

Preface

"Delaware at Christmas" offers readers a rich exploration of the holiday season through the lens of Delaware's unique history, culture, and inheritance. This book explores the diverse ways Christmas has been celebrated across the state, pulling together stories from different communities, eras, and customs. From the early settlers—Swedish, Dutch, and English—who brought their distinct practices to the New World, to the modern multicultural celebrations that reflect Delaware's evolving population, each chapter paints a vivid picture of the holiday's impact on the state.

Readers will traverse the festive past with chapters on the evolution of outdoor decorations—called 'lawn trees' initially, the history of Christmas house tours, and the fascinating stories behind classic beverages like eggnog and wassail. The book also explores lesser-known practices, such as 17th century Finnish Christmas straw, the Irish influence on caroling, and the role of Orthodox Christian practitioners with their emphasis on Old Christmas.

Additionally, a chapter on Antebellum Black Christmas provides insight into the unique holiday experiences of

both free and enslaved Black communities in early 19th-century Delaware, illuminating an often-overlooked aspect of the state's Christmas history. Each section highlights how congregations have preserved, adapted, or sometimes forgotten these rites, offering insight into the broader cultural shifts that have shaped Delaware's identity.

"Delaware at Christmas" also sheds light on the more surprising aspects of the season, including the legacy of the holly wreath industry in Milton and the curious history of IBM punch card wreaths. The book emphasizes the tenacity and flexible nature of Delawareans, showcasing how they have maintained their heritage while embracing new influences over time.

Whether exploring the sacred rituals of German Christmas, the resonant sounds of handbell choirs, or the culinary delights of the Feast of the Seven Fishes, "Delaware at Christmas" provides a comprehensive and engaging look at how residents of this small state have celebrated the yuletide season across centuries. The book is a perfect read for anyone interested in history, culture, and the timeless spirit of Christmas in one of America's most historically rich regions.

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Part I: Cultural Traditions

Delaware's Christmas celebrations draw from a vibrant mosaic of observances introduced by immigrant communities. This segment investigates the rich panoply of their customs—from the early Swedish settlers' Jul festivities to Hispanic Las Posadas—revealing how each group shaped the holiday landscape.

Scandinavian Christmas in Colonial Delaware

Dutch Influence: From St. Nicholas to Santa Claus

English Christmas Customs in Colonial Delaware

French Huguenots and Their Christmas Legacy

German Christmas Traditions and Their Influence

Antebellum Black Christmas

Polish Christmas in Wilmington

Two Sides of Irish Christmas

Orthodox Christian Communities

The Italians' Feast of the Seven Fishes

Hispanic Christmas Traditions in Delaware

Part II: 19th Century Celebrations and Customs

The 19th century ushered in a blend of old colonial customs and new festive approaches. In this section, discover how Delawareans combined reverence with revelry, from eggnog recipes to the controversial practice of mumming, reflecting an era of innovation and changing tastes.

The Spirited History of Eggnog and Wassail

Charles Heber Clark's "Max Adeler"

Mumming Traditions in Delaware

Sleigh Bells

Richardson & Robbins' Plum Pudding

The Poinsettia

Part III: The Victorian Era and Early 20th Century

Victorian values and industrial progress left an indelible mark on Delaware's holiday customs. This part traces the evolution of outdoor decorations, the birth of Christmas seals, and other innovations that redefined how residents experienced the season.

The Harvest of Mistletoe

The Holly Wreath Industry
American Red Cross Christmas Seal Campaign
The Lovefeast
The Evolution of Outdoor Christmas Decorations
Toy Trains Under the Tree

Part IV: Modern Traditions

Delaware's late 20th-century Christmas traditions reflect an era of rapid change and cultural exchange. This section showcases the intersection of technology, nostalgia, and diverse influences that shaped modern celebrations—from IBM punch card wreaths to Kwanzaa observances.

Christmas Card Etiquette
The Rise and Fall of Christmas Savings Clubs
IBM Punch Card Wreaths
Christmas House Tours
A Delaware Inventor's Christmas Toy
Handbell Choirs
Evolving Perspectives on Old Christmas
Kwanzaa in Delaware
Christmas in July

Postscript