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## 07 184 Years of Borough Christmas Events

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# **184 Years of Borough Christmas Events**

By Jim Jones

Residents of West Chester have observed the Christmas holiday ever since the first Christians settled in the area. A search of years of notes on local history for the word "Christmas" yielded this timeline of holiday observances in the Borough of West Chester.

- In 1833, a group of Philadelphia dignitaries celebrated the completion of the first railroad bridge over the Schuylkill River by riding in a mahogany rail car to West Chester on Christmas day and eating dinner at the Chester County Hotel (later called the Mansion House Hotel at Church & Market Street).
- In 1854, William S. Christmas was born, naturally, on December 25.
- In 1871, the owners of the Hoopes Brothers & Darlington wheel works served a Christmas dinner for about 40 workers at the factory, with entertainment provided by the West Chester Cornet Band, plus speeches and toasts. The employees gave presents to the three owners and "a handsome bundle of greenbacks" to an elderly black man who worked at the factory.
- In 1876, the Darlington Brothers Grocery at Market & Church Streets (in the building now occupied by State Senator Andy Dinniman) advertised "stacks of holiday goods" including apples, dried apples, plums, butter, cranberries, pecans, almonds, "Grenoble walnuts," raisins, currants, and figs plus "Whitman's Fine Goods" (candies and oranges).
- In the early part of the 20th century, the Sharpless Separator Company usually shut down at Christmas time to retool. One way to gauge the health of the company was by the length of the shutdown.
- In 1909, the president of the Keystone Tag Company, Samuel O. Barber, presented his employees with gifts on Christmas eve. Each received a large, fat turkey and some of the men received a ton of coal. His female employees each received a pair of "handsome kid gloves." The employees chipped in and gave Barber a silver smoking set with his initials engraved on it. His son C. H. Barber, the plant superintendent, received a silver match safe.
- In 1912, the Chester County Trust Company introduced a "Christmas Club" savings program for its customers. The First National Bank followed suit in 1914.
- In 1930, Christmas Seals were introduced into Chester County for the first time to raise money to find a cure for tuberculosis.
- In 1933, the local postmaster hired jobless men to help with the "Christmas rush," while the West Chester Civic Association collected donated toys and hosted a Christmas party for about 900 poor children at the Warner Theater. The Lions Club also collected toys, and opened a shelter and established a soup line in West Chester, while the American Legion collected candy for children whose families were on relief. That same year, 1,500 people attended a performance of Henry Van Dyke's play "The Other Wise Men" at the West Chester State Teachers College.
- Shortly before his death, artist Horace Pippin, who lived at 327 W. Gay Street from 1920 to 1946, painted "Christmas Morning, Breakfast," which currently resides at Cincinnati Museum of Art.



**Christmas tree and presents at the Keystone Tag Company circa 1943**

- The Keystone Tag Company held its first Christmas banquet in 1941. It continued to do so until 1956 when it was bought out by the Denney Tag Company.
  - In 1947, Don Gardner -- a 1936 graduate of the West Chester State Teachers College -- had a national hit with the song "All I want for Christmas is my Two Front Teeth" and sold more than three million copies.
  - Also in 1947, the West Chester High School held its Christmas pageant on December 19, the last day of classes. On December 22, the school burnt to the ground.
  - Noted local historian Paul Rodebaugh was born on the day after Christmas, 1940, in the house on Sharpless Street where he lived until he died in 2002.
  - In the 1950s, it was normal for local families to assemble at the houses of their parents or grandparents on Christmas Day. After their children started to move out of the Borough to the suburbs following World War II, they still came "back home" on Christmas Day each year.
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- Throughout the 1950s, both the National Bank of Chester County & Trust Company and the First National Bank held Christmas dinners for their employees at which they recognized employees for long years of service.
  - In 1955, Mr. & Mrs. Horace F. Darlington of 513 W. Nields Street won the first prize in the "ensemble division" of the Chamber of Commerce Home Lighting Contest" with their Christmas light display.
  - On Christmas Day 1956, Fred Clompus died in Harrisburg. He was the brother of I. M. Clompus, owner of a salvage yard at the corner of Market and Wayne Street in West Chester.
  - Back in 1959, West Chester High School held a parade during the holidays and student Joan Schlegel was chosen as the "Christmas Queen." Around the same time, current Mayor Dick Yoder sold Christmas trees in front of his father's feed store on N. Matlack Street near Gay Street.



**The WCU Russian Club is one of many groups that joins the Old Fashioned Christmas Parade each year**

- In 1962, the West Chester State College choir performed Christmas Carols at Philips Auditorium on December 12, and a week later performed another program of Christmas music for Philadelphia's WCAU radio.
- In the 1970s, the Norcross Greeting Card company was located on what is now Airport Road east of West Chester, and one of its biggest sellers was Christmas cards.
- In 1980, the Chamber of Commerce of Greater West Chester organized the first "Old Fashioned Christmas Parade."

Finally, for many years, the West Chester Community Center (now known as the Melton Arts & Education Center) has hosted the "Toys for Tots Christmas Party" and Borough Council has granted free parking in the town center at Christmas time in order to help out local merchants.

This list is not complete, since it leaves out the practice of displaying a Christmas tree at the County Court House, bell-ringing by the Salvation Army, charitable acts by other organizations, and plenty of private initiatives. But it does suggest some ways that the holiday has changed over time, and offer some ideas for future observances.