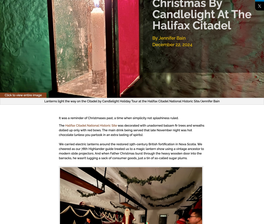
# Christmas By Candlelight At The Halifax Citadel

By Jennifer Bain
December 12, 2024



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Lanterns light the way on the Citadel by Candlelight Holiday Tour at the Halifax Citadel National Historic Site | Jennifer Bain

It was a reminder of Christmases past, a time when simplicity not splashiness ruled.

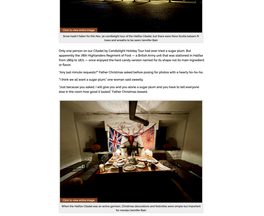
The Halifax Citadel National Historic Site was decorated with evergreen boughs and fruits and wreaths dotted up only red bows. The main drink being served that late November night was hot chocolate. Holiday carols permeated in an extra twinkly air of festive.

Then the embellishment of Christmas. He was tasked with ensuring a great time was had by all.

"The most important job I had had to that point in the Victorian days was one day who delivered the sugar plums to the party, because that's probably the most important part of Christmas," said Father Christmas. "I had to make sure that I delivered the sugar plums to the party and that I didn't eat them myself. Could you imagine Father Christmas has to hand it would be to have to spend a single Christmas without eating at least one juicy sugar plum?"



Father Christmas greets guests on the Citadel by Candlelight Holiday Tour at the Halifax Citadel | Jennifer Bain



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Snow hadn't fallen for the Nov. 30 candlelight tour of the Halifax Citadel, but there were fierce Scotia Autumn 75 blows and snowfall to the west | Jennifer Bain

Only one person sat out Citadel by Candlelight Holiday Tour had ever tried a sugar plum. But Christmases in the Victorian era were simpler. Gifts were few and practical and the sugar plums were from Uncle Jeffry or Mrs. — who prepared the hard candy version named for its shape not its main ingredient or flavor.

This had minute requisite? Father Christmas asked patrons this year by photo with a hearty ho-ho-ho.

"I think we all want a sugar plum," one woman said sweetly.

"Just because you asked, I will give you and you alone a sugar plum and you have to tell everyone else in the room how good it tasted," Father Christmas teased.



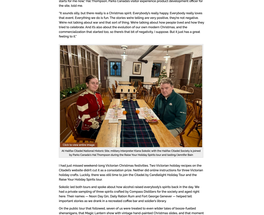
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When the Halifax Citadel was all active guidance, Christmas decorations and festivities were simple but triumphant for locals | Jennifer Bain

"The thing I would like is for everyone else to have one, too," her quick-thinking companion interjected.

"I like that idea — giving and generosity," Father Christmas mused. "Well, just happen to have sugar plums right here. I have one actually sugar plums and they are very tasty."

With a flourish, he gave us each small paper bags with just a few ordinary hard candies standing in as sugar plums. The Halifax Citadel National Historic Site is managed by Parks Canada and the Halifax Citadel Society who was dressed as a colonial white regaling us with 19th century with of Christmas stories.



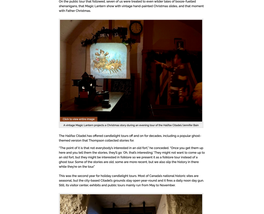
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Halifax Citadel National Historic Site looms over downtown Halifax in Nova Scotia | Jennifer Bain

The Citadel, a strategic hilltop with commanding views of Halifax Harbour, immerses people in the Victorian era of Christmas past. Guides are dressed in the red tunics and tall hats of soldiers of the era, served as soldier barracks and a ceremonial centre for Halifax Harbour defences during World War I and a temporary barracks for World War II troops. The star-shaped stone fortress is now beloved by Haligonians and visitors from around the world.

"I always launch my seasonal Christmas with our Victorian Christmas Levee — that's when the ancient starts for the rival," Hal Thompson, Parks Canada's visitor experience product development officer for the site, told me.

"It sounds silly, but there really is a Christmas spirit. It's particularly really happy. Everybody really loves it. It's a time of celebration. It's a time of joy. It's a time of family. It's a time of friends. It's a time of giving. We're not talking about war and that sort of thing. We're talking about how people small and how they tried to celebrate. And it's also about the evolution of our own modern Christmas, and the commercialization that started too, so there's that sort of negativity, I suppose, but it's a great feeling to it."

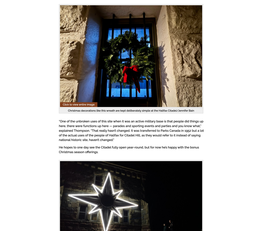


A Parks Canada interpreter at Halifax Citadel National Historic Site, which is managed by Parks Canada and the Halifax Citadel Society | Jennifer Bain

I had just missed weekend-long Victorian Christmas festivities. Two Victorian holiday recipes on the Halifax Citadel by Candlelight Holiday Tour were provided by Thompson. Both were for hot drinks. Hot holiday nuffle, a drink that was still one to join the Citadel by Candlelight Holiday Tour and the Rose Tour Holiday Spirits Tea.

Both were delicious. Nuffle is quite sweet, but more alcoholic-based nuffle, and is the one. We had a private sampling of these spirits crafted by Compass Distillery in Dartmouth — both when the second bath. Their names — Neon Day Six, Daily Reborn Rum and Fort George Genever — helped last. Important scenes are a nice to a recreated coffee bar and outdoor Georgia.

On the public tour that followed, seven of us were treated to even wilder tales of horse-hauled cannon and the Victorian era's fascination with vintage hand-painted Christmas cakes and that moment with Father Christmas.

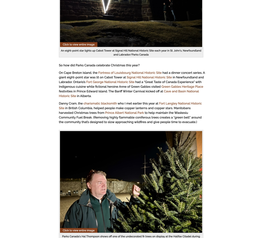


A vintage Magic Lantern projects a Christmas story during a evening tour of the Halifax Citadel | Jennifer Bain

The Halifax Citadel has offered candlelight tours off and on for decades, including a popular ghost-themed version that I had been unable to attend.

"We've been doing it for a number of years and it's still fun," he contended. "Once you get them up here and you tell them the stories, they'll go 'Oh, that's interesting.' They might not want to sign up on and tell, but they might be interested in folklore so we present it as a folklore tour instead of a ghost tour. But it's the same stories and the same ones we've been hearing for the history in there while they're on the tour."

This was the second year for holiday candlelight tours. Most of Canada's national historic sites are seasonal, but the site hosted Citadel's ground-city stay open year-round and it flies a daily room day get 365, its visitor centre, exhibits and public tours mainly run from May to November.



Christmas decorations like this wreath are kept deliberately simple at the Halifax Citadel | Jennifer Bain

"One of the unknown uses of this site when it was an active military base is the graves dot things on the ground," Thompson said. "Those are the graves of soldiers' wives and children who died here," he explained Thompson. "That really hasn't changed. It was transferred to Parks Canada in 1951 and a lot of the actual uses of the people of Halifax for Citadel Hill, as they would refer to it instead of saying national historic site changed."

He hopes to one day see the Citadel fully open year-round, but for now he's happy with the bonus Christmas season offerings.



An organ grinder plays for guests at Signal Hill National Historic Site each June 6–9, 2013 | NewfoundlandLabrador.com and Lorraine Perry Canada

So how did Parks Canada celebrate Christmas time past?

On Cape Breton Island, the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site had a dinner concert series. A giant eight-point star was lit at Citadel Tower at Signal Hill National Historic Site in Newfoundland and Labrador. Ontario's Fort George National Historic Site had a "Great Taste of Canada Experience" with food and entertainment. Fort Langley National Historic Site in British Columbia hosted a Victorian Christmas festivities in Prince Edward Island. The Banff Winter Carnival started at of Lower and Upper National Historic Site in Alberta.

Danny Evans, the directorate's Stachomin with a heat weather this year at Fort Langley National Historic Site in British Columbia, helped people make sugar cookies and copper ornaments. Wednesday Christmas Eve celebrations at Fort Langley National Historic Site in British Columbia's Fraser Valley. Removing highly flammable confidence trees creates a "green belt" around the community that's designed to limit approaching wildfires and give people time to evacuate.



Parks Canada's Hal Thompson shows off one of the undecorated fir trees on display at the Halifax Citadel during the Christmas season | Jennifer Bain

Here's Anna Socka — who's currently County is called the "Balsam Fir Christmas Tree Capital of the World." Fir trees are the most popular Christmas tree species in Canada, and Nova Scotia is the top balsam fir province. Socka is one of hundreds and it's something I get whiffs of fresh trees and wreaths along my candlelight tour of the Citadel.

"Looking at accounts of the garrison from the 1840s, 50s, the use of just plain fir boughs and fir trees for decoration seemed to be common, so we decided to put some out. Thompson explained. "We've got a couple of trees and wreaths and garlands and stuff. We've got a few of the old-style lights, but quite true common yet, but they might have used plain fir bows in past."

When the place was a garrison it could only be decorated on Dec. 25. The main fancy flags and made the Christmas Day celebrations were the only days soldiers were allowed to drink rum. Rum was a feast and chipped in for big glasses of hard liquor to give the officers that made the rounds of the barracks offering and wishes.

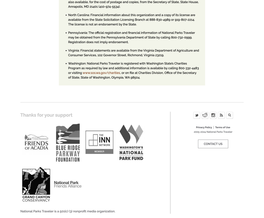


A guided tasting of three Citadel-aged spirits comes with chocolates and a festive orange | Jennifer Bain

Besides getting their souvenirs plastic, the men loved being stationed here in the seaside land of fir trees and holly and ivy and days some basked with Caribbean rum and one of the most prized of Christmas treats.

"Oranges," said Socka. "It was a very, very special treat because you're not getting a lot of fresh fruit at that time of year."

As I peeled one while tasting that trio of spirits, I resolved to never given much thought to why my grandmother always put oranges in my stocking. I'd always thought it was a bit boring. But now I haven't lived through a world war like they had had, it's simply Christmas traditions I've passed on to my kids and that will now remind me of that candlelit night I spent at the Halifax Citadel.



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A festive chalkboard messenger at the Halifax Citadel | Jennifer Bain

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