

Welcome to

Van Cortlandt House Museum

Van Cortlandt House Museum is owned by City of New York under the auspices of the Department of Parks & Recreation and the Historic House Trust of New York City. Since 1896, Van Cortlandt House Museum has been under the custody of The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York through a license agreement with the City of New York. The Society is responsible for preserving and restoring the interiors, providing and caring for the collections, offering educational opportunities to school children throughout New York City, and assuring that the doors to Van Cortlandt House are open to visitors 6 days a week all year round.

Please Note: The house may seem dark to you when you first arrive. This is due to the special shades we use to help protect the items in the rooms and hallways from sunlight which can damage fabrics, wood surfaces, paintings and floor boards even on over-cast, cloudy days. We encourage you to pause for a minute or two in the entrance hall to allow your eyes to adjust. There are green-painted Windsor chairs placed in the hallways throughout the house for use by our guests please feel free to sit in them.

Photographic Policy: You are welcome to take photographs inside Van Cortlandt House for your own personal use. Please use caution when attempting to take "selfies", especially when using a selfie-stick.

Professional or commercial photographers should contact the Museum before using images of the house or to request special access. Contact information for the museum can be found on our website: www.vchm.org.

Over -view of the History of the Site

This guide provides a glimpse into the history of the Van Cortlandt family and the lives of three generations who resided within the walls of this house. The history of the family and their house is far too extensive to be contained in these pages. If you have more questions after your tour, please notify the staff and we will do our best to help you.

The story of the Van Cortlandt family in America begins in 1638 when Oloff Stevense Van Cortlandt landed in New Amsterdam. Fifty years later, Oloff was considered the fourth wealthiest man in New York having made his money as a merchant involved in trading, brewing, manufacturing wampum, money lending and shipping. At the close of the 17th

century, Jacobus, the youngest of Oloff's seven children, purchased the first piece of land of what would eventually become a large and profitable wheat plantation.

Present-day Van Cortlandt House was built in 1748 by Jacobus' only son Frederick. He chose for his house an English style of architecture adding details to remind him of his forefather's Dutch heritage. The carved grotesque masks set over the windows on the front of the house were added to protect the residents from evil spirits. Sadly, Frederick did not live to see his house completed. After his death, the plantation and milling operations were inherited by his eldest son James.

James Van Cortlandt continued the successful operation of the plantation and mills. Continuing his family's involvement in government, James served at various times as Supervisor of the Precinct of Yonkers and as its Commissioner of Highways. During the Revolutionary War, James served as a member of the Committee of Safety and the Westchester County Militia. He died in 1781 leaving the plantation and mills to his brother Augustus.

Augustus Van Cortlandt lived in lower Manhattan before inheriting his family's plantation and served for 30 years as Clerk of Courts for the City of New York. In the fall of 1776, he received an order from the New York Provisional Congress to secure the city records due to the "alarming state of public affairs". First hiding the records in his backyard, Augustus later moved them to the family's plantation at Little Yonkers. Augustus' final hiding place was the family burial vault on a hill north of the house.

During the Revolutionary War, the House and plantation were considered neutral ground with George Washington and British and Hessian officers using it as a temporary Headquarters. In November of 1783 Washington returned to Van Cortlandt House where he stayed the night before starting his march into New York as the defeated British evacuated.

It is the story of three of these Van Cortlandt men and the history that unfolded during their lives which are portrayed in the interpretation of Van Cortlandt House.

Please note that the front door of the House faces south. This will help you locate the rooms by name.

Entrance Hall

The Entrance Hall is decorated to welcome guests to Van Cortlandt House for festive winter holiday celebrations. The end of harvest signaled the beginning of a very sociable season of entertainments and celebrations. Christmas as we know it today was not part of the celebrations but was a religious holiday. Children were celebrated and delighted in the Feast of Saint Nicholas held on December 6th.

The staircase is adorned with a mixed pine garland attached with bows. From the hall light hangs a kissing ball featuring sprigs of mistletoe. The tradition of hanging a kissing ball is first seen in the Middle Ages, when villagers would bring evergreen branches inside their homes to brighten up the dark days of winter. Twining together pine boughs

with herbs such as rosemary (symbolizing remembrance) or thyme (representing courage), the balls were hung in a passageway to greet guests and wish them good fortune. Over the years, these decorations were embellished with mistletoe and became the ideal place for a holiday kiss. Whether you're sharing a platonic peck on the cheek or a seasonal smooch with your loved one, how wonderful it is that this long-standing holiday tradition continues to this day. If you share a photo of your kiss under the mistletoe, please tag it as #BXHolidayKiss.



East Parlor

The most formal room in Van Cortlandt House, the East Parlor would have been the scene of the family's most festive and special entertaining. The highly carved mantelpiece, c. 1760, is the work of two anonymous New York carvers who may have apprenticed or worked as journeymen in London. This decoration is believed to have been added by James Van Cortlandt, eldest son of Frederick, at the time of his marriage. Regardless of the occasion or motivation for the remodeling, it was carried in the highest fashion of the era.

As the scene for various types of entertainments, the East Parlor would have been filled with beautiful yet versatile furniture. When not in use, card tables and tea tables fold up for placement against the walls, leaving the center of the room open for a large gathering or dancing. In addition to the boxwood garland on the fireplace, the room has also been made ready for a festive bowl of rum-based punch.

On New Year's Day of both the Dutch and English colonial periods in New York, the day was spent making visits to friends' houses. In a practice known as First Footing, good luck was promised to the first person to step foot into a friends' house on New Year's Day. Further good luck was promised to the homeowner if the first footer was a tall gentleman with dark hair and arrived bearing certain small gifts such as a lump of coal, a silver coin, a bit of bread, a sprig of evergreen, and some salt. Tradition also dictates that no one of the household can leave until the first footer has arrived.

Dashing about First Footing was primarily a man's activity. The women of the house would remain home to greet their own first footer as well as welcome the steady stream of visitors that would follow. Guests were served either punch or brandy and perhaps a piece of rich cake similar to what we know today as pound cake. The refreshments were served in the finest room of the house and as many chairs as the room could comfortably hold were arranged around the perimeter.

The portrait to the left of the fireplace is of the third owner of the house, Augustus Van Cortlandt (1728-1823), painted by John Wesley Jarvis, c.1810. Augustus held the important position of Common Clerk of the City of New York between 1751 and 1783, a period of 32 years. It was in this capacity that Augustus, in the late summer of 1775, received a request from the New York Provincial Congress to safeguard the public records of the City of New York. Augustus first hid the records in a cellar under the garden of his city residence near 11 Broadway, but later transferred the records to the family's plantation, then under the ownership of his brother James. The records were hidden in the burial vault established under the terms of their father Frederick Van Cortlandt's will. The city records remained on the plantation until 1784 when Augustus was ordered to turn them over to the newly appointed clerk of the City and County of New York.

West Parlor

This less-formal parlor would have hosted family meals and casual gatherings. The bright orange and blue paneling is the exact color of the room at the end of the 18th century as determined by microscopic paint analysis. In this less-important room, decoration was achieved with color rather than expensive carving, as in the East Parlor.



The Dining Room

After extensive research and painstaking restoration, the Dining Room has been brought back to how it appeared during the ownership of the house by Augustus Van Cortlandt (1728 – 1823) the youngest son of Frederick and third owner. Augustus inherited the house upon the death of his brother James in 1781.

The room as it is seen today represents the height of post-Revolutionary War Federal elegance. The side wall and border papers, found preserved beneath later wall finishes, is a copy of the original French paper manufactured by the firm Jacquemart y Benard c. 1820. The earliest wallpaper discovered during the exploratory phase of the restoration project was dated c. 1750 based on George II tax stamps found on the back of the paper. The other major changes to the architectural finishes of the room were removal of the c. 1840 Greek revival plaster molding and a mantel that research indicated was not original to the room but was given to the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York in 1896. These features were removed because remnants of the original crown molding and fireplace wall paneling were discovered during restoration of the room. The crown molding was recreated as was two-thirds of the fireplace wall paneling. The original paneling is the section to the left of the mantel. You may also notice there is a small area where the ceiling is higher. This shows the original ceiling height. During the c. 1840 renovations to the room, the ceiling was lowered to help visually minimize an east to west slope that developed over the years as the house settled. To restore the entire ceiling to the original height proved to be too great a challenge so the decision was made to show it in this one corner which also revealed the full height of the original paneling.

Furnishings in the Dining Room have also been reinterpreted to represent those which may have been used in the room during Augustus' ownership. Some of these furnishings, Van Cortlandt family objects, were used in the previous interpretation of the Dining Room. The tall chest of drawers between the windows to the right of the room and the knife boxes on the side board are both Van Cortlandt family objects. The table, four of

the chairs, and the settee were formerly in storage at the headquarters of The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York, quietly waiting restoration and a return to useful life at Van Cortlandt House. The other two chairs were purchased at auction to match. These pieces have all been upholstered in horsehair, a very common textile used on seat furniture in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The table is laden with a traditional dessert course featuring clear jellies, sugared fruits, small cakes and cookies, and a blanc mange hedgehog studded with almonds. A fancy dessert would have been served on a special occasion such as Twelfth Night which was the closing celebration of the Christmas Season and marked the arrival of the three kings to the manger in Bethlehem. Held in the evening on the Twelfth Day of Christmas, Twelfth Night was filled singing, dancing, drinking, and games.

Second Floor Rooms

East Chamber

In the 18th century, celebrations and social gatherings, such as a ball, frequently lasted for more than a single evening. Because of the great difficulty with travel, party guests would have been offered lodging with the host. When offered lodging, most guests, whether due to distance traveled or reluctance to leave a festive party, accepted. The East Chamber has been made ready for visiting guests who have traveled to Van Cortlandt House with an infant child. The table pulled close to the fire is set for a warming cup of tea.

The blue and white bed curtains are reproductions in the 18th century style and follow the practice of outfitting a room with one color or pattern. Note that the same fabric has been used for window valances and chair seat upholstery. The fabric is an expression of the family's wealth. The process for printing the pattern took several steps with each step requiring the handwork of dyers and colorists. The more steps in the printing process, the more expensive the fabric. This type of printing is known as resist and involves the use of wax to make areas of the fabric temporarily waterproof thereby resisting the dye. Resist dyeing allowed for two shades of blue on a white ground. The first application of wax protected the portions of the linen that were desired to end up white from the later blue dyes.

The William and Mary chest of drawers and matching dressing table were made in New England c. 1710. A looking glass usually hung over the dressing table where men and women sat to apply make-up and groom themselves for appearances in polite society.

The Dutch Room

The Dutch Room is an exhibition room created by the Museum in 1918 to represent a 17th century dwelling in New Amsterdam, the Dutch colony established on Manhattan Island. An all-purpose chamber such as this provided cooking, eating, and sleeping space for a middle-class family. The traditional Dutch cabinet bed kept the family warm with adults sleeping on the upper compartment and children below by keeping body heat inside.

The reproduction garments laid out include a traditional Saint Nicholas costume. With their Dutch heritage, the Van Cortlandt family would have celebrated this festive holiday on December 6th. Today's modern Santa Claus was invented in New York City by Clement Clarke Moore from this traditional holiday.

West Chamber

This bedchamber, the "best" bedchamber, is the one most likely used by George Washington on his various visits to Van Cortlandt House. Keep in mind, though, that the furnishing and decorations in the room were not here during Washington's time. The furnishings in this room, and throughout the house, were collected for the museum based on the choices that would have been available to a family such as the Van Cortlandts in the second half of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th century. Furnishings which were known to have been in Van Cortlandt House or were once owned by a member of the family are pointed out in this guidebook.

The West Chamber is decorated or "hung" with vibrant multi-colored chintz reproduced from a pattern imported and sold in the 18th century by The Dutch East India Company. The taste for upholstering rooms "en suite" with furniture and curtains created from a single fabric was very popular in the 18th century. An elaborate display of imported textiles such as this was possible only in the home of a wealthy family. The style of hangings on the bed and windows is referred to as drapery which uses an elaborate system of rings and cord to draw up flat panels of fabric to allow light and air into the room and bed.

The mahogany knee-hole dressing table, c. 1770, beneath the mirror descended in the Van Cortlandt Family.

The burl walnut chest of drawers to the left of the door is English, c. 1725. It is said to have belonged to Mary Van Cortlandt Horne, a daughter of Frederick Van Cortlandt, who built the house.

Third Floor Rooms

Nursery

For many years it was believed that the nursery had seen the least number of alterations since the house was built in 1748. In the winter of 2001, a closer examination of the room raised many questions surrounding its history. With little evidence beyond the existing wall surfaces, which may date to as late as the early 20th century, these questions may never be answered. The present paint colors were determined through microscopic analysis at several key points in the room. The wood trim exhibited a variety of paint layers with the oldest being the dark blue gray. With few clues as to how or even if the Van Cortlandt family used this space, it was decided to retain the long-standing interpretation of this room as a nursery.

In the 18th century, children seldom participated in the social world of adults. Instead, children were relegated to a room such as this which was used as a sleeping chamber, a playroom and a schoolroom. It is likely that the children ate many meals in the kitchen and did not join their elders in the dining room.

The dollhouse is one of the earliest known American examples dated c. 1740. It is descended in the Homans family of Boston.

The miniature tea service is earthenware with a Whieldon-type spattered glaze. It was manufactured in Staffordshire, England c. 1760. The service is actually made up of pieces from several sets.

In this room you are seeing New Amsterdam holiday traditions represented. The wooden shoes with carrots and straw have been laid out by the children in preparation for Saint Nicholas' visit. Just as children today leave out milk and cookies for Santa Claus, children in New Amsterdam left out carrots and hay for Saint Nicholas' horse. In the morning the carrots and straw would have been replaced with a small present, a traditional pastry called a "letterbanket" or letter cake filled with marzipan and formed in the shape of the child's initial.

You may also notice that stockings have been hung by the chimney. This common practice grew out of one of the legends of Saint Nicholas. After their father took ill, three young sisters were faced with the prospect of having to go out into the streets to work. This troubled the family greatly but no other solution could be found. One evening, after washing their stockings, the girls hung them carefully by the chimney so that they would be dry come morning. During the night, Saint Nicholas climbed up on the roof and tossed gold coins down the chimney. These coins landed in the girls' stockings and proved enough to spare them from working the streets. Clement Clarke Moore drew upon this legend and tradition when writing his famous poem 'Twas the Night Before Christmas.

The Unfinished Chamber

This plain, unheated room was most likely used as a storage area and possibly as a sleeping chamber for the enslaved servants who worked in the household. When it was used for sleeping, the chamber was likely furnished with a very simple table and chair and a low bed or a grass mattress placed on the floor.

This room is referred to as the Unfinished Chamber because of the unfinished state of the walls. You can see that the framing of the house was left exposed in this room unlike others in the house which have been finished off with plaster or wood paneling. Attic rooms such as this one and the nursery would have been finished off as needed as the family or need for space grew.

When you finish your tour inside, we suggest you take a few minutes to walk around to the front of the house to see the fruit-bedecked pine wreaths and the elaborate fruit plaque above the front door.

Thank-you for visiting Van Cortlandt House Museum - please return this booklet to the visitor's service associate.