

The King of Prussia Gazette

Preserving Upper Merion's Past to Enlighten its Future

Volume I, Number Two

Winter 2012

HOLIDAY MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

by Michael Morrison

I'm reminded of an article written several years ago by my friend and local historian, Ed Dybicz, wherein he mentions the various ways in which the holidays were celebrated in young Upper Merion.

Ed tells us that Christmas was "observed with great reverence in early Upper Merion," with many a "colorful blend of customs and traditions brought over from the old country."

His article begins with the Swedes and the feast of St. Lucia, the patron saint of Sweden, on December 13. However, on Christmas morning, they gathered in Christ Church, Old Swedes, where the minister addressed the congregation in a traditional Christmas service. After a service in Christ Church, the Swedes would meet in their various homes for meals, inviting their neighbors and Native American friends to join them.

The English and the Welsh living in Upper Merion brought over a curious observance during Christmas time—the Kissing Bunch, which Ed describes in detail.

Christmas was a very holy day for the Irish as well. They would walk to St. Patrick's Church in Norristown, from Swedesburg or Cudgeltown. Later, the Polish settlers arrived in Upper Merion for them Christmas combined three important attributes, religion, family, and country. The Germans who settled in Upper Merion celebrated Christmas Eve with the anticipation of the coming of the Christ Child "Kristkindleir" who would visit the children bearing gifts.

The Slovaks and Hungarians lived mainly around the Swedeland area and observed Christmas with the exchange the peace wafer on Christmas Eve. The Italians of Upper Merion were part of the group of immigrants who built the Philadelphia and Western Railroad from 69th street to Norristown, settling along its route. A very religious people, the Italians placed Nativity sets in front of their homes.

The complete article, *Christmas Was Observed with Great Reverence in Early Upper Merion*, appears on



Supporting the Township's heritage...On behalf of the Historical Society, Michael Morrison presented a check to Father Evans, Pastor, for needs at Christ Old Swedes Church in Swedesburg. The presentation was made at the September 19 meeting of the Upper Merion Tricentennial Committee meeting.

page six of this edition. Another holiday article by Ed, *New Year's Observed by Early UM Settlers*, can be found on page seven.

I have always found it fascinating that what we celebrate as Christmas today is an amalgamation of traditions from many cultures, not unlike Upper Merion itself. Many African-American families arrived and settled in the Rebel Hill and Mount Pleasant areas in later years, adding to the diversity of traditions in the township. More recently traditional holiday celebrations include those from India, Pakistan, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean. Upper Merion is a microcosm---a true American Melting Pot of Holiday traditions to respect, embrace, and share. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all.



MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the King of Prussia Historical Society is to preserve and interpret the history of Upper Merion Township as relevant to its various neighborhoods of Gulph Mills, Gypsy Hills, Croton Woods, King of Prussia, Valley Forge, Abrams, Belmont, Town Center, Swedesburg/King Manor, Henderson, and Swedeland, as well as the areas of Rebel Hill, Port Kennedy, and Hughes Park. The Society's goal is to stimulate public interest and to support the township's heritage through educational programs and public events focusing on preserving the past and shaping the future.

OUR PURPOSE

The goals of the Society are fourfold:

To encourage research in the history of Upper Merion Township and adjoining communities, regularly exchange local historical knowledge, and present such research in a public forum.

To promote interest and research in local history by publishing and distributing a periodical entitled *The Upper Merion Gazette*, dedicated to proclaim historic truths and to ennoble the present through a recognition of the past.

To collect, archive, and preserve the various documents, photographs and artifacts of local historic significance that have, or will, become the property of the Society.

To maintain a cooperation with the teachers and administration of the Upper Merion Area School District, and the Upper Merion Township Library, designed to increase community interest in local history.

VOLUNTEERS

The Society benefits greatly by the knowledge and expertise of dedicated and capable volunteers whose efforts enable all of our varied activities, from coordinating our public programs to working with our archives and managing our publications and our website.

We are always looking for new people to step up and to take on new projects. If interested, please come to a meeting and talk to us or contact us by electronic or conventional mail.

MEETINGS

Members and friends of the King of Prussia Historical Society are invited to regular meetings nine times a year. No meetings will be scheduled in July, August,

and December. A topic dealing with local history will be presented following a brief business meeting. Meetings will be held at 2:00 in the Upper Merion Township Building.

An "Annual Meeting" will be held each January. The purpose of this meeting will include the election of Directors and Officers, the reporting of the business of the Society, and for any other objectives that may be deemed necessary.

WHY YOU SHOULD JOIN

Your membership supports the Society's efforts to preserve Upper Merion Township's past through maintenance and expansion of our written and photographic archives, the on-going development of our website, and the continuation of our public programs on local community history.

Annual membership entitles you to receive by mail quarterly issues of THE KING OF PRUSSIA GAZETTE, which features articles about our local history and other valuable information.

Members will have an opportunity to meet like-minded neighbors, community leaders, and historians who share an interest in expanding the knowledge of the fascinating history of Upper Merion Township and its architecture, genealogy, and other remarkable intriguing aspects.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

Student/Senior (65+)	\$35.00
Individual	\$40.00
Family Household	\$50.00
Patron	\$125.00
Charter	\$250.00



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THE LUCIA FEAST IN UPPER MERION

The Swedish Yule begins on December 13 with *Luciadagen*, Saint Lucy's Day. The traditional ceremony enacted in Swedish households and in their churches. This feast is celebrated annually in Christ Old Swedes Church in Swedesburg.

Lucia was born in Syracuse, Sicily, in the fourth century. Tradition says she cut out her eyes because their beauty attracted a heathen nobleman. She was denounced as a Christian and condemned to death during the reign of Diocletian.

Scandinavian observance of Lucia's festival has come down through the centuries. In some parts of Sweden, old people used to say that the Lucia Bride, clothed in white and crowned with light, could be seen between three and four o'clock in the morning on December 13, moving across icy lakes and snow-covered hills with food and drink for parish folk.

The Lucia legend is beloved by Sweden's hospitable people. On December 13, Yuletide is opened officially in cities and villages by a young girl re-enacting the role of the Lucia Bride, who visits each household at dawn with a tray of coffee and cakes.

Of the many folk customs that exist in connection with *Luciadagen*, one of the most interesting is that the year's threshing, spinning, and weaving must be finished and everything put in order for the Christmas holidays. Before this day boys and girls finish making Christmas presents. The housewife completes her weeks of holiday baking and makes the tallow dips for table and Christmas tree; the *lutfisk*, traditional Christmas fish, is already buried in beech ashes, so it will be sweet for the holiday feast.

Luciadagen is the festival of light! Lucia and her attendants then enter singing the Swedish Lucia song, to the tune of "Santa Lucia":

Night goes with silent steps
Round house and cottage.
Over the earth that the sun forgot
Dark shadows linger.
Then on our threshold stands
Whiteclad, with candles in her hair,
Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia.

(English version by Holger Lundbergh)

Such a ceremony was witnessed by Washington and his army after they had crossed the Schuylkill River into Upper Merion. On December 11, 1777, Washington broke camp and intended to cross the Schuylkill at Matson's Ford. On December 13, 1777, as General George Washington and his troops were making their way to a site for their winter encampment, they saw lights burning on the west side of the Schuylkill River.



Making their way across the river, they came to Christ Church in Swedesburg. At the time, the church was holding a festival for the feast of St. Lucia, and Washington and his officers were welcomed into the church for the evening. After the service, Washington asked the men of the church to join his effort and eight volunteers joined Washington's army.



PICTURE THIS!



This little frame chapel was a visitor attraction in Upper Merion and became even more famous as the place in which President Theodore Roosevelt made a notable speech on June 19, 1904. This was the only time that a President of the United States had visited this site up to that time.

The President spoke on the lessons of Gettysburg and Valley Forge, and in the course of his address said: "It is a good thing that these great historic landmarks of our country...should be preserved—constant effort.

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(See Page 6 for the location and history of this site.)



CHRISTMAS AT VALLEY FORGE, 1777

by Suzanne Vincent

Snow fell at Valley Forge that Christmas Day.

By all apparent measures, but for the new snow, the day would be no different from the one before. Men still worked at hewing trees to build winter huts and provide firewood for the hundreds of campfires around which other sicker, weaker men huddled. The commissary still warned of perilous shortages--only 24 barrels of flour remained to feed 11,000 men and boys with no promise of supplies to come. Graves still needed digging to bury the men who had died during the night.

General Washington knew all this, as he knew every detail of the camp and the men who wintered there. The morning had seen a constant stream of Colonels and Captains coming to the command tent to report the day's conditions to him, of patrols reporting the doings of the British army, of camp doctors reporting the tolls cold and illness continued to take on the Continental army.

Near midday he refused an offered portion of gruel seasoned with a few precious grains of cracked pepper, and called an aide to his side.

"Mr. Tilghman," he said, "I wish to draft a letter to Congress."

Mr. Tilghman, as always, responded promptly, gathered paper, quills, and penknife, retrieved the bottle of ink he kept in his breast pocket to prevent it freezing, poured some ink into the inkwell, and sat at the small desk kept in the tent for this very purpose, the desk at which he had transcribed dozens of letters for the General. He expected, after the morning's grim news, that he would be sending yet another plea for food and blankets, shoes for men with nothing but rags wrapped around half-frozen feet, fodder for starving horses.

"I am ready, General," he said, his pen poised over the inkwell.

Washington did not immediately begin. He stood beside Tilghman, looking down at the empty page. He placed a long-fingered hand on Tilghman's shoulder.

"You should know," he said, "you will be transcribing my resignation."

Mr. Tilghman looked into the General's eyes. He saw nothing but weariness there and knew its source. Tilghman, one of three aides-de-camp to General Washington that December of 1777 and a member of the General's military 'family,' had seen what few others had seen. He had seen the grief and rage and tears shed for the men who had left bloody footprints on the road that climbed the hill to the Valley Forge plateau on which their camp stood, for the threats of desertion and mutiny which he could blame no one for, for the men who hungered and suffered from cold and illness with no food or coats or medicines to ease their distresses. Tilghman knew also that, were it left to him, he would have resigned long before now.

But it was not left to him. It was left to Washington, and Tilghman believed, as many others did not, that if Washington could not succeed in the cause of liberty, no one could.

"Then it is over," he said.

Washington pulled a chair close and sat heavily in it. "I do not see how it can be otherwise," he said. "It is Christmas Day, and while our congressmen feast on goose and plum pudding and sleep in their feathered beds, the men entrusted with securing the liberty they crave starve on this God-forsaken hill." He hunched over and rested his head in his hands. "I save myself by resigning, Mr. Tilghman. It seems a conceit for me to do so, but I cannot observe the suffering of my men one more day. I sell my soul to save it."

Mr. Tilghman nodded. "I understand, Sir."

The General sat up and looked Mr. Tilghman in the eye. "I knew you would," he said. "Which is why I gave this unhappy task to you. I beg your forgiveness, Tench."

"There is nothing to forgive, General," he said.

Washington nodded and frowned. "Then we shall begin."

Tilghman dipped his pen and held it at the ready.

Washington spoke.

"Addressed to Henry Laurens, President, Continental Congress, United States. Dear Mr. Laurens..."

For more than an hour, Mr. Tilghman's pen scratched gently on the paper as the General spoke, interrupted only occasionally by messengers reporting conditions, or officers bringing information from the British lines, or Tilghman's own need to cut a new nib on an overused quill. With each interruption Washington's resolve seemed to Tilghman to weaken. He paused longer before proceeding, spoke more slowly when he did. All the while the snow fell, hissing faintly on the roof and walls of the tent.

As the short midwinter day began to subside, a disturbance arose in the camp. Shouts could be heard, calls and whistles.

General Washington rose, his face pale, and went to the tent door where a guard always stood. Tilghman heard the General speaking, sending the guard off to discover the cause of it then turning to his bed where his coat and hat and gloves lay.

"Your Excellency?" Mr. Tilghman said as the General began to dress.

"We've heard rumors of mutiny for some time, Mr. Tilghman," the General said. "I fear it has finally come to that."

Tilghman abandoned his inks and pens and reached for his own coat and gloves. Without waiting for the guard to return, they walked out into the sea of tents, Tilghman jogging to keep up with Washington's long energetic stride, following the noise to its source.

There, greatly to the surprise of Tilghman and Washington, they found men gathered around a large fire, stirring a pot of something boiling thickly and singing. One among them spotted the General and called out to him in a cheerful voice: "Hail to our Chief!"

A chorus of voices joined his: "Good Christmas, General! May God grant that Liberty prevail! Long live the United States!"

General Washington, wide-eyed with astonishment, stuttered his own greetings of Good Christmas, and God Bless, then strode on to the next fireside where he found conditions nearly identical to the last. And the next fireside, and the next.

At one fire he waved down the chorus of good cheer and asked, "Have you not suffered enough?"

A lieutenant, his head wrapped in a tattered scarf, responded: "Having come this far," he said, "we can but go the rest of the distance. With you to lead us, we can't lose!"

Tilghman followed on as Washington completed a round of the camp. Nowhere did they find the expected misery and mutiny. Instead they found carols of Christmas and an air of celebration. With dark descending, and the night's cold with it, the General finally made his way to the command tent. He spoke not a word, but went in, picked up the letter that lay undisturbed on Mr. Tilghman's desk, folded it once and handed it to Tilghman.

"Burn it, Mr. Tilghman," he said, "then see that I'm left alone for a time, will you?"

Mr. Tilghman folded the letter again and tucked it into his breast pocket, then helped the General with his coat and hat, then turned to exit the tent again. As he did, he glanced one last time at Mr. Washington, and saw the General lowering himself to his knees.

Outside, Mr. Tilghman gave orders to the guard to see that the General was not disturbed, then started off toward the nearest fire, joining in on the song. "Noel, Noel, Born is the King of Israel."

NOTE: As far as I have been able to discern, the historical information in this story is factually correct. The Continental Army arrived at Valley Forge on December 19th, 1777. Most would still be in tents, with little time or able-bodied manpower to have made much progress building the 12' by 16' winter huts Washington had ordered. The General, in empathy with his troops, remained in a tent himself until most of the huts had been completed some weeks later. Tench Tilghman was, in fact, an aide-de-camp of General Washington's at Valley Forge that Christmas and would have been as likely as any of the other two then serving to have transcribed the letter he began to Congress. I suspect Washington might not have chosen Col. Robert Henry Harrison, as Harrison suffered from chronic illness; or that he would have chosen John Laurens to whose father (then President of Congress Henry Laurens) the letter may very well have been addressed.

Washington wasted no time seeking to rectify the lack of provisions as best he could from his end, sending out an order that Christmas Day that the following day (Dec 26th) detachments, under the order of the Commissary General, would be sent out "for the purpose of collecting flour, grain, cattle and pork for the army."

However, as the hardships of my ancestors strengthened their resolve as Mormon Pioneers, so did the hardships of that winter of 1777, and the help of a few key men, strengthen the resolve of the Continental Army and see them emerge in the spring a force to be reckoned with--as would be seen.

Among my sources, I viewed several pages of The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress website. Most of the papers are images of the actual letters written by, for, or to Washington. Some are transcribed into a more readily readable modern font format. At any rate, they are fascinating to search and view. You can find them here: <http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>



PICTURE THIS!

THE WOODLAND CHAPEL



This little frame chapel, to the right of the present George Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge, was a visitor attraction in Upper Merion and became even more famous as the place in which President Theodore Roosevelt made a notable speech on June 19, 1904. This was the only time that a President of the United States had visited this site up to that time.

The President spoke on the lessons of Gettysburg and Valley Forge, and in the course of his address said: "It is a good thing that these great historic landmarks of our country...should be pre-served; that one should commemorate a single tremendous effort, and the other what we need, on the whole, much more--much more commonly---and which is a more difficult thing, - constant effort.

"Here...*they* warred, not against foreign soldiery, but against themselves; against all the appeals of

our nature that are most difficult to resist; against discouragement, discontent, the mean envies and jealousies and heart burnings sure to arise at any time in large bodies of men, but especially when defeat and disaster have come to them; when the soldiers who carried our national flag had suffered from cold, from privation, from hardship, knowing that their foes were well housed, that things went easier with the others than they did with them; and they conquered because they had in them the spirit that made them steadfast, not only on an occasional great day, but day after day, in a life of endeavor to do their duty well."

On September 10, 1905, the little chapel was again honored when Vice-President Fairbanks made an eloquent address...

The chapel was first used for service on September 27, 1903, when the sermon was preached by the Rev. Herbert J. Cook, Dean of the Convocation of Norristown. Since February 22, 1906, the building had been used by the Sunday School.



CHRISTMAS WAS OBSERVED WITH GREAT REVERENCE IN EARLY UPPER MERION

By Ed Dybicz

The early settlers of Upper Merion Township celebrated Christmas with a colorful blend of customs and traditions brought over from the old country.

The Swedes began their Christmas celebration with the feast of St. Lucia, the patron saint of Sweden, on Dec. 13. However, on Christmas morning, they gathered in Christ Church; Swedesburg, where the minister opened the service announcing to the congregation, "Today, in the City of David, is born a Saviour, Jesus the Lord, let us adore Him." And the people responded, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." This then was followed by the liturgy of the Swedish Lutheran rite. After the service, the Swedes would meet in their houses for meals, inviting their neighbors and Indian friends.

The early English and Welsh settlers of Upper Merion brought over a curious observance during Christmas time called "The Kissing Bunch," which consisted of a tree branch laced with wooden hoops. These were covered with evergreen boughs and hung from the ceiling. Inside the hoops were the figures of Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child. From the bottom of the kissing bunch hung a sprig of mistletoe.



Christmas was a special holy day for the early Irish immigrants of Swedesburg and Cudgeltown. Most of the Irish walked to St. Patrick's church in Norristown from Swedesburg, while those in Cudgeltown, used John Brooke's quarry carts to attend Mass. After Mass, the Irish gathered in their homes for dinner and singing.

Polish settlers came to Upper Merion on the 1880's and for them Christmas combined three important attributes, religion, family, and country. The observance of the Christmas Eve *Wigilia* or supper sharing the peace wafer (*oplatek*) made for an unforgettable experience in family togetherness, culminated with the Midnight Mass (*pasterka*) in Sacred Heart Church, Swedesburg, and the singing of Christmas carols (*Kolendy*).

The Germans of Upper Merion observed Christmas Eve with the anticipation of the coming of the Christ Child *Kristkindlein* who would visit the children bearing gifts. But also, there was *Pelznichol* who was known to punish unruly children. The Germans observed a ritual called *Kindelweige*, a traditional practice of "rocking a cradle with baby Jesus" as they sang, "Let us rock the little Child and bow our heads before the crib."

The Slovaks and Hungarians lived mainly around the Swedeland area of Upper Merion. They observed Christmas with great reverence. On Christmas Eve they exchanged the peace wafer (*oplatky*) followed by a traditional fish dinner with a toast of *slivovica*, plum brandy or *krunik*, a honey-spiced vodka. The evening concluded by attending Midnight Mass. The Slovaks were well known for their baking of the *piernik*, a ginger cake and a poppyseed bread pastry.

The Italians, of Upper Merion were part of the group of immigrants who built the Philadelphia and Western Railroad (P&W) from 69th Street to Norristown, settling along its route. A very religious people, the Italians placed Nativity sets (*presepio*) in front of their homes and went house-to-house caroling and playing on bagpipes "*canzone di Zampognart*", the carols of the bagpipers.

NEW YEAR'S OBSERVED BY EARLY UM SETTLERS

by Ed Dybicz, Correspondent

The original 13 colonies stretched along the east coast from Massachusetts (then including Maine) to Georgia.

Most of the early settlers were English, but the colonists also included people from Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Holland, Sweden and France.

Although they brought many of the traditions of their home-land, the observances often turned out different from anything they had known in the past.

Records kept by the Holstein family, early Swedish settlers of Upper Merion, indicate that the Swedes, and in later years, the Germans and Swedes welcomed in the New Year with mumming. The Upper Merion Swedes called it "Fantasticals."

Hands of masked, costumed men paraded in the village streets and went house to house acting out short plays or reciting verses.

In return, the revelers were offered coins or something to eat or drink.

In later years, as immigrants from European, countries settled in this area, New Year's Eve became more festive and more active with music, dancing, and singing.

Some of these immigrants observed New Year's Eve as St. Sylvester's Day. Celebrations escalated to costumed parades and fireworks. For many, however, New Year's Eve and Day have become a religious observance. Many denominations hold special services to thank God for the preceding year.

During the 1920s, the Friendship Band of Swedesburg participated in Philadelphia's Mummer's parades. Because the band could play German, Polish, Irish and Italian music, it received much praise along the parade route.

THE KING OF PRUSSIA COURIER, Tuesday, December 30, 1997



**MARK YOUR CALENDARS!
UPPER MERION TOWNSHIP IS CELEBRATING ITS TRICENTENNIAL!
SEPTEMBER 2012-DECEMBER 31, 2013**

SPEAKER SERIES

Sponsored by the Tricentennial Committee and the King of Prussia Historical Society.

Looking ahead to 2013:

February 9, 2013: Noah Webster, LET FREEDOM RING

February 24, 2013: Carrie Hogan, THE NEW SWEDEN COLONY

March 10, 2013: Friends of Valley Forge, COLONIAL DAY

April 14, 2013: Dr. Joseph Eckhardt, LUBIN AND THE BETZWOOD STUDIOS

April 27, 2013: NATIVE AMERICAN LENNI LENAPE POW WOW

May 5, 2013: Laura Catalano and Kurt Zwicki, SCHUYLKILL RIVER HERITAGE AND HISTORY



**Check out [Upper Merion Township Tricentennial](#) on Facebook
and Upper Merion Township Website at www.umtownship.org for up-to-date information!**

And check out the King of Prussia Historical Society website at www.kophistory.org.



**King of Prussia Historical Society
175 West Valley Forge Road
King of Prussia, PA 19406
Attn.: Marianne Hooper**