

New Year's Eve, Civil War Style

The turn of the year from old to new has long been celebrated in a variety of ways, sometimes with frivolity and sometimes with spirituality, and sadly, sometimes on the battlefield. This is true of the Civil War period also.

Celebrating with Frivolity

According to Alexis McCrossen, writing for *We're History*, men and women belonging to what were then known as the "sporting fraternity" caroused much as they did throughout the year by visiting taverns, drinking, dancing, and singing. However, in 1862, a group of celebrants dubbed themselves "The Baxter Muffins" (the name likely used for comedic ragtag militia – see *Minstrels Gags and End Men's Handbook* 1875), added some wild costumes to the mix and paraded through the streets of New York playing horns and drums.

Celebrating with Spirituality

Meanwhile, other people gathered in churches to pray the new year in. Attending church services and holding Watch Nights was a tradition in many denominations. But on December 31, 1862 a special event occurred. Abolitionists and the free black community waited for President Lincoln to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, which he did on January 1st, 1863.

One such vigil occurred in Tremont Temple in Boston where Frederick



While Abraham Lincoln cooperated in the making of Francis Bicknell Carpenter's *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation*, he showed little interest in William Tolman Carlton's painting *Watch Meeting*, a gift from a group of New England abolitionists. The depiction of slaves awaiting the stroke of midnight when the Emancipation Proclamation would take effect quickly became famous. Photographs of the painting in the form of *cartes-de-visite* were distributed across the country. Apparently, Mary Todd Lincoln liked Carlton's work and took it with her after Lincoln's death.

Douglass, Anna Dickinson, and other notable abolitionists spoke to a mostly African-American crowd. By the morning of the 1st, thousands had gathered, and when word was received, Douglass led the audience in singing *Blow Ye Trumpet, Blow*.

For many years after, African American congregations held Watch Nights, a practice that has continued to this day in some churches.

(Continued on page 2)

Upcoming Campaigns

2026 Annual Meeting and Event Schedule coming soon!

New Year's Eve

(Continued from page 1)

Celebrating While at War

But we must remember that while some rejoiced, in 1862, a war was going on to make the freedom for the slaves a reality. In Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the battle of Stone's River was being waged on a chill, foggy New Year's Eve. The forces of General Bragg and General Rosecrans met from December 30th to January 1st in a battle involving over 80,000 men with casualties numbering 23,500.

However, even in the midst of battle, the soldiers took time to mark the occasion. The night of New Year's Eve, the Union troops played *Yankee Doodle*, followed by *Hail Columbia*. The Confederate soldiers hearing the music played *Dixie* in return. Songs went back and forth across the battle lines throughout the night. The exchange of music ended with the Union playing *Home Sweet Home* and the Confederate band joining in.

More Thoughts on New Year's



William M. Thayer

In the 1860 January to June volume of the *Home Monthly Magazine*, the editor William M. Thayer wrote an essay on the celebration of New Year's which artfully cap-

tures the various meanings of a new year still relevant for today. Here is an excerpt:

THE NEW YEAR 1860

EDITORIAL by Wm. M. Thayer

New things are novelties to many, so that they are sought after with a keen relish. To them, a new thing is better than the old, though it be not half so valuable really. But how is it with a New year? Does old time lose its charms, so that any say the new is better? Yes; this is true to some extent. How many last year hopes are to be realized during the new year? Thousands formed plans, started enterprises, and began labors, that are expected to be consummated, and their fruits enjoyed, within the next twelve months. The old year unbosomed seed, the flower and fruit of which the new year will hold and gather. Many disappointments have sobered by-gone hours, so that their recollection even, is unpleasant. They will be remembered, as we remember accidents and calamities; but new time, that promises a brighter and happier experience, how much more attractive it is! In this respect, a new year is worth more to many than the old. It promises more to them than the past, as one air-castle after another rises to their view, but oh! how it may cheat them! Hundreds never realized their expectations in time past, and yet they fully believe they shall in time to come. They are hopeful, and often hope against hope, and therefore each new year is hailed as the harbinger of expected good.

How many fortunes there are to be made in eighteen hundred sixty! If

we could enter the marts of trade, and have the Great Revealer disclose the secrets of all hearts to us, how many we should find expecting to be made rich or influential before another December shall have passed. Aye, this would be a more remarkable year than any since time was born, if all human projects should result as men anticipate. How natural, then, for such persons to hail with joy the coming years!

Pleasure-lovers appear to value new years. They are wont to celebrate their arrival with festive demonstrations. They institute parties and balls, and, with music and dancing, inaugurate each one to rule over its predecessor. As if it were a light thing for their years to be numbered one after another, they join to commemorate this flight of time. Though each passing year makes their number less, and carries them nearer to the eternal world, a new year more than overbalances the somber view, by the joys which it brings.

Properly considered, the flight of time is a subject of serious reflection. As our days are numbered, we have less and less time for prosecuting the mission of life. We are nearer to the world of spirits, with all its momentous realities, prepared or unprepared, to meet God. One would think, judging from the pleasure-scenes of a New Year's Eve, that it was a matter of great joy that life is so rapidly passing away, and its close hastening with the speed of a

(Continued on page 5)

“Another Year in the War”



Illustration of New Year's Day by Thomas Nast for the January 1864 Harper's Weekly issue. The illustration is comparing and contrasting conditions in the north and south during the Civil War.

As the calendar turned during the Civil War, Americans greeted the New Year not with champagne and fireworks, but with musket fire, prayer, hunger, and reflection. For soldiers in the field, enslaved people awaiting freedom, and civilians struggling on the home front, January 1st was often less a celebration than a reckoning — a moment to take stock of survival and hope in the midst of national catastrophe.

As the calendar turned during the Civil War, Americans greeted the New Year not with champagne and fireworks, but with musket fire, prayer, hunger, and reflection. For soldiers in the field, enslaved people awaiting freedom, and civilians struggling on the home front, January 1st was often less a celebration than a reckoning — a moment to take stock of survival and hope in the midst of national catastrophe.

New Year's on the Battlefield: Cold, Music, and Combat

For many soldiers, the New Year arrived with little ceremony. Win-

ter camps were cold, damp, and uncomfortable, and in some cases the holiday coincided with brutal fighting.

One of the starkest examples occurred at the Battle of Stones River near Murfreesboro, Tennessee, which raged from December 31, 1862, into January 2, 1863. The New Year opened not with resolutions, but with artillery fire and staggering casualties. One Union officer grimly observed that the year had begun “under fire,” a sentiment shared by thousands of men who found themselves fighting as the calendar turned.

Yet even amid hostility, moments of humanity occasionally surfaced. On New Year's Eve, soldiers recalled a rare pause in the fighting as regimental bands from both sides took turns playing familiar tunes across the lines. A Tennessee soldier remembered how the music floated through the darkness until the night ended with Home, Sweet Home, a melody that stirred home-

(Continued on page 4)



The Battle of Stones River, also known as the Second Battle of Murfreesboro, was fought from December 31, 1862, to January 2, 1863, in Middle Tennessee, as the culmination of the Stones River Campaign in the Western Theater of the American Civil War.

“Another Year” ...

(Continued from page 3)

sickness on both sides of the battlefield.

“Everyone Intended to Have a Happy New Year”: Life in Camp

Away from active combat, New Year's could bring small, improvised observances — reminders of civilian life left behind.

Seventeen-year-old Charley Howe of the 36th Massachusetts Infantry wrote home from camp near Fredericksburg on January 1, 1863, offering his parents a vivid glimpse of camp life at the turn of the year. He began with a familiar greeting:

“I wish you a ‘very happy New Year.’ Last night was the coldest night we have seen since we left Old Massachusetts and we had to keep fires all night long in our fireplaces in order to keep warm.” Despite the bitter cold, the day itself brought a small novelty:

“It being New Year's Day, we had whiskey rations given us — a thing which has not happened before since leaving home.” Howe noted that even this modest indulgence carried moral weight among the men:

“Everyone intended to have a happy New Year as Sons of Temperance and all drank their little gill.”

His letter captures the quiet resilience of soldiers who seized fleeting comforts while maintaining a sense of discipline and identity. Two years later, Nelson Statler of the 211th Pennsylvania Infantry marked New Year's Day 1865 in a very different way. Writing home from winter quarters, Statler framed the date with careful precision rather than festivity:

“This is the first day of week, first day of the month, first day of the

year, and the first day for me on camp guard since I am in the service.”

His attention quickly turned to the weather and his duties:

“It is very cold today. There is a little skift of snow on the ground — the first I have seen since last winter.”

Statler's words underscore how, for many soldiers, New Year's passed as simply another day of responsibility, marked more by cold and routine than celebration.

Watch Night and “Freedom's Eve”

While soldiers marked the New Year in camps and on picket lines, African Americans experienced January 1, 1863, as a moment of profound transformation.

On the night of December 31, 1862, enslaved and free Black communities gathered in churches and private homes for Watch Night, waiting through prayer and song for the Emancipation Proclamation to take effect at midnight. These gatherings were deeply spiritual, blending religious tradition with political hope.

Frederick Douglass captured the emotional weight of the moment, recalling the atmosphere as midnight approached:

“It was a moment of solemn waiting... we were waiting for the word of deliverance.”

When January 1 dawned, Douglass described the day in luminous terms:

“This is a day for poetry and song... a new song... the day of jubilee.”

For those who had lived under bondage, the New Year in 1863 rep-

resented not merely another turn of the calendar, but the promise of freedom — fragile, incomplete, and contested, yet momentous.

Promises Unfulfilled: New Year's on the Confederate Home Front

In the war-weary Confederate capital of Richmond, New Year's celebrations could be painfully hollow. In January 1865, citizens organized what was intended to be a generous New Year's feast for soldiers defending the city. Food was collected amid great fanfare, but when the meal was finally distributed, it amounted to almost nothing.

One soldier recorded his bitterness in a diary entry:

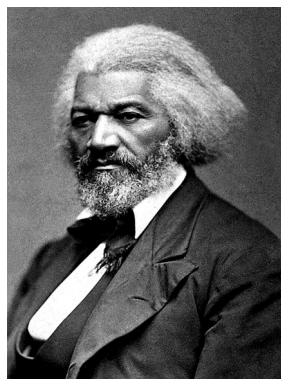
“Not a mouth full apiece... where has it all gone to... The commissary or quarter masters no doubt got it. May the Lord have mercy on the poor soldiers.”

A contemporary newspaper lamented that the promised dinner had “gone without coming,” a grim metaphor for a Confederacy nearing collapse.

A New Year Without Illusions

Across the divided nation, New Year's during the Civil War was rarely joyful. Instead, it became a moment for reflection — on hardship endured, on freedom hoped for, and on an uncertain future. For soldiers like Charley Howe and Nelson Statler, January 1st meant cold nights, guard duty, and letters home. For African Americans, it could mean the long-awaited dawn of emancipation. And for civilians, it often marked another year of sacrifice with no clear end in sight. In the Civil War, the New Year did not promise easy beginnings. But in camps, churches, and homes, Americans continued to mark its arrival — clinging to hope that someday, the war itself would finally end.

(Continued on page 5)



Frederick Douglass

OUR CAMP JOURNAL



*Civil War Re-enactors;
America's Living Historians.*

(Continued from page 2)

weaver's shuttle. Look in upon the merry groups that gather at this season of the year, for frolic and fun; listen to the music of song and dance, and hear the ring of the youthful laugh, and say if young hearts do not rejoice that an old year is gone and a new one come.



(Continued from page 4)

Bibliography:

American Battlefield Trust.
"New Year's Hell."
National Museum of African American History and Culture.
"The Historical Legacy of Watch Night."
Emery, Tom. "New Year's in Civil War, other conflicts brought little celebration."
Staunton Star-Times.
RVA News. "Civil War: A New Year's Day 'feast'."
The Research Arsenal. Charley Howe letter:
<https://app.researcharsenal.com/imageSingleView/13158>
Nelson Statler letter: <https://app.researcharsenal.com/imageSingleView/56471>

A boy remembers New Year's calling in the 1860s

The tradition—a carryover from colonial New Amsterdam—died out with gaslights and elevated trains.

But going "calling" on New Year's Day was still in full swing in the 1860s, as sculptor James E. Kelly remembers in his memoir of later 19th century New York, *Tell Me of Lincoln*. "There was great preparation on all sides for calling and receiving on New Year's Day," recalled Kelly. "Parties were made up and lists prepared. Those who had money hired a coach or sleigh, while others less fortunate footed it.

Kelly lived with his middle-class parents in the West 50s off Eighth Avenue in New York. He and his pals hoofed it on January 1 to the homes of neighbor girls, who waited to receive callers in a very gender-specific and competitive ritual.

"Girls prepared all sorts of refreshments and vied with each other with the number of callers. . . . 'Small boys ran from store to store bursting in with yells: 'Wish you a happy New Year, what are you going to give us?' The streets were filled with cutters and sleighs with jingle bells—it was joy

inspiring."

"After church, two or three of my friends would gather at my house, and well primed with cake, coffee, or lemonade, we would start out for the day visiting our neighbors and gradually extending our circle."

"The glow and tingle of the walk was heightened by the gust of warm spice-laden air that greeted us, and as our pretty little girl schoolmates received us at the doors in all their holiday finery."

"We lined up on the sofa, and they overwhelmed us with the embarrassment of riches: oranges, cake, apples, lemonade, coffee, doughnuts, raisins, and spice New Year's cake, etc."

Kelly and his chums were adolescents, so mingling with girls meant lots of awkwardness—with the girls giggling and tugging at their short dresses and the boys spilling drinks. We "would whack or punch each other on the knees, till we finally mustered up the courage to bid a happy New Year and start for the next house."

For slightly older men and women, calling served as a socially acceptable way for the sexes to meet and greet and potentially find a match.

New Year's morning, with shutters closed, and blinds drawn down, gaslighted, the young ladies prepared to

receive their guests. All seemed to reflect the glow and color of the pendant prisms on the chandeliers and candelabra.

"The girls in full dress with flowers in their hair, clustered around a long table. Its glistening silver coffee urn, liquors, etc., with the usual turkey and other substantial things, which they served to the groups of merry friends who had driven up in their cutters."

"Among those who received special attention were some young veteran soldiers, whose empty sleeves gave the girls an excuse to hover around and serve them."

"Most of the guests seemed anxious to make a record for the number of calls they made—as the girls were anxious as to the number of calls they received by counting their visiting cards—but others evidently came to stay judging from the way they clustered around the beautiful young girls.

Kelly also recalls the demise of calling. "As years went on, some exclusive [families] used to hang out baskets on the door knob to receive cards from the pilgrims of friendship."

"This sort of frigid acknowledgment soon killed the enthusiasm, and after a few seasons, the joys of New Years calling were no more."