

## SOME CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

*This article is the text of an illustrated presentation given at the Chapter's Christmas function last year.*

The rejection by many Americans, especially the Puritans who founded New England, of the rowdy European-style Christmas celebrations began to change in the nineteenth century, when the holiday evolved into a family-centred celebration of the birth of Jesus.

By the time of the Civil War, many of the traditions that modern America associates with Christmas had been established in the United States, including decorating Christmas trees, giving gifts and anticipating the arrival of Saint Nicholas or, as he became increasingly called, Santa Claus. By the 1850s, observers were complaining of the commercialisation of Christmas, as newspapers ran countless ads for Christmas sales of toys, food treats, and virtually every other imaginable item.

The practice of sending Christmas cards and of spending ever increasing amounts of money on lavish gifts would grow with the American middle class after the war ended. Christmas became a federal holiday in 1870, but Christmas celebrations would be familiar to modern Americans by the time the War began.

But the Civil War changed Christmas for countless children and parents. There are references to Christmases during the War in autobiographies of Americans who had grown up during the war, in children's magazines, and in the popular illustrated weekly magazines. Indeed, this was the period during which the prolific political caricaturist, illustrator and cartoonist **Thomas Nast** (pictured below) was fine-tuning the modern image of a rotund, jolly, red-clad Santa of the 1860s.



The focus of this presentation is on the work of Nast and other cartoonists of his time - how they portrayed in the print media of the day aspects of Christmas for Americans during the Civil War. These are aspects, which have continued to be part of America's Christmas traditions up until the present day.

Thomas Nast was a German immigrant working as a writer and artist at *Harper's Weekly*. When he was tasked to provide a drawing to accompany Clement Clark Moore's poem, '*'Twas the Night Before Christmas'*, he called on his Bavarian childhood to create our modern image of Santa Claus. His cherubic Santa, thin by today's standards, was depicted bringing gifts of *Harper's Weekly* to the soldiers, making Nast the first to combine imagery (Santa) and commercialism (selling *Harper's Weekly*) into the American marketplace.

Santa brought children gifts and gifts were always homemade. Children were satisfied to receive just small hand-carved toys, cakes, oranges or apples. Many Southern diaries tell the story of Santa running the blockaded ports in Dixie to fill children's stockings with what little the parents could spare to make the day special for them. Even General Sherman's soldiers played Santa to impoverished Southern children by attaching tree-branch antlers to their horses and bringing food to the starving families in the war-ravaged Georgia countryside.

It was during the 1850s and 1860s that the magazine ***Harper's Weekly*** provided a comprehensive coverage of life of American society, particularly during the Civil War and it is from this source that most of the examples will be drawn. Presented below are a number of Nast's illustrations:



This cartoon is the very serious issue of the separation of family members during the War. Indeed, many of Nast's cartoons had either a serious basis to them or an important underpinning social message.

The next cartoon, overleaf, is from 1863 and is the first attempt by Nast to use Santa in his cartoons. It is noted here that Santa is giving presents to Union Troops and that his red costume, that finally was to become the traditional one, had not yet appeared. In this cartoon, Santa is dressed in the colours of the Union Flag.



You will be aware that Nast's leanings in his cartoons were firmly on the Union side of the conflict. Here's another one of his early drawings of Santa, with the focus on the children:

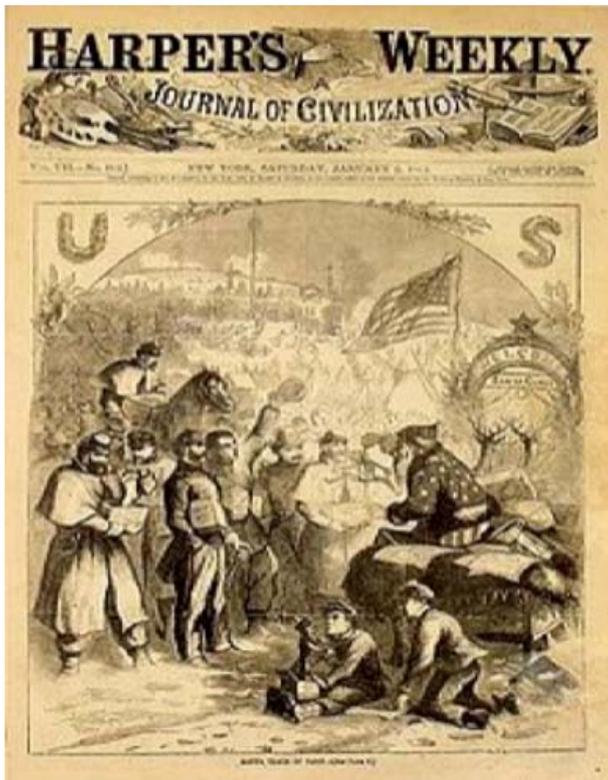


In the next cartoon we see President Lincoln welcoming some Confederate soldiers to a formal dinner in a cartoon titled *'The Thanksgiving Dinner'*. It will be noted that this cartoon is constructed in the common genre of the time, being rich in both scope and detail.



Shifting the focus of the cartoons, to look at Nast's fine-tuning of the modern day Santa Claus into the rotund, jolly red clad Santa who we know today, here is a series of caricatures, the last one not appearing in 1881, well after the end of the War.

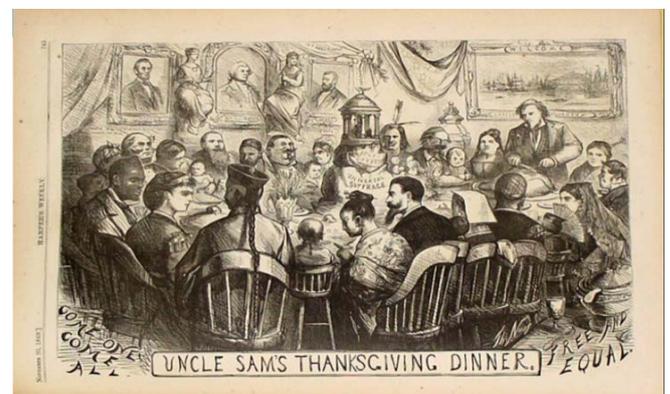
By Christmas 1862, Nast had allied Santa firmly in the Union's camp, as seen by the cover of Harper's Weekly of January 3, 1863. This cartoon, which was presented previously in this article, was the first step by Nast in creating our modern Santa Claus.



It is interesting to note that Nast's Union bias shows clearly in this cartoon, with the boy in the bottom right hand corner being equipped with a sword, drum, kepi and haversack with 'US' prominently displayed.

Then there is the cartoon, titled 'Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner', one of biting social comment and shows, possibly, that Nast was a man ahead of his time.

There are other Nast's cartoons that demonstrate the scope of his Civil War political and social commentary. The first of these is a large detailed picture in the formal style of the day, titled 'Christmas 1863', which shows the impact of the War on families, particularly that relating to children.



It might stretch the imagination that in a 19<sup>th</sup> Century dinner party, comprising guests of Afro-American, Chinese, Indian, Native American and European backgrounds there would be support for the notion of -

***'Free and Equal'.***

There is, also, the cartoon showing the family aspect of Christmas that was important during the War. Here we have children opening their presents on Christmas morning, as seen in this 1864 edition of Harper's Weekly.

Turning to other prominent cartoonists of the time, there was a focus on the lonely times for soldiers at the front, their receiving presents at Christmas time and the games they played in camp when there was no fighting. The next three cartoons show each of these activities.

The following cartoon depicts men of the 5<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire Regiment engaged in a hilarious greased pig chase as their Christmas entertainment.



The next cartoon is a lonely camp scene from Harper's Weekly titled, A Christmas Dinner:



A CHRISTMAS DINNER.

The final cartoon of this group of three is by artist Winslow Homer and depicts soldiers' joy at receiving holiday boxes from home in this 1861 Harper's Weekly illustration:



John Cook  
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No presentation of the Christmas traditions during the Civil War would be complete without mention of the most famous gift of the War. General William Tecumseh Sherman presented the captured city of Savannah to President Lincoln in 1864. Who can forget General Sherman's words contained in his telegram, to the President:

*To his Excellency, President Lincoln,*

*I beg to present you as a Christmas gift the city of Savannah with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, and also about twenty-five thousand bales of cotton,*

*W T Sherman  
Maj-Genl*

The gift, of course, was not the guns, the ammunition or the bales of cotton, but the beginning of the end of the War. This event was portrayed in the illustration where Sherman is the host at a celebratory dinner in Savannah following his victory.



The cartoons and illustrations depicting Christmas that appeared before, during and after the Civil War were simple in concept but not in terms of content. There was certainly little or no use of satire and much of the published material displayed a strong Union bias.

Finally, if you have gained the impression that all Civil War illustrations and cartoons were "wholesome", try this one from Harper's Weekly for size:

