Religion and Food

June Smythe-Rapier, a docent at Magnolia Mound, removes a hot sweet potato waffle from an old waffle iron after it was prepared in the authentic open-hearth method in the outside kitchen. Foods prepared for the holiday on the table include a kettle of fish soup, a large jar of pickled walnuts, roasted chicken, lamb chops, gingerbread Stage Planks and herb bread. A second table to the rear groans with more holiday treats.

Magnolia Mound celebrates holiday of French Creole days

By CHERAMIE SONNIER

Religion and food, not elaborate gifts, defined holiday festivities at Magnolia Mound and other French Creole homes along the River Road in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

There are no documents available on how the Duplantier family of Magnolia Mound actually celebrated Christmas, but it is believed they followed the customs in vogue in New Orleans and France, explained Catherine White, curator/registrar of the raised Creole cottage built in the 1790s as the center of a 900-acre agricultural operation.

The historic house's period of interpretation for Christmas is 1790-1820, White said.

"We present the Christmas season as it might have been celebrated by the Duplantier family at Magnolia Mound," she explained. "Armand Duplantier was from France and his wife, Constance, was a first-generation Louisiana Creole. She was of French heritage but born in Louisiana. This was her property. She and her first husband had property both here and in Mobile. Both (Armand and Constance) were widowed. Between them they had 14 children. He had four, she had two, and they had five."

The Duplantiers had a home in New Orleans, and "they went there a lot for the winter social season and for Carnival," White said.

"In the 1790 to 1810 period when most Americans observed Christmas on a small scale, if at all, French and Spanish Catholics and Southern Episcopalians celebrated in the European tradition of 12 days of church-sanctioned gaiety," White noted.

Advised, The four weeks before Christmas Day, was a time for reflection, with little socializing and no decoration.

"Christmas was a religious holiday," White said, and Christmas Eve was a fast day. Everyone went to midnight service.

The dining table at Magnolia Mound is ready for an early 19th century dinner. A buche de Noel, (Yule log) in the foreground, is one of the dishes that would have been served during the holiday season. The table's focal point is a Temple of Good Faith which appeared for receptions and on New Year's Day.

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Mass and then returned for "le Reveillon," a sumptuous meal to break the fast. The meal might have included such items as oysters, turtle soup, smials, fish, goose, olives, pâté de foie gras, potato soufflé, cheeses, turkey, pig's feet, sausages, corned beef (crescent-shaped loaves), sweetmeats, puddings, pralines, among all of the fun items and fine wines and liqueurs. A special feature was often the Flûche de Noel, a cake made in the shape of the Yule Log.

The figure of the Baby Jesus would be placed in the family's small creche, but the figures of the Wise Men weren't added until Epiphany. Christmas Day was for visiting with friends and family, and the children might have received small gifts, but there was no Christmas tree. That custom started in Europe in the 1850s and wasn't common until the 1870s, she added.

Decorations would have been simple and would have been made of greens that were growing on the property - holly, ivy, magnolia leaves. In the late 18th century, they used little vases on the mantel with flowers. Four to six on the mantel was thought to be very elegant, and they would have been silk flowers, White said. "Fresh flowers would have seemed quaint."

The breakfast menu might have included sliced Louisiana oranges, Sweet Potato Waffles, fried sausages, pork chops, grits and cream. The main meal of the day would be served at 2 or 3 p.m., and the table would have been crowded with a variety of foods. "In the winter, they always had oysters, a soup like turtle or gumbo, a fish course and lots of meat," White said.

For Twelfth Night celebration ended on Jan. 6. "The children in the kitchen served a small gift and the celebration began the Mardi Gras season."

White said at that time in France, Twelfth Night also was celebrated as "Le Feu de Sages," and was tied in to the custom of a single been placed in a bag. Whoever got the bean was king at the "Feast of Fools" and was obliged to be the host for the party on the following year.

In some areas, Twelfth Night celebration ended with a bonfire of Christmas greensery, but in Baton Rouge, fireworks were used throughout the season. And, White said, "something were traveling entertainers, puppet shows and circuses."

"They might have had the current types of pralines. Sometimes they would be tinted different colors."

Cookies and sherry would be served with the soup and fish courses, claret with roasts, Champagne with sweets, and brandy, amaretto or Madeira with the fruits, sweetmeats and nuts course.

"They might have had as many as 11 fruits at that course. They had desserts growing in the garden here," White said.

Symbolism was important in the choices of fruit and greenery used. For example, apricots meant salvation; grapes, the blood of Christ; figs, fertility; lemons or limes, fidelity; olives, wealth; oranges, purity, chastity and generosity; plums or prunes, independence; pears, Incarnate Christ; pomegranates, the Church; pineapples, hospitality; gourds, resurrection; pine, patience; holly, Christ's crown; thorns, and ivy, immortality.

Christmas Day supper was served at 8 p.m. "This was a lesser meal, and a lot of time was left over," White said. She suggested a typical menu of cold meats, salads, leftover puddings, and the hard gingerbread Stage Planks dinked into milk or tea.

On New Year's Eve, the children probably set out their wooden shoes for "le pere Noel" or "le petit Jesus" to fill with toys and sweets, and the Duplantiers probably had another leaves for the tree for the Wise Men weren't added until Epiphany. Christmas Day was for visiting with friends and family, and the children might have received small gifts, but there was no Christmas tree. That custom started in Europe in the 1850s and wasn't common until the 1870s, she added.

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For Twelfth Night, "little bisque cherubs might have decorated the King's cake," she said. "I wonder if that's where the plastic baby (used in today's King cakes) comes from." The Duplantiers probably also used special molds for some of the cakes and breads. "We have a nucleus, a French mold in the shape of a swaddled baby. It was used for making either a cake or a bicelle as a brioche. It was meant to be a figure of the Baby Jesus. It was a presentation dish."

In the late 18th and early 19th century, both the French and English in the United States and Europe were making what they called a "great cake," a dense, rich fruit cake, that they used as a king's cake for Twelfth Night festivities. White said, "It would be decorated with a motto such as Sacrè d'Amour (Sacred Love) and with figures made of what they called marchpane (marzipan) or gum arabic.

"They loved the idea of pyramids, and even stacked little cookies in pyramids. White said she found a reference to a baker in Baton Rouge in 1822 and has wondered if the Duplantiers might have ordered some of their fancy holiday pastries from that bakery.

Recipes for some of the foods that might have appeared on Magnolia Mound Plantation's Christmas menu follow.

**Marzipan cherubs and the love declaration, 'sacré d'amour,' decorate an elaborate king's cake which would have been served on Twelfth Night at Magnolia Mound.**

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**BOUILLON DE POISSON**

(Fish soup)

- 1% lbs. firm fish, frozen acceptable
- 2 lbs. margarine
- 1 cup chopped bell pepper
- 3 cups chopped celery
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 1 cup clam juice or fish stock
- 2 tsp. chopped parsley
- 1 tsp. salt
- 3 cups water
- 1 cup flour
- 1 tsp. thyme
- 1 tsp. paprika
- 1 tsp. tomato paste
- 1 tsp. white pepper
- 1 tsp. cayenne
- A clove garlic, 1 bay leaf and 1/2 tsp. thyme leaves
- 1/2 cup sliced mushrooms

1. Sauté onions, bell pepper, carrot, green onion and celery in margarine until soft; add fish cut into pieces.
2. Pour into a greased jelly-roll pan. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven for 10 minutes. Cool gingerbread in pan and then cut into rectangles. (Note: Don't wait until gingerbread is cool because then it will be too hard to cut easily. This recipe wasn't called "stage planks" for nothing.)

**STEWED OYSTERS**

- 1 lb. jar oysters
- 1 tsp. garlic
- 1 tbsp. butter
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/4 tsp. black pepper
- 1/4 tsp. cayenne

1. In a 10X15-inch baking dish, stir together the oysters, onions, flour, salt, pepper and cayenne.
2. Add 1 cup water and bring to a boil, then simmer for 20 to 25 minutes or until tender.
3. Drain the oysters, if desired, and quarter and serve with a white sauce with capers.

Serves 4.

"The Magnolia Mound Plantation Kitchen Book"