

# The History of Christmas

(as documented by History.Com with minor edits by me)

Christmas is celebrated on December 25 and is both a religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. For two millennia, people around the world have been observing it with traditions and practices that are both religious and secular in nature. Christians celebrate Christmas Day as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a spiritual leader whose teachings form the basis of their religion. Popular customs include exchanging gifts, decorating Christmas trees, attending church, sharing meals with family and friends and, of course, waiting for Santa Claus to arrive. December 25<sup>th</sup>. Christmas Day has been a federal holiday in the United States since 1870.

## How Did Christmas Start?

The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Centuries before the arrival of the man called Jesus, early Europeans celebrated light and birth in the darkest days of winter. Many people rejoiced during the winter solstice when the worst of the winter was behind them and they could look forward to longer days and extended hours of sunlight.



Decorated trees date back to Germany in the Middle Ages with Germany and other European settlers popularizing trees in America by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Ricardo Reitmeyer/Getty Images)

In Scandinavia the Norse celebrated Yule from December 21, the winter solstice, through January. In recognition of the return of the sun, fathers and sons would bring home large logs which they would set on fire. The people would feast until the log



This beloved TV special inspired by Charles Schulz's Peanuts comic strip was first rejected by CBS executives. But when it finally aired on December 9, 1965 almost half of all U.S. TV sets were tuned into the broadcast. (Walt Disney Television/Getty Images)

burned out, which could take as many as 12 days. The Norse believed that each spark from the fire represented a new pig or calf that would be born during the coming year.

The end of December was a perfect time for celebration in most areas of Europe. At that time of year most cattle were slaughtered so they would not have to be fed during the winter. For

many, it was the only time of year when they had a supply of fresh meat. In addition, most wine and beer made during the year was finally fermented and ready for drinking.

In Germany, people honored the pagan god Oden during the mid-winter holiday. Germans were terrified of Oden, as they believed he made nocturnal flights through the sky to observe his people and then decide who would prosper or perish. Because of his presence, many people chose to stay inside.



Poinsettias are America's Christmas flower. These plants are native to Central America and were brought to the U.S. and given their name by the country's first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Botanist Jowl Roberts Poinsett, in the 1820s. (Zoom Travels/Getty Images)

## Saturnalia

In Rome, where winters were not as harsh as those in the far north, Saturnalia—a holiday in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture—was celebrated. Beginning in the week leading up to the winter solstice and continuing for a full month, Saturnalia was a hedonistic time when food and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. For a month slaves would become masters. Peasants were in

command of the city. Business and schools were closed so that everyone could join in the fun.

Also around the time of the winter solstice, Romans observed Juvenalia, a feast honoring the children of Rome. In addition, members of the upper classes often celebrated the birthday of Mithra, the god of the unconquerable sun, on December 25th. It was believed that Mithra, an infant god, was born of a rock. For some Romans Mithra's birthday was the most sacred day of the year.



While leaving treats for Santa and his reindeer dates back to ancient Norse mythology, Americans began to sweeten up to the tradition during the Great Depression in the 1930s. (Hoptocopter/Getty Images)

## Is Christmas Really the Day Jesus Was Born?

In the early years of Christianity Easter was the main holiday and the birth of Jesus was not celebrated. In the fourth century church officials decided to institute the birth of Jesus as a holiday. Unfortunately the Bible does not mention date for his birth - a fact Puritans later pointed out in order to deny the legitimacy of the celebration. Although some evidence suggests that his birth may have occurred in the spring (why would shepherds be herding in the middle of winter?), Pope Julius I chose December 25th. It is commonly believed that the church chose this date in an effort to adopt and absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival. First called the Feast of the Nativity, the

custom spread to Egypt by 432 and to England by the end of the sixth century.

By the end of the eighth century, the celebration of Christmas had extended all the way to Scandinavia. Today, in the Greek and Russian orthodox churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 to 14 days after the 25th. This is because Western churches use the Gregorian Calendar, while Eastern Churches use the Julian Calendar, (which



A favorite of the English (why for crying out loud), fruitcake has been a subject of long-running American holiday jokes. The Colorado town of Manitou Springs holds an annual fruitcake toss Day on January 3<sup>rd</sup>. (Lauri Patterson/Getty Images)



The Salvation Army Bell Ringers tradition started in 1891 when San Francisco Salvation Army Captain Joseph McFee wanted to raise money to offer a free Christmas dinner to 1,000 of the city's most destitute. Please consider dropping your spare change into the bucket and keeping the tradition alive. (Tom Boyle/Getty Images)

is 13 to 14 days behind the Gregorian Calendar). Both Western and Eastern churches celebrate Epiphany or Three Kings Day 12 days after their own respective Christmases. This is the day it is believed that the three wise men finally found Jesus in the manger.

By holding Christmas at the same time as traditional winter solstice festivals, church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced but Christian leaders gave up the ability to dictate how it was celebrated. By

the Middle Ages Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. On Christmas believers attended church then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today's Mardi Gras. Each year, a beggar or student would be crowned the "lord of misrule" and eager celebrants played the part of his subjects. The poor would go to the houses of the rich and demand their best food and drink. If owners failed to comply their visitors would most likely terrorize them with mischief. Christmas became the time of year when the upper classes could repay their real or imagined "debt" to society by entertaining less fortunate citizens.

## When Christmas Was Cancelled

In the early 17th century a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645 they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. By popular demand Charles II was restored to the throne and with him came the return of the popular holiday.



Ugly Christmas sweaters became a party trend in Vancouver, Canada in 2001. (Ryan J Lane/Getty Images)

The pilgrims, English separatists that came to America in 1620, were even more orthodox in their Puritan beliefs than Cromwell. As a result, Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681 the celebration of Christmas was actually outlawed in Boston. Anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. By contrast, in the Jamestown settlement, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all and passed without incident.

After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor, including Christmas. In fact Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.

## **Washington Irving Reinvents Christmas**

It wasn't until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. Americans re-invented Christmas and changed it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia. But what about the 1800s piqued American interest in the holiday?

The early 19th century was a period of class conflict and turmoil. During this time, unemployment was high and gang rioting by the disenchanting classes often occurred during the Christmas season. In 1828, the New York city council instituted the city's first police force in response to a Christmas riot. This catalyzed certain members of the upper classes to begin to change the way Christmas was celebrated in America.

In 1819, best-selling author Washington Irving wrote *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, gent.*, a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. In contrast to the problems faced in American society, the two groups mingled effortlessly. In Irving's mind, Christmas should be a peaceful, warm-hearted holiday bringing groups together across lines of wealth or social status. Irving's fictitious celebrants enjoyed ancient customs, including the crowning of a Lord of Misrule. Irving's book, however, was not based on any holiday celebration he had attended—in fact, many historians say

that Irving's account actually "invented" tradition by implying that it described the true customs of the season.



## **A Christmas Carol**

Also around this time, English author Charles Dickens created the classic holiday tale, *A Christmas Carol*. The story's message-the importance of charity and good will towards all humankind-struck a powerful chord in the United States and England and showed members of Victorian society the benefits of celebrating the holiday.

The family was also becoming less disciplined and more sensitive to the emotional needs of children during the early 1800s. Christmas provided families with a day when they could lavish attention and gifts on their children without appearing to "spoil" them.

As Americans began to embrace Christmas as a perfect family holiday, old customs were unearthed. People looked toward recent immigrants and Catholic and Episcopalian churches to see how the day should be celebrated. In the next hundred years Americans built a Christmas tradition all their own that included pieces of many other customs including decorating trees, sending holiday cards and gift-giving.

Although most families quickly bought into the idea that they were celebrating Christmas how it had been done for centuries, Americans had really re-invented a holiday to fill the cultural needs of a growing nation.

## **Who Invented Santa Claus?**

The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back to a monk named St. Nicholas who was born in Turkey around 280 A.D. St. Nicholas gave away all of his inherited wealth and traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick, becoming known as the protector of children and sailors

St. Nicholas first entered American popular culture in the late 18th century in New York, when Dutch families gathered to honor the anniversary of the death of “Sint Nikolaas” (Dutch for Saint Nicholas), or “Sinter Klaas” for short. “Santa Claus” draws his name from this abbreviation.

In 1822, Episcopal minister Clement Clarke Moore wrote a Christmas poem called “*An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas*,” more popularly known today by its first line: “T’was The Night Before Christmas.” The poem depicted Santa Claus as a jolly man who flies from home to home on a sled driven by reindeer to deliver toys.

The iconic version of Santa Claus as a jolly man in red with a white beard and a sack of toys was immortalized in 1881, when political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore's poem to create the image of Old Saint Nick we know today.



## Some Other Christmas Facts

- Each year, 30-35 million real Christmas trees are sold in the United States alone. There are about 21,000 Christmas tree growers in the United States, and trees usually grow for about 15 years before they are sold.
- In the Middle Ages, Christmas celebrations were rowdy and raucous—a lot like today's Mardi Gras parties.
- The first eggnog made in the United States was consumed in Captain John Smith's 1607 Jamestown settlement.
- Poinsettia plants are named after Joel R. Poinsett, an American minister to Mexico, who brought the red-and-green plant from Mexico to America in 1828.
- The Salvation Army has been sending Santa Claus-clad donation collectors into the streets since the 1890s.
- Rudolph, "the most famous reindeer of all," was the product of Robert L. May's imagination in 1939. The copywriter wrote a poem about the reindeer to help lure customers into the Montgomery Ward department store.
- Construction workers started the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree tradition in 1931.