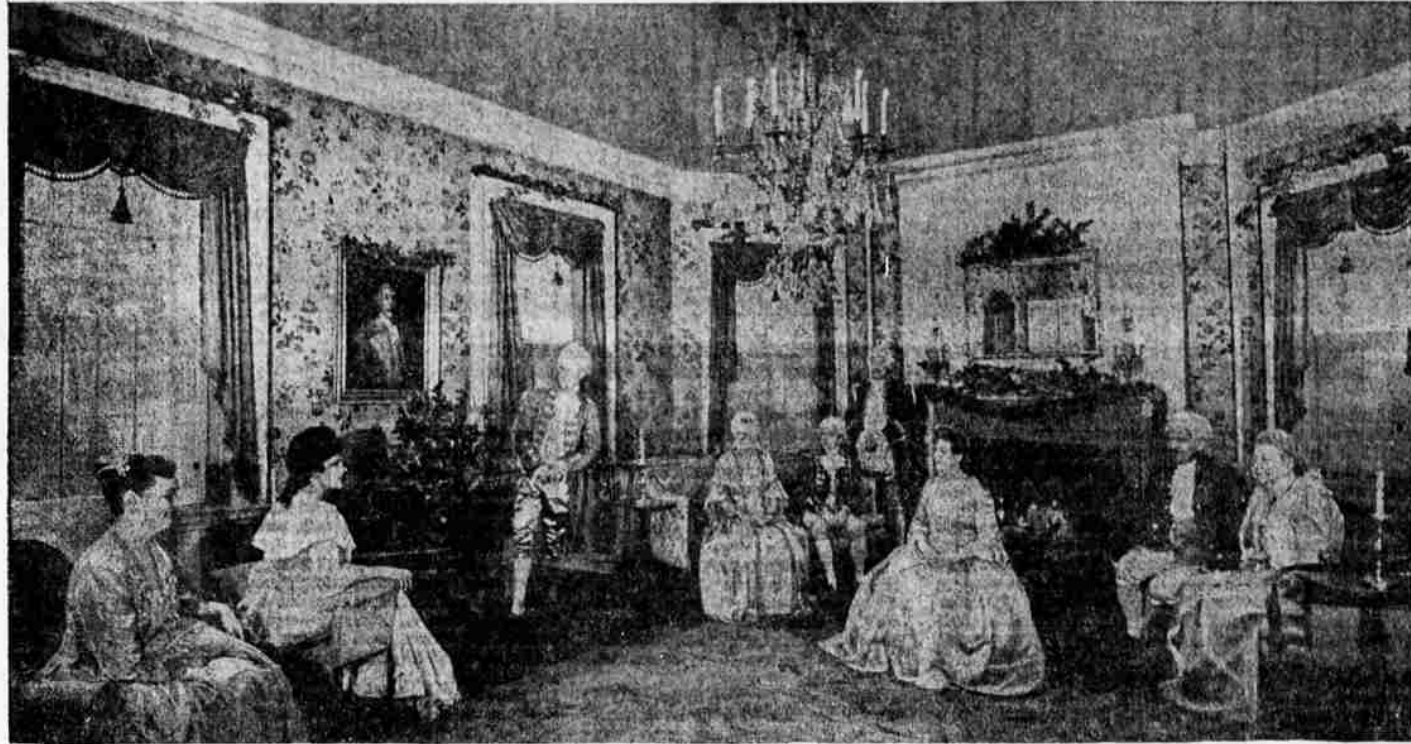
The Morris mansion was the finest residence in that region when the Morris family abandoned it after the outbreak of the War of Independence. They had chosen to remain loyal to the king and, as Tories, moved away hurriedly as the tide of war swept the patriot army into the Bronx in 1776.

The sweeping view of terrain at the mansion site made it a natural choice for headquarters of General George Washington while the army held its position around the heights for some five weeks, from Sept. 14 to Oct. 21, 1776. As soon as the British and Hessians were forced to evacuate New York in 1783 by the victorious Americans, the mansion was seized as Tory property and sold. It underwent declining fortunes of owners until purchased in 1810 by Stephen Jumel, a prosperous French-born merchant in New York who had a beautiful young wife of high social aspiration. The Jumels restored the mansion and made it a showplace through which there was a procession of notables, including Lafayette, Joseph Bonaparte, Louis Napoleon, Louis Philippe.

After Jumel died in 1832, the widow wed Aaron Burr, the ex-Vice President of the U.S. Possessions of the Morris, the Jumels and other notables of the house have been re-assembled by its administrators, the Washington Headquarters Association and Daughters of the American Revolution, as furnishings. These are background for the period decorations arranged each Christmas season for visitors. In true Christmas spirit, the doors are open to all comers.



The Morris-Jumel mansion at Christmas-time, snow on the ground, and garlands strung upon the balcony above its door. All photographs taken by Joseph Costa for this article. (C)KFS.



Drawing room of the mansion decorated for a musicale hour of carols. A Yule log is in the crackling fireplace. The young lady at the spinet is Caribel Schuyler Sternbergh, New York debutante descendant of neighbors of the Morris.

At left, also in heirloom gown, is Mrs. John Wheelchel Finger, president of the Washington Headquarters Association.



At the Christmas punch table, with guests in authentic costumes of 200 years ago for the "open house" observance of the holiday season.

In 1940, the British Empire covered nearly 16 million square miles of the earth, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica.



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