Colonial Christmas to be marked

For those who long for an old-fashioned Christmas celebration, there's one planned Sunday at Magnolia Mound Plantation, 2141 Nicholson Drive, from 1 to 4 p.m. It's free and the public is invited.

The Colonial holiday celebration open house is traditional at Magnolia Mound and once again the home will be decorated as it would have been in the times of the Duplantier owners, 1800-1830. Musical entertainment is planned and refreshments will be served.

Christmas in the early 1800s was a religious observance more than a festival time and decorations were simple. Greenery, berries and pinecones were used because there were few flowers at that time of year.

The owners of the plantation at that time were French Catholics, so they used European customs when decorating. The children awaited a visit from Christmas Eve from Papa Noel, the French version of St. Nicholas. The Yule Log in the parlor fireplace is actually a Christmas Eve tradition from both English and French origin. A glass of wine is poured over the log before it is ignited.

The Yule Log will be set as it would have been for supper after Midnight Mass, fresh fruit glazed with raw sugar will be the centerpiece — surrounded by nuts, berries and greenery, On the sideboard, the punch bowl will be filled with Rum Shrub.

A walk through the plantation and surrounding greens will provide a sampling of a Colonial Christmas. Children's choirs and hand bell choirs will perform on the back gallery at 1:30 p.m., 2:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. Puppet shows are planned at 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. in Hart House, where miniature trees and creches will be exhibited. A Christmas shop is also planned there.

In the overseer's house antique quilts and clothing will be exhibited along with crafts — split wood baskets, herbs, potpourri, and wreaths. Fresh greenery will be for sale along the garden walk and in the pigeon coop a "strickly for the birds" exhibit will have bird-related items for sale. Period cooking demonstrations will be held during the afternoon in the plantation kitchen. The gazebo will feature a cookie tree, decorated with holiday baked goods, and refreshments will be served in the Carriage House.

Magnolia Mound, a plantation house, which stands on a high natural ridge on Nicholson Drive, once overlooked a Mississippi River before the levee was built in 1927. It is one of the oldest wooden structures in Louisiana with a floor plan typical of very early houses which reflect French-Spanish construction techniques — simple side by side room arrangement.

Magnolia Mound is located on a portion of property acquired in 1789 by an early settler, James Hillen, who developed an indigo plantation and sold the property in 1794 to John Joyce from Ft. Mobile, who converted it to a cotton plantation. The original four rooms of the present house were built during Joyce's ownership in the last decade of the 18th century, probably as an overseer's house.

Joyce died in 1798 and his widow Constance, married a Frenchman, Armand Duplantier, who had served as an aide-de-camp to Lafayette during the Revolutionary War and subsequently settled in Louisiana. Around 1802 they made Magnolia Mound their home.

With 11 children to raise, the Duplantiers had to enlarge the house. The Duplantiers remodeled the house to its present size in the Federal style popular at that time and it is to this period the house has been restored.

Shortly before and during the Civil War era, Magnolia Mound was a sugar cane plantation, remaining a working plantation until the turn of the century.

The house itself fell into disrepair in the late 1960s and was to be destroyed in order to make way for the construction of an apartment complex.

The Foundation for Historical Preservation, of Louisiana, supported by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, architects, architectural historians and other concerned citizens within the community prevailed upon City Parish Government to purchase the property. After initial refusal to sell by the owners, it was subsequently expropriated because of its architectural and historical value to Louisiana. Baton Rouge Recreation and Parks Commission paid for the house and about five acres of land and the Foundation contracted to restore and maintain the house.

In 1977 Magnolia Mound was added to the National Register of Historic Places and restoration began.

The restored Magnolia Mound was opened to the public in 1975 as a historic site and house museum.

Additional acreage and structures have been acquired, providing the opportunity for expanded programs.