Plantations recreate Christmases past
Curators display different modes of holiday décor

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Passing a pink, peppermint candy pig from guest to guest around the dinner table may not leap to mind as a standard holiday tradition, but families regularly performed this tribute to prosperity at places such as Oakley Plantation, nearly 200 years ago. “What they do is they put the peppermint pig inside a red bag, and there’s a little silver hammer that goes with it,” John House, site manager of the Audubon State Historic Site, said Saturday. The site features Oakley Plantation, the temporary residence of famed bird artist John James Audubon.

“And after the dinner’s over, everyone passes the thing around and everybody gives it a tap and of course it breaks,” House continued. “They’re required to tell some story of good fortune that happened to them that year. They go all the way around the whole table until everyone’s tapped it and then at the end, they share the candy inside.”

Oakley Plantation in St. Francisville showcased more than just peppermint pigs during its holiday candlelight tour on Saturday. Authentic early-1800s decorations such as greenery found on the plantation’s grounds adorned mantles, tables, and shelves.

“They’re going to do things to remind them of home,” said Tonya Niccolosi, curator of the Audubon State Historic Site, of the Purnees, the English family that owned Oakley in the 1820s.

The holiday display of fresh greenery on the mantles served as backdrops for brightly colored fruits, such as lemons, apples, oranges, and kumquats. Candies of the 1820s filled bowls in the Spode’s blue Italian china pattern, placed across a federal-style mahogany table.

“We have candy drops made of clove and ginger,” Niccolosi said. “They’re like lemon drops.”

The menu for an 1820s holiday feast, at least the one prepared at Oakley plantation Saturday, includes an array of foods that may seem foreign to the modern palate.

“We’re going to be doing a buffalo roast, a leg of lamb, and a Christmas sausage, which is a turkey-apple-cranberry sausage,” said Karl House, volunteer and living historian who did the cooking for the 1820s holiday feast. “All of that along with Swiss chard, and probably ratty ham sausages, will be put on the dining room table in the house for the evening tour.”

Perhaps equally as interesting as the customs performed in the 1820s, are the customs that were not performed in Louisiana plantation homes the 1820s. No Christmas trees. No stockings. No Santa Claus or Pere Noel.

“The Christmas tree is not out yet,” Niccolosi said of holiday celebrations in the 1820s. “It’s going to come out of Europe during the Victorian time period. There’s no Christmas tree in the house because of that. There aren’t any stockings hung by the fire. The family probably would have had an Advent wreath.”

Fast-forward 20 years, that is, to the 1840s, and travel a few miles down the road on Saturday from Oakley Plantation, and you found Rosedown Plantation’s holiday celebration — complete with a Christmas tree.

“We do have a Christmas tree here,” said Sasha Trana, interpretive park ranger at Rosedown Plantation. “There was a picture in a magazine in the mid-1840s of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and their family standing around a Christmas tree on a tabletop. So, we have our Christmas tree on the tabletop.”

English families who settled in the United States, such as the Turnbills who owned Rosedown Plantation in the 1840s, often looked to English royalty as role models. “Because this was an English family, they had to be just like the king and queen,” said Trana, “so they probably would have had a 3- to 4-foot tree on top of a table strung with popcorn and cranberries. They would have had just a star on the top instead of an angel, that was later.”

One Christmas tree adornment of the 1840s is not duplicated in the present time for safety reasons. “They would have had real candles on the tree,” said Trana, “and had a bucket of water sitting beside the tree so in case there was a fire, they could put the fire out.”

Aside from the Christmas tree at Rosedown Plantation, holiday decorations are similar to those at Oakley Plantation.

“For Christmas, back then they would have decorated with all-natural type things,” Trana said. “So, that’s what we did here, is bring in greens from outside. We cut cedar trees, the branches off magnolia trees, we put nuts, fruits, pinecones, and holly berries throughout the house.”

Magnolia branches spiral around the banister that curls up the staircase. A fruit pyramid, made of apples, boxwood, and a pineapple at the top, serves as the centerpiece for the holiday table. All chandeliers in Rosedown are decorated for the holiday season with mistletoe and holly.

The 1840s holiday feast at Rosedown included turkey, oyster stew, dressing, and salad served up in a fashion not commonly practiced today. “The salad would be laid out on a flat plate instead of a salad bowl,” said Trana. “And the big thing was a Charlotte Rousse, which is a gelatin mold with cake in it.”

How do the curators at Rosedown know how to prepare an 1840s holiday feast? “We do use the family recipes,” Trana said. “We have Margaret Turnbull’s Christmas list for her Christmas menu.”

A similar celebration will be held at Rosedown on Dec. 17 and 18. Admission is free.