

## Thomas Nast and His Civil War Christmas Illustrations

Thomas Nast made many illustrations dealing with various aspects of the Civil War. Nast was a Radical Republican, a liberal, progressive, nationalistic, and member of the Protestant wing of his party. Nast was a fierce support for the Union cause, skillfully using allegory and melodrama in his art to support the cause he believed was just. He was a freelance illustrator until he took on a position with *Harper's Weekly* in the summer of 1862. This position made him the first cartoonist to have the advantage of a weekly publication in a magazine with national circulation.<sup>1</sup> Some of Civil War illustrations are associated with Christmas, which is the focus of this article.

Thomas Nast was born in Landau, Germany, on September 26, 1840. His father had sent his wife and their small son (Thomas) and daughter to New York City in 1846, and he then joined them in 1849. Thomas Nast studied art with Theodore Kaufmann in 1854. At the age of 15, he was hired as a reportorial artist for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. In 1859 he moved to the *New York Illustrated News* which sent him in February 1860 to London to cover a major prizefight. In the summer of 1862, he secured a position with *Harper's Weekly*.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Nast created a famous illustration for *Harper's Weekly* in which he portrayed a wife separated from her soldier husband on Christmas Eve 1862. The wife is at the window, on her knees in earnest prayer, looking up at the night sky, obviously distressed about the absence of her husband. In the background can be seen a small bed with her two children in it. On the wall, a picture of the woman's husband can be seen hanging. On the inset image on the right, the woman's husband can be seen sitting with his rifle around a lonely campfire. In his hand is a



small album with photographs of his wife and children. He is obviously lonesome, missing his wife and kids on a cold winter night. Surrounding these two main images are a variety of scenes. In the upper left corner, an image of Santa Claus can be seen. Santa is crawling into a chimney. In the lower left is an image of soldiers marching in the snow. The upper right corner has another image of Santa, in a sleigh, being pulled by reindeer. This is one of the earliest images of this popular tradition of Christmas. The lower right corner shows a ship being tossed in the sea. The lower center shows an image of the graves of soldiers lost in the war.<sup>3</sup>



In his Christmas 1863 illustration for *Harper's Weekly*, Nast has a number of captivating inset images. On the left is an image of little children asleep in bed, with Santa Claus coming from the fireplace with a bag of gifts on his shoulder. This image represents the original presentation of Santa as we know him today. The center image shows a Civil War soldier, on furlough, coming home for Christmas. The family is ecstatic, and is celebrating his return with hugs and kisses. To the right, the children can be seen opening their presents. Stockings can be seen hanging on the fireplace.<sup>4</sup>

The January 3, 1863 edition of *Harper's Weekly* shows Santa Claus visiting a Civil War Union camp. In the background is a sign that reads "Welcome Santa Claus." The illustration shows Santa handing out gifts to children and soldiers. One soldier receives a new pair of socks, which would no doubt be one of the most wonderful things a soldier of the time could receive. Santa is pictured sitting on his sleigh, which is being pulled by reindeer. Santa has a long white beard, a furry hat, collar and coat. Perhaps most interesting about this print is the special gift in

Santa's hand. Santa is holding a dancing puppet of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States. Davis appears to have a string tied around his neck, so Santa appears to be lynching Jefferson Davis. This is Nast's first published picture of Santa Claus.<sup>5</sup>



Probably the most touching and moving Abraham Lincoln print to come out of the Civil War era was Thomas Nast's "The Union Christmas." Printed on December 31, 1864, the print shows President Lincoln standing at the door, inviting the Southern rebels to come in from the cold and snow, and rejoin the Union. The picture shows a large banquet table with empty chairs labeled Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and so forth. The print has a large banner that reads, "The Union Christmas Dinner, Peace on Earth and Good Will Toward Men." The print has four insets, one showing Robert E. Lee offering his surrender to Grant (something that actually did happen a few months later). A second inset is captioned, "Lay Down your Arms and You Will be Welcome," which shows Rebel Soldiers being welcomed back into the Union. The third inset presents the Rebels as the prodigal son returning home, and the fourth inset shows a soldier bowing down to accept a pardon from Lady Liberty. Despite all the pain and loss of the Civil War, in this print we see that by the end of 1864, there were signs of hope. Nast creates this image of hope by showing a country tired of war, and willing to invite their former countrymen to once again sit at the table of fellowship and Union.<sup>6</sup>



As has been mentioned several times, Thomas Nast is credited with creating our popular image of Santa Claus. In an 1865 Harper's Weekly illustration captioned "A Merry Christmas to All," featured is a portrait that we all today would recognize as Santa Claus. The image of Santa is surrounded by smaller images showing the typical Christmas traditions of the 1860s.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>1</sup> "Thomas Nast Biography," <http://cartoons.osu.edu/nast/bio.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Civil War Christmas," [http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Civil\\_War\\_Christmas.htm](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Civil_War_Christmas.htm)

<sup>4</sup> "Thomas Nast Santa Claus," [http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Thomas\\_Nast\\_Santa\\_Claus.htm](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Thomas_Nast_Santa_Claus.htm)

<sup>5</sup> "Original Santa Claus," [http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Original\\_Santa\\_Claus.htm](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Original_Santa_Claus.htm)

<sup>6</sup> "The Union Christmas," [http://www.sonofthesouth.net/nast\\_Union\\_Christmas.htm](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/nast_Union_Christmas.htm)

<sup>7</sup> "Original Santa Claus Print," [http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Nast\\_Santa\\_Claus.htm](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Nast_Santa_Claus.htm)