

CHRISTMAS IN AMERICA

*A
History*



PENNE L. RESTAD

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PENNE L. RESTAD

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*For Robert,
Benjamin, and Jobanna*

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Foreword

There exists a commonplace history of America's Christmas: Dour Puritan forefathers banned its observance and the effects of their prohibition lingered into the nineteenth century, when the Christmas stories of Washington Irving and Charles Dickens, the customs of new immigrants, and the expansion of commerce invigorated and widened our notion of the holiday. By the 1870s, Americans eagerly decorated trees, sang carols, shopped for gifts, and spent hot hours in kitchens preparing festive dishes. They dashed over snow-laden fields and impatiently awaited the arrival of Santa Claus. By the end of the century, they had forged a new, splendid, and popular Christmas. Since then, the familiar wisdom concludes, materialism, aided by media, modern advertising, and mass marketing, has overtaken and profaned this most glorious of holidays.

This account has guided much of the popular as well as academic writing on the holiday. Many have approached Christmas with an antiquarian's passion, searching out the origins and details of the festival's customs and habits in order to acquaint us with its former grandeur. Their efforts have rewarded us with rich descriptions of ornaments, toys, trees, rituals, stories, and menus. More recently, scholarly forays into the universe of Yuletide have yielded important perspectives on Christmas and the roles of commerce and class conflict. Yet, whether etched as nostalgic fact- and object-finding or incorporated into the latest demystified view of the American past, each elaboration mainly reaffirms clichés.¹

Christmas in America places these understandings within a broad and often paradoxical chronicle, one that considers the holiday's rich and changing spiritual, social, material, and personal meanings. It addresses those mythic qualities of Christmas that make it more than a simple winter festival, and shows it to be, at least for our own era, a time of considerable private and social consequence. Within communities and even for the nation, the celebration briefly unites a disparate people in rites and impulses that hold almost universal appeal. For individuals, it cradles myriad sentiments concerning friends, family, age, place, heritage, and values.

The chapters that follow provide an explanation for how such a Christmas came to be. In part, they comprise a narrative running from seventeenth-century Jamestown, and before, to the present. They tell how Christmas has been celebrated or ignored at various times and in various places in America. This history also explores what Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm called the "invention of tradition." At certain critical times, they argued, a particular culture invents new symbols and ceremonies that help define and reflect its character. These actions or icons soon become so closely associated with a people as to seem or feel as if they had been in place for ages past. For instance, Scotsmen did not always wear kilts, nor did the Queen of England always address her realm on Christmas Day. Yet these traditions have about them a timelessness that orders the history and meaning of Scottish nationalism in one case and English society in another.²

Given that, historically, not all Americans kept Christmas and that those who did had celebrated it in ways that varied by region and religion, Hobsbawm and Ranger's theory suggests that the American Christmas as it evolved in the nineteenth century was just such an "invented" tradition. Its rise corresponded with America's struggle to find its own identity and its need to bind together the peoples of many nationalities who made this country home.

The concept of "invention" provides a useful starting point, but leaves much to be considered and explained. We know, for example, that Americans began to celebrate Christmas widely only in the last half of the nineteenth century. Even as Americans framed the holiday, they revealed a self-conscious awareness that it was significantly different from earlier celebrations of Jesus' birth. We also know that the holiday matured in an era marked by the Civil War and titanic social change. The creation of the Christmas we celebrate cannot be considered apart from these tumultuous events. Indeed, any explanation of our Christmas must draw upon many themes, ones as pervasive as a remolding of religious expressions, the rise

and dominance of science and a new rationality, the efforts of accommodate an unprecedented heterogeneity in the nation, and the changing social and economic roles of both individuals and groups within an ever-expanding industrial economy.

In the twentieth century, Christmas has continued to reveal the nature of American life. Of the innumerable conversations about the holiday that I have enjoyed, many began with a person's memories of his or her own Christmas and often focused on traditions brought from other nations or from different areas within the United States. American Finns, Germans, Mexicans, African-Americans, and Balinese all have unique stories. Californians, Pennsylvanians, Texans, and Montanans have others. These accounts, fascinating in their detail and variety, are all the more arresting for their similarities. How is it that from so many types and sorts of people, we can genuinely speak of Christmas as a common experience? "Invention" is a helpful but too singular and static a word to encompass and explain the American Christmas.

Looking at the full sweep of this holiday's history in our culture, we can begin to see its relationship to ethnic pluralism, its meaning for non-Christians, and its unchallenged position as the most important of national holidays within a culture that also values religious freedom and separation of church and state. Only then can we approach an answer to perennial concerns about the holiday, ones that range from the nagging feeling that Christmas is in decline to the more specific charge that materialism has destroyed its spiritual message.

Given this breadth of inquiry, *Christmas in America* attempts to chart the evolution of our Christmas from its colonial days, when the marks of religion and region were most distinct, to its incarnation by media and money in the twentieth century. For the most part, though, this book concentrates on events and conditions of the nineteenth century that have indelibly shaped the Christmas we keep and the attitudes we hold about it. It emphasizes the elastic and ever-changing nature of the American calendar and its holidays, as well as the interaction of political, social, economic, and religious realms. It seeks to analyze rather than moralize the issues of materialism and gift-giving, and to bring new insights to such familiar elements of the festival as trees, cards, and Santa. Ultimately, it wills the reader to understand Christmas through the lens of history and, through Christmas, the ambiguities and paradoxes of our culture.

I owe a debt of gratitude to those people who have helped me in thinking and writing about Christmas. First of all, my parents, Mary and Lee

Restad, who teach me, every year, the meaning of the holiday. For this, and many more things, I am always thankful.

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CHAPTER 1



European Inheritances: Christmas in the Colonies

"Shall we have Christmas?" was the way one Pennsylvanian asked the question in 1810. Throughout their colonial history and well into nationhood, not only the matter of "shall" but of "how shall" Christmas be celebrated challenged Americans. Their search for answers to these two difficult and sometimes divisive issues can be found in a chronicle of evolving customs, cultural discord, and striking invention. It begins with the first European émigrés, who brought to America an ambiguous legacy concerning the holiday that was almost as old as the Christian Church itself.¹

Christians had wrestled for centuries with questions of if, when, and how to celebrate Jesus' birth. As a commemoration of the miracle that established the Godly paternity of Jesus, Christmas was a celebration of the event upon which the existence of Christianity depended. At the same time, the festival functioned from its inception as an end-of-year substitute for pagan rites and quickly absorbed many profane elements, ones that remain among its most attractive features. As the observance of Christmas spread, the details of its celebration became as varied as the cultures that kept it and as changeable as the history of those cultures. But the radically paradoxical mix of both the sacred and the profane remained.

The earliest Christians gave little attention to Jesus' birth. They expected the Second Coming any day, and in any case viewed birthday celebrations as heathen. As the possibility of his imminent return faded, the faithful

took a more historical perspective and began to search for evidence of the day or even season of Jesus' birth. They found no clues in the Gospels. Nor could they locate any other reliable sources to pinpoint his nativity. Undeterred, some placed his birth on May 20 and others on April 19 or 20. Clement, Bishop of Alexandria (died c. 215), nominated November 18. Hippolytus (died c. 236) calculated that Christ must have been born on Wednesday, the same day God created the sun. The *De Pascha Computus*, written anonymously in North Africa about 243, posited that the first day of creation coincided with the first day of spring, on March 25, and contended that Jesus' birthday fell four days later, on March 28.²

Sometime in the fourth century of the Common Era, the Roman Church began to celebrate a Feast of the Nativity and to do so on December 25. A variety of issues influenced the decision. Internally, heresies plagued Church authority. Arianism, one of the most threatening, regarded Jesus as a solely human agent of God. The Church insisted on his divinity. By assigning him one human quality—a birthday—it appropriated some of Arianism's appeal, but sustained Jesus' place in the Holy Trinity.³

The Church had also grown concerned about the increasing popularity of pagan religions and mystery cults in Rome. Each year beginning on December 17, the first day of Saturnalia, and continuing through Kalends, the first day of January, most Romans feasted, gamed, reveled, paraded, and joined in other festivities as they paid homage to their deities. The Church's alarm deepened when Emperor Aurelian, noticing that the pagan rituals had begun to converge around Mithras, the solar god, decreed in 274 C.E. that December 25, the winter solstice on the Julian Calendar, be kept as a public festival in honor of the Invincible Sun. Rome's Christians challenged paganism directly by specifying December 25, rather than some other date, as the day for their Nativity Feast.⁴

Exactly when the Church of Rome began to keep Christmas, however, is not known. The first extant reference to the Feast of the Nativity may be as old as 336, in the earliest list of martyrs of the Roman Church. Perhaps Christmas was celebrated even earlier. Some scholars believe that Emperor Constantine (ruled 312–337 C.E.), who had converted to Christianity and built the Vatican atop the hill where the Mithras cult worshipped the sun, may have instituted the festival.⁵

In any case, by the middle of the fourth century, the Church had boldly declared its Nativity holy day to be observed on the same day as the winter solstice. The concurrence of the two celebrations gave the Church an opportunity to turn elements of the Saturnalia itself to Christian ends. For

example, it used the creation of the sun, the center of the Saturnalia, to reinforce and symbolize frequent scriptural and doctrinal imagery of God as the sun, and of Jesus' role as Son of God. The creation of Christmas was thus a measure of Christianity's growing power, challenging the crowds enjoying Saturnalian revelry to join the once secretive Christians in a celebration not of the birth of the sun, but rather the birth of Jesus, the Son of God.⁶

The overlapping of Saturnalia and the Feast of the Nativity set the terms of all future debate over the Christmas festival. Its Christian aspects, at least in their most intense form, emphasized heavenly afterlife. The heathen elements absorbed into the festival affirmed life and exalted its annual renewal. The Church made no clear separations between the two perspectives. Instead, it layered profane activities with sacred ends to answer the needs, spiritual and physical, of the total person. This combination of sacred and profane made some religious leaders uncomfortable. For example, Gregory of Nazianzen (died 389) urged that "the celebration of the [Christmas] festival [be conducted] after an heavenly and not after an earthly manner" and cautioned against "feasting to excess, dancing and crowning the doors." Indeed, the paradox of purpose forged an enduring Christmas reality. As one historian succinctly characterized it: "The pagan Romans became Christians—but the Saturnalia remained."⁷

The custom of honoring Jesus' birth on December 25 quickly spread to the Eastern Church. By 380, Christians in Constantinople honored it as "Theophany or the Birthday." These Christians had once observed Epiphany, January 6, as a joint Feast of the Nativity and Baptism. This was the same date that popular legends held pagan gods made themselves known to humans. "Deep in the tradition of the Church's spirituality," writes John Gunstone, "was the idea that Christ's appearance in flesh was the consummation of all epiphanies." During the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, the celebration of Epiphany spread westward, but the Roman Church, with its celebration of the Nativity set in late December and its emphasis on Jesus' incarnation and divinity, recast it to commemorate the adoration of the Magi. In Constantinople, Epiphany continued to consecrate Jesus' baptism, but the Eastern Church began to mark December 25 as the day of his birth. The dual celebration, that of birth and baptism, that had defined the old holy day ceased to exist.⁸

Over the next thousand years, the observance of Christmas followed the expanding community of Christianity. By 432, Egyptians kept it. By the end of the sixth century, Christianity had taken the holiday far northward

and into England. During the next two hundred years in Scandinavia it became fused with the pagan Norse feast season known as Yule, the time of year also known as the Teutonic "Midwinter." Sometime around the Norman incursion in 1050, the Old English word *Christes maesse* (festival of Christ) entered the English language, and as early as the twelfth century "Xmas" had come into use. From the thirteenth century on, nearly all Europe kept Jesus' birth.⁹

The tension between the folk and ecclesiastical qualities of the holy day did not ease with the advance of Christmas-keeping. Documents of the Middle Ages, Tristram Coffin has noted, were "fat with decrees against the abuses of Christmas merriment," an indication "that people at large [were] doing just what they ha[d] always done and paying little attention to the debates of the moralists." Some clergy stressed that fallen humankind needed a season of abandon and excess, as long as it was carried on under the umbrella of Christian supervision. Others argued that all vestiges of paganism must be removed from the holiday. Less fervent Christians complained about the unreasonableness of Church law and its attempts to change custom. Yet the Church sustained the hope that sacred would eventually overtake profane as pagans gave up their revels and turned to Christianity.¹⁰

These conflicts continued during the Protestant Reformation, but with little promise of resolution. In England, the Anglican Church repeatedly, but with little success, tried to gain control over the day. Its custom had been to begin Christmas on December 16 (known as "O Sapientia") and celebrate for nine days. But during King Alfred's reign (871–899 C.E.), a law passed extending the celebration to twelve days, ending on Epiphany.¹¹

Celebrants devoted much of the season to pagan pleasures that were discouraged during the remainder of the year. The annual indulgence in eating, dancing, singing, sporting, card playing, and gambling escalated to magnificent proportions. By the seventeenth century, under the reigns of the Tudors and Stuarts, the Christmas season featured elaborate masques, mummeries, and pageants. In 1607, King James I insisted that a play be acted on Christmas night and that the court indulge in games. One account of an evening's "moderate dinner" noted a first course of sixteen dishes. In 1626, the Duke of Buckingham found that the captains, masters, boat-swains, gunners, and carpenters of three ships had abandoned their service in favor of Christmas revels, leaving their vessels prey to any enemy. In

1633, the four Inns of Court presented a masque, "The Triumph of Peace," at a cost of £20,000.

It fell to Puritan reformers to put a stop to the unholy merriment and to bend arguments over the proper keeping of Christmas into an older and more basic one—whether there should even be an observance of the day. Defying the decision of the Anglican Convocation of 1562 to maintain the church calendar, the Puritans struck Christmas, along with all saints' days, from their own list of holy days. The Bible, they held, expressly commanded keeping only the Sabbath. That would be their practice as well.¹²

In taking the offensive against Christmas-keeping, Puritans distributed colorful diatribes against the excesses of the holiday. Philip Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583) condemned revelous celebrants as "hel hounds" in a "Deville's daunce" of merriment. William Prynne's *Histriomastix* (1633) inveighed against plays, masques, balls, and the decking of houses with greens. "Into what a stupendous *beight* of more than pagan impiety . . . have we not now *degenerated*!" he lamented. Christmas, he thought, ought to be "rather a day of mourning than rejoicing," not a time spent in "amorous mixt, voluptuous, unchristian, that I say not pagan, dancing, to God's, to Christ's dishonour, religion's scandal, chastities' shipwracke and sinne's advantage."¹³

Even as Puritan condemnation of Christmas intensified, the economic and social upheaval of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century had begun to alter English life. The standing social order, along with the paternalism of its manor system, was crumbling. Christmas, in its role as a part of the old structure, could not escape unscathed. In some years, the lavish celebrations lapsed. In many cases, the emphases of the holiday changed. It transformed, in the words of J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, into "a symbol for hospitality towards the poor, an understanding between the different levels of society, and happier and more prosperous times in now neglected villages." King Charles I (1625–1649) went so far as to direct his noblemen and gentry to return to their landed estates in midwinter in order to keep up their old style of Christmas generosity.¹⁴

The rise of Oliver Cromwell's Puritan Commonwealth dealt another staggering blow to England's Christmas celebrations. Parliament outlawed seasonal plays in 1642. It ordered that the monthly fast, which coincidentally fell on Christmas in 1644, be kept. Parliament purposely met on every Christmas from 1644 to 1652. In 1647, it declared Christmas a day of penance, not feasting, and in 1652 "strongly prohibited" its observance.

Ministers who preached on the Nativity risked imprisonment. Churchwardens faced fines for decorating their churches. By law, shops stayed open on Christmas as if it were any regular business day.¹⁵

Yet resistance was not uncommon. One year, protesting Londoners decorated churches and shops with swags of bay, rosemary, box, holly, privet, and ivy, only to watch the Lord Mayor and City Marshal ride about setting fire to their handiwork. The populace "so roughly used" the merchants who ventured to open shop in 1646 that the shopkeepers petitioned Parliament for protection. In Canterbury, when the Lord Mayor ordered that the markets be kept open that Christmas, a "serious disturbance ensued . . . wherein many were severely hurt."¹⁶

It was within this particularly turbulent era that English Christmas customs entered early Virginia and New England. Most settlers and adventurers arriving in the New World welcomed Christmas as a day of respite from the routines of work and hardship. Some observed it, at least in part, as a holy day. Others attempted to feast. On Christmas, 1608, Captain John Smith and his men, having endured for "six or seven dayes the extreame winde, rayne, frost and snow" as they traveled among the Indians of Virginia colony, "were never more merry, nor fed on more plentie of good Oysters, Fish, Flesh, Wild-foule, and good bread; nor never had better fires in *England*." Maryland-bound passengers aboard the *Ark* in 1633 "so immoderately" drank wine on Christmas that "the next day 30 sickened of feve[r]s and whereof about a dozen died afterward."¹⁷

Only Dissenters tried to ignore the holiday. The *Mayflower* Pilgrims, who arrived at Plymouth in December 1620, spent Christmas building "the first house for commone use to receive them and their goods." Within a year, however, the Pilgrims themselves had to face dissent. On the morning of December 25, 1621, less reform-minded newcomers to the colony "excused them selves and said it wente against their consciences to work on that day." Governor William Bradford allowed the "lusty yonge" Englishmen to rest, saying he "would spare them till they were better informed." But at noon he found them playing games in the street. Angered, Bradford told the frolickers that it ran against *his* conscience that they should play while others worked. If they desired to keep Christmas as a matter of devotion they should stay in their houses, he said, "but ther should be no gameing or revelling in the streets." Nor did the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony observe Christmas. Governor John Winthrop

entered nothing in his diary on his first Christmas in America in 1630, and in succeeding years he attempted to suppress the holiday.¹⁸

In the early non-English settlements, sparse evidence points to a more traditional attitude toward the holiday. In 1604, for instance, French settlers of St. Croix Island, off the coast of Maine, held religious services and spent the remainder of Christmas Day playing games. In 1686 LaSalle's French colony on Garcita Creek celebrated what was probably the first Christmas in Texas. "[W]e first kept the Christmas *Holy-Days*. The Midnight Mass was sung, and on *Twelve-Day*, we cry'd *The king drinks* . . . tho' we had only Water. . . ." ¹⁹

As the first settlements grew into more established communities, patterns of Christmas celebration peculiar to the colonies began to appear. Geographic separation from European homelands, the proximity of disparate religious and ethnic groups to each other, and the hardship of new beginnings disrupted old habits and holidays. In Dutch New Amsterdam, early in the seventeenth century, eighteen languages could be heard among the 500 or so inhabitants. Numerous Christmases abounded, persisting as an expression of individual heritages. In large towns, where various groups lived close together, the common ground for celebration could often be found in public and secular rather than in potentially divisive religious areas. Thus, Christmas, although widely celebrated, retained little importance in society as a whole precisely because of religious and cultural diversity.²⁰

Particularly in the middle colonies, a wide range of ethnicities and religions prevented a shared ecclesiastic and religious holiday. Pennsylvania Quakers scorned Christmas as adamantly as Puritans did. Huguenots, Moravians, Dutch Reformed, and Anglicans, who also lived in the colony, all kept Christmas in their own way. Shortly after Americans had won their independence, Elizabeth Drinker, a Quaker herself, divided Philadelphians into three categories. There were Quakers, who "make no more account of it [Christmas] than another day," those who were religious, and the rest who "spend it in riot and dissipation."²¹

"Frolicking," the name many gave to this sort of boisterous Christmas and New Year's fun, could be found throughout the colonies. In the New England countryside, revelous intruders entered houses with a speech and swords at Christmas time. Far into the eighteenth century, masked merry-makers roved Pennsylvania's Delaware Valley "making sport for everyone." Southerners shot guns, a custom similar to one practiced in northern England.²²

The antecedents to this seasonal phenomenon have been traced to Roman times, when early Christians, seeking to ridicule pagan superstition and the Roman custom of masquerading, masked themselves on New Year's Day. Many, however, flagged in their intent and joined in the heathens' frolics. Church officials attempted to persuade members to desist, but failed. In time, even clergy could be found in full disguise, taking part in miracle and mystery plays performed during the Christmas season.²³

The convention of disguising, or mumming, and performing plays and skits dispersed throughout nearly all European countries. In England, beginning under the reign of Edward III (1327–1377), it became a form of royal entertainment. It peaked in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when elaborate dress and formal presentations, such as Ben Johnson's *Masque of Christmas* and that in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, were the order of the season. Enthusiasm for court masques diminished thereafter, dampened by the Puritan Directory. But the tradition of masquerading and mumming continued to thrive in more rustic forms. In parts of England, householders, family, guests, and servants donned masks and painted their faces or darkened them with soot to become "guisers," "geese-dancers," or "morris dancers." Often they dressed as animals. Sometimes men and women exchanged clothes with each other. Disguised, they played crude tricks on one another, or went from house to house and entered without permission. There they might dance, sing, feast, and act "a rude drama," mocking propriety and challenging the social order.²⁴

American colonists engaged in similar antics, though usually without the performance of even a rudimentary play. They concentrated instead on disguises, noisy good humor, and chaotic peregrinations through neighborhoods. Across the land, revelers, almost always males, gathered to shoot off firecrackers and guns, paraded with musical instruments, call from house to house in garish disguise, and beg for food and drink on December 25 and, in some places, on New Year's.²⁵

Such frolics, drawn from the custom of English Anglicans, as well as those of Swedish, German, and other settlers, were especially prominent in New York and Pennsylvania. Samuel Breck remembered maskers from his Pennsylvania childhood in the late eighteenth century. "They were a set of the lowest blackguards," he wrote, "who, disguised in filthy clothes and oftentimes with masked faces, went from house to house in large companies, . . . obtruding themselves everywhere, particularly into the rooms that were occupied by parties of ladies and gentlemen, [and] would demean themselves with great insolence." As the elder Breck and his friends

played cards, Samuel had watched the mummers "take possession of a table, seat themselves on rich furniture and proceed to handle the cards, to the great annoyance of the company." He could only get rid of them by "giv[ing] them money, and listen[ing] patiently to a foolish dialogue between two or more of them . . ." ²⁶

Usually an informal code regulated the mummers' reception. According to one set of rules, "the proper custom" had been to ask the uninvited guests "into the house and regale them with mulled cider, or small beer, and home-made cakes," or "give the leading mummers a few pence as a dole, which . . . they would 'pool,' and buy cakes and beer." One never "address[ed] or otherwise recognize[d] the mummer by any other name than the name of the character he was assuming." ²⁷

In New York, the calling ritual varied slightly. Men had gone from house to house, firing their guns, on New Year's Day since "time immemorial." At each place, after being invited in for food and drink, the men of the household joined them. "[T]hus they went on increasing their numbers until the whole neighborhood had been saluted and visited. . . ." The remainder of the day the shooters engaged in contests of marksmanship and other sports. At least one, the "very barbarous amusement" of "Shooting Turkeys," required a keen eye and sharp betting skills. ²⁸

The southern colonies, largely rural and unhampered by Quaker and Puritan dissenters and whose white population was comparatively less diverse, cultivated Christmases of a very different sort. Decentralized living, a dearth of women, and a high death rate kept the holiday at bay during the first decades of settlement. As social and political conditions stabilized, southerners began to look to England for models of dress, manner, and social behavior. Their Christmas, like that of the English manor, evolved as an interval of leisure rather than a set of rituals assigned to one particular day. During the season, Virginians, Carolinians, and Marylanders especially enjoyed dancing, but also engaged in card playing, cock fighting, nine-pins, and horse racing. Anglicanism, the established religion in most of the planting colonies, did not pressure its members into sacred observance. ²⁹

While southerners may have aspired to recreate a sense of the English Christmas, its authentic reproduction eluded them. No pre-Revolutionary account mentions boars' heads or wassail bowls, mummers or waits. In England those traditions had been on the wane when John Smith first ventured through Virginia, and by the 1650s had been mortally threatened