Source: How We Do Run On: White Christmas in the Antebellum South

White Christmas in the Antebellum South
"I'm mighty glad Georgia waited till after Christmas before it seceded or it would have ruined the Christmas parties, too."

--Gone with the Wind, Chapter I

"'Do you remember,' he said and under the spell of his voice the bare walls of the little office faded and the years rolled aside and they were riding country bridle paths together in a long-gone spring… There was the far-off yelping of possum dogs in the dark swamp under cool autumn moons and the smell of eggnog bowls, wreathed with holly at Christmas time and smiles on black and white faces."

--Gone with the Wind, Chapter LIII

In the years following the Civil War, Southerners, both black and white, would look back at the old plantation Christmases with overwhelming nostalgia. For the former, like for Scarlett and Ashley, it was the charm and security of the wealthy antebellum days that they were crying after, the self-assured grace of their old lifestyle which had vanished in the throes of war and Reconstruction. For the latter, for the slaves upon whose labor and confinement that illusion had been built, the old Christmases stood out as bright spots from their life before Emancipation, as occasions when they'd receive small gifts from their masters, the permission to drink and, more importantly, when they didn't have to work.

In writing today's post I tried to bring you one side of the story first and see how Christmas was celebrated among the white Southern nobility. Tomorrow we will look at the way slaves themselves celebrated Christmas and try to see how and why Christmas became a central element in establishing the myth of the Old South as an untroubled world of chivalrous masters and happy slaves. To bring you a taste of 19th century Christmas celebrations, I've relied on a handful of period sources, as well as on Penne L. Restad's excellent *Christmas in America. A History*. You will find all of them listed at the end.

And now, let's roll!

A Holiday for the Nation?

In the first half of the 19th century, very few holidays were observed across the nation and Christmas was not one of them. Though the ban on Christmas had been repealed in the 17th century, New England Puritans continued to frown upon most forms of celebration or even upon interrupting activity on Christmas day. K.A. Marling's Merry Christmas!: Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday records that as late as 1870 public schools in Boston were functioning on Christmas day and pupils who dared to skip class for the sake of the holiday were punished.

By contrast, Christmas was largely observed in the South, owing to the area's Episcopalian tradition and to the high degree to which Southerners had adapted and preserved old English customs. Christmas was the time for fox-hunting, for parties and balls... and for making noise. Harvard student Jacob Rhett Motte, writing in the 1830s, compares "the ringing of bells and firing of guns" on the Fourth of July in the North to Christmas celebrations back home, in South Carolina.

In the agrarian South, Christmas also had one very important function: it was a much-needed period of leisure after a hard year of work. It allowed workers to rest, neighbors to interact with each other and planters to settle their financial affairs. Traditionally, this was the time of the year when the plantation registries were reviewed, profits and losses calculated and new slaves bought or leased out accordingly. It is not surprising that the first states to make Christmas an official holiday were Southern: Alabama in 1836, followed closely by Louisiana and Arkansas in 1838.

Christmas is near! Holiday Preparations

Preparations began weeks before Christmas, preceded by a period in which the rest of the affairs of the plantation were put in order so that everyone could focus on getting ready for the holidays. It was the slaves' duty to:

"...shuck corn, butcher hogs, render lard and smoke hams, stuff sausage-casings, make mincemeat, and bring in wood 'cut and stacked high in the wood-house and on and under the back porticos, so as to be handy, and secure from the snow which was almost certain to come.' For the feasts of Christmas, nuts, raisins, citron, and currants had to be procured and readied for the days of baking, and the woods invaded for turkey, duck, partridges, and an ample supply of evergreens. Stores of alcohol and dairy products were laid in for the endless bowls of songaree, sack posset, syllabub, or egg-nog. The Yule log had to be selected and brought to the firegrate."

--excerpt from Christmas in America. A History

Houses and churches had to be decorated with evergreens and mistletoe. This activity was usually reserved to white Southerners, as an occasion for social bonding. In William Gilmore Simms's *Maize in Milk. A Christmas Story of the South* (set in South Carolina), the lady guests help decorate the Openheart mansion with myrtle, bamboo, cassina and holly, "giving to the spacious walls and rooms a charming aspect of the English Gothic." In his *Social Life in Old Virginia*, Thomas Nelson Page recalls that dressing the church was one of the most important events of the year - and a collective effort par excellence. All the young men of the neighborhood would ride out together to "help" dress the church and didn't return home again until it was time for the festivities (conveniently skipping, I might add, all the intermediary work).

Waiting for Guests

Unlike Puritan Boston, Southern schools generally allowed their pupils a break during the winter holidays. The plantations received their young masters & mistresses home, along with various family members that fancied to spend their holidays there. As Margaret Mitchell observes at one point, there were no fixed limits for the length of their stay, for unbounded hospitality was one of the chief Southern values, and special emphasis was laid on it during the Christmas season.

Large parties of guests generally started to arrive on Christmas Eve and stayed throughout the holidays. The most evocative description of such an arrival you find in Thomas Nelson Page's *Social Life in Old Virginia*. I will quote it in its entirety, although the fragment is a bit long, because it gives a particularly nice feel of the era and of how such festivities must have looked like, even in Clayton County:

"Then the vehicles went off to the distant station for the visitors -- the visitors and the boys. Oh the excitement of that! at first the drag of the long hours, and then the eager expectancy as the time approached for their return; the 'making up' of the fires in the visitors' rooms (of the big fires; there had been fires there all day 'to air' them, but now they must be made up afresh); the hurrying backwards and forwards of the servants; the feverish impatience of every one, especially of the children, who are sure the train is 'late' or that something has 'happened,' and who run and look up towards the big gate every five minutes, notwithstanding the mammy's oft-repeated caution that a 'watch' pot never b'iles.' There was one exception to the general excitement: the Mistress, calm, deliberate, unperturbed, moved about with her usual serene composure, her watchful eye seeing that everything was 'ready.' Her orders had been given and her arrangements made days before, such was her system."

And if you are not yet convinced that the scenes and characters from this Virginian plantation could well be those of Tara or any other plantation from the County, check out what Page has to say about the belles of the house:

"The young ladies, having finished dressing the parlor and hall, had disappeared. Satisfied at last with their work, after innumerable final touches, every one of which was an undeniable improvement to that which had already appeared perfect, they had suddenly vanished -- vanished as completely as a dream -- to appear again later on at the parlor door, radiant visions of loveliness, or, maybe, if certain visitors unexpectedly arrived, to meet accidentally in the less embarrassing and safer precincts of the dimly lighted halls or passages. When they appeared, what a transformation had taken place! If they were bewitching before, now they were entrancing. The gay, laughing, saucy creature who had been dressing the parlors and hanging the mistletoe with many jests and parries of the half-veiled references was now a demure or stately maiden in all the dignity of a new gown and with all the graciousness of a young countess."

--excerpt from Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War

On the Eve

To see what happened once the guests arrived, we'll turn to the fictional plantation Maize in Milk, from William Gilmore Simms's story with the same title. By no means a literary masterpiece, this story was openly intended to glorify Southern values as they shone during the holiday season. We will discuss some of its more disputable aspects tomorrow, but for now we'll use it as an excellent insight on how Christmas was celebrated on Southern plantations. While the ladies were busy decorating the mansion, the master of the house took the boys and men for a ride in the woods surrounding his plantation. And here the making noise part comes in... The party goes down to the river where they fire an old canon left from the War of Independence, three times, as it was their custom every year. (Where no such convenient artillery relics were available men would fire guns or light firecrackers.) Once this yearly ritual is performed, they return home and kindle a new Yule log.

At Maize in Milk, the evening was marked by dancing and drinking of eggnog and then one of the family's daughters sang a carol as a sign that the evening had ended. There seemed to have been no fixed customs for the Christmas Eve dinner. The issue is skipped entirely by Thomas Page, and in the case of Eliza Ripley, the author of the memoir *Social Life in Old New Orleans*, the family had gathered to witness a wedding in the slave-quarters that evening.

Christmas Day and Christmas Parties

The Christmas morning was - then as now - dedicated to children who hurried to find their presents by the chimney-place. They had been left there during the night by the benevolent Father Christmas (Simms makes a point out of saying that "Santa Claus visits us in the South too, but under no such Dutch appellation"), who in turn took the sprigs of holly the children had left for him in their stockings. The boys at Maize in Milk received presents such as spurs, buck-handled knives, flageleots, bilbo-catchers, India rubber-balls and bags of marbles. For the girls, other types of gifts were set aside: prayer books, copies of *Pilgrim's Progress*, gold watches and music boxes. One child did receive a bunch of hickory switches.
Christmas day was divided between hunting and other leisure activities and going to the church, "where the service was read, and the anthems and hymns were sung by every one, for every one was happy," says Thomas Page. But the focal point of the day was the Christmas dinner, followed by the Christmas party. I won't insist on the richness of Southern Christmas dinners - that all of our period sources mention with nostalgia - because I happen to know that iso is preparing an edition of Southern Cookin' on precisely that topic. Instead, we'll jump directly to the party!

Music to the parties was provided by plantation musicians or by skilled pianists from among the guests. At the Christmas party of 1859 that Eliza Ripley describes in her memoir, they had managed to assemble two violins, a flute, a triangle and a tambourine, and this small orchestra was sitting on a platform erected for it at one end of the room. Dancing would go on till dawn, when people who lived nearby would retire to their own houses. Here's a lively description of a Christmas party at a Virginia plantation, from Thomas Page:

"There were games and dances -- country dances, the lancers and quadrilles. The top of the old piano was lifted up, and the infectious dancing-tunes rolled out under the flying fingers. Haply there was some demur on the part of the elder ladies, who were not quite sure that it was right; but it was overruled by the gentlemen, and the master in his frock coat and high collar started the ball by catching the prettiest girl by the hand and leading her to the head of the room right under the noses of half a dozen bashful lovers, calling to them meantime to 'get their sweethearts and come along.'"

--excerpt from Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War

Interestingly enough, while in *Gone with the Wind* the Christmas of 1860 is mentioned as the happy Christmas before the war, Eliza Ripley claims that by 1860 things at her plantation had severely deteriorated and the slaves had become "restless and discontent." The Christmas of 1859 was the one of the last celebrations of a lifestyle that was soon meant to be gone. We'll see how Christmas in the antebellum South contained within it the seeds of its demise tomorrow, when we'll examine how Christmas was like for the black inhabitants of the plantations.

Check out Black Christmas in the Antebellum South, the second post of this series here.

And, as promised, here are my sources for this post:

- Eliza Ripley, *Social Life in Old New Orleans, Being Recollections of my Girlhood* (1912)
- William Gilmore Simms, *Maize in Milk. A Christmas Story of the South* (1847)
- Thomas Nelson Page*, Social life in Old Virginia before the War (1897)*
- Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America. A History (1996)*

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