



Santa Claus - Our Nation's Jolly Old Elf

By Gloria Swift, BGES Historian

Did you know that the American Civil War was responsible for the modern-day Santa Claus? He was created in January 1863 by editorial cartoonist Thomas Nast, an illustrator for the popular publication, Harper's Weekly. And Santa was definitely on the side of the Union! At least during the war.

In the mid-19th century, Christmas was on its way to becoming an all-out holiday with presents and festivities adding to the quieter observances of religious services. America was already very familiar with the poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas" or as it is more widely known, "Twas the Night Before Christmas" written by Clement Clarke Moore in 1823. Twenty years later, in 1843, Charles Dickens published his own popular book about the holiday, "A Christmas Carol".

It was into this era that Thomas Nast would soon find himself creating a character that was destined to become one of the most iconic figures of the holiday. Born in 1846 in Germany, Nast was just six years old when he came to the United States. Attending school in New York City, he was not exceptional at studies, but showed a great passion for drawing. At age 14, he took lessons with private artists in New York and later studied at the National Academy of Design.

Nast was hired in 1859 as a staff artist for the ever popular publication *Harper's Weekly*. No matter the event or political wind, Nast was always ready with a quick and witty pen. Most importantly, he had an amazing ability to grasp the emotion of the reading audience with his skillful drawings. When the war broke out in 1861, Nast was eager to promote the Union cause with his political cartoons.

By December 1862, battlefield efforts had not been going particularly well for the North. Just a few weeks earlier, the battle of Fredericksburg in Virginia had taken place. The North was still reeling over the loss of nearly 13,000 men killed, wounded or missing. For the upcoming January 3, 1863 issue, Nast wanted to create something special, something to boost morale; not only for the Union cause, but also for the soldiers and their families separated by war.

Nast's first image of Santa appeared on the front cover of the Harper's Weekly January 3, 1863, issue. Called "Santa in Camp", Santa is shown visiting a Union camp in Fredericksburg handing out letters, papers and presents. He appears as a very patriotic Santa wearing stars and stripes while sitting in his sleigh pulled by reindeer. Even though the men Santa is visiting with have recently been in battle, they look refreshed and tidy and ready to go on to continue the Union cause.



A second Nast drawing in the same issue received a two-page spread. Entitled "Christmas Eve 1862", this one tugged at the heartstrings. The image shows a wife at home with the children. While the children sleep, she looks out at the sky and prays for her husband's safe return. Her husband-soldier is shown to the right. Alone on picket duty and huddled around a fire, he gazes at his wife's photo that he holds in his hand. Santa is not as obvious in this image, but we see him at the top left and top right of the main images. First, we see him climbing down a chimney to deliver presents and then we watch as he flies away in his sleigh.



Christmas 1863 brought the soldier home on furlough to his family. This one highlights the welcome home scene, Christmas Eve with Santa delivering presents, and Christmas morning. Nast skipped the Santa scene for Harper's Weekly in 1864 but brought him back in 1865 with "Merry Christmas to All". From then until 1886, when Nast stopped working for the publication, Santa appeared every year in Harper's Weekly.

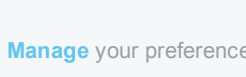


Nast's Santa changed a bit as circumstances and time warranted. However, one thing really didn't change – the round physical appearance of Santa. Prior to Nast, drawings of St. Nicholas (or Santa) appeared as someone tall and thin. Nast seemed to bring Santa to life; in fact, he must have, given the iconic status with which this image has passed down through the pages of time. One might even say that Thomas Nast really put a lot of himself into creating his Santa. It wouldn't be wrong to think that - for you see - Santa's portly figure was fashioned after his own!

Merry Christmas!



Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

P.O. Box 1176
Chatham, VA | 24531 US

This email was sent to .
To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma