

Christmas During the Civil War

Written by

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Many of today's American Christmas customs are rooted in the early 19th century. Perhaps ironically many of these customs came into maturity during the Civil War, when violence, chaos, and staggering personal losses seemed likely to drown out the choruses of "Peace on Earth."¹ Christmas was celebrated in both the United States and the Confederate States, although the day did not become an official holiday until five years after the war ended.² For a nation torn by civil war, Christmas was observed with conflicting emotions. Nineteenth century Americans had embraced all the trappings of Victorian English Christmas that had moved the holiday from the private and religious realms to a public celebration. Christmas, however, also made the heartache for lost loved ones more acute. As the Civil War dragged on, deprivation replaced bounteous meals and familiar faces were missing from the family dinner table. Soldiers used to "bringing in the tree" and caroling in church were instead scavenging for firewood and singing drinking songs around the campfire. So, the holiday celebration most associated with family and home became a contradiction—joyful, sad, religious, boisterous and subdued.³

President Abraham Lincoln and Christmas Day

On Christmas Day in 1861, President Lincoln spent hours trying to legitimize the capture of John Slidell and James Murray Mason, two Confederate representatives to Great Britain and France (the Trent Affair). That night he hosted a Christmas party.

In 1862, President Lincoln visited injured soldiers at various hospitals.

In 1863, many Union soldiers received gifts "From Tad Lincoln," as Tad (one of Lincoln's sons) had been deeply moved by the plight of Union soldiers when he was taken by his father to see them. The gifts were mostly books and clothing.

Perhaps the best Christmas gift President Lincoln received during the Civil War was the news he received on December 22, 1864—that General William Tecumseh Sherman had captured Savannah, Georgia the previous day.⁴

Military Activities on Christmas Day

The military actions of the Civil War did not stop on Christmas Day. In 1861, a blockade runner was caught by the Union navy, and there were two skirmishes in Virginia and Maryland.

In 1862, there were several skirmishes, including the famous Christmas Raid of Confederate General John Hunt Morgan in Kentucky. On that single day, Morgan's men destroyed everything they possibly could of the improvements that the Louisville & Nashville Railroad had made along 35 miles of track from Bacon Creek to Lebanon Junction. Also, there was a military execution for desertion that the soldiers were forced to witness.

In 1863, Union forces destroyed Confederate salt works at Bear Inlet, North Carolina. There also were several skirmishes between Confederate artillery and the Union navy on the Stono River and near Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1864, Confederate forces repelled the Union assault of sixty warships on Fort Fisher. Also, in the western theater of the war, there were several skirmishes.⁵

Modern-Day Holiday Traditions Became Commonplace

Many holiday traditions were enjoyed today, including Christmas trees, Santa Claus, gift-giving, caroling, and holiday feasting became commonplace during the Civil War. Christmas trees had become popular in the decade before the Civil War, and in the early 1860s, many families were beginning to decorate them. Illustrators working for the national weekly publications helped to popularize the practice by putting decorated table-top Christmas trees in their drawings. On the home front, the homes were mostly decorated with different kinds of pines, holly, ivy and mistletoe. Most trees were small and sat on a table. The decorations were mostly home-made, such as strings of dried fruit, popcorn, and pine cones.

It was only a matter of time before the Christmas tree made its way into military camps. Alfred Bellard of the 5th New Jersey remarked about the arrival of the newly-popular Christmas decoration to his camp along the lower Potomac River when he said, "In order to make it look much like Christmas as possible, a small tree was stuck up in front of our tent, decked off with hard tack and pork, in lieu of cakes and oranges, etc."⁶

Much of our current depiction of Santa Claus can be traced to the *Harper's Weekly* illustrations of Thomas Nast. In his famous illustration of January 3, 1863, (see picture in section dealing with Thomas Nast Cartoons and Other Propaganda) Nast presented an image of Christmas Eve, containing in the upper left corner of the picture an image of Santa Claus crawling into a chimney. In the January 3, 1863 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, Nast showed a large drawing of Santa Claus visiting a Union camp. (see picture in section dealing with Thomas Nast Cartoons and Other Propaganda) In his illustration for the December 26, 1863, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, Nast depicted Santa Claus with a bag of gifts on his back, walking past two children sleeping in bed. His 1865 illustration of Santa Claus shows him basically as the image of Santa Claus that endures today.⁷

By 1863, the union blockade of the Southern coasts made it nearly impossible for Santa Claus to visit homes in the South. The scarcity of goods and the resulting high prices put both store-bought presents and raw materials for home-made gifts out of the financial reach of many Southern consumers. Quite a few mothers explained to their children that even Santa Claus would not be able to run the formidable blockade. In his book *We Were Marching on Christmas Day*, author Kevin Rawlings tells of one little southern girl named Sallie Brock Putnam who plotted the course that Santa Claus would have to take to avoid the Union blockade.⁸

Sometimes, however, Santa Claus worked behind the scenes of wartime savagery to bring a bit of Christmas cheer to those who otherwise had little reason to celebrate. Following General William T. Sherman's capture of Savannah, Georgia on December 21, 1864, about 90 Michigan soldiers and their captain gave a token of charity to Southern civilians living outside the city. On Christmas Day, they loaded several wagons full of food and other supplies and distributed the items about the ravaged Georgia countryside. "The destitute Southerners thanked the jolly Union 'Santa Clauses' as the wagons pulled away under the power of mules that had tree-branch 'antlers' strapped to their heads to turn them into makeshift reindeer."⁹

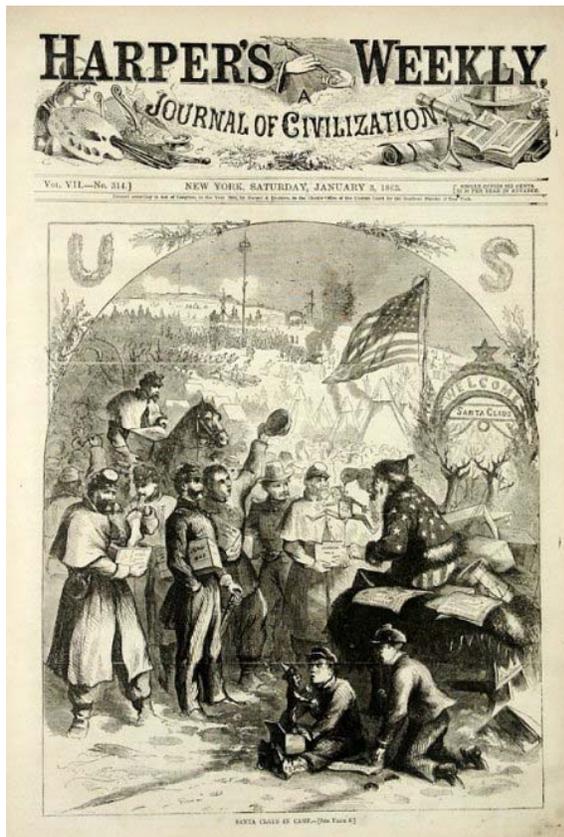
Christmas carols were sung both at home and in the military camps. Some of the most popular ones were "Silent Night" (1818), "Oh Come All Ye Faithful" (1751), "Deck the Halls" (1700s), "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" (1840), "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" (1850), "Jingle Bells" (1857), "We Three Kings of Orient Are" (1857), and "Up on the Housetop" (1860).¹⁰

Thomas Nast Cartoons and Other Propaganda

Thomas Nast used his editorial cartoons for *Harper's Weekly* as propaganda promoting

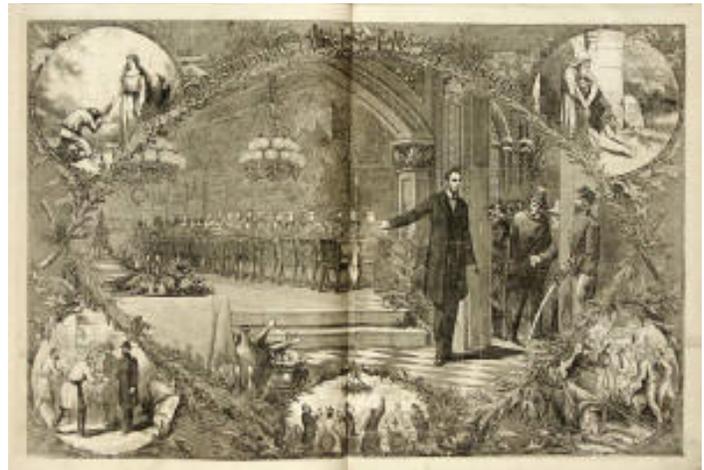


the Union cause. The one he did for Christmas Eve 1862, which appeared in the January 3, 1863, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, shows a wife on one side praying through a window and on the other side shows her husband on the battlefield, also in prayer. (This is the same one that shows a small Santa Claus at the top left crawling down a chimney.) The cover for that same issue shows Santa Claus among the troops. President Lincoln had asked Thomas Nast to do an illustration of Santa Claus with some Union troops as a means of raising soldiers' morale during the holiday season.



The white-bearded Santa is giving gifts such as socks to Union soldiers, while also holding a Jefferson Davis (President of the Confederate States) dancing puppet with a rope tied around its neck to insinuate perfectly a lynching.

The Thomas Nast cartoon for Christmas 1864 was more conciliatory. It showed President Lincoln inviting Confederate soldiers into a warm lodge hall full of merriment. It symbolized Lincoln's wish that the rebellious southern states would rejoin the northern states.



These are just some of the wonderful cartoons that Thomas Nast drew to help the Union cause. It is not surprising that President Lincoln called Nast's use of Santa Claus "the best recruiting sergeant the North ever had."

Nast was not the only one to use Christmas as a propaganda tool. On the Union side, *The New York Herald* also engaged in propaganda. One illustration in the paper showed a Santa Claus fuming that he could not reach southern children, due to the northern blockade. On the Confederate side, *The Richmond Examiner* described Santa to its young readers as "a Dutch toy

monger” who was a New York/New England “scrub” and Hottentot that had nothing to do with traditional Virginian celebrations of Christmas.

Even though the Civil War was over, Thomas Nast had a drawing in the Christmas 1865 issue of *Harper’s Weekly* depicting the heads of several Confederate generals at Ulysses S. Grant’s feet in an image that centered around Santa. After the war, Nast purposely made the North Pole the home of Saint Nick so that no one else could use him for nationalistic propaganda like Nast himself did.¹¹

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and “Christmas Bells”

The great poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow endured deep despair during the Civil War. It started in 1861 with the untimely death of his wife Fanny. That Christmas, he wrote, “How inexpressibly sad are all holidays.” On Christmas Day 1862, he wrote in his journal, “A merry Christmas’ say the children, but that is no more for me.” Things got worse when Longfellow learned in 1863 that his oldest son Charles, a lieutenant in the Army of the Potomac, had been severely wounded in battle. His deep personal despair was reflective of the despair and loss suffered by so many Americans, both in the North and in the South, during the long, terrible Civil War. Shortly after a visit to his son Charles, who was still struggling to recover from his war injuries on Christmas Day 1864, Longfellow penned the words to his poem “Christmas Bells.” This poem was later put to music and became known as “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” Some of the stanzas of his poem illustrate well his despair:

...
And in despair I bowed my head
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

...
Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound the carols drowned
Of peace on earth good will to men.

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn, the households born
Of peace on earth, good will to men.¹²

In Their Own Words—Comments Made by Civil War Soldiers

Corporal J.C. Williams, Co. B, 14th Vermont Infantry, wrote this comment on Christmas Day 1862: “This is Christmas, and my mind wanders back to that home made lonesome by my absence, while far away from the peace and quietude of civil life to undergo the hardships of the camp, and may be the battle field, I think of the many lives that are endangered, and hope that the time will soon come when peace, with its innumerable blessings, shall once more restore our country to happiness and prosperity.”

Lt. Col. Frederic Cavada, captured at Gettysburg and writing about Christmas 1863 in Libby Prison in Richmond said: “The north wind comes reeling in fitful gushes through the iron

bars, and jingles a sleighbell in the prisoner's ear, and puffs in his pale face with a breath suggestively odorous of eggnog...Christmas Day! A day which was made for smiles, not sighs—for laughter, not tears—for the hearth, not prison.”

Tally Simpson wrote this to his sister: “This is Christmas Day. The sun shines feeble through a thin cloud, the air is mild and pleasant, a gentle breeze is making music through the leaves of the lofty pines that stand near our bivouac. All is quiet and still and that very stillness recalls some sad and painful thoughts. The day, one year ago, how many thousand families, gay and joyous, celebrating merry Christmas, drinking health to absent members of their family and sending upon the wings of love and affection long, deep, and sincere wishes for their safe return to the loving ones at home, but today are clad in the deepest mourning in memory to some lost and loved member of their circle...When will this war end? Will another Christmas roll around and find us all wintering in camp? Oh! That peace may soon be restored to our young but dearly beloved country and that we may all meet again in happiness.”

On Christmas Day 1864, the Confederate General Gordon wrote: “The one worn-out railroad running to the far South could not bring us half enough necessary supplies; and even if it could have transported Christmas boxes of good things, the people at home were too depleted to send them.”¹³

On Christmas Day 1863, Sergeant John L. Hoster, Co. A., 148th NY (the author's great-grandfather), who was serving an extended period of non-combat duty in the Fort Norfolk, Virginia area, wrote in his diary: “Cool but pleasant. Corpl. Spaid, Dick Bachman, the orderly and I had a splendid Christmas dinner today, consisting of roast goose, mashed potatoes, good gravy, bread and butter. The goose was bought in market yesterday by F. Spaid for \$1.25, stuffed with crackers and oysters and roasted by Mrs. Duncan. We had it served up on a fine large platter, borrowed, bought or stolen for the occasion. Had a fine supper on the remains. Flag of truce ship, New York, came here today and took away a few prisoners to City Point. A schooner also came today with several new pontoons which were unloaded at the dock.” The next Christmas, however, Sergeant Hoster was a prisoner in a Confederate prison camp and had this to say: “Cloudy, disagreeable weather. Had barely time to dispose of our morning meal before we had to go to the other side of the creek to be counted again. Dull Christmas. One year ago today I had the pleasure of sitting down to a fine roast goose with all the necessary accompaniments to make it both agreeable to the eyes and palate. This was in Corpl. Spaid's little house at Fort Norfolk, Va. After we had fully satisfied ourselves, Fred produced a box of segars (sic) and we enjoyed a pleasant smoke. How different my circumstances then and now. For dinner today (eaten at dark) sweet potato soup and meal dumplings flavored with a small beef bone with a thimble full of fat that William procured through the kindness of Frank Cook, a friend of his that works outside. It commenced raining tonight after dark. Three years ago tonight Miss Clark, Miss Spaid and myself spent the evening at John Spaid, Jr. at Canoga and had a pleasant time.”¹⁴ Fortunately, John L. Hoster would be back home in Canoga for Christmas 1865.

Conclusion

Like what was true of soldiers during the Civil War, we presently have many soldiers—male and female—serving in war-like conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan who are separated from their loved ones. Given such present-day technology as the cellular telephone, and the internet, it is hard for us, however, to appreciate just how difficult it must have been for Civil War soldiers to be separated from their loved ones at Christmas.

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- ¹ “Christmas During the Civil War” http://dburgin.tripod.com/cw_xmas/cwarsmas2.html
- ² “Christmas in the American Civil War” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_in_the_American_Civil_War
- ³ “Ought it not be a Merry Christmas?” <http://oha.alexandriava.gov/fortward/special-sections/christmas/>
- ⁴ “Christmas in the American Civil War”
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ “Christmas During the Civil War” (dburgin)
- ⁷ “Santa Claus Pictures” http://www.sonofthesouth.net/Original_Santa_Claus.htm
- ⁸ “Christmas in the American Civil War”
- ⁹ “Christmas During the Civil War” (dburgin)
- ¹⁰ “Christmas in the American Civil War”
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² “Christmas During the Civil War” http://www.premiumchristmastree.com/a39/Christmas-During-the-Civil-War/article_infor...
- ¹³ “Christmas During the Civil War” (dburgin)
- ¹⁴ John L. Hoster, *Adventures of a Soldier* (typed transcript of the diaries kept by John L. Hoster while he served in Co. B, 148th NY Volunteers), pp 51 and 123-24.