

**“A General Time of Indulgence and Festivity”: Early Winter
Holiday Celebrations at the Vancouver National Historic Reserve**

Part I: Christmas

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Just as today we celebrate a holiday season, encompassing an array of different holidays and celebrations from late December to early January, so did the early Hudson's Bay Company employees and families, at area such as Fort Vancouver and the Village now included within the boundaries of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve. At the same time, these nineteenth century celebrations are both very similar to and markedly different from the way we celebrate the holiday season today. With the help of fur trade- era journals, letters, books, and newspapers, we can begin to understand how the season was celebrated in our community during its formative years. Today, special events such as "Christmas at Fort Vancouver", held this year on December 8 on the grounds of the national historic site, help connect visitors to these integral traditions of the past.

"The holidays are not forgotten in these far distant regions," explained reverend Samuel Parker, an American missionary, upon his visit to Fort Vancouver in 1835. "From Christmas until after the New Years, all labor is suspended," he noted, "and a general time of indulgence and festivity commences."

At Fort Vancouver, the headquarters and supply depot for Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) operations in the Pacific Northwest in the 1830s and 1840s, Christmas was an important holiday. At the darkest period of the year, it ushered in a multi- day hiatus from the harsh labor and strict regimentation of the fur trade, illuminating life with leisure, recreation, feasting, and worship.

The winter holiday season began in earnest several days before Christmas. In anticipation of the holiday, the HBC would give its employees a *regale* or special treat of additional food and drink. In 1845, this consisted of “rum and eatables” while a year later it was three quarts of flour, one quart of molasses, three and a half pounds pork, and one pound grease - - “but no Rum,” noted Thomas Lowe, an HBC clerk. These regales would be key factors in the revelry to follow.

More spiritual activities began on the day before Christmas. Many of the HBC’s working class employees (known as *engagés*) and their families were of Catholic faith and French Canadian descent, and attended the traditional midnight mass. The midnight mass of 1842 was of particular significance, as Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor for the HBC at Fort Vancouver, made his first communion and officially joined the Catholic faith. Catholic priest Francis N. Blanchet recalled the occasion, noting that the chapel at Fort Vancouver was “beautifully decorated and brilliantly illuminated...the chant of canticles of Noel, in French and Chinook jargon, alternately by the two choir of men and women, was impressive; as well as the holy performance around the altar; in a word, it was captivating and elevating to the minds of the faithful, commemorating the great day of the birth of our Saviour.”

The dawning of Christmas day brought many of the gentlemen of the fort out and about to bestow the compliments of the season, much like Thomas Lowe who “went the rounds wishing my friends a ‘Merry Christmas and many returns

of the day.” An American missionary noted that on Christmas morning the fort’s employees and their families would “dress themselves in their best attire, accelerated movements are seen in every direction, and preparation is made for dinners, which are sure to be furnished in their first style, and greatest profusion; and the day passes in mirth and hilarity.”

While record of a Christmas tree at Fort Vancouver may never be uncovered, decorations seem to have been an important part of the holiday season, and the abundance of fir, spruce and other evergreen trees perhaps contributed to ornamentation at the fort. British Army Lt. Henry J. Warre noted that the visiting HMS *Modeste* was “very prettily decorated and festooned with Holly and Evergreens” in 1845, while at another northwest post Father Blanchet rejoiced in the “garlands and wreaths of green boughs” he found adorning a church.

Outdoor leisure activities were popular with the fort’s upper class, especially shooting, hunting and riding – when weather and health permitted. On one occasion, Thomas Lowe had “rather a dull time of it” when rain foiled his plans to be outside on Christmas morning. On another, he explained that a measles outbreak caused “so much sickness in the fort, [that] we had no amusement during the day.” The fort’s working class also indulged in the outdoors. “Some were engaged in gambling,” American pioneer Joel Palmer noted, “some singing, some running horses, many promenading on the river shore, and others on the large green prairie above the fort.”

Worship also played an important role in the day's festivities, with various services held in the morning and afternoon for the fort's diverse population. Catholic services, in French, took place at the Catholic Church – first inside and then later outside the stockade walls – while other Christian services, in English, were often held in the dining room of the Chief Factor's House and led by James Douglas, another HBC officer, or a visiting missionary or minister. By 1844, William Kaulehelehe had begun conducting Christian services in native Hawaiian language for the dozens of Hawaiian employees at the fort.

One of the day's highlights was the Christmas dinner. Perhaps the grandest of these dinners was that of the HBC's officers. On Christmas day at three o'clock, an extraordinary feast would take place within the fort, featuring traditional English fare such as roast beef and plum pudding. Often, there would be several lavish dinners held throughout the day. In 1845, sailors from the Royal Navy's HMS *Modeste* hosted "a Christmas feast that the table groaned under," according to Thomas Lowe. In 1849, HBC officers joined the recently- arrived U.S. Army officers at their dining hall, located north of Fifth Street near the Park Road. In the eyes of the HBC attendees, something important was missing. "They gave us a temperance – or rather total abstinence – dinner, which none of us relished much. Made up for it however on our return Home," exclaimed Thomas Lowe sardonically.

Indeed, alcohol played a major role in fur trade- era celebrations. For the officers, Lowe recounted that "the wine was freely circulated" at Christmas

dinner and intoxication often resulted. “The ladies all behaved well,” noted fort visitor Letitia Hargrave, “only my friend Betsy ‘got drunk’ as she told me and was carried home.” For the working class, rum was the drink of choice; it lubricated a welcome rest from the rigors of work, and ensured that the “ranting and frolicking” observed by Joel Palmer at 1845’s Christmas was sure to follow.

The celebratory spirit fostered by the many Christmas dinners continued to grow as balls, dances, and parties lasted well into the evening. Inside the walls of the fort, activities such as card parties involving whist and other games seem to have dominated, while outside the stockade a different level of merriment ensued. Visitors to the area both noted and enhanced the party- like atmosphere. “Most gloriously drunk” was how Joel Palmer described the attendees of a party hosted by sailors aboard the visiting HMS *Modeste*. “[J]udging from the noise kept up until ten at night, they were a jolly set of fellows,” he exclaimed. Inside the fort, the activities were different. “On shore we had nothing better to do than amuse ourselves at cards,” bemoaned Thomas Lowe.

The following day, the merriment would continue, for the celebration of Christmas was but the front end of the fur trade- era holiday season. In part two, we will explore the rest of the holiday season, which featured the most popular holiday of the era – New Year’s Day.

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