

## **Christmas in America in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century A Special Edition of "The Making of a Nation"**

From VOA Learning English, welcome to The Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning American English. I'm Steve Ember. Today Shirley Griffith and I present a special program on Christmas traditions in the United States during the first half of the 19th century.

During this period, Christmas was a very different kind of holiday than it is today. There was no set way of celebrating the day, which was not yet an official holiday. Communities around the country honored the day in different ways. Some observed Christmas as an important Christian religious day honoring the birth of Jesus. Others celebrated the day with parties, music, drinking and eating. And, some communities did not celebrate the day at all.

But, it was during this period that Americans began to reinvent the holiday by combining ancient Christmas traditions from different cultures with modern American influences. You can think about the historical people we have been talking about, Andrew Jackson, Martin van Buren and others, and the ways they too might have celebrated Christmas.

In 1819, the popular American writer Washington Irving wrote a series of five essays published in a book called "The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent."

The essays describe a wealthy British landowner who invites his farm workers into his home to celebrate Christmas. The landowner recreates a traditional Christmas as it would have been celebrated in the distant past. Irving praised this looking back to ancient traditions. He liked the idea of different levels of society coming together to enjoy a festive and peaceful holiday. Washington Irving seemed to express concern about the lack of such unifying Christmas traditions in modern America.

Penne Restad wrote a book "Christmas in America: A History." It shows how Americans began to slowly shape Christmas into a unifying national holiday during the first half of the 19th century. She describes how Christmas had different meanings for Americans who came from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Many immigrants brought Christmas traditions from their own countries.

Religion played a big role in how an American might celebrate the holiday. Calvinist Christians banned the celebration of Christmas. But groups such as Episcopalians and Moravians honored the day with religious services and seasonal decorations.

By mid-century, Christian groups began to ignore their religious differences over the meaning of Christmas and honored the day in special ways.

Christmas became an important time for families to celebrate at home. More and more Christian Americans also began to follow the European traditions of Christmas trees and giving gifts. Christians believed that the tree represented Jesus and was also a sign of new beginnings. German immigrants brought their tradition of putting lights, sweets and toys on the branches of evergreen trees placed in their homes.

This tradition of setting up a Christmas tree soon spread to many American homes. So did the practice of giving people presents. As these traditions increased in popularity, the modern trade and business linked to Christmas also grew.

As Christmas became more popular, some states declared the day a state holiday. Louisiana was the first state to make the move in 1837. By 1860, 14 other states had followed. It was not until 1870 that President Ulysses Grant made Christmas a federal holiday.

Americans already knew old Christmas songs that came from England and other areas of Europe. But many new American Christmas songs started to become popular. For example, in eighteen forty-nine, a religious leader from Massachusetts wrote the words to "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." The song "Jingle Bells" appeared seven years later. And, a year later, a religious leader in Williamsport, Pennsylvania wrote the song "We Three Kings of Orient Are."

And of course, no discussion of Christmas would be complete without talking about one of the holiday's most famous representations, Santa Claus.

This character is based on the story of Saint Nicholas, a Christian holy person believed to have lived in the third century. Saint Nicholas became known as a protector of children. In his role as a Christmas hero, different cultures have given him different names. These include Sinterklaas, Kris Kringle and Father Christmas. But for most Americans his most popular name would become Santa Claus.

In the 19th century, many Dutch immigrants living in the United States celebrated the feast of Saint Nicholas on December sixth. Saint Nicholas was especially important to New Yorkers because of their history as a Dutch colony. In 1809, Washington Irving published his "History of New York." It lists Saint Nicholas as the patron saint of New Yorkers. He describes the saint wearing a low hat, large pants, and smoking a pipe. Does this description sound familiar?

In 1822, an American professor named Clement Clarke Moore wrote a poem that redefined the image of Saint Nicholas. It was called "Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas." He did not expect it to be published. He wrote it as a Christmas present for his young children. In recent years, experts have questioned whether Moore actually wrote the poem.

Some believe it was written by Henry Livingston, a map maker in New York who wrote and published funny poems in his spare time.

But whoever wrote this classic poem, it has since become a favorite around the world. This poem combines the traditions of Santa Claus, seasonal decorations and gift-giving that have come to define Christmas in America. We leave you with Clement Clarke Moore's poem, popularly known as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas."

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.  
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,  
In hopes that Saint Nicholas soon would be there.

The children were nestled all snug in their beds,  
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads.  
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,  
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap.

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,  
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.  
Away to the window I flew like a flash,  
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow  
Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below.  
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,  
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer.

With a little old driver, so lively and quick,  
I knew in a moment it must be Saint Nick.  
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,  
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name!

"Now Dasher! Now, Dancer! Now, Prancer and Vixen!  
On, Comet! On, Cupid! On Donner and Blitzen!  
To the top of the porch! To the top of the wall!  
Now dash away! Dash away! Dash away all!"

As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,  
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky.  
So up to the house-top the coursers they flew,  
With the sleigh full of toys, and Saint Nicholas, too.

And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof  
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.  
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,  
Down the chimney Saint Nicholas came with a bound.

He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,  
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot.  
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,  
And he looked like a peddler, just opening his pack.

His eyes -- how they twinkled! His dimples how merry!  
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!  
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,  
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow.

The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,  
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.  
He had a broad face and a little round belly,  
That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly!  
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,  
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself!  
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,  
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,  
And filled all the stockings, then turned with a jerk.  
And laying his finger aside of his nose,  
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose!

He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,  
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.  
But I heard him exclaim, `ere he drove out of sight,  
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night!"



Jim Tedder read 'Twas the Night Before Christmas. I'm Steve Ember, with Shirley Griffith. Join us again next week for The Making of a Nation. And happy holidays from all of us in VOA Learning English!