



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on December 5, 2023

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## Santa Claus in America

Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, has given rise to a multitude of ancillary traditions, such as Christmas trees and gift-giving, but perhaps no tradition is more pervasive in modern America than the mythical figure of Santa Claus. Imagined as a jolly fat man with a flowing white beard in a heavy red suit, he is considered to have evolved from an historical figure, Saint Nicholas, whose habit of secret gift-giving gave rise to the traditional model of Santa Claus. Even today, Santa Claus is often referred to as Saint Nick.



Wikimedia Commons/Jonathan G Meath

However, the story of Santa Claus as a man who lives at the North Pole but leaves every Christmas Eve on a flying sleigh pulled by reindeer to deliver presents to children all over the world is a fairly recent development.

Many Christians are understandably nervous about the emphasis on Santa Claus at Christmastime, fearing that it replaces the “true meaning” of the season, which is a remembrance of the Incarnation of Christ, born of a Jewish virgin in a stable in Bethlehem. Others are reluctant to tell children that Santa Claus is real, as they see that as not being entirely truthful.

The rise of Santa Claus as an American tradition is found in the increased emphasis on the Christmas holiday itself. Celebrating December 25 as a religious holiday was not common in Colonial America, largely due to the Puritan influence, as the holiday — Christ Mass — was regarded as a Catholic holy day. And even heavily Catholic countries concentrated more on church services.

In Germany, in what was then known as the Holy Roman Empire, Germans put up “Christmas” trees and exchanged presents, but this tradition did not exist until the late 1700s in Europe, and only came to the United States in the 1830s. With the rise of German immigration, however, in the years leading up to the Civil War, Christmas rose in popularity.

Then, Clement Clarke Moore, a professor of Oriental and Greek literature at the General Theological Seminary (Episcopalian) in New York City, wrote a poem in 1823 titled “A Visit from St. Nicholas.” It soon became better known by its opening line, “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” and it was through this poem that the legend of Santa Claus as a man who delivered presents to children really took hold.

Other elements associated with Santa Claus — which the poem describes as St. Nicholas — such as the sleigh and reindeer, a bag full of toys, coming down the chimney dressed in fur, and a white beard, were all introduced in Moore’s poem. One element that never really became widely associated with Santa Claus — and would certainly be “politically incorrect” today — was that he was smoking a pipe. Moore did not describe his fur suit as red, but he did describe him as “chubby and plump.”

In the January 1863 *Harper’s Weekly*, a cartoon portrayed Santa visiting the Union Army. The artist, Thomas Nast, was of German ancestry. In the ensuing years, Nast’s cartoon drawings of Santa Claus



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began to fix in the American mind the image we have of him to this day. Nast's Santa was a jolly fat man with an enormous belly and a long white beard.

**Santa's image:** Thomas Nast, a partisan Republican cartoonist, did much to promote the idea of Santa Claus. In a cartoon for *Harper's Weekly* magazine, Nast had Santa paying a visit to the Union army during the Civil War.



Nast, a staunch Republican, also created the popular symbols of the Republican Party — an elephant — and the Democratic Party — a donkey (although previously the Whigs had referred to President Andrew Jackson, the first Democratic president, as a “jackass,” and Jackson proudly accepted the comparison).

With Christmas trees, gift-giving, and Santa Claus, the secular elements of the holiday merged with the Christian, and Congress made Christmas a federal holiday in 1870. The Jewish “Feast of Lights” — Hanukkah — also made its contribution to Christmas traditions.

By the end of the 1800s, Christmas and Santa Claus were both firmly established as vital elements of American culture. On September 21, 1897, an editorial in the *New York Sun* by Francis Pharcellus Church was published, titled, “Is There a Santa Claus?” By this time, it had become a regular practice for adults to admonish children to “be good” so Santa Claus would reward them with toys under the Christmas tree.

Dr. Philip O’Hanlon was asked by his eight-year-old daughter, Virginia, whether Santa Claus was a real person. This led to Virginia writing a letter to the *Sun*, asking them if Santa existed. The paper did not respond quickly, and Virginia forgot about it. About two months later, though, Church was assigned by the editor-in-chief, Edward Page Mitchell, to write a response, which he did.

In examining a copy of little Virginia’s letter, one is struck by the excellent penmanship and good sentence construction. “Dear Editor,” Virginia wrote, “I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says ‘If you see it in the Sun it’s so.’ Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?”

Church responded, “Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age.” Then, in the second paragraph, Church wrote, “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus,” which is one of the most famous lines of American history. “He exists as certainly as love and generosity



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and devotion exist.” (See the original letter and full response below.)

Reprinted multiple times over the next few years, this letter solidified the tradition of Santa Claus in American life. Since its publication, many songs have added to the story of Santa Claus. “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” is one of the bestselling songs of all time, and made the singing cowboy, Gene Autry, a very wealthy man.

One song even portrays Santa Claus as omniscient: “He knows when you’ve been sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows when you’ve been bad or good.”

Ronald Reagan even used that song in his bid to take the Republican Party nomination away from Gerald Ford in 1976, joking that Ford — who often announced a new federal grant in a state where a primary contest was imminent — had replaced “Hail to the Chief!” with “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town!”

In our time, shortly after Thanksgiving, Santa begins appearing in shopping malls and other stores, listening to the Christmas-gift wishes of little children. It is certainly hard to imagine Christmas without Santa Claus.

## Is There a Santa Claus?

Dear Editor —

I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says “If you see it in the Sun, it’s so.” Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?

— *Virginia O’Hanlon*

Virginia,

Your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men’s or children’s, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that’s no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine



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all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

— **Francis P. Church**  
**Editor of the New York Sun, 1897**



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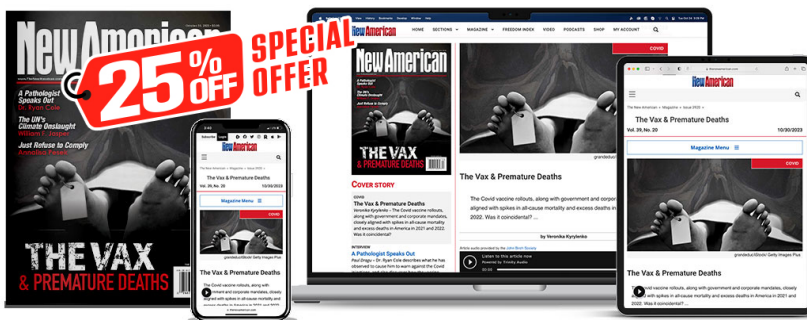
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