



U.S. ARMY

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BORN IN CONFLICT: THE MODERN SANTA CLAUS

In this modern day it can sometimes be difficult to feel as though we can relate to the men and women of the past, especially those from 160+ years ago where many of our holiday traditions have their foundations. By the mid-19th century, most of today's familiar Christmas trappings — carols, songs, gift giving and tree decoration — were already in place in the United States with one major exception, Santa Claus.

Soldiers serving during the American Civil War drew comfort from similar traditions that characterize Christmas today. Alfred Bellard of the 5th New Jersey noted, *"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."* John Haley, of the 17th Maine, wrote in his diary on Christmas Eve that, *"It is rumored that there are sundry boxes and mysterious parcels over at Stoneman's Station directed to us. We retire to sleep with feelings akin to those of children expecting Santa Claus."* Even at Rock Island Prison Barracks 1SG Cornelius L. Dunham of the 4th Veterans Reserve Corps describes in a letter to his wife that, *"Rock Island Barracks. My Dear Little Wife. It is candle light Christmas. How many happy hearts are beating high with joy to night. How many a bright Christmas Tree to night hangs full of precious fruit to be plucked at morn by small eager hands. Dreams of precious Treasure untold in number and variety from the great pockets of Santa Claus. But there are some Who can share this joy of giving only in imagination!"*

Even with these references to Santa there was no common depiction of the person until Thomas Nast, a German born artist, illustrated the cover of one of the most popular newspapers in the country, the *Harpers Weekly*. The issue, published on 3 JAN 1863, depicted a patriotic Santa Claus as a Union supporter sitting in a sleigh-full of presents, ready to be distributed to soldiers in a Union Army camp. His allegiance is unquestionable, as he donned a star-covered coat and striped pants. In a separate illustration within the same issue, Nast delivers scenes of Santa flying in his sleigh and delivering presents by way of chimney, likely drawing from the influence of Clement Clarke Moore's poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas*.

Christmas at *Harper's Weekly* was synonymous with Nast's illustrations, which were also chockfull of symbolism that reflected issues impacting American society. From 1863 to 1886, Nast contributed 33 Christmas-themed images. Of which, only one is devoid of a reference to, or visual appearance of, everyone's now favorite, Santa Claus. In 1866, Santa is seen preparing for his busy night of gift-giving, in his workshop making rocking horses, sewing "dollies" clothes, peering through a telescope looking for good children, and checking his "account book" to review children's behavior. Nast leaves no question whether Santa has a packed schedule. Moreover, while Santa generally exuded happiness and goodwill, he was also a means to enforce children's good behavior with the promise of presents. Prior to the Civil War, the holiday was only recognized in 18 states, but after Nast released the visual of Santa Claus to the American public and the country yearned for peaceful traditions after a divisive, years-long conflict, the nation's domestic celebration of Christmas was kindled.

The popular Nast images would solidify the general image of our modern Santa except for the red suit. It is often Louis Prang (a.k.a. the "Father of the American Christmas Card"), a U.S. immigrant of French and German descent, who is credited with popularizing Santa's festive red suit through a series of postcards printed in the 1870s. Later illustrator Haddon Sundblom landed upon a version of the holiday's jolliest fellow that has stuck for decades. Created for Coca Cola in the 1930s, Sundblom's Santa was a plump man in a red and white fur trimmed suit. When war came again in World War II Santa's American patriotism never faltered.

Source: American Battlefield Trust *"The Man Behind "Merry Old Santa Claus"*



Above: shows Union Soldiers opening Christmas presents sent from home December 1861.



Above: is a more somber depiction of a Union Soldier's Christmas on the Rappahannock December 1862

DECEMBER TRIVIA

1. When was the original song "Jingle Bells" created?
2. What were some common Christmas Tree decorations during the Civil War?
3. What gift did GEN Sherman give to President Lincoln in December of 1864?

LAST MONTH'S ANSWERS

1. What was the alleged "missile gap" that was purported by Kennedy between the United States and the Soviet Union?
The (unproven) gap in missile technology between the two powers.
2. Who was the pilot of the U-2 spy plane that was shot down over Soviet territory in May 1960?
Gary Powers
3. What was the highest Defense Condition (DEFCON) level issued during the Cuban Missile Crisis?
DEFCON 2



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