



Celebrating Peace During War



Christmas in America 1861-1865



"The Christmas Tree" by F. A. Chapman.

This Thomas Nast print from a Harper's Weekly issue of January 1863, illustrates the longing born of separation that became more amplified during the Christmas celebrations for soldiers' and their families. The illustration on the left depicts a wife in earnest prayer on Christmas Eve. She prays for her husband while their small children sleep quietly in the background beneath his picture. In the scene on the right, the husband, as soldier far from home and isolated, is repining over pictures of his loved ones. Surrounding the main images are illustrations that express the complexity and contradictions of celebrating the peace and joy of Christmas while experiencing the separation and loss of war. The scene in the upper right corner portrays the merrymaking of a Christmas sleigh ride. A similar emotion is evoked by the illustration in the opposite corner which illuminates the whimsical reverie of Santa and his reindeer atop a snow-covered roof. The images bordering the bottom of the illustration are a stark contrast. In the center are the final resting places of soldiers lost in the conflict. Those gravesites are flanked on the right by warships on a storm-tossed sea, and on the left, soldiers trudging over a snowy hillside. The hopes for the carefree spirit of a joyous Christmas celebrated in the presence of beloved family members are set against the realities of separation, longing, isolation, and fears of war.

The Home Front



Children still found Christmas morning joyful in this 1864 *Harper's Weekly* edition. Note that the youngster on the right is equipped with sword, drum, kepi and a haversack with "U.S." prominently displayed.

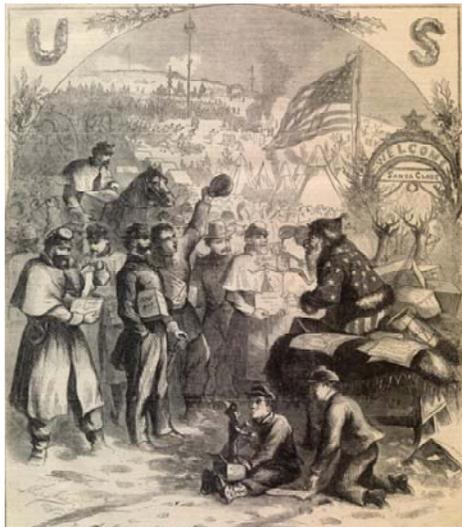
Many of the Christmas festivities, traditions, and celebrations enjoyed today were well-established by 1860. Numerous Christmas traditions practiced during the American Civil War were customs adopted from Western Europe, primarily Victorian-era England. Yule logs, Christmas feasts, Christmas greens, the Mistletoe Ball, the custom of kissing underneath the mistletoe, caroling, and exchanging cards, are all imports from Victorian England. However, one of the most dearly-held symbols of the holiday, the Christmas tree, was brought to the United States courtesy of German immigrants. Perhaps the most cherished and endearing Christmas association, Santa Claus, was already a legend during the Civil War. Although, even by that time, there was not yet a standard image of Santa Claus, the

idea was firmly entrenched in national consciousness. In the first quarter of the 19th century, popular writers did much to instill in the American imagination and cement the idea of St. Nicolas, especially for the merriment of youth. The nocturnal visit from the kindly, jolly, gift-bearing elf, bent of catering to the whimsical fancy of children, contributed to the family-oriented underpinnings of the holiday. In the mid-19th century, Christmas in America was a family-oriented celebration. It revolved around home, relatives, and children. Thus, it, above all seasons, accentuated the absence of those who went to war, for the families left behind, and the soldiers themselves.

In Camp



Christmas Boxes in Camp – 1861 by Winslow Homer
Illustrated cover page from the January 4, 1862,
issue of Harper's Weekly



By Christmas, 1862, Thomas Nast had allied Santa Claus with the Union Army. From
Harper's Weekly, January 3, 1863

From the highest ranking officers to rank-and-file privates, soldiers' thoughts returned to home and family in far-removed places, times, and circumstances during Christmas. Confederate General Robert E. Lee expressed the bittersweet recollections of many a previous Christmas in a December 1861, letter to his wife, *"I cannot let this day of grateful rejoicing pass, dear Mary, without some communication with you. I am grateful for the many among the past that I have passed with you and the remembrance of them fills me with pleasure. For those on which we have been separated we must not repine. If it will make us more resigned and better prepared for what is in store for us, we should rejoice."* A Confederate from Mississippi expressed his homesickness in a letter sent from Virginia – *"My Dearest Wife and Babies, A healthy Christmas to you all and to father and son and all the rest. I can't say a happy one (though I wish it), for happiness is not ours until we all meet after the war. You have no idea how lonesome I feel this day. It's the first time in my life I'm away from loved ones at home."*

Similarly, a Union soldier from Pennsylvania noted the only pleasure of an otherwise lonely day, *"Yesterday was a rather dull day for Christmas. One of our mess got a box from home on Christmas Eve containing a large roasted turkey and several other good things. So we had the pleasure of eating a very good Christmas dinner but I was not as happy as I was when I ate my Christmas dinner one year ago with my dear wife and I hope before another Christmas rolls around that we may be together never more to part."*

The 1862 Winslow Homer illustration on the left depicts the mirth and merriment soldiers experienced when they received boxes from home during Christmas. Parcels sent from home containing all manner of Christmas treats were highly sought after by soldiers in blue and gray. One Confederate recounted the pleasure a box from home elicited for those lucky enough to receive them – *"The Christmas of 1862 was cheerless indeed; the weather was frightful, and a heavy snowstorm covered everything a foot deep. Each soldier attempted to get a dinner in honor of the day, and those to whom boxes had been sent succeeded to a most respectable degree, but those unfortunates whose homes were outside the line had nothing whatever delectable partaking of the nature of Christmas. We read in the Richmond papers of the thousands and thousands of boxes that had been passed in route to the army sent by the ladies of Richmond and other cities, but few found their way to us. The greater part of them were for the troops from the far South who were too distant from their homes to receive anything from their own families."* Likewise, a Union soldier from New Jersey commented, *"On Christmas day, Co. H of our Reg. were well supplied with good things as their friends had sent them out about 18 boxes containing plenty of poultry and various other good things, making mouths of the less fortunate companys water. As I received a box myself about this time it did not affect me quite so bad as some of the rest."*

A Day of Merriment

Among the events that distracted soldiers' attention from the loneliness felt so acutely at Christmas were a variety of recreational activities. Many commanding officers suspended the usual official pursuits of inspection and drill on Christmas Day, and substituted foot races, jumping contests, wrestling matches, and even a greased pig chase.

Northern and Southern soldiers alike, staged parades and diluted the longings of home with the gaiety and cheer that came from partaking of spirits.

Or perhaps spirits were used to numb the senses and so too the yearning for those far away and memories of home. One Confederate remembered, *"A good deal of drunkenness in camp. In the morning the captain gave us a treat of eggnog. One-half of the boys very tight by nine o'clock...Never saw so many drunk men before. It might be said with propriety that the 7th was drink on the 25."* Through four years of the loss, separation, and longing of war, the celebration of Christmas continued, and the peace that it promised was sought after – whether on the home front or in camp.

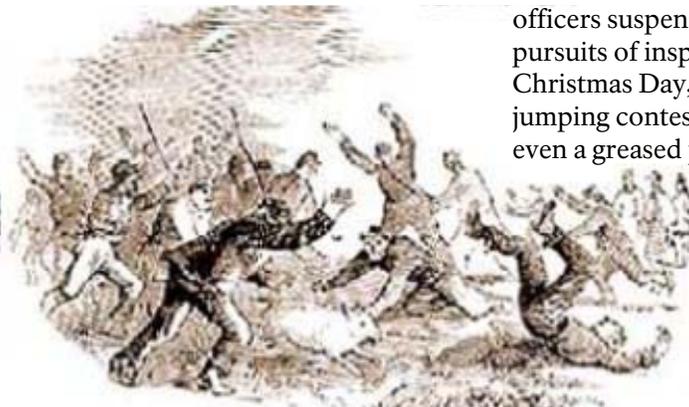


Illustration from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated History of the Civil War*, of a greased pig chase in the camp of the 5th New Hampshire Infantry