HISTORY

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Santa Claus

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Santa Claus—otherwise known as St. Nicholas or Kris Kringle—has a long history steeped in Christmas traditions. Today, he is thought of mainly as the jolly old man in red who brings toys to good girls and boys on Christmas Eve night, but his story stretches all the way back to the 3rd century when the real St. Nicholas walked the earth and became the patron saint of children. Find out more about the history of Santa Claus from his earliest origins to the shopping mall Santas of today.

Where Did Santa Claus Originate?

The legend of Santa Claus can be traced back hundreds of years to a monk named St. Nicholas. It's believed Nicholas was born sometime around A.D. 280 in modern-day Turkey.

Much admired for his piety and kindness, St. Nicholas became the subject of many legends. It is said that he gave away all of his inherited wealth and traveled the countryside helping the poor and sick. One of the best-known St. Nicholas stories is the time he saved three poor sisters from being sold into slavery by their father by providing them with a dowry so they could marry.



St. Nicolas, the protector of children and sailors, became the most popular saint in Europe by the Renaissance.

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Over the course of many years, Nicholas' popularity spread, and he became known as the protector of children and sailors. His feast day is celebrated on the anniversary of his death, December 6. This was traditionally considered a lucky day to make large purchases or to get married.

By the Renaissance, St. Nicholas was the most popular saint in Europe. Even after the Protestant Reformation, when the veneration of saints was discouraged, St. Nicholas maintained a positive reputation, especially in Holland.

Sinter Klaas Comes to New York

St. Nicholas made his first inroads into American popular culture towards the end of the 18th century. In December 1773, and again in 1774, a New York newspaper reported that groups of Dutch families had gathered to honor the anniversary of his death.

The name Santa Claus evolved from St. Nick's Dutch nickname, Sinter Klaas, a shortened form of *Sint Nikolaas* (Dutch for St. Nicholas). In 1804, New York Historical Society member John Pintard distributed woodcuts of St. Nicholas at the society's annual meeting. The background of the engraving contains now-familiar Santa images, including stockings—filled with toys and fruit—hung over a fireplace.

In 1809, Washington Irving helped to popularize the Sinter Klaas stories when he referred to St. Nicholas as the patron saint of New York in his book *The History of New York*. As his prominence grew, *Sinter Klaas* was described as everything from a "rascal" with a blue three-cornered hat, red waistcoat and yellow stockings to a man wearing a broad-brimmed hat and a "huge pair of Flemish trunk hose."

Did you know?

The Salvation Army has been sending Santa Claus-clad donation collectors into the streets since the 1890s.

Shopping Mall Santas

Gift-giving, mainly centered around children, has been an important part of the Christmas celebration since the holiday's rejuvenation in the early 19th century. Stores began to advertise Christmas shopping in 1820, and by the 1840s, newspapers were creating separate sections for holiday advertisements that often featured images of the newly popular Santa Claus.

In 1841, thousands of children visited a Philadelphia shop to see a life-size Santa Claus model. It was only a matter of time before stores began to attract children, and their parents, with the lure of a peek at a "live" Santa Claus.

In the early 1890s, the Salvation Army needed money to pay for the free Christmas meals they provided to needy families. They began dressing up unemployed men in Santa Claus suits and sending them into the streets of New York to solicit donations. Those familiar Salvation Army Santas and other volunteers have been ringing bells in American towns and cities ever since.

Perhaps the most iconic department store Santa is Kris Kringle in the 1947 classic Santa Claus movie *Miracle on 34 Street*. A young Natalie Wood played a little girl who believes Kris Kringle when he says he is the real Santa Claus. Edmund Gwenn won an Oscar for originating the role of Kris Kringle.

The Macy's Santa has appeared at almost every Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade since it began in 1924. Fans of all ages still line up to meet the Macy's Santa in New York City and at stores around the country, where children can take pictures on Santa's lap and tell him what they want for Christmas.

What Does Santa Look Like?

In 1822, an Episcopal minister in New York City named Clement Clarke Moore wrote a long Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled "A Visit from St. Nicholas," more popularly known as "'Twas The Night Before Christmas."

Moore's poem, which he was initially hesitant to publish due to the frivolous nature of its subject, is largely responsible for our modern image of Santa Claus as a "right jolly old elf" with a portly figure and the supernatural ability to ascend a chimney with a mere nod of his head.

Although some of Moore's imagery was probably borrowed from other sources, his poem helped popularize the now-familiar image of a Santa Claus who flew from house to house on Christmas Eve in a sleigh led by eight flying reindeer to leave presents for deserving children. "A Visit from St. Nicholas" created a new and immediately popular American icon.

In 1881, political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew on Moore's poem to create the first likeness that matches our modern image of Santa Claus. His cartoon, which appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, depicted Santa as a rotund, cheerful man with a full white beard, holding a sack laden with toys for lucky children. It was Nast who gave Santa his bright red suit trimmed with white fur, North Pole workshop, elves and his wife, Mrs. Claus.

Santa Claus Around the World

America's Santa Claus is not the only St. Nicholas–inspired gift-giver to make an appearance at Christmastime. There are similar figures and Christmas traditions around the world.

Christkind, or Kris Kringle, was believed to deliver presents to well-behaved Swiss and German children. Meaning "Christ child," Christkind is an angel-like figure often accompanied by St. Nicholas on his holiday missions.

In Scandinavia, a jolly elf named Jultomten was thought to deliver gifts in a sleigh drawn by goats. English legend explains that Father Christmas visits each home on Christmas Eve to fill children's stockings with holiday treats.

Père Noël is responsible for filling the shoes of French children. In Italy, there is a story of a woman called La Befana, a kindly witch who rides a broomstick down the chimneys of Italian homes to deliver toys into the stockings of lucky children.

Santa Traditions in the United States

In the United States, Santa Claus is often depicted as flying from home to home on Christmas Eve to deliver toys to children. He flies on his magic sleigh led by his reindeer: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, Blitzen and Rudolph.

Santa enters each home through the chimney, which is why empty Christmas stockings—once empty socks, now often dedicated stockings made for the occasion—are "hung by the Chimney with care, in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there," as Moore wrote in his famous poem.

Stockings can be filled with candy canes and other treats or small toys. In return, children often leave cookies and milk for Santa and carrots for his reindeer.

Santa Claus and his wife, Mrs. Claus, call the North Pole home, and children write letters to Santa and track Santa's progress around the world on Christmas Eve. Throughout the year, Santa Claus is said to keep a "naughty list" and a "nice list" to determine who deserves gifts on Christmas morning.

Parents often invoke these lists as a way to ensure their children are on their best behavior. The lists are immortalized in the 1934 Christmas song "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town":

"He's making a list
And checking it twice;
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice
Santa Claus is coming to town

He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!"

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

Rudolph, "the most famous reindeer of all," was born more than 100 years after his eight flying counterparts. The red-nosed wonder was the creation of Robert L. May, a copywriter at the Montgomery Ward department store.

In 1939, May wrote a Christmas-themed story to help bring holiday traffic into the store. Using a similar rhyme pattern to Moore's "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," May told the story of Rudolph, a young reindeer who was teased by the other deer because of his large, glowing red nose.

When Christmas Eve turned foggy and Santa worried that he wouldn't be able to deliver gifts that night, the former outcast saved Christmas by leading the sleigh by the light of his red nose. Rudolph's message—that given the opportunity, a liability can be turned into an asset—proved popular.

Montgomery Ward gave away almost 2.5 million copies of the poem in 1939. When it was reissued in 1946, the book sold over 3.5 million copies. Three years later, one of May's friends named Johnny Marks wrote a short song based on Rudolph's story. It was recorded by Gene Autry and sold over two million copies.

Since then, the story has been translated into 25 languages and been made into a television movie, narrated by Burl Ives, which has charmed audiences every year since 1964.

SOURCES

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Academy of American Poets

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Smithsonian Institution

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