



HOLIDAY TRAIN GARDEN TRADITIONS

Holiday train gardens have been a tradition in Baltimore, particularly in firehouses, since the late 1800s. Until the 1950s, every firehouse in Baltimore displayed their train gardens throughout December and into the beginning of January. Many firehouses gradually stopped doing the displays as their work and hours changed. Today there are only a handful of firehouses that have train gardens, but many people in Baltimore display train gardens under their trees, maintaining the tradition.

Holiday gardens are unique to Baltimore because the tradition descended from the Moravians who immigrated to America and settled in Pennsylvania and parts of Baltimore two centuries ago. Their holiday gardens were slightly different in that they had a religious context.

Moravian gardens were basically Nativity scenes displayed under the Christmas tree throughout the season to remember the first Christmas. It is thought that these gardens had roots in Rome where refugees chiseled scenes connected to the birth of Christ in rocks and walls.

The Moravian gardens were named “putz” after garden parties. When the Moravians moved to the Baltimore area, the gardens began to change. Baltimoreans loved their gardens but wanted more than a religious scene. In the late 1800s, Baltimoreans were getting more involved with electric motors and designers wanted trains circling their gardens. Firefighters utilized the gardens as a way to bring holiday spirit to the community, especially to those who wouldn’t have much at Christmas. The gardens included churches, waterfalls, houses, stores, flowers, and many other symbols to represent the town. During difficult times, the train gardens were thought to represent an ideal world.

The original train gardens were handmade of wood, paper and cardboard. As the gardens became popular, they expanded. The firefighters began using themes based on the year’s events. Thousands of visitors came to see the gardens and many would donate money. The firefighters would use that money to make the gardens bigger and better every year. Some stations charged a small fee to raise money while others relied on donations. Many times fire fighters would donate this money to a local charity.

There are several fire companies today that take pride in their elaborate train gardens such as the Wise Avenue Volunteer Fire Company in Dundalk. Fire fighters often begin working on the garden during the summer months when they have time to design and create. Gardens include fires, water pumps, traffic lights, cars, and require considerable wiring. Many gardens have gotten so large that fire engines need to be moved outside.

Since 1986, the Fire Museum of Maryland has hosted a train garden designed by volunteers. Visitors will be delighted by the 1940's style, O27 trains and O-gauge track of this large display.

During the holiday train garden opening, America’s premier collection of fire fighting apparatus will also be on display. The collection contains 40 fire engines dating from 1806 to 1957, audio guide tours of the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904, working fire alarm office, children’s discovery room where they can dress up as a firefighter and sit behind the wheel of a 1938 Mack fire engine, museum store and more.

The Museum is located one block north of exit 26B, off of York Road. For information, call 410-321-7500 or visit www.firemuseummd.org.