

Colonial
Dutch town
on
Manhattan,
capital of
New
Netherland;
renamed
New York



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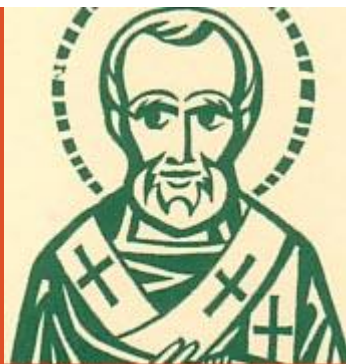
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St. Nicholas, artist: Ade Bethune

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December 6 or 19
Three Gold Balls



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Customs Around the World



"It was not the changes in [Nicholas'] appearance and his name that struck me, so much as the apparent betrayal of what he meant—the soul of charity corrupted and relaunched as the seasonal crony of the retailers"

—Jeremy Seal, *Nicholas: The Epic Journey from Saint to Santa Claus*

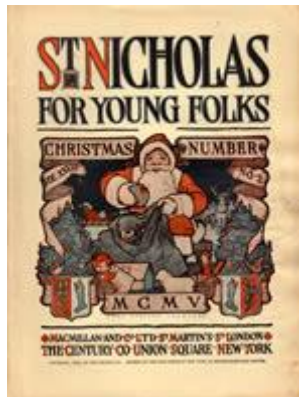


Turn Chocolate Santas into Saint Nicholas!

Santa [illustrations](#) from the popular children's magazine *St. Nicholas*. All of these appeared before Haddon Sundblom created the Cola-Cola Santa in 1931.



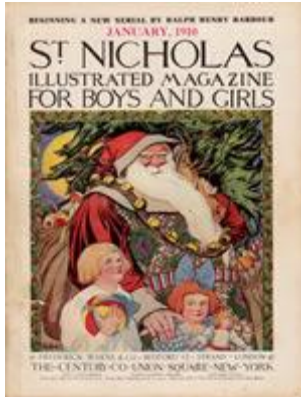
December 1882



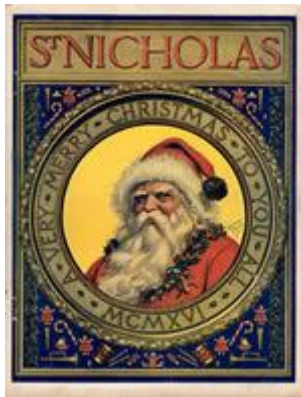
December 1905
Carl Stetson Crawford



December 1906



January 1910
Willard Bonte



December 1916
Norman Price



December 1918

Saint Nicholas and the Origin of Santa Claus



Bishop St. Nicholas, early American St. Nick, & American Santa, from *Santa Claus Comes to America*, by Caroline Singer & Cyrus Baldrige, Alfred Knopf, 1942

How did the kindly Christian saint, good Bishop Nicholas, become a roly-poly red-suited American symbol for merry holiday festivity and commercial activity? History tells the tale.

The first Europeans to arrive in the New World brought St. Nicholas. Vikings dedicated their cathedral to him in Greenland. On his first voyage, Columbus named a Haitian port for St. Nicholas on December 6, 1492. In Florida, Spaniards named an early settlement St. Nicholas Ferry, now known as Jacksonville. However, St. Nicholas had a difficult time during the 16th century Protestant Reformation, which took a dim view of saints. Even though both reformers and counter-reformers tried to stamp out St. Nicholas-related customs, they had very little long-term success except in England where the religious folk traditions were permanently altered. (It is ironic that fervent Puritan Christians began what turned into a trend to a more secular Christmas observance.)

Because the common people so loved St. Nicholas, he survived on the European continent as people continued to place nuts, apples, and sweets in shoes left beside beds, on windowsills, or before the hearth.

The first Colonists, primarily Puritans and other Protestant reformers, did not bring Nicholas traditions to the New World. What about the Dutch? Although it is almost universally believed that the Dutch brought St. Nicholas to New Amsterdam, scholars find scant evidence of such traditions in Dutch New Netherland. Colonial Germans in Pennsylvania kept the feast of St. Nicholas, and several later accounts have St. Nicholas visiting New York Dutch on New Years' Eve, thus adopting the English custom (New Year gift-giving had become the English custom in 1558, supplanting Nicholas, and this English custom lasted in New York until 1847).

In 1773 New York non-Dutch patriots formed the Sons of St. Nicholas, primarily as a non-British symbol to counter the English St. George societies, rather than to honor St. Nicholas. This society was similar to the Sons of St. Tammany in Philadelphia. Not exactly St. Nicholas, the children's gift-giver.



"New Year's Hymn to St. Nicholas," colonial Dutch life, Albany, NY. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, March 1881
St. Nicholas Center Collection



Detail from broadside by Alexander Anderson, December 6, 1810
St Nicholas Center Collection

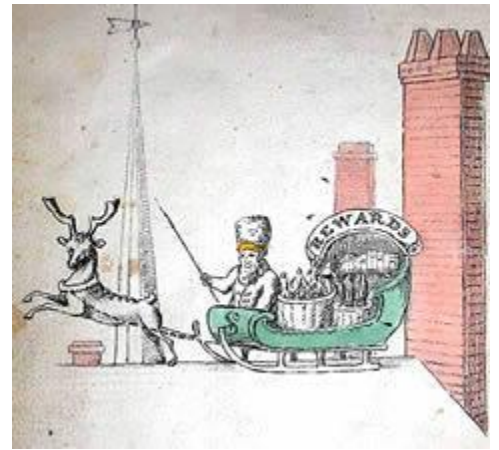
After the American Revolution, New Yorkers remembered with pride their colony's nearly-forgotten Dutch roots. John Pintard, the influential patriot and antiquarian who founded the New York Historical Society in 1804, promoted St. Nicholas as patron saint of both society and city. In January 1809, Washington Irving joined the society and on St. Nicholas Day that same year, he published the satirical fiction, *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, with numerous references to a jolly St. Nicholas character. This was not the saintly bishop, rather an elfin Dutch burgher with a clay pipe. These delightful flights of imagination are the source of the New Amsterdam St. Nicholas legends: that the first Dutch emigrant ship had a figurehead of St. Nicholas; that St. Nicholas Day was observed in the colony; that the first church was dedicated to him; and that St. Nicholas comes down chimneys to bring gifts. Irving's work was regarded as the "first notable work of *imagination* in the New World."

The New York Historical Society held its first St. Nicholas anniversary dinner on December 6, 1810. John Pintard commissioned artist Alexander Anderson to create the first American image of Nicholas for the occasion. Nicholas was shown in a gift-giving role with children's treats in stockings hanging at a fireplace. The accompanying poem ends, "Saint Nicholas, my dear good friend! To serve you ever was my end, If you will, now, me something give, I'll serve you ever while I live."

The 19th century was a time of cultural transition. New York writers, and others, wanted to domesticate the Christmas holiday. After Puritans and other Calvinists had eliminated Christmas as a holy season, popular celebrations became riotous, featuring drunken men and public disorder. Christmas of old was not the images we imagine of families gathered cozily around hearth and tree exchanging pretty gifts and singing carols while smiling benevolently at children. Rather, it was characterized by raucous, drunken mobs roaming streets, damaging property, threatening and frightening the upper classes. The holiday season, coming after harvest when work was eased and more leisure possible, was a time when workers and servants took the upper hand, demanding largess and more. Through the first half of the 19th century, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers and other Protestants continued to regard December 25th as a day without religious significance, a day for normal business. This was not a neutral stance, rather Christmas observance was seen as inconsistent with gospel worship. Industrialists were happy to reduce workers' leisure time and allowed many fewer holidays than existed in Europe.

All of this began to change as a new understanding of family life and the place of children was emerging. Childhood was coming to be seen as a stage of life in which greater protection, sheltering, training and education were needed. And so the season came gradually to be tamed, turning toward shops and home. St. Nicholas, too, took on new attributes to fit the changing times.

1821 brought some new elements with publication of the first lithographed book in America, the *Children's Friend*. This "Sante Claus" arrived from the North in a sleigh with a flying reindeer. The anonymous poem and illustrations proved pivotal in shifting imagery away from a saintly bishop. *Sante Claus* fit a didactic mode, rewarding good behavior and punishing bad, leaving a "long, black birchen rod . . . directs a Parent's hand to use when virtue's path his sons refuse." Gifts were safe toys, "pretty doll . . . peg-top, or a ball; no crackers, cannons, squibs, or rockets to blow their eyes up, or their pockets. No drums to stun their Mother's ear, nor swords to make their sisters fear; but pretty books to store their mind with knowledge of each various kind." The sleigh itself even sported a bookshelf for the "pretty books." The book also notably marked S. Claus' first appearance on Christmas Eve, rather than December 6th.



Sante Claus
The Children's Friend, 1821
 William B. Gilley, publisher

The jolly elf image received another big boost in 1823, from a poem destined to become immensely popular, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," now better known as "The Night Before Christmas."

*He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
 And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
 A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
 And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.
 His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
 His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
 His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
 And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;
 The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
 And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath;
 He had a broad face and a little round belly,
 That shook, when he laughed like a bowlful of jelly.
 He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf. . . .*



1848
 T. C. Boyd F. O. C.
A Visit from Saint Nicholas
 Facsimile, St Nicholas Center Collection



1862
 Boyd F. O. C.
A Visit from Saint Nicholas
 St Nicholas Center Collection



ca 1869
 Darley Thomas Nast
Santa Claus and his Works
 First red suit for a Santa
 St Nicholas Center Collection

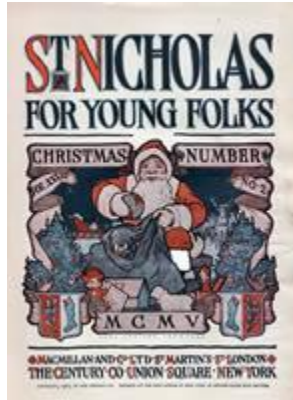
Washington Irving's St. Nicholas strongly influenced the poem's portrayal of a round, pipe-smoking, elf-like St. Nicholas. The poem generally has been attributed to Clement Clark Moore, a professor of biblical languages at New York's Episcopal General Theological Seminary. Moore was a friend and neighbor of William Gilley, who had published *Sancte Claus* in 1821:

*Old Santeclaus with much delight
His reindeer drives the frosty night
O'er chimney tops and tracks of snow
To bring his yearly gifts to you.*

However, a case has been made by Don Foster in *Author Unknown*, that [Henry Livingston](#) actually penned it in 1807 or 1808. Livingston was a farmer/patriot who wrote humorous verse for children. In any case, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" became a defining American holiday classic. No matter who wrote it, the poem has had enormous influence on the Americanization of St. Nicholas.



1881
Thomas
Nast
Harper's
January 1,
Val Berryman Collection



1905
Nast Carl Stetson
Weekly St. Nicholas for Young Folks
1881 Vol. XXXIII, No. 2
St Nicholas Center Collection



1908
Boyd Smith
Santa Claus and All About Him

The New York elite succeeded in domesticating Christmas through a new "Santa Claus" tradition invented by Washington Irving, John Pintard and Clement Clarke Moore. Moore's poem was printed in four new almanacs in 1824, just one year after it was in the Troy, New York, paper. The poem and other descriptions of the Santa Claus ritual appeared in more and more local papers. More than anything else, "A Visit From St. Nicholas" introduced the custom of a cozy, domestic Santa Christmas tradition to the nation.

Other artists and writers continued the change to an elf-like St. Nicholas, "Sancte Claus," or "Santa Claus," unlike the stately European bishop. In 1863, during the Civil War, political cartoonist Thomas Nast began a series of annual black-and-white drawings in *Harper's Weekly*, based on the descriptions found in the poem and Washington Irving's work. These drawings established a rotund Santa with flowing beard, fur garments, and an omnipresent clay pipe. Nast's Santa supported the Union and President Lincoln believed this contributed to the Union troops' success by demoralizing Confederate soldiers. As Nast drew Santas until 1886, his work had considerable influence in forming the American Santa Claus. Along with appearance changes, the saint's name shifted to Santa Claus—a natural phonetic alteration from the German *Sankt Niklaus*.

Churches, influenced by German immigrants who loved Christmas, Clement Clarke Moore, Washington Irving, Charles Dickens, the Oxford Movement in the Anglican church, and church musicians embracing carol singing, began to bring Christmas observances into their lives. The growth of Sunday Schools in cities exposed hundreds of thousands of children to Christianity. Initially opposed to Christmas observance, by the 1850s Sunday Schools had discovered that a Christmas tree, Santa and gifts, greatly improved attendance. So, in a strange twist of fate, the new "secular" Santa Claus, no longer seen as a religious figure, helped return Christmas observance to churches.



1922
Norman
Saturday
December
[Michigan State University Museum](#)
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1925
Rockwell N.
C.
The Country Gentleman
Print: St Nicholas Center Collection



1925
Wyeth J.
C.
Kris Saturday Evening Post
December 26, 1925
[Michigan State University Museum](#)
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Santa was then portrayed by dozens of artists in a wide variety of styles, sizes, and colors. However by the end of the 1920s, a standard American Santa—life-sized in a red, fur-trimmed suit—had emerged from the work of N. C. Wyeth, J. C. Leyendecker, Norman Rockwell and other popular illustrators. The image was solidified before Haddon Sundblom, in 1931, began thirty-five years of Coca-Cola Santa advertisements that further popularized and firmly established this Santa as an icon of contemporary commercial culture.



1931
Haddon
First
Permission
Company



1939
Norman
Santa
December
Print: St Nicholas Center Collection



1955
Haddon
December 12, 1955
Nicholas Center Collection

This Santa was life-sized, jolly, and wore the now familiar red suit. He appeared in magazines, on billboards, and shop counters, encouraging Americans to see Coke as the solution to "a thirst for all seasons." By the 1950s Santa was turning up everywhere as a benign source of beneficence, endorsing an amazing range of consumer products. This commercial success led to the North American Santa Claus being exported around the world where he threatens to overcome the European St. Nicholas, who has retained his identity as a Christian bishop and saint.



Nast Santa, Bishop Nicholas, Coke Santa, illustration by Renee Graef, *A Special Place for Santa* Roman, Inc., 1991. Permission pending.

It's been a long journey from the Fourth Century Bishop of Myra, St. Nicholas, who showed his devotion to God in extraordinary kindness and generosity to those in need, to America's jolly Santa Claus, whose largesse often supplies luxuries to the affluent. However, if you peel back the accretions, he is still Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, whose caring surprises continue to model true giving and faithfulness.

There is growing interest in reclaiming the original saint in the United States to help restore a spiritual dimension to this festive time. For indeed, St. Nicholas, lover of the poor and patron saint of children, is a model of how Christians are meant to live. A bishop, Nicholas put Jesus Christ at the center of his life, his ministry, his entire existence. Families, churches, and schools are embracing true St Nicholas traditions as one way to claim the true center of Christmas—the birth of Jesus. Such a focus helps restore balance to increasingly materialistic and stress-filled Advent and Christmas seasons.



[How St. Nicholas Became Santa Claus: One Theory](#)

An interview with Jeremy Seal, author of *Nicholas: the Epic Journey from Saint to Santa Claus*

[St. Nicholas and American Christmas Customs](#)

Which American holiday traditions reflect distinctive St. Nicholas characteristics?

[Knickerbocker Santa Claus](#)

Scholar Charles W. Jones recounts the evidence telling how Santa Claus was created in 19th century New York

[Belgian Sinterklaas Influence in "Nieuw Nederland"?](#)

Not everyone in the Dutch colonies was Dutch

[St. Nicholas Timeline](#)

See St. Nicholas through the centuries, including Santa

[1902 Santa in Chicago](#)

How has Santa changed?

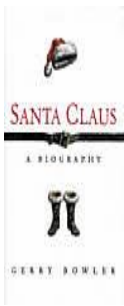
Links

[NPR: The Story of St. Nicholas](#) an interview with Jeremy Seal by Renee Montagne, *Morning Edition*, December 23, 2005

[How Santa Saved N.Y.](#) by Michael Grady, Tribune columnist, *East Valley Tribune*, Phoenix, December 15, 2007. A good summary of how Christmas changed and Santa Claus came to be in the 19th century.

Rotating images: Luca Brühart, [Musée d'art et d'histoire](#), Fribourg, Switzerland. Used by permission.

Sources and further reading:



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Carefully researched account uses history, literature, advertising, and art to show development of the American Santa; primarily about Santa

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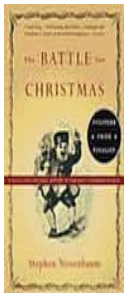


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Hageman, Howard, [Book review](#): *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend* by Charles W. Jones, *Theology Today*, October 1979

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Nissenbaum, Stephen, [The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday](#) Vintage, Random House, New York, 1996
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Purchase from [amazon.com](#), [amazon.ca](#) or [amazon.uk](#).



Seal, Jeremy, [Nicholas: The epic journey from Saint to Santa Claus](#) Bloomsbury, New York & London, 2005; UK edition: *Santa: A Life*
Nicholas' transformation into Santa told through careful historical detail, travelogue, and personal reflection; extensive material on Nicholas as Saint, as well as Santa

Purchase from [amazon.com](#), [amazon.ca](#) or [amazon.uk](#).



Walsh, Joseph J., [Were They Wise Men or Kings](#), Joseph J. Walsh, Westminster John Knox, 2001
Short chapters present a wealth of information on Christmas traditions, answering many common questions

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