



CHRISTMAS

CULTURAL RESOURCE

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I. Historical Background

Robert J. Myers, co-editor of *American Christmas*, gives a scholarly overview of the historical origins and cultural evolution of Christmas. Myers' essay will serve as the primary source for our discussion of the historical background of Christmas.

Christmas, the Christian holiday that celebrates the birth of Jesus, is observed on December 25. Although there is no historical verification for this calendar date, this is the date that most Christians have chosen to celebrate the event described in Luke 2:7. "And

she [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son [Jesus] and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger; because there was no place for them in the inn.” The word “Christmas” is derived from an earlier English phrase, “Cristes maesse,” which means “Mass of Christ.”¹

The first reference to December 25 being the birth date of Jesus can be traced to a Roman calendar in A.D. 336. These earlier celebrations were probably influenced by such older, end-of-the-year Roman festivals which honored Saturn, their harvest god, and Mithas, the god of light. During these mid-December harvest festivals “the people prepared special foods, decorated their homes with greenery, and joined in singing and gift giving.”² By A.D. 1100, Christmas had become the most important religious festival in Europe, and Saint Nicholas had become the symbol of gift giving in many European countries.

Christmas dinner menus have evolved since the early European converts to Christianity feasted on “roasted boars, pigs, and peacocks over large open fires.” Today’s traditional Christmas dinners include stuffed turkey, baked ham, oyster stew, gumbo, mashed potatoes, candied yams, collard greens, green beans, okra, corn, macaroni and cheese, cranberry sauce, giblet gravy, homemade dinner rolls, and a variety of other dishes. Popular traditional desserts still served today include mince meat, pumpkin and sweet potato pies, fruitcake, plum pudding, ambrosia, bourbon balls and bread pudding.³

Christmas Floral Decorations

The origins of four of Christmas’s most popular floral decorations, namely the Christmas tree, the Christmas wreath, holly, and mistletoe, can be traced to earlier European pagan customs. Myers has noted that “[t]he traditional colors of Christmas are green and red. Green represents the continuation of life through the winter and the Christian belief in eternal life through Christ. Red symbolizes the blood that Jesus shed at His Crucifixion.”⁴ German immigrants to Pennsylvania introduced the Christmas tree tradition to America in the early 1800s. The Christian custom of hanging a Christmas wreath on the front door of homes is a contemporary manifestation of an ancient Roman custom which was used as a sign of victory and celebration. Holly boughs, the materials from which Christmas wreaths and other holiday decorations are fashioned, were selected because: “The needle-like points of the leaves were thought to resemble the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when He was crucified. The red berries symbolized the drops of blood He shed.”⁵ And, lastly, the hanging of sprigs of mistletoe can be traced back to ancient Celtic priests who believed that the plant was sacred and gave samples of it to be used as charms. Somewhere along the way the contemporary custom of kissing a person standing under a sprig of mistletoe began.

A Christmas Remembrance from Frederick Douglass

Christmas was observed by African American slaves. One of the earliest accounts of these slave celebrations was recorded by Frederick Douglass:

My term of actual service to Mr. Edward Covey ended on Christmas day, 1833. The days between Christmas and New Year’s Day are allowed as holidays; and, accordingly, we were not required to perform any labor, more than to feed and

take care of the stock. This time we regarded as our own, by the grace of our masters; and we therefore used or abused it nearly as we pleased. Those of us who had families at a distance, were generally allowed to spend the whole six days in their society. This time, however, was spent in various ways. The staid, sober, thinking and industrious ones of our number would employ themselves in making corn-brooms, mats, horse-collars, and baskets; and another class of us would spend the time in hunting opossums, hares, and coons. But by far the larger part engaged in such sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whiskey; and the latter mode of spending the time was by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters. A slave who would work during the holidays was considered by our masters as scarcely deserving them. He was regarded as one who rejected the favor of his master. It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas; and he was regarded as lazy indeed, who had not provided himself with the necessary means, during the year, to get whiskey enough to last him through Christmas.⁶

II. A Personal Christmas Remembrance

My earliest – and most pleasant – boyhood memory of Christmas was my father, William H. Wiggins, Sr., who was later named “Daddy Wig” by grandchildren, putting my brother Alfred, sister Anna, and myself to bed on Christmas Eve with a dramatic reading of the poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas.” Another father, Clement Clarke Moore, composed this poem and read it to his children on December 23, 1822. One of the guests who heard this reading copied the poem and later sent it to the Troy Sentinel newspaper in New York. Like James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” which was composed for one presentation, Moore’s poem has become an annual Christmas classic, retold around the world by parents to their children on Christmas Eve:

A Visit from St. Nicholas

Tw’as the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;
And mamma in her kerchief and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter’s nap,
When out on the lawn their rose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.

Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters, and threw up the sash;
The moon, on the breast of the new fallen snow,
Gave a luster of midday to objects below;
When what to my wondering eyes should appear

But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer,
With a little old driver, so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment, it must be St. Nick.

More rapid than eagles his courses they came,
And he whistled and shouted and called them by name:
'Now Dasher! Now Dancer! Now Prancer! Now Vixen!
On, Comet! On, Cupid! On, Donner and Blitzen!
To the top of the porch! To the top of the wall!
Now, dash away, dash away, dash away, all!'

As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky,
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew,
With the sleigh full of toys and St. Nickolas too.
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.

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 on his chin was a 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 bowl full of jelly;
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf;
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself,
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying a finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose.
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle;
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
'Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night!'⁷

III. Christmas Music

African American slaves left a rich cultural legacy of Christmas Spirituals, but arguably the most widely known and sung during the Christmas Season is “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” the refrain that James Baldwin used to title his first novel.

“Go Tell It on the Mountain”

Refrain:

Go tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere,
To tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

Verse 1

While shepherds kept their watching over silent flocks by night
Behold throughout the heavens, there shown a holy light.

[Refrain]

Verse 2

The shepherds feared and trembled when lo! Above the earth,
Rang out the angel chorus, that hailed our Saviour’s birth.

[Refrain]

Verse 3

Down in a lonely manger the humble Christ was born,
And God sent out salvation, that blessed Christmas morn.

[Refrain]⁸

African American’s created and nurtured numerous Christmas traditions during the 20th Century. In the late 1950’s, while enrolled in Phillips School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia, I attended a Christmas Concert that was held in Sister’s Chapel on the campus of Spelman College. The community choir, which consisted of members from local African American churches and students from Morehouse, Morris Brown, Clark, Atlanta University, and Spelman, was under the direction of Willis Laurence James, the choir director at Spelman College. At this time it was widely recognized as being the only truly integrated public worship event in the city. The Negro Spiritual “Behold That Star” was the recessional. The community choir sang this Spiritual as they marched down the aisle of the chapel into the vestibule. Once they were removed from the auditorium, the final words heard by the congregation was a hushed call-response repeating of the refrain, “Behold, the star!” first by the altos and sopranos and then by the baritones and bass.

Behold The Star

Refrain

Behold that star!

Behold that star up yonder,

Behold that star!

It is the star of Bethlehem.

Verse 1

There was no room found in the inn.
It is the star of Bethlehem.
For Him who was born free from sin.
It is the star of Bethlehem.
(Refrain)

Verse 2

The wise men travelled from the East.
It is the star of Bethlehem.
To worship Him, the Prince of Peace.
It is the star of Bethlehem.
(Refrain)

Verse 3

A song broke forth upon the night.
It is the star of Bethlehem.
From angel hosts all robed in white.
It is the star of Bethlehem.
(Refrain.)⁹

Father Josef Mohr composed “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve 1818. Like Clement Clark Moore’s poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” it was composed to be performed only once. But, like Moore’s poem, it has become one of, if not the most popular, Christmas hymns:

Silent Night

Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon Virgin Mother and child!
Holy Infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,
Shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
Christ, the Savior, is born.

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love’s pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.¹⁰

IV. Prose and Poetic Excerpts

On September 21, 1897, The New York Sun published Pharcellus Church's editorial response to eight-year old Virginia O'Hanlon's question: "Is there a Santa Claus?" Church's essay, which expresses the hope, faith, and wonderment of Christmas, has become a classic.

"DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 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.

115 West Ninety-Fifth Street."

VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except [what] 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 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 VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith, then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We would 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 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.¹¹

Notes

1. Myers, Robert J. "Christmas." The World Book Encyclopedia. C-CH. Volume 3. Chicago: World Book, a Scott Fetzer Company, 2008. p. 534
2. Ibid, p. 535
3. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1998. p. 829
4. Meyers, p. 535
5. Ibid.
6. Douglass, Frederick. "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave." In My Soul Has Grown Deep: Classics of Early African American Literature. John Edgar Wideman, ed. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2001. p. 498
7. Del Re, Gerard, and Patricia Del Re. "A Visit from St. Nicholas." The Christmas Almanack. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979. p. 197
8. Work, Jr., John W. "Go Tell It on the Mountain." African American Folk song
9. "Behold The Star." Online location:
[www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/behold_that_star.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/ behold_that_star.htm)
10. Del Re, Gerard, and Patricia Del Re. "Silent Night." The Christmas Almanac. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1979. p. 216
11. Pharellus, Francis. "Yes Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus." The Sun. 1897 Online location: <http://www.newseum.org/yesvirginia/>