

Your Name

Mr. Larson

Intermediate Computers

July 4, 1776

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### Christmas: The Legend of Santa Claus

The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back hundreds of years to a monk named St. Nicholas. It is believed that Nicholas was born sometime around 280 A.D. in Patara, near Myra in modern-day Turkey. Much admired for his piety and kindness, St. Nicholas became the subject of many legends. It is said that he gave away all of his inherited wealth and traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick. One of the best known of the St. Nicholas stories is that he saved three poor sisters from being sold into slavery or prostitution by their father by providing them with a dowry so that they could be married. Over the course of many years, Nicholas's popularity spread and he became known as the protector of children and sailors. His feast day is celebrated on the anniversary of his death, December 6. This was traditionally considered a lucky day to make large purchases or to get married. By the Renaissance, St. Nicholas was the most popular saint in Europe. Even after the Protestant Reformation, when the veneration of saints began to be discouraged, St. Nicholas maintained a positive reputation, especially in Holland.

#### Sinter Class Comes to New York

St. Nicholas made his first inroads into American popular culture towards the end of the 18th century. In December 1773, and again in 1774, a New York newspaper

reported that groups of Dutch families had gathered to honor the anniversary of his death.

Sinter Klaas. The name Santa Claus evolved from Nick's Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas (Dutch for Saint Nicholas). In 1804, John Pintard, a member of the New York Historical Society, distributed woodcuts of St. Nicholas at the society's annual meeting. The background of the engraving contains now-familiar Santa images including stockings filled with toys and fruit hung over a fireplace. In 1809, Washington Irving helped to popularize the Sinter Klaas stories when he referred to St. Nicholas as the patron saint of New York in his book, *The History of New York*. As his prominence grew, Sinter Klaas was described as everything from a "rascal" with a blue three-cornered hat, red waistcoat, and yellow stockings to a man wearing a broad-brimmed hat and a "huge pair of Flemish trunk hose."

### Shopping Mall Santas

Gift-giving, mainly centered around children, has been an important part of the Christmas celebration since the holiday's rejuvenation in the early 19th century. Stores began to advertise Christmas shopping in 1820, and by the 1840s, newspapers were creating separate sections for holiday advertisements, which often featured images of the newly-popular Santa Claus. In 1841, thousands of children visited a Philadelphia shop to see a life-size Santa Claus model. It was only a matter of time before stores began to attract children, and their parents, with the lure of a peek at a "live" Santa Claus. In the early 1890s, the Salvation Army needed money to pay for the free Christmas meals they provided to needy families. They began dressing up unemployed

men in Santa Claus suits and sending them into the streets of New York to solicit donations. Those familiar Salvation Army Santas have been ringing bells on the street corners of American cities ever since.

### 'Twas the Night Before Christmas

In 1822, Clement Clarke Moore, an Episcopal minister, wrote a long Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled, "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas." Moore's poem, which he was initially hesitant to publish due to the frivolous nature of its subject, is largely responsible for our modern image of Santa Claus as a "right jolly old elf" with a portly figure and the supernatural ability to ascend a chimney with a mere nod of his head! Although some of Moore's imagery was probably borrowed from other sources, his poem helped to popularize Christmas Eve - Santa Claus waiting for the children to get to sleep the now-familiar idea of a Santa Claus who flew from house to house on Christmas Eve - in "a miniature sleigh" led by eight flying reindeer, whom he also named - leaving presents for deserving children. "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas," created a new and immediately popular American icon. In 1881, political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore's poem to create the first likeness that matches our modern image of Santa Claus. His cartoon, which appeared in Harper's Weekly, depicted Santa as a rotund, cheerful man with a full, white beard, holding a sack laden with toys for lucky children. It is Nast who gave Santa his bright red suit trimmed with white fur, North Pole workshop, elves, and his wife, Mrs. Claus.

### A Santa By Any Other Name

18th-century America's Santa Claus was not the only St. Nicholas-inspired gift-giver to make an appearance at Christmastime. Similar figures were popular all over

the world. Christkind or Kris Kringle was believed to deliver presents to well-behaved Swiss and German children. Meaning "Christ child," Christkind is an angel-like figure often accompanied by St. Nicholas on his holiday missions. In Scandinavia, a jolly elf named Jultomten was thought to deliver gifts in a sleigh drawn by goats. English legend explains that Father Christmas visits each home on Christmas Eve to fill children's stockings with holiday treats. Pere Noel is responsible for filling the shoes of French children. In Russia, it is believed that an elderly woman named Babouschka purposely gave the wise men wrong directions to Bethlehem so that they couldn't find Jesus. Later, she felt remorseful, but could not find the men to undo the damage. To this day, on January 5, Babouschka visits Russian children leaving gifts at their bedsides in the hope that one of them is the baby Jesus and she will be forgiven. In Italy, a similar story exists about a woman called La Befana, a kindly witch who rides a broomstick down the chimneys of Italian homes to deliver toys into the stockings of lucky children.

### The Ninth Reindeer

Rudolph, "the most famous reindeer of all," was born over a hundred years after his eight flying counterparts. The red-nosed wonder was the creation of Robert L. May, a copywriter at the Montgomery Ward department store.

In 1939, May wrote a Christmas-themed story-poem to help bring holiday traffic into his store. Using a similar rhyme pattern to Moore's "Twas the Night Before Christmas," May told the story of Rudolph, a young reindeer who was teased by the other deer because of his large, glowing, red nose. But, when Christmas Eve turned foggy and Santa worried that he wouldn't be able to deliver gifts that night, the former

outcast saved Christmas by leading the sleigh by the light of his red nose. Rudolph's message, that given the opportunity, a liability can be turned into an asset, proved popular. Montgomery Ward sold almost two and a half million copies of the story in 1939. When it was reissued in 1946, the book sold over three and half million copies. Several years later, one of May's friends, Johnny Marks, wrote a short song based on Rudolph's story (1949). It was recorded by Gene Autry and sold over two million copies. Since then, the story has been translated into 25 languages and been made into a television movie, narrated by Burl Ives, which has charmed audiences every year since 1964.

"The History of Christmas." July 4, 1776. <http://www.history.com>.