

# Christmas in 19th Century America

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The Christmas that Americans celebrate today seems like a timeless weaving of custom and feeling beyond the reach of history. Yet the familiar mix of carols, cards, presents, trees, multiplicities of Santas and holiday neuroses that have come to define December 25th in the United States is little more than a hundred years old.

Americans did not even begin to conceive of Christmas as a national holiday until the middle of the last century. Like many other such 'inventions of tradition', the creation of an American Christmas was a response to social and personal needs that arose at a particular point in history, in this case a time of sectional conflict and civil war, as well as the unsettling processes of urbanization and industrialization. The holiday's new customs and meanings helped the nation to make sense of the confusions of the era and to secure, if only for a short while each year, a soothing feeling of unity.

In colonial times, Americans of different sects and different national origins kept the holiday (or did not) in ways they carried over from the Old World, Puritans, for instance, attempted to ignore Christmas because the Bible was silent on the topic. Virginia planters took the occasion to feast, dance, gamble, hunt and visit, perpetuating what they believed to be the old Christmas customs in English manors. Even as late as the early nineteenth century, many Americans, churched or unchurchd, northerners or southerners, hardly took notice of the holiday at all.

By mid-century, however, new conditions had begun to undercut local customs and create needs for common and visible celebrations. Communication and transportation revolutions made once isolated parts of the country acutely aware of each other. Immigration vastly widened the ethnic and religious pluralism that had been a part of American settlement from its beginning. Moral, political and economic tensions mounted among east, west and south, raising new questions about the nature of the Union itself. Science challenged religion. New wealth and larger markets superseded old. Population swelled. The pace of life accelerated.

The swirl of change caused many to long for an earlier time, one in which they imagined that old and good values held sway in cohesive and peaceful communities. It also made them reconsider the notion of 'community' in larger terms, on a national scale, but modelled on the ideal of a family gathered at the hearth. At this cross-roads of progress and nostalgia, Americans found in Christmas a holiday that ministered to their needs. The many Christmases celebrated across the land began to resolve into a more singular and widely celebrated home holiday.

This new 'revived Christmas of our time' afforded a retreat from the dizzying realities of contemporary life, but cast in contemporary terms. Americans varied old themes and wove new symbols into the received fabric to create something definitively their own. The 'American' holiday enveloped the often contradictory strains of commercialism and artisanship, as well as nostalgia and faith in progress, that defined late nineteenth-century culture. Its relative lack of theological or Biblical authority – what had made it anathema to the Puritans – ironically allowed Christmas to emerge as a highly ecumenical event in a land of pluralism. It became a moment of idealized national self-definition.

Not surprisingly, the strongest impetus for such a holiday came from those areas most profoundly affected by the various social, economic and technological revolutions of the antebellum era. Especially in the northern cities, where the intimacies of village and town culture had been most forcefully challenged by city and factory, the felt need for more explicit symbols of common purpose and shared. past grew first. A number of writers came to see holidays as a tool to meet these ends and even to forge a national culture. New Year's Eve, the Fourth of July and, especially, Thanksgiving had their merits and partisans, but Christmas emerged as the most logical and affecting choice. By the 1850s, it had captured the Northern imagination and was making inroads in the South.

The Civil War intensified Christmas' appeal. Its sentimental celebration of family matched the yearnings of soldiers and those they left behind. Its message of peace and goodwill spoke to the most immediate prayers of all Americans. Yet northern victory in 1865 as much as the war situation itself determined the popularity and shape of the America's Christmas. Now unchallenged in the sphere of national myth-making and in control of the publishing trade, customs and symbols of Yankee origin and preference came to stand for the American Christmas.

We can see this as a broad and unified development only in retrospect. More interesting is the way details of the holiday appeared through accident and personal genius. Each custom had its own history, and only over time merged with others to create a full-blown, national holiday.

As early as 1832, Harriet Martineau had identified what would become one of the most familiar symbols of the American Christmas. She had 'little doubt' that the Christmas tree would 'become one of the most flourishing exotics of New England'. By the 1850s, many Americans, not just New Englanders, had fallen in love with the German custom. Some had seen Christmas trees for the first time when they had toured Germany and then recreated their experience of German Christmas celebrations for friends at home. Others viewed them first-hand in the homes of German Americans. The media introduced the custom even more widely, inspiring Americans throughout the nation to adopt the tradition as their own.

As the tree gained prominence in front parlours, it also assumed a place in the market. During the 1850s, town squares began to bristle with trees cut for seasonable profits. Seamlessly, the 'German-ness' of the tree receded as it became an icon of an American festival and, to some, an index of acculturation. Even in the homes of 'the Hebrew brethren', 'Christmas trees bloomed', noted a Philadelphia newspaper in 1877. '[T]he little ones of Israel were as happy over them as Christian children'. By 1900, one American in five was estimated to have a Christmas tree.

At first, the decoration of these fragrant evergreens reflected the whim of folk tradition. Celebrants added nuts, strings of popcorn or beads, oranges, lemons, candies and home-made trinkets. However, widely-read newspapers and ladies' magazines raised the standards for ornamentation. (One suggestion: cotton batting dipped in thin gum arabic then diamond dust made a 'beautiful frosting' for tree branches.) Homely affectations gave way to more uniform and sophisticated ones, the old style overtaken by the urge to make the tree a showpiece for the artistic arrangement of 'glittering baubles, the stars, angels, etc'.

Tree decoration soon became big business. As early as 1870, American businessmen began to import large quantities of ornaments from Germany to be sold on street corners and, later, in toy shops and variety stores. Vendors hawked glass ornaments and balls in bright colours, tin cut in all imaginable

shapes and wax angels with spun glass wings. 'So many charming little ornaments can now be bought ready to decorate Christmas trees that it seems almost a waste of time to make them at home', one advertisement declared.

The rise of Christmas cards revealed other aspects of the new holiday's profile. R.H. Pease, a printer and variety store owner who lived in Albany, New York, distributed the first American-made Christmas card in the early 1850s. A family scene dominated the small card's centre, but unlike its English forerunner (itself only a decade older), the images on each of its four corners made no allusion to poverty, cold, or hunger. Instead, pictures of Santa, reindeer, dancers and an array of Christmas presents and Christmas foods suggested the bounty and joys of the season.

It took Louis Prang, a recent German immigrant and astute reader of public taste, to expand the sending of cards to a grand scale. Prang arrived in America in 1850 and soon made a name as a printer. By 1870, he owned perhaps two-thirds of the steam presses in America and had perfected the colour printing process of chromolithography. After distributing his trade cards by the thousands at an international exposition in 1873, the wife of his London agent suggested he add a Christmas greeting to them. When Prang introduced these new cards into the United States in 1875, they proved such a hit that he could not meet demand.

Behind Prang's delight in profits lay a certain idealism. He saw his cards as small, affordable works of art. Through them he hoped to stimulate popular interest in original decorative art and to educate public taste. In 1880, Prang began to sponsor annual competitions for Christmas card designs to promote these ends. These contests made Christmas cards so popular that other card manufacturers entered the market. By 1890, cheap imitations from his native Germany drove Prang from the Christmas card market entirely.

Whatever Prang's plans for democratising art in his adopted land, the advent of Christmas cards in the marketplace soon served functions in keeping with the increasing pace and essential nature of American society. In a hurried and mobile nation, more and more Americans resorted to cards instead of honouring the older custom of writing Christmas letters or making personal holiday visits. The cards' ready-made sentiments drew together friends and families spread across a rapidly expanding national geography, making them a staple of December's mail. 'I thought last year would be the end of the Christmas card mania, but I don't think so now', one postal official complained in 1882. 'Why four years ago a Christmas card was a rare thing. The public then got the mania and the business seems to be getting larger every year'.

Christmas cards also made modest but suitable presents. '[W]orn out from choosing gifts' for old friends and school mates, one writer noted, 'we usually fall back on Christmas cards, which constitute one of the most precious and at the same time inexpensive contributions of these latter days to the neglected cause of sentiment'.

Decorated trees and cards, however, were only window dressing to the custom of Christmas gift-giving that blossomed in the 1870s and 1880s. Gifts had played a relatively modest role in Christmases of the past. Now they lavishly gilded the already popular holiday. Clearly a product of the new world of commerce and consumerism, Christmas presents also served more subtle ends. The getting and giving of gifts provided a means of grappling with jarring social change. Through personal gifts, Americans mediated the fragile relationships of an increasingly fragmented society. Through charitable gifts, they

sought at least symbolic solutions to the problems of extreme economic inequality that threatened social peace and individual conscience. Gift-giving itself became controversial, sometimes perceived as a worrisome, materialistic perversion of a holy day.

Such fear has not stemmed the growth of Christmas commerce. Indeed, by our own day, Christmas gift-giving has become the single most important sector of the consumer economy. No wonder that some have read backwards in time to make the new Christmas almost a conspiracy of retailers. Yet evidence suggests that the transition to a Christmas economy occurred only gradually, with both merchant and consumer acting as architects. In the 1820s, '30s and '40s merchants had noticed the growing role of gifts in the celebration of Christmas and New Year. Starting in the mid- to late- 1850s, imaginative importers, craftspersons and storekeepers consciously reshaped the holidays to their own ends even as shoppers elevated the place of Christmas gifts in their home holiday. However, for all the efforts of businessmen to exploit the season, Americans persistently attempted to separate the influence of commerce from the gifts they gave.

What emerged was a kind of dialogue between consumers and merchants. Many gift-givers, for instance, ranked handmade gifts over purchased or totally manufactured ones. Retailers responded by marketing partially assembled goods to which givers applied the finishing touches. Americans also moderated the relationship between commerce and giving by wrapping the gifts they gave. The custom had once been merely to give a gift unadorned and uncovered, but a present hidden in paper heightened the effect of the gesture, fixing the act of giving to a moment of revelation. Wrapping also helped designate an item as a gift. As gifts came increasingly from stores, factories and homes of cottage labourers, paper and string helped redefine an object to meet its social use. The commercial work comprehended the importance of this symbolic transformation of goods. Grander stores began to wrap gifts purchased from their stock in distinctive, coloured papers, tinsel cords and bright ribbons, as part of their delivery services. Thus, while paper might have blurred a present's association with commerce in some cases, in others it advertised a material status associated with patronizing the 'right' store.

The spiralling custom of giving and getting gifts did not simply reflect the materialism of the age. The felt need to demonstrate kinship ties and communal bonds more vividly helped to insure the importance of Christmas gifts. Some scholars have explored the important role that kinship plays in determining the value of an object. In what one observer has called our 'materials-intensive way of life', gifts often serve as 'social statement[s]'. Given within families, another has commented, gifts 'provide continuity in one's life and across generations'. The Gilded Age, a time of particularly challenging social and economic upheaval, underlined the importance of family ties even as it threatened them. Gifts symbolized and helped secure these important relationships. The magazine Harper's gave early voice to the link between gifts and givers in 1856: 'Love is the moral of Christmas ... What are gifts but the proof and signs of love!'

Charity functioned in a related manner, but more as a symbolic, cathartic exercise in selflessness. The same social changes that fostered gift-giving as a means of reinforcing familial and social attachments at the private level also inspired charitable gifts as a way of declaring, if only symbolically, a unity and safety in society that extended even to the most impoverished. It was but one more large step to extend those good feelings and generosity to the homeless, hungry and unemployed, and to target Christmas as the time for the amelioration of those conditions (or at least the assuaging of guilt over them). 'Nowhere in Christendom are the poor remembered at Christmastide so generously as they are in American cities, especially our own,' the New York Tribune contended.

In their comprehension of poverty and its solutions, most Americans moved little beyond Ebenezer Scrooge's personally fulfilling but ultimately narrow patronage. Their sentimentalization of 'worthy paupers' at Christmas time, especially virtuous but destitute women and vagabond children, did not question the essential goodness of the market economy that had, directly and indirectly, produced the poverty. As in Dickens' evocation of charity, the rich man escaped condemnation if he recognized that his money meant little compared to his responsibility to humanity. That truth perceived and acted upon in highly public, seemingly generous fashion, the wealthy man could make his peace.

In this glow of self-congratulation, Americans persisted in seeing poor relief as a matter of individual action to be undertaken on much the same terms as gift-giving within the circle of family. The best and largest gifts, of course, went to those closest to the circle's centre. Lesser gifts, in descending order of value, went to relatives and acquaintances of decreasing importance. The deserving poor, as the outermost members of the larger community, received gifts too, though often the least valuable and certainly the least personal of all. An 1894 advertisement for Best and Company illustrated the hierarchy. It suggested that 'while busy buying "things for Christmas"' the shopper might think of other children who are 'less fortunate than your own'. For them, the store advised that 'a gift of serviceable clothing', chosen from its special group of marked-down goods, 'would be more than welcome'.

This material means of salvation indicated a broader truth about Christmas and its gifts. In a world dominated by commerce, one important ritual of grace was spending money on others. Indeed, charity and gifts, and the increasingly munificent expenditures on them, emphasized the relationship between affluence, which many saw as a reward from God, and Christian duty. Mixing traditional Protestant and American doctrines of individualism with the newer vision of Social Darwinism, many in the Christian community felt that American prosperity was proof and extension of God-ordained success, a link confirmed by Christmas giving.

If gifts became the currency of an almost theological vision of affluence, their transcendent symbol was an updated version of an old saint. Santa Claus, with his fur-trimmed red suit, sackful of toys, reindeer, sleigh and home at the North Pole, emerged as a major folk figure. He first appeared in semi-modern form in the 1820s, in Clement Moore's *An Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas*. By the 1850s and '60s, artists and writers had given wide circulation to the genial and generous American saint that Moore had introduced. Thomas Nast's fanciful Christmas drawings widened the sphere of Santa's rule in the late nineteenth century. Moore had already supplied eight reindeer to pull the sleigh. Nast gave him a workshop and ledgers to record children's conduct. He made him taller and dressed him in red. To this, Nast and others added a home at the North Pole, elves, a wife and even, by some accounts, children.

These amplifications imparted to Santa an ever more human and credible dimension and idealized troublesome aspects of the nation's material and spiritual life. For example, the charming notion that Santa and his tiny helpers supplied all the Christmas toys encoded a highly romantic vision of American capitalism. This Santa reigned without opposition over a vast empire. In a world of practicality, he prospered as a highly successful manufacturer and distributor of toys. From his fur coat to his full girth, he resembled the nation's Gilded Age presidents and its well-fed captains of industry.

Labour conditions were idealized as well. A work force of skilled and reliable elf-labour helped secure Santa's place in the pantheon of American business. These North pole elves were not unlike immigrants working in the nation's sweatshops. Unassimilated, isolated from the rest of society, and undifferentiated

by individual name or character, the best of them worked hard, long and unselfishly; Their existence made manifest a maxim that hard work and a cheerful attitude benefited all.

Yet any analogies that might be drawn between Santa's work and late nineteenth-century capitalism lay enmeshed in paradox, for, in significant was, Santa Claus also represented values at odds with the system. He was a robber baron in reverse. Rather than acquire wealth, he shed it yearly. He never purchased gifts, but (with elf help) made his own to give away without regard for financial profit, rewarding hest the most innocent and naive of all – the children. His world lay at some distance from the calumnies and banalities of everyday life. Santa Claus exemplified the realm of dreams, hopes, wishes and beliefs, not from the realities and compromises necessary to negotiate contemporary life.

So powerful a symbol did Santa become that a number of writers and preachers worried that he had become a substitute and rival to Jesus. Centuries earlier Puritans had expressed the same fear about saints in general. Although the faith not only of Puritan Calvinists but of all Christians had modified over the intervening years, America's Protestant culture still looked upon an iconographic, human-like embodiment of Christmas with great suspicion. An evangelical magazine gave a succinct illustration of the danger when it reported in 1906 that one little girl, when told that Santa did not exist, refused to attend Sabbath School. 'Likely as not this Jesus Christ business will turn out just like Santa Claus', she reasoned.

The fear that children might equate Santa with Jesus or God, however, missed an important point. In an age of science, Santa, while not a religious figure per se, represented a palpable medium through which children and adults in late nineteenth-century America could experience and act upon spiritual impulses. In that age (and ours) of material wealth and rational discourse, the ascetic saints of Christianity held no wide appeal, hut Santa allowed one to give and get and also to believe.

Therein lay the significance of the New York Sun's famous discourse on the spiritual meaning of Santa. In 1897, Virginia O'Hanlon asked a plain question of the editor: 'Is there a Santa Claus?' 'Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus', came the terse reply. The answer, though, was not a patent fib designed to placate a youngster, but an exposition on belief itself. 'Virginia, your little friends are wrong', the editor wrote. 'They have been affected by the scepticism of a sceptical age. They do not believe except they see'. Without Santa, he argued:

... there would he no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence ... Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

The durability of the American Christmas may, in fact, rest on its ability to bring to our material and scientific world, against daunting odds, a broadly shared hint of the sacred. It is in the brief December season that Americans, using the language and objects of their culture, recapture ideals and act according to their better selves. In this sense, the nation's Christmas truly brings together the culture's two most disparate yet similarly unbounded projects – to seek wealth and to secure salvation.