

## **A Short History of Christmas**

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### 1. Epiphany

The Gospels give us no clues about the date or even the season of Jesus' birth. Sometime after the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Greek speaking Christians started to celebrate January sixth as the date of the "epiphany." Epiphany is the Greek word for manifestation and refers to the mythical day that people realized that Jesus was the son of God. Because Unitarians believe that Jesus was a human being and not God, we do not celebrate Epiphany.

### 2. Saturnalia

Around the same time, 1600 years ago, the Roman Christians, the Christians who spoke Latin, started celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25. The Roman Christians picked December 25, because they were concerned about the popularity of the God Saturn, for whom the Romans named Saturday. In Roman polytheism Saturn was the agricultural God, the God of sowing and seed. Saturn's great festival, the Roman harvest celebration, called Saturn-ali-a, was the most popular and most exciting of all the Roman festivals. Starting at least two hundred years before Jesus was born, saturn-ali-a was originally only one day long, taking place on December 17, but later it expanded to a week. With the harvest completed, the Romans suspended all work and business. Instead of working Romans hunted, ate, and drank wine. Masters gave slaves temporary freedom to say and do as they wished. Roman authorities eased certain moral restrictions, and everyone freely exchanged presents. They decorated homes, public buildings and streets with green trees and shrubs, and at night with candles and lamps.

Sixteen hundred years ago the leaders of the Roman Christian church saw it as their responsibility to encourage Romans to honor Jesus not Saturn. They intentionally established Jesus' birthday at the same time as the Saturn's festival. They hoped the Romans would transfer their reverence from Saturn to Jesus. This decision by Roman Christian leaders to turn a pagan harvest celebration into a Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus has led to a debate over the true meaning of Christmas that has continued for sixteen hundred years.

Meanwhile, the Greek Christians were Celebrating Epiphany on January 6. To bring the Greek Christians and the Roman Christians together, church leaders called the 13 days between December 25 and January 6, "the twelve days of Christmas."

The tension we feel between the desire to pray and the desire to party this time of year, is a sixteen-hundred-year-old tension. On the one hand, the end of the harvest was in many people's minds a good time to relax and have fun. People drank alcoholic beverages. They enjoyed the food farmers had harvested. People played games, gambled and dressed up in funny costumes. They danced and sang. They gave gifts to loved ones.

On the other hand, Church leaders taught that December 25, was a time to celebrate a sacred event. It was a time to remember and honor the birth of Jesus, and to recommit oneself to living life following the teachings of Jesus.

Over the next thousand years the observance of Christmas with these two very different meanings, spread as Christianity spread across Europe. In Scandinavia Christmas became combined with the pagan feast season known as Yule. Sometime around 1050 the old English word *Christes maesse* (festival of Christ) entered the English language. By the thirteenth century on nearly all Europe celebrated Christmas.

As Christianity expanded throughout Europe, clergy had mixed reactions to the two different ways people celebrated. Some clergy believed that humankind needed a season of indulgence and excess. They tolerated the hunting and eating and

drinking, if people carried on under the umbrella of Christian supervision. Other clergy argued that people must remove all aspects of paganism from the holiday.

### 3. The Puritans ban Christmas

In England the Anglican Church tried to gain control over Christmas, with little success. The annual indulgence in eating, drinking, dancing, singing, hunting, card playing, gambling and more drinking escalated in England until, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, sober people reacted against the excesses of the holiday.

All of us here have had experience with the problems of alcoholism and gambling. These activities destroy families and friendships. I suspect that this was part of the motivation of people who gathered into the religious group called Puritans. They were fed up with the damage that excessive drinking and gambling were causing. They sought to “purify” the Church of England, to cleanse it of its impure practices. They believed that the Christmas Holiday had become overwhelmed by immoral behavior.

Under Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan Parliament met on every Christmas Day from 1644 to 1656. In 1644 it declared Christmas a day of penance, and in 1652 strongly prohibited any observance of Christmas. Ministers who preached on the topic of Christmas risked imprisonment. Churchwardens faced fines for decorating their churches. The Puritans required stores to stay open Christmas day.

During this time of turmoil in England, English settlers were arriving in America. The English who settled in the south were those who enjoyed drinking in excess as the way to celebrate December 25. For example, Maryland-bound passengers aboard a boat in 1633 “so immoderately” drank wine on Christmas that “the next day thirty sickened of fever” and “about a dozen died.”

On the other hand, the Pilgrims were Puritans. They spent their first Christmas Day at Plymouth building a house. Later the Puritan Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony attempted to suppress the holiday. A Puritan minister wrote:

It can never be proved that Christ was born on December 25. Had it been the will of Christ that the Anniversary of his Nativity should have been celebrated, he would at least have let us know the day.

South of New England Dutch, German and Swedes settled the areas of New York and Pennsylvania. They celebrated Christmas and New Years by drinking hard cider, wearing costumes and masks, card playing and the firing of guns.

Non-Puritan English settlers in Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas enjoyed dancing, card playing, cock fighting, ninepins, and horse racing. Still, Christmas was not a major day in the lives of people in the mid Atlantic colonies or the southern colonies. In his diary, Thomas Jefferson rarely mentions Christmas. George Washington frequently spent Christmas Day hunting and settling year-end financial matters. The United States congress met on Christmas Day most years from 1789 to 1855. Two hundred years ago national holidays did not exist. The only consistency was that when Americans celebrated a holiday in a local community, drinking, fighting, and squandering of money was the routine way to behave.

In fact when our nation was founded we had no national holidays. Slowly overtime, our ancestors developed national holidays. Such days are important to the formation of a cultural identity. As our new nation matured in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Thanksgiving, Independence Day, New Years Day, and Christmas began to gain prominence on the calender.

How did Americans first celebrate Christmas? At first loud detonations, like on the fourth of July and on New Years, were popular on Christmas. Shooting guns and exploding gun power was the most common approach to creating these big noises. However, one man in Missouri recalled that in his boyhood his brother took the bladders of freshly butchered hogs and blew them up as tight as they could bear. Christmas Day they lay the bladders down on the ice and struck them with a big paddle making “a noise louder than a popgun.”

The practice of drinking as a way to mark Christmas was also popular. In Philadelphia on Christmas eve 1833 young men wandered in packs, drinking in taverns and fighting on street corners.

#### 4. From Drinking and Explosions to a Celebration of Family

However, gradually nineteenth-century Americans recast Christmas. Slowly our for-mothers and for-fathers molded Christmas into a celebration of the family. The home became a symbol of a spiritual sanctuary from the world. The central scripture of this new American Christmas was a poem first published by the Troy, New York *Sentinel* on December 23, 1823. Soon “A Visit from St. Nicholas” appeared each year at Christmas in newspapers throughout the nation. The poem does not celebrate drink and gambling. It does not celebrate guns and explosions. The poem is a celebration of home and family.

'T WAS 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;

#### 5. The Tree

The poem does not mention a tree, but soon a central focus in the home became an ancient symbol of fertility and regeneration. The practice of bringing an evergreen branch or a small tree into the house and placing it on a table during Christmas, became popular in German speaking countries about 450 years ago. The Pennsylvania Dutch brought the custom of Christmas trees to the United States. One of the earliest documented references is in 1821. In 1832 Rev. Charles Follen a Unitarian and professor of German at Harvard College put up a tree in his home in Cambridge and decorated it. Because of this, Unitarians like to claim that we were the first to introduce Christmas trees to America. These first trees were small and sat on tables. Soon Americans started to bring trees into their homes that stretch from floor to ceiling. They decorated the trees with candies, toys and candles. In the ancient tradition of religious offerings to the Gods, families sacrificed the tree and transformed it into a shrine.

#### 6. Gifts

The early Christians had refrained from gift-giving at Christmas because gift giving was popular with the Romans during their harvest celebration. Germans and non Puritan English revived the custom. The poem “the Night Before Christmas” encouraged the idea of gift giving at Christmas and by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century many Americans gave family members gifts on December 25. At Christmas trading worldly items gave people a symbolic way for expressing the emotional aspects of their relationships. Giving gifts to spouses and to children promoted the American Christmas idea of home and family. Before the Civil War most gifts were hand made, After the war Christmas shopping grew dramatically. In 1867 for the first time Macy’s stayed open until midnight on Christmas eve. The social changes of civil war, the industrial revolution, the growth of cities, caused people to increase gift-giving to reinforce relationships at a personal level.

Slowly the popularity of the Christmas grew. Louisiana was the first to declare Christmas an official holiday, in 1837. By 1860 fourteen states had done so. The need for a national holiday to celebrate “religion, family happiness, childlike mirth, and generosity,” increased during the Civil War. By 1865, 31 states and territories officially recognized Christmas.

In 1870 Congress declared December 25 a federal holiday and Christmas became the most important American holiday. The old Christmas of drinking, card playing and shooting guns had disappeared. A national celebration of home and family replaced it.

#### 7. Carols

New traditions developed to reinforce this home and family theme.

- Edward Sears, a Unitarian minister, wrote “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.”
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a Unitarian poet, wrote “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.”
- And the Unitarian John Pierpont wrote “Jingle Bells.”

The Puritans had denounced Christmas singing, but after 1865 singing in December became popular. Huge choruses sang the Messiah each year in a New York armory. Street caroling became popular. Some 150,000 wandering singers toured Boston’s streets in 1895. By 1928 2,000 American cities had community carol singing.

#### 8. More about the Tree

The popularity of the Christmas tree continued to grow. The first electric lights replaced candles in 1882 and by 1895 electric lights replaced candles on the White House Christmas tree. By 1900 one in five American homes had a Christmas tree. In Reading, Pennsylvania one hundred years ago it was fashionable for people to decorated trees with stuffed animals. Squirrels and chipmunks perched on the branches. Grouped around the base were opossums, racoons, and occasionally a fox. Many households created elaborate landscapes beneath the trees, including earthen hills three to five feet tall covered with snow or moss. One house had a mountain, achieved with an estimated half ton of rocks in its front room. While most people did not adopt this approach to decorating, by 1930 Christmas trees were nearly universal.

#### 9. The Card

A New York engraver printed and distributed the first American Christmas card in 1851. By the 1880s, after mail delivery became more reliable, Americans sent millions of cards. They were gifts of small works of art, affordable to nearly everyone.

#### 10. Charity

Charles Dickens’s story *A Christmas Carol* established a moral obligation that Americans adopted toward Christmas charity. Although written in 1842, *A Christmas Carol* was first widely read in our country after the civil war. The story inspired charitable giving. By giving at Christmas Americans could connect to even the most impoverished in our land.

In the 20th century these customs endured and grew stronger. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christmas trees, gift giving, caroling, cards, charity and shopping are all part of our Christmas.

#### 11. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Shopping

The issues raised by shopping are rooted in the decision sixteen hundred years ago by the Roman Catholic leadership to have Jesus’ birthday fall at the same time as a celebration in Rome of the end of the harvest season. As a result of that decision, for centuries Christians have worried about the ancient Roman customs dishonoring Christmas. The most extreme reaction was that of the Puritans, who felt that the heavy drinking and gambling had gotten so much out of hand in England, that Christmas itself should be ban.

In the 21<sup>th</sup> century we are still concern about drinking and gambling, but the greatest concern for clergy at Christmas is the commercialization of the holiday. In our time the scientific method is being apply to the study of Christmas happiness. One researcher wrote that the students in one of his classes wondered if happiness comes more from the exercise of kindness than it does from having fun. Each student undertook an assignment for the next class to engage in one pleasurable activity and one charitable activity, and write about them both.

It turned out that the afterglow of the pleasurable activity such as hanging out with friends, or watching a movie, or eating a hot fudge sundae, paled in comparison with the effects acts of kindness. The students found that when their charitable acts were spontaneous and called upon personal strengths, their whole day went better. One student told about how her

nephew asked for help with his third grade arithmetic. After an hour of tutoring, she was astonished to discover that for the rest of the day, she could listen better, she was mellower, and people liked her more than usual. A business student said that he came to the university to learn how to make a lot of money in order to be happy, but that he was floored to find that he liked helping other people more than spending his money shopping.

This is my message this morning. I do not want to go as far as the Puritans and outlaw Christmas, but I remind us again of what we have heard many times. None of us can buy happiness. Therefore, may we be moderate in our buying and generous in our helping others. Simple gifts to relatives and friends can be powerful symbols of the love we feel. May we make the season a time when we preform acts of kindness as well as a time of shopping and parties.

Do these things. And then the joy of the Carols, the beauty of the trees, the friendly messages of the cards, and charity of giving, will renew our spirits and fill our hearts with hope and love.

Sources:

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