

The Making of Santa Claus: 1773 to 2013

(Revised December 5, 2016)

(Ringing jingle bells, enter the room with a loud voice,) “St. Nicholas! Father Christmas? Jolly old elf! Santa Claus! By what names have your ancestors known me? Which holiday traditions today do you share with your Revolutionary War ancestors? Your Civil War ancestors? Your grandparents?”

“By the wiggle of my nose...with a sprinkle elf dust... ...through the music of jingle bells, I can call upon the magic of Christmas to whisk me up a chimney flue, allow me to visit millions of homes in a single night, or travel back in time. And so, let me take you back in time now as the St. Nicholas of 1776 to bring you the timeline history of Santa Claus.”

1773: Santa’s Name

“What’s in a name? The earliest known record associating the name “Santa Claus” with Christmas was in a newspaper in New York City on December 23, 1773, 243 years ago, probably referring to a well known 17th century Delaware Indian and referring to him as “St. a Claus.” The name of Santa Claus did not reappear again in association with Christmas in any known documents until 20 years later in 1793.”

“While the name Santa Claus was not common in early American history, the concept of a gift bearing gentleman by several other names around Christmas time was popular among many of the various cultures making up the American colonies. Like so many additions to “American” culture, our founders eventually borrowed a little from this ethnic group, a little from that ethnic group, and eventually they created our own unique American version of Father Christmas.”

1776: A Santa by Any Other Name

“I appear before you now as “St. Nicholas” -- a name you instantly recognize in place of “Santa Claus”. In 1776, St. Nicholas was a traditional gift bearer among the Dutch who were prominent in settling New York. As such, I was portrayed as a well dressed, affluent religious figure. But since most of the colonies were British oriented, why did the Dutch version prevail after the American Revolution? Politics of course!

“I became a popular saint among the colonists of Revolutionary-War-era America as an alternative choice to the British symbolic religious leader, St. George. This was particularly true in New England. As the patriots of old gave up their allegiance to King George, so did they give up St. George in favor of St. Nicholas, as an alternative religious hero. Can you imagine singing today, ‘Up on the house top, click, click, and down the chimney came ole St. George?’”

1810: The Holiday Gift Giver

“As the War of 1812 neared, the lower classes did not always have reason to celebrate Christmas. Instead of rich landlords giving turkeys and puddings to their tenants, or factory owners giving a day off with pay, the tenants and workers were expected to give their rich overseers gifts in order to continue working their rented lands or keeping their jobs in the new year.”

“This resulted in changing my character from a religious figure to a gift giving, benevolent character purposely associated with the celebration of Christmas, someone who gave to those less fortunate. As such, rather than a richly robed ecclesiastical bishop such as I might have been previously portrayed, I became portrayed wearing a simple long robe and carrying a stick or switch in one hand and a coin purse in the other and bearing a halo over my uncovered head – a saint for the people.”

1815: Stockings

“Being of mostly Dutch origin, it’s natural that another of their traditions became part of the new Santa Claus legend. Among Dutch children it was common to have their wooden shoes left at their front door step to be filled with gifts. This tradition in New York appears to have changed in 1815 with the publication of a request in a newspaper for Santa Claus to instead bring gifts for children’s stockings. It makes sense to me that one might find cookies, candies, and toys in a clean stocking “hung with care” over the fireplace more appealing than stuffed in someone’s shoe out on the front doorstep in cold, snowy weather.”

“And so it began in the 1800s that we saw dramatic changes in the vision of Santa Claus with major changes about every 20 years!”

1821: Reindeer

“Reindeer! In 1821, William Gilley wrote the poem, “A Children’s Friend,” which is the first mention of “Santeclaus” with reindeer, although only one reindeer was implied.

1822: More Reindeer

“More reindeer! In 1823, Clement C. Moore composed the poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (or “Twas the Night before Christmas”). In this poem, Santa drives a Dutch designed sleigh with an 8-reindeer team. Can anyone name all of the reindeer?”

“Donald Trump was recently asked if he could name all of the reindeer. He started well with, “Donder and Blitzen, Prancer and Dancer,…” but then he got a little confused when he replied, “Nixon and Julianni!” He tried to divert the press’ attention from this error by appearing on Fox News the next day where he read the childhood favorite, *The Gingrich Who Stole Christmas*.

“The main stream media reported the next morning that Trump had insulted all of the elves that were Democratic supporters. Trump replied that he knew thousands of elves whom he loved and who loved him, but until we could determine if any of the elves were terrorists that he promised when taking office to build a gigantic ice wall around the North Pole.”

“Like Trump, most of us have trouble naming all of the reindeer. Most of the reindeer names do still make sense to us, such as Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, and Cupid. But how about Donder and Blitzen? What is a Donder? These were names for thunder and lightning, Blitzen being a Dutch spelling and Donder being changed later to the Donner we use today.”

1822: Chimney Soot & a Short Pipe

“Mr. Moore’s version continued the effort to make Santa a man of the people with him now wearing a sooty, fur suit rather than a rich robe. He

also became portrayed as jolly, and smoking a stubby pipe characteristic of the poor class rather than the upper class long pipe that Washington Irving's version smoked."

1820s: Elves

"Elves! Mr. Moore further developed Santa in the 1820s as an elf rather than a man-sized saint, and with miniaturized reindeer and sleigh. The reindeer team and an arctic home may have come from the English concept of Father Frost, and his elfin nature may be based on a Pennsylvania Dutch or German association."

"Can you imagine a poem these days having any impact on our society?! What would these poets think if they knew that their few verses of rhyme would develop into a billion dollar Santa Clause artifacts industry!?"

1841: Santa Gets Bigger

"Fat Santa! While elves became a part of the tradition, Santa's miniature size did not. Twenty years later drawings of Santa changed him to a man-sized image or at least a large elf."

1863: Red Clothing

"A red suit! One of the biggest changes came from 1863 to 1886, when political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew illustrations of Santa Claus in *Harper's Illustrated Weekly* that first put Santa into red clothing with a spotted red-brown, skin-tight suit with a red sash."

1870: Santa's Hat & Dog

"The North Pole! Santa's conical red hat and a home near the North Pole became part of the tradition in 1870 in yet another poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" by George Webster. The poem also gives Santa his famous dog named.... (pause for a response) His famous dog named? His dog named Watch, ...which never caught on. However, we all know that song about Santa that starts, "You better watch out..." – maybe the original version was, "You better let out Watch..." Or maybe that's where the term, watch dog, comes from."

1885: Boots, Belt, & Fur

“The Santa suit of today started when Christmas cards by Louis Prang in 1885 established Santa clad with black boots and belt; a bright red, non-flannel, white fur lined suit; and a white tufted tassel hat. Within 35 years, by the 1920s, this red suit became the standardized fashion of all Santa Clauses, which will be 100 years ago in just 4 more years.”

1890: The Store Santa & Mrs. Claus

“By 1890, Santa Claus’ modern commercial role was established when the first store Santa Claus was James Edgar in Brockton, Massachusetts, and Mrs. Claus was revealed by Katherine Lee Bates in her book *Sunshine and Other Verses for Children*.”

1939: Rudolph!

“Rudolph! Finally, Santa’s most trusted side-kick, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, was created by Robert May in Chicago in 1939, although Rudolph did not become popular until 10 years later with the song written by John Marks in 1948 and sung by singing cowboy star Gene Autry in 1949. That makes Rudolph 77 years old this year!”

2013: Yikes!

“High tech Santa! Yikes! In the 1990s and early 21st century, Santa has been overwhelmed with new characters and new gadgets at the North Pole. His toy shops have become state-of-the-art, and the list of villainous characters, like the Grinch, trying to shut down Christmas has become too long to enumerate. Kittens, mice, pigs, ducks, and aliens have become regular visitors to the North Pole always trying to help save Christmas! How many will become part of the tradition for your great-grandchildren, and how many will go the way of Watch, Santa’s forgotten doggy? Only time will tell.”

“I end my timeline of the legend of Santa Claus with this timely wish, **‘Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!’**”