

History of Arasapha Garden Club's Wreath Workshop

In the middle of the 20th century, New Castle was decorated for the holidays much as any other small American town, with colored lights and artificial decorations. Some townspeople felt these decorations didn't showcase Historic New Castle's unique charm. One of those townspeople was Arasapha member Eleanor Holden, who expressed her views quite colorfully in a 1967 speech to the Colonial Dames:

Many townspeople for many years had had an uncomfortable feeling that we were perhaps not celebrating the Christmas season in the very best way. Something ought to be done! I know my particular breaking point came the day I saw nearby on one of the most beautiful Georgian doorways in the country, a plastic wreath – white, magenta and viridian green! Something really *had* to be done!!!

Eleanor Holden went on to explain, "The Arasapha Garden Club was the most logical and the most interested group to suggest a new plan of decoration."

The idea of Arasapha providing appropriate holiday decorations for New Castle's historic district appears to have originated with Arasapha member Mary Earle. In Spring 1963, Eleanor Tobin, Arasapha's First Vice President, asked Mary to write a proposal for decorating New Castle at Christmastime, and newspaper articles in 1963 and 1964 credit Mary with conceiving the idea. (A 2003 Arasapha document written to celebrate the Christmas Workshop's 40th anniversary says that the Mayor and City Council asked Arasapha to undertake a Christmas decoration project in January 1963. But Arasapha meeting minutes and newspaper records from the time make no mention of this.)

Mary Earle was one of Arasapha's many remarkable leaders. A professional floral designer, she was active in Arasapha for over 40 years. At various points over the decades, she was president of Arasapha and headed May Market, May Market's plants sales, the Dutch House garden committee, committees for other Arasapha gardening projects around the city (such as the Academy's secret garden and the garden behind the Court House), the club's program committee, and the club's annual flower show (a big thing in the 1950s and early 1960s). She also helped start New Castle's annual antiques show, served on the Historic Area Commission, and chaired an advisory committee on landscaping two new local schools.

Everyone agreed that the decorations should be "traditional," but what did that mean? Some Arasapha members researched early Christmas decorations and learned that outdoor Christmas decorations weren't used in this country until the very late 1800s. Christmas decorations in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, were among the members' inspirations.

The eventual idea was to enhance the inherent beauty of Historic New Castle in two ways: first, with simple, traditional, fresh greens and other natural materials that might have been used in the late 1800s and, second, with soft illumination of churches and historic landmarks, because light has been a symbol of Christmas for centuries.

Mary Earle's proposal focused on the Court House and the Green. She proposed several Christmas trees in front of the Court House (with one large one, in front of the east wing, as the "Town Tree"), roping of fresh greens on the Court House railings, and wreaths with natural decorations on the Court House doors. She also suggested a large spot lit tree on the Green and that Delaware Street shops be encouraged to put trees in tubs on their sidewalks, trimmed with artificial snow or colored lights (a surprising suggestion, since those are hardly natural). Finally, she suggested spotlights on the Arsenal cupola, Immanuel spire, and all churches, along with soft lighting inside public buildings to resemble candlelight.

Mary Earle's proposal was enthusiastically accepted by Arasapha members, and a group got to work implementing it for Christmas 1963. The Board of Water and Light (now the Municipal Services Commission) offered to install and pay for the lighting. This is when the spotlights familiar to us today were first added to the Court House cupola, Town Hall cupola, Arsenal cupola, and Immanuel Church spire. Initially the spotlights and interior lights were lit for only two weeks, and someone had to be hired to turn the lights on and off each night.

Arasapha members ended up decorating 26 wreaths in 1963, not just the two that Mary Earle proposed. To decorate the wreaths, they purchased holly and fruit, and they cut greens themselves, a practice that continued for decades. Workers from a local construction company helped hang wreaths that were too high for Arasapha members to reach. The total cost that first year, for trees, tubs and stands for the trees, wreaths, decorations, and labor was \$390.63 (about \$3900 in today's dollars)..

For the project's first year, Arasapha budgeted \$400 of its own funds for the project, noting "Another year it is hoped the City of New Castle would help." And indeed this happened. The next year, 1964, the Mayor and City Council provided some financial support for the project, a practice they have continued ever since. In the late 1970s, Public Works crew members began hanging the wreaths and, in the early 1990s, they began removing them as well—both important City contributions to the success of the project. The Trustees of New Castle Common began making annual contributions in 1967. The contributions from the City and Trustees have been generous but never fully covered Arasapha's expenses. Starting in 1978, Arasapha began writing businesses that received wreaths, asking for donations to the Club, another practice that continues to this day.

The "Christmas decoration project," as it was called then, was not without problems in its early years. Enough wreaths were damaged or stolen that Arasapha had an annual Replacement Committee through the late 1980s. Some of the trees were blown over by winds and others were stolen. In 1965 one towns person built a creche that was placed in the walkway from Delaware Street to Battery Park, but it was heavily damaged by a nor'easter in 1967 and not used again.

Over the project's first 40 years, Arasapha gradually decreased its role in holiday lighting. The last Lights chair in 1999 only lit Town Hall. Today the cupolas and spires around the Green are lit year-round, public buildings are no longer lit from within, and the City takes responsibility for adding strings of lights to some Delaware Street lampposts.

The project's focus on trees also declined over its first 40 years. By the 1980s the trees were no longer lit because of safety concerns. (Electrical cords had to be run quite a distance to the nearest outlet.) An evergreen tree planted and lit on the Green for many years was cut down in 1988. Theft of Christmas trees continued to be a problem into the 1990s, and Arasapha erected its last trees in 1997. Today the City takes responsibility for lighting a large evergreen tree in the park between Market and 2nd Streets.

Some other initiatives have come and gone over the years. Between 1966 and 1978, Arasapha sponsored a carol sing around one of the trees. Also between 1966 and 1978, Arasapha designated one or more trees as "bird trees," decorated with treats made by local children such as popcorn balls for birds to enjoy. For almost 30 years, from 1965 through 1994, shop windows were filled with items that might have been sold during Victorian Christmastimes. Interest in this gradually declined, partly because of liability concerns, until at the end only one store window was decorated.

Meanwhile, wreath decorating became a bigger and bigger project. The number of decorated wreaths hung in the Historic District grew from 26 in 1963 to 83 in 1993, to almost 100 in 2000, and to about 120 today.

The complexity of the wreath decorating process reached a peak in the 1980s and 1990s. Starting in 1979, a committee began creating decorations from dried materials such as nuts, popcorn, and pinecones. Soon some Arasapha members were drying their own flowers. Starting in 1987, a Dried Flower Workshop was held about a month before the Wreath Workshop, in which Arasapha members

bundled purchased and donated dried flowers onto flower picks for easy attachment to the wreaths. In the 1990s another group met the day before the Wreath Workshop to make “fruit do das”: flowers made from citrus peel and cranberries. Yet another group made bows.

In pre-Internet days, researching and buying supplies was a time-consuming process. Separate committees were set up to buy greens, fruits and vegetables, and other supplies. Even as late as 2003, materials for the Dried Flower Workshop came from 11 different suppliers, most contacted in person.

In the 1980s and 1990s considerable time and thought was also spent on the design of individual wreaths. A “Wreath Design” report from 1991 explains that two Arasapha members specified decorations for each wreath that they deemed compatible with the building on which it was to be hung. After wreaths were hung, the two wreath designers drove around town to check the wreaths and make notes for design improvements for next year. In 1999 one member began the Wreath Workshop with a demonstration on creating a “well-constructed” wreath, and two other “experienced wreath designers” provided “diplomatic technical and aesthetic help during the workshop.” Two photo albums from those days—virtually the only photos Arasapha has of past Christmas decoration projects—show how magnificent the wreaths were.

Today Arasapha’s annual Wreath Workshop is bigger but simpler. During a two-day marathon workshop, roughly 120 wreaths are decorated with all-natural materials, including donated evergreen clippings, dried flowers bundled onto picks, fresh fruits and vegetables, pinecones, and other natural materials. We now invite members of the New Castle community to help us. Designers no longer specify the look of the wreaths, but even wreaths created by novice volunteers are beautiful and help transform Historic New Castle during the holiday season.

Compiled by Linda Suskie from Arasapha archives
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