**Happenin's 'Round The House**

**Here Come the Holidays!**

#### by Museum *Education and Volunteer Coordinator*, Rachel Barnes

For thousands of years, cultures all around the world have celebrated the return of the sun. In mid-December (by our modern calendar), the winter solstice comes and with it, the shortest day of the year. After the passing of solstice, the days get longer, and this lengthening of daylight was a big reason to party. In ancient Rome, they celebrated the multi-day feast of *Saturnalia*, which honored the Roman god, Saturn. In ancient Greece, it was *Lenaia,* an annual festival for wine-loving, ecstasy-inducing, grape-harvesting Dionysus. And in Northern Europe, it was *Yule*, where the celebrations centered on the burning of a “yule log” – a light that would burn away the darkness of winter and allow the sun to return.

Some believe it was this practice of burning the yule log that ultimately led to the modern-day practice of hanging Christmas lights.

Furthermore, winter solstice, as the official passing of winter, also meant the return of greenery to the land. Celebrators of *Saturnalia* and *Yule* hung evergreen boughs around their window frames and doorways to prepare for the arrival of spring and to thank the gods for sending winter on its merry way. Ancient Egyptians celebrated the rebirth of their sun god, Ra, by placing green palm fronds around their homes. And it is believed the use of greenery in these ancient festivals / traditions led to the present practice of a Christmas tree.

Not surprising when you think about it, since, after all, early Christianity drew on many of these ancient traditions when they established Christian celebrations. Therefore, many of our Christmas traditions appear to have been influenced by these ancient winter solstice festivals.

And let’s continue the tradition, shall we? The holiday season approaches, and the Hart Museum will be decking the halls with evergreen boughs of holly and hanging yuletide lights along the Mansion’s walls in the time-honored (centuries and centuries of time) practice. Will our festive decorations scare away the dark days of winter? You’ll have to let us know when you come for a visit! The decorations are visible as of Wednesday, December 4, 2013, and will be on view until Sunday, January 5, 2014.

Oh, and by the way, you can thank the ancient Romans for fruitcake. They mixed pomegranate seeds, pine nuts, and dried grapes in a barley mash, a combination that led to a cake with a remarkable shelf life. Perfect for Roman soldiers out on campaign. And 2,000 years later … do I need to comment on modern-day fruitcake’s shelf life?