

Celebrating Christmas in historic Cape May

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As soon as a newspaper published an illustration in 1848 of Queen Victoria and her family with a Christmas tree — a German tradition representative of the queen's own German ancestry and that of her husband, Prince Albert — everyone had to have their own tree.

"It would have been decorated before the children saw it in the parlor," said Joyce Barth, a tour guide at the historic Emlen Physick Estate in Cape May.

Tabletop trees, like the one in the parlor of the estate, were common and most of what was used to decorate them was edible, Barth said. Some households even had artificial trees made from dyed green goose feathers.

Like Christmas trees, many common

holiday traditions have roots in the Victorian era. It was in the mid-1800s when many beloved practices still popular today — including sending Christmas cards and singing Christmas carols — took root.

So it seems only fitting that Cape May, a Victorian town, would embrace the Christmas season, starting with the Emlen Physick Estate, an example of Victorian Stick Style architecture.

"When we get to Christmas, it looks like a Victorian wonderland," said Susan Krysiak, communications coordinator for the Cape May Mid-Atlantic Center for Arts and Humanities.

Drawing tourists at Christmas also has economic benefits.

"Obviously we want to have tourists all year round," Krysiak said. "We're a beach town, but we're not just that. We're so much more."

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Cape May lights up for Christmas, and visitors can see the decorated homes and inns on nighttime tours. ALEKS MORVAKOV COURTESY OF MAC