Christmas in the Colonies:

The STAR

Paganism or Piety
In the early sixteenth century the printed “Book of Hours,” decorated profusely with relief-cut illustrations, slowly took the place of the illuminated manuscript. An integral part of Catholic devotional literature, the “Book of Hours” contained prayers or offices for use at specific canonical hours. Few books so richly exemplify reverence for Christianity, as can be seen from the following decorative illustrations of the Christmas story.

1. Book of Hours.
   Ces presentes heures a lusaige de Romme.
   Paris, 1498.

   This work, acquired in 1882, is open to the Tree of Jesse (left), which shows the lineage of Christ, and a decorative vision of the Annunciation.

2. Book of Hours.
   Ces presentes heures a lusaige de Romme.
   Paris, 1505?

   This edition, printed on vellum, contains an almanac for the years 1500-1520. It is open to two woodcuts: the visit of Mary to Elizabeth (left) and the Annunciation (right).

3. Book of Hours.
   Las horas de Nuestra Señora según el uso romano.
   Lyons, 1551.

   Mary’s visit to Elizabeth.

4. Book of Hours.
   Heures a lusaige de Paris. Paris, 1522?

   Beautiful in its simplicity, this illustration of Christ’s nativity sets itself apart from the others by the presence of the star over the stable. Because stars were often associated with paganism, most early illustrations either substituted angels or left the star out entirely. This artist has distinguished himself by choosing a more realistic representation of both the stable and the heavens.
5. Book of Hours.
   [Heures a lusaige de Romme]. Paris, 1520?

   This Book of Hours is easily identifiable by its extremely wide border with woodcuts of familiar Biblical scenes and by the almanac it contains for the years 1520-1530.

   It is open to the illustration of the shepherds in the field.

   [Heures a lusaige de Troyes]. Paris, ca. 1515.

   The visit of the Three Wise Men is celebrated in the Church on January sixth as The Epiphany, or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. For many centuries Epiphany, or, in English usage, "Twelfth Night," was more joyously celebrated than the feast of the Nativity at Christmas. The event is here memorialized upon the glowing page of this Book of Hours.

   New York, 1792.

   Here the Biblical narrative of the Nativity is illustrated by "The Flight Into Egypt," made by one of the most active of early American engravers, Amos Doolittle of New Haven. The Bible itself was popularly known as "Brown's Family Bible" after the Reverend John Brown who added his "explanatory notes, and evangelical reflections" to this edition.


   The engraved borders on the pages displayed, and on the pages immediately preceding and following, present a sequence of events in the Christmas story. The volume is a book of private devotions prepared especially for the use of Queen Elizabeth.

   Cambridge, 1663. Translated by John Elliot, 1604-1690.

   Written in the Massachuset language, this version of the Old Testament is opened to Isaiah 53, probably the best-known messianic passage in the Bible. This is one of the portions of scripture that Handel chose to use in his famous Christmas oratorio, the "Messiah."

    [Scenes from the life of Christ with Old Testament prefigurations and prophecies]. [Germany? ca. 1460-1470].

    This is an example of a block book. Such books were popular in the mid-fifteenth century and were made by printing each page from a single woodcut block. It is one of many books designed to teach Bible stories to those unable to read. Shown here are several illustrations leading to and including Christ's nativity.

11. Proprium sanctorum Hispanorum, que generaliter in Hispania celebrantur, ad formam officii novi reductum.
    Antwerp, 1682.

    Opened to the church calendar for the month of December.

    Mexico, 1685.

    Opened to the passages dealing with the Archangel Gabriel's visit to Zacharias hailing the birth of John the Baptist.

13. Novena al glorioso martyr S. Christoval, abogado contra los temblores, y muertes repentinas.
    Mexico, 177-?

    Hardly less moving than the Gospel story of the Nativity are the legends which grew up in the early centuries of the Church about the childhood and infancy of Christ. Perhaps the best known of these is that of Saint Christopher the ferryman, who took a child upon his shoulder and found in mid-river that he was bearing a crushing weight, the weight of the world which Christ Child was carrying in his hands.
where they founded the settlement of Ebenezer. Ausführliche Nachricht is one of the many reports published by Urisperger about the growth and financial situation of the Georgia settlement.

Shown here is the account of Christmas Day, 1750.

Tripartito del Christianissimo y consolatorio Doctor Juan Gerson de doctrina Christiana. Mexico, 1544.

The first book illustration to be published in the Western hemisphere was this representation of the crowned Virgin, displaying, above and below in handsome letters, the momentous greeting to her of Gabriel, the Angel of the Annunciation--Ave Maria Gratia Plena Dominus Tecum.

19. Ptolomay, fl. 2nd cent.
Cosmographia. Ulm, 1482.

The Palestine displayed in this distinguished map of Ptolomy was the scene of the birth and life of Jesus Christ. The map is derived from an early 14th-century work in which Marino Sanuto, a Venetian statesman and geographer, urged a resumption of the crusades for the liberation of the Holy Land. Knowledge of Palestine gained from the crusades makes this map, in the matter of place names and geographical features, one of the fullest of the period. Its contents were of the first interest to all literate Christians. The place of the Nativity, here spelled "Bethlehem," is located on the map at about the center of the right-hand page.

20. Erasmus Weilenhan, d. 1594.
Christliche Betrachtungen über die evangelischen Texte, so man pflieget zu lesen an denen Sonntagen und hohen Festen. Germantown, 1791.

Open to the lesson for Christmas Sunday.

Villancicos, que se cantaron en la Santa Iglesia Metropolitana de Mexico. Mexico, 1696.

The "villancico" was a metrical composition sung or recited in the churches of Spain and Latin America at Matins on Christmas and other important feasts of the Church. Sometimes these poems were sung in connection with liturgical dramas appropriate to the feast being
celebrated. Each year the forms of this service were freshly prepared with an especially written musical setting. In this volume are the texts without music of some forty separately printed villancicos ranging in date from 1657 to 1730.


Here are shown the familiar words to the Christmas carol we sing today “While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks...” although the tune written here is different from that now commonly used.


This short Christmas hymn, with words reminiscent of the carol “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” became part of the Library’s collection in December of 1928.


Shown here is the beginning of a Christmas anthem by Handel.

CASE 3

The Christmas story is vital to the teaching of Christianity and, therefore, must somehow be taught to children. The following four items are attempts to bring the message of Christianity to children in various mediums such as verse and simple illustration.


CASE 4


Christmas, as we know it today, is built primarily upon nineteenth-century celebrations. In colonial America Christmas was not a significant holiday. In 1644 Parliament, influenced by the Puritans, officially forbade the “pagan” celebration of Christmas. In 1680 Charles II re-established the holiday, but the Puritans in the colonies and Scotland held fast to the notion that the observance of Christmas on December 25 was pagan. As the years wore on and people began to include a bit of merrymaking during the Christmas season, preachers such as the Mathers spoke out against such celebrations. Several of their arguments are presented on the two pages shown here.


Following in the footsteps of his father, Increase, Cotton Mather spoke out strongly against the traditional merrymaking associated with Christmas. He speaks to this issue in section IX to which the volume is opened.


While not speaking directly to the issue of Christmas, Mather discusses the basic problem of Christians trying to remain pious at a time when paganism is most seductive.
Shakespeare more than once referred to Christmas in his plays and poetry. Two instances are shown here: Love's Labour's Lost and Hamlet. Of the two editions of Hamlet presented, the Boston, 1794, edition completely omits the reference to Christmas, although there is no indication in the front matter that the volume was abridged.

32. William Shakespeare, 1564-1616.
Mr. William Shakespear's comedies, histories, and tragedies. The second impression. London, 1622.

The second folio is open to the speech of Biron beginning "At Christmas I no more desire a rose..."

33. William Shakespeare, 1564-1616.
Mr. William Shakespear's comedies, histories & tragedies. London, 1623.

This is the famous "first folio" of Shakespeare's works. It is opened to the speech of Marcellus at the end of Scene 1, which begins "Some sayes, that ever 'gainst that Season..."

34. William Shakespeare, 1564-1616.
Hamlet, Prince of Denmark: A tragedy. ...As performed at the theatre in Boston. Boston, 1794.

Here the two speeches by Horatio at the end of scene I have been combined, eliminating entirely the mention of Christmas by Marcellus.


Opened to the Christmas story, told in the iambic pentameter of Milton's Paradise Regained.

36. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1651-1695.
Poemas de la unica poetisa americana, musa dezima. Barcelona, 1691.

Juana Inés de la Cruz, celebrated poet, was a Mexican nun. Like Anne Bradstreet, she was honored with the title "The Tenth Muse." Open to her "Villancicos" (see number 21).

37. Anne Bradstreet, 1612-1672.
Several poems compiled with great variety of wit and learning. Boston, 1758.

Anne Bradstreet came to Massachusetts when she was eighteen years old. She was the first English woman in America to publish a book of poems, dealing often with natural philosophy, physics and human nature.

Open to the "winter" section of her "Four Seasons of the Year."


A valiant attempt is made in this periodical to recognize the literary merits of eighteenth-century women. It is opened to a poem entitled "Winter."


Der Wandsbecker Bote was a weekly periodical published (1771-1775) by Matthias Claudius, who wrote most of the contents. Acquired by the Library because of the poem on slavery that it contains, the work is now opened to his lyrical rendition of the Christmas story.

CASE 6


One of the things now commonly associated with Christmas is shopping. In this December 23 issue of The Massachusetts Centinel, the section entitled "Levity" offers a humorous sidelight to shopping in the eighteenth century.
41. The Rhode-Island almanack for the year, 1728.
   Being the first ever printed in that colony.
   Newport, 1728.

   A facsimile, published in Providence in 1911. The
   almanac alludes to some of the controversial Christmas
   customs in the colonies. With comments on which
   month the Yule Log surrounds December. Along the
   outside we find a reference to feasting and within
   can be found a reference to logs for the fire, whispering
   remembrances of the Yule Log.

42. Susannah Carter.
   The frugal housewife. Boston, 1772.

   One of the most favored traditions of the
   Christmas holiday is the practice of feasting. In
   this eighteenth-century cookbook the proposed
   menu for December includes both ham and fowl, the two
dishes
   most commonly served at current Christmas dinners. The
   engraving of various types of fowl on the right was
   done by Paul Revere.

   [Original autograph letters, from General Washington
   to Joseph Reed, during the American Revolution].
   Cambridge, 1775.

   Some colonists had other concerns at Christmas time,
as can be seen in this letter from George Washington
   written on Christmas Day. Although his chief concern
   is military affairs, he does close his letter with, "I
   very sincerely offer you the compliments of the season
   & wish you, Mr. Reed, & your Fireside, the happy return
   of a great many of them."

44. Mourt's relation.
   A relation or journall of the beginning and
   proceedings of the English plantation settled at

   Referred to by Sabin as the "cornerstone of a New
   England library," Mourt's Relation is a work of primary
   importance to the scholarship of the Plymouth colony.
   It was the first book published in Great Britain that
   gives an account of the founding of the Plymouth
   colony. The work is opened to the passage describing
   the Pilgrims' First Christmas in the New World.

45. A.E. Denis Lee-Dillon, 16th Viscount Dillon,
   1. London, 1840.

   Here, on page 163, one sees how the image of
   Christmas has changed a century later. On the pages to
   follow the details of the celebration are given, which
   included much feasting, music, and dancing.

   New lands within the Arctic circle. Narrative of
   the discoveries of the Austrian ship "Tegetthoff" in
   the years 1872-1874. New York, 1877.

   In this book of arctic voyages it is obvious that
   the celebrations have extended themselves to Christmas
   Eve as well as Christmas Day.

47. Frederick Albert Cook, 1865-1940.
   Through the first Antarctic night 1898-1899: a
   narrative of the voyage of the "Belgica." New York,
   1909.

   By the time this work was written, Christmas had
   become an important festival. Here the absence of a
   regular Christmas celebration is felt strongly by the
   "Belgica" crew.
Christopher Columbus.

Epistola de insulis de novo repertis. Paris, 1493.

This Latin version of the Columbus letter was translated from the Spanish text first published in Barcelona, 1493.

The verso of the title leaf shows the woodcut of the Angel bringing "good tidings of great joy" to the shepherds.
At the head of the cut is printed an epigram by R. L. de Corbaria, which ends:
Then to Columbus, the true finder, give
Due thanks; but greater still to God on high.
Who makes new kingdoms for himself and thee
Both firm and pious let thy conduct be.

Bernardino de Sahagún, ca. 1499-1590.

Psalmodia Christiana, y sermonario delas sanctos del año, en lengua mexicana.
Mexico, 1583.

This is a songbook for the Christian year, written in Aztec.
Sahagún was a Spanish Franciscan missionary and historian, who lived in Mexico from 1529 to the time of his death.

Martin Opitz, 1597-1639.

Martin Opizgen von Boberfeld teutsche Gedichte
... Dritter Band. Frankfurt am Main, 1746.

Opitz, born in Silesia, emigrated to the Netherlands after the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War; he died in Poland. A collection of his poems was first published in 1624.
The displayed "Song of praise on the joyful birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" was composed in spite of bitter frost and raging plague by which the poet felt threatened when writing those lines.

Please turn over
The plate shows a nativity scene painted by Johann Justin Preisler and engraved by Martin Tyroff, both of Nuremberg. It was not uncommon in such nativity scenes to anticipate Christ's crucifixion, as in this case.

Valerius Anselmus Ryd, 1475-1540.

Catalogus annorum et principum sive
monarcharum mundi geminus. Bern, 1550.

This work first appeared approximately at the
time of the author's death in 1540.
Ryd was a physician at Bern, who left his
hometown for an unknown period of time,
when the persecution of the Huguenots began.
The dated woodcut has the initials of Hans
Brosamer, a famous German engraver and
portrait painter.

John Smith, 1580-1631.

The generall historie of Virginia,
London, 1627.

The passage shown here tells about the
events during the winter of 1607/1608, when
Captain John Smith, later as President of
the Colony of Virginia, was captured by
the Indians. It was shortly after the
Christmas celebrations that Pocahontas,
one of the daughters of Chief Powhatan,
allegedly saved the Captain's life.
This copy was originally owned by Charles II
(his royal crest is stamped on the front cover),
who in 1690 re-established Christmas as
a holiday.