

OUR CAMP JOURNAL



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"We are but few in number but formidable." -Pvt. James Shelton, 7th Md. Co. B

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HOW THE CIVIL WAR CHANGED CHRISTMAS IN THE UNITED STATES

As a divided nation fought, the holiday became more important than ever.



By Erin Blakemore

As the Civil War's first Christmas neared, a pair of young lovers, Nathaniel Dawson and Elodie Todd, a Confederate soldier and his eventual bride, wrote to one another with increasing melancholy. They were separated by hundreds of miles, and their communication was often interrupted by delays in the mail and the desperation of the Civil War.

"I wish I could be with you at Christmas, the festal season, where age is rejuvenated and lives again in the merry carols of youth," Dawson

wrote to Todd (sister of Mary Todd Lincoln) on December 22, 1861. On the holiday itself, he wrote to describe his regiment's rowdy celebrations. "Bad whiskey is abundant, and pleasure and sorrow drowned in large potations," he said.

Dawson and Todd's lives changed dramatically during the war, as the Confederacy crumbled and their personal lives stretched to their limits. But they weren't alone in wishing they could celebrate Christmas together. As the fractured United States fought, the holiday took on new meaning.

By the end of the war in 1865, Christmas had gone from a relatively unimportant holiday to the opposite, a day rooted in an idealized vision of home. The way Americans observed the holiday changed too, setting the stage for the more modern Christmas holiday we know today.

Christmas Had Not Been Official Holiday

Before the Civil War, Christmas was not an official holiday in the United States. Nor was it celebrated

(Continued on page 4)



Upcoming Campaigns

Dec. 25th: Have a very Merry Christmas!

The 7th Maryland and Mine Run

By Pvt. Jeff Joyce

Following the end of the Bristoe Campaign in October 1863 the 7th Maryland and the I Corps were assigned to guard the Orange and Alexandria Railroad while the rest of the Army of the Potomac followed the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia back to the Rappahannock River. General Robert E. Lee established his defensive line along the south side of the river, but also placed troops on the north side at Rappahannock Station (today's Remington). The Confederates built earthworks at Rappahannock Station but their only line of retreat was across a pontoon bridge. On November 7, Major General George Meade attacked the Confederate position at Rappahannock Station, inflicting nearly 1,700 casualties as the Confederates retreated across the Rappahannock. Lee realized his defense line along the Rappahannock was untenable and withdrew further south to the Rapidan River.

Meade and the Army of the Potomac paused for several weeks before he decided on a final attempt to bring Lee to battle before winter set in. His plan was to march southeast from Culpeper Court House and strike the right flank of the Confederates south of the Rapidan in Orange County. The I Corps (including the Maryland Brigade and 7th Maryland) remained in reserve as the rest of Meade's army prepared for battle. On November 23 Captain Edward Mobley of Company A noted in his diary "Brigade marched from Bristow to Rappahannock Station".

On November 26 Meade set his army in motion but rain, bad roads and poor knowledge of the terrain hindered his movements across the Rapidan River. The following day, at Payne's Farm near Locust Grove, elements of Meade's III Corps (Major General William French) clashed with Confederates of Ewell's Corps (under the command of Major General Jubal Early). The only significant fighting that occurred during the Mine Run

Campaign, the battle at Payne's Farm allowed Lee to withdraw behind entrenched positions along Mine Run that night. Though skirmishing continued over the next few days, Meade decided the Confederate line was too strong to attack and retired during the night of December 1, ending the campaign of 1863. Both sides suffered more than 1,900 combined casualties. Mine Run has been referred to as one of the greatest Civil War battles never fought. Meade's failure to attack the Army of Northern Virginia caused consternation in the Lincoln administration and helped lead to Ulysses Grant's promotion to Lieutenant General and command of all Union armies the following March. And Meade's effort to outflank Lee at Mine Run foreshadowed the Wilderness campaign in May 1864.

As the Army of the Potomac returned to Culpeper County for the winter the 7th Maryland was repositioned. On December 4 Captain Mobley noted in his diary "Left

(Continued on page 5)



The battle at Payne's Farm allowed Lee to withdraw behind entrenched positions along Mine Run.

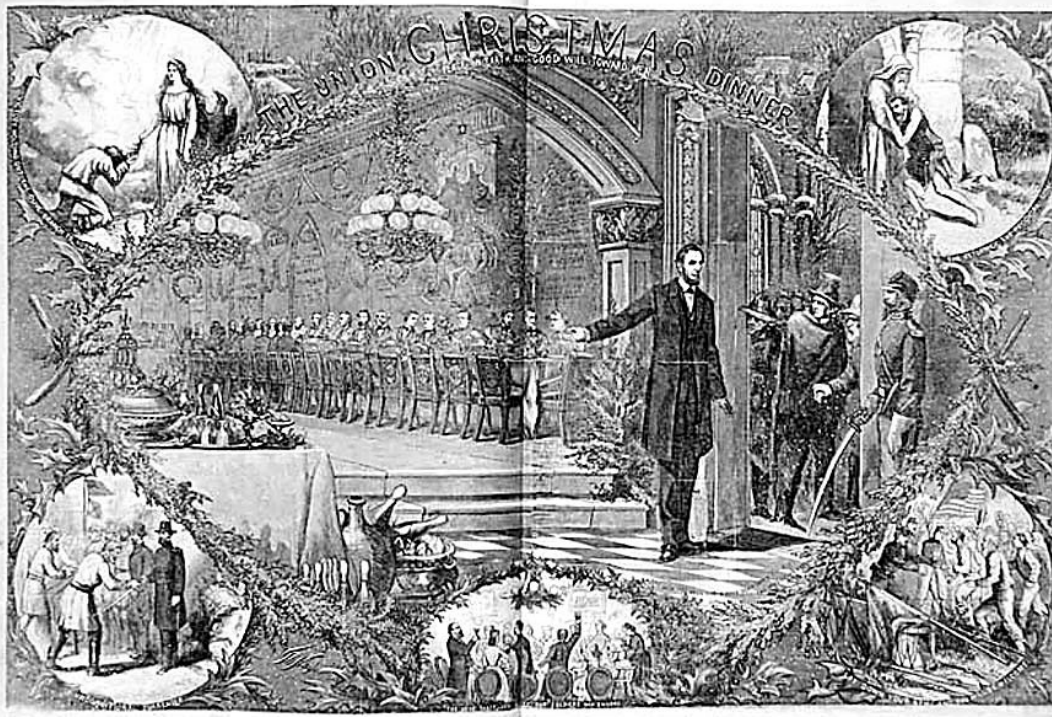
Thomas Nast's Original "The Union Christmas" Civil War Print

This is probably the most touching and moving Abraham Lincoln print to come out of the Civil War era. The leaf was printed on December 31, 1864, and Thomas Nast was the artist. The print shows Mr. Lincoln standing at the door, inviting the Southern Rebels to come in from the cold and snow, and re-join the union.

A large banquet table has been prepared, and the table has empty chairs labeled Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and so forth. The print has a large banner that reads, "The

Union Christmas Dinner, Peace on Earth and Good Will Toward Men." The print has four insets, one showing Robert E. Lee offering his surrender to Grant (something that did happen a few months later. The

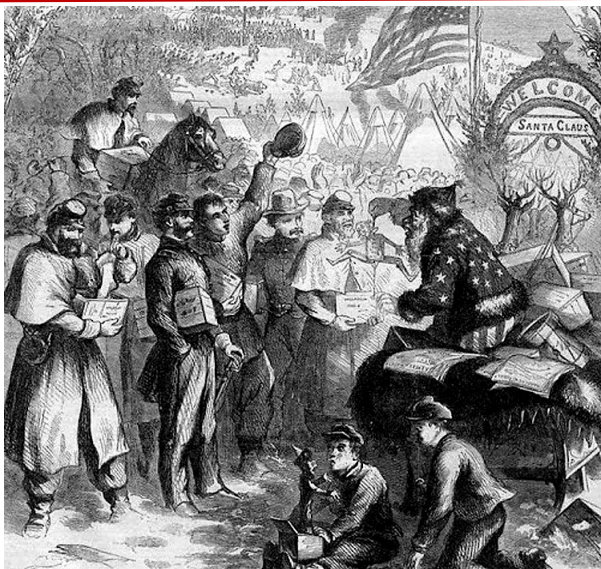
Union. The third inset presents the Rebels as the prodigal son returning home, and the forth inset shows a soldier bowing down to accept a pardon from Lady Liberty.



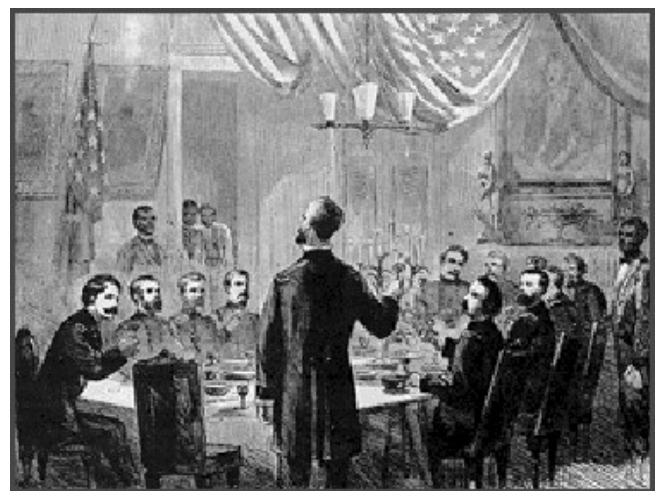
second inset is captioned, "Lay Down your Arms and You Will be Welcome", which shows Rebel Soldiers being welcomed back into the

For all the pain and all the loss of the Civil War, we see by the end of 1864, there were signs of hope. Nast creates this image of hope by showing a country tired of war, and willing to invite their former countrymen to once again sit at the table of fellowship and Union. Within three months of this image being made, Mr. Lincoln

was dead, assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. However, Nast's vision of a country once again united did come to pass.



Thomas Nast's first image of Santa Claus appeared on the cover of the Christmas edition of Harper's Weekly in January 1863 and is titled "Christmas at Camp."



General William Tecumseh Sherman is host at a celebratory Christmas dinner in Savannah after presenting the captured city to President Lincoln as a holiday.

CHRISTMAS

(Continued from page 1)

uniformly across the country. In early New England, Christmas was looked down upon by Puritans and Calvinists, who felt the day should be observed for strict fasts and rituals, if it was observed at all. During the 17th century, Massachusetts imposed a fine on colonists who celebrated the holiday, and after it became a state, businesses and schools did not observe the holiday at all.

Elsewhere, Christmas was celebrated in a variety of ways, most depending on the country of origin of the immigrants who celebrated it. But by the mid-19th century, the holiday's importance—and distance from religious tradition—was already starting to grow. Songs and carols like “Jingle Bells” (1857) and poems like “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (1823) set the stage for a fun, secular holiday that revolved around gift-giving and celebration with food and drink.

Christmas in the South

In the antebellum South, plantation owners used the holiday to show off their paternalism toward the people they enslaved, write historians Shauna Bigham and Robert E. May. During lengthy Christmas celebrations, they gave enslaved people passes to marry, provided food and alcohol, and gave gifts.

Though enslaved people managed to create some of their own Christmas traditions, many of which incorporated traditions from Africa, they were also expected to help absolve slaveowners' guilt over the holidays by enthusiastically opening gifts and showing their gratitude. “So far as their owners could

tell,” Bigham and May write, “most slaves played their prescribed role to the hilt throughout the holiday.”

But the Civil War disrupted not just the relations between plantation owners and the people they enslaved, but those within families and communities. As both sides shifted their resources to war, the ability to give gifts and celebrate was dramatically curtailed. People cast their decision to have more modest Christmas celebrations as a patriotic one, and children got in on the act, too. Instead of giving and receiving store-bought gifts, they made more humble gifts like popcorn balls or crude homemade toys. And they learned to temper their expectations of Santa.

One Confederate family's children were told “not to expect a visit from St. Nick because the Yankees had shot him,” writes historian James Alan Marten, “while other parents offered more sensitive explanations. As a Yankee, Santa would be held

up by Confederate pickets or perhaps Union blockading vessels had interrupted his journey.”

Meanwhile, those children's mothers, aunts and sisters experienced Christmas as an agonizing reminder of the danger faced by men who had gone to war. Civil War-era diaries and letters document how many women felt anxiety, grief and depression around Christmas.

In 1861, Margaret Cahill wrote to her husband, Thomas, a Union officer, that she felt so “nervous and lonely” that she could not write to him on Christmas. “Will you say? Why did you not write to me on Christmass [sic] Day” she wrote. “Well to tell you the truth I was not able.” “Never before had so sad a Christmas dawned upon us,” wrote Sallie A. Brook, a Confederate woman from Richmond, of Christmas 1861.

Christmas on the Battlefield

On the battlefield, men on both sides tried to celebrate Christmas by giving gifts, eating and drinking, and taking time off. In his memoir, James A. Wright, a sergeant in the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment, recalls eating beef soup and greeting his fellow soldiers on Christmas in camp. “The men had been allowed as much liberty as consistent with discipline and were ‘circulating around’ among their acquaintances in other regiments,” he recalled. “I was frequently invited to ‘smile,’ or take a drink. In 1863, a Confederate soldier from North Carolina wrote to his mother asking for a bottle of brandy and some sugar so he could make eggnog for his fellow soldiers.

Popular media did its best to increase the morale of both soldiers and their families at



Christmas Eve in Camp—Christmas, 1861.

Christmas in camp, 1861

(Continued on page 5)

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

CHRISTMAS

(Continued from page 4)

home around Christmas.

Harper's Weekly, the most popular periodical at the time, published a variety of Christmas stories and illustrations during the war. The most famous were drawn by illustrator Thomas Nast, who portrayed not just sad wives and husbands but happy Christmas Day traditions. He is credited with solidifying how the nation imagined Santa Claus with illustrations of a jolly, bearded St. Nick who handed out good cheer to soldiers and families alike.

Though individual traditions still varied, the upheaval of the

Civil War made the holiday seem increasingly important to separated families. "The Christmas season [reminded] mid-19th century Americans of the importance of home and its associations, of invented traditions," writes historian David Anderson.

When the war ended, the magazines and newspapers that had underlined the importance of the holiday kept promoting it, and reunited families, devastated by the losses of the war, kept cherishing it. In 1870, in the aftermath of the war, Congress passed the first federal holiday law and made Christmas an official holiday. Four years of war had changed the holiday from a loose celebration to an essential one.

7th MD at Mine Run

(Continued from page 2)

camp at Rappahannock and marched six miles (starting at 4 a.m.) to Paoli Mills, near Kelly's Ford. Huts built by Rebs sheltered the Brigade." Paoli Mills is located south of Rappahannock Station along Mountain Run, a tributary of the Rappahannock River. The 7th Maryland remained at Paoli Mills until December 24, when it marched to Culpeper Court House and established its winter camp south of the town with the rest of the I Corps.

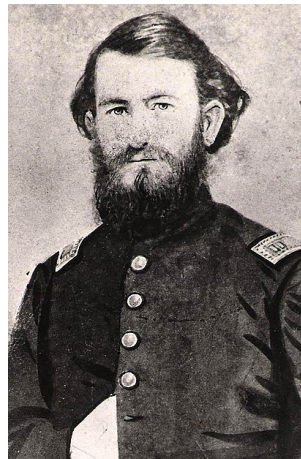
One of the Confederates killed at Payne's Farm on November 27 was Private George Wise Chapin of the 4th Virginia Infantry (part of the famous "Stonewall" Brigade). George was born in 1844 in Lexington, Virginia. Following the outbreak of the Civil War he enlisted in the 27th Virginia Infantry (also part of the "Stonewall" Brigade) at



Pvt. George W. Chapin

the age of 16 and fought at the 1st Battle of Manassas/Bull Run. George was discharged from the 27th in April 1862 but re-enlisted in the 4th Virginia Infantry the following February. He fought at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg before being killed at Payne's Farm. George was buried in Lexington. George's older brother Gurden Chapin (born in 1831) graduated from West Point in

1851 and was a Captain at Fort Buchanan in New Mexico Territory at the start of the Civil War. Gurden remained loyal to the Union and served in New Mexico before guarding Confederate prisoners in Elmira, New York, and organizing the 25th New York Cavalry Regiment. He served in Arizona and California after the war. Retiring



Col. Gurden Chapin

from the Army in 1869 as a Brevet Colonel, Gurden and his family settled in Culpeper Court House. He died in 1875 and is buried in Culpeper National Cemetery, not far from several members of the 7th Maryland who died during the winter of 1863-1864. The Chapin family was one of many torn apart by the Civil War, brother against brother.

