



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Christmas and Camp

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The American Civil War standardized the concept of what an American Christmas should be. While technological advances, such as time-keeping and canned food were made uniform by the Union Army, a new cultural concept of Christmas tradition took hold in the post-1861 United States.

The widespread use of Thomas Nast images of Santa Claus and the adaptations soldiers made to accommodate both their surroundings and their fellow soldiers allowed the troops, many of whom were recent arrivals to the United States, a template for a standardized celebration of the holiday. What was in some parts of the country a very strictly religious holiday began to represent a time of laughter, a community that didn't necessarily mean family, and gift-giving that evolved to a more commercial concept of the holiday by the mid-20th century.

Thomas Nast first published an illustration of his interpretation of Santa Claus in the winter of 1862 for Harper's Weekly. The depictions of a jolly gift-bringer were so successful, President Abraham Lincoln joked that Nast's depictions of the war, and his annual tradition of drawing Santa Claus were "the best recruiting sergeant the North ever had."

An article in the Dec. 26, 1863 edition of Harper's, with the cover illustration by Nast of Santa Claus visiting soldiers in camp, argued:

"Ought it not be a merry Christmas? Even with all the sorrow that hangs, and will forever hang, over so many households; even while the war still rages; even while there are serious questions yet to be settled – ought it not to be, and is it not, a merry Christmas?"

Nast kept building his interpretation of Santa Claus after the end of the war, including the residence at the North Pole in 1866. Illustrations of the workshop and the naughty and nice list followed in later years.

For years, Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site has offered a Christmas and the Civil War program. The program features a Civil War-era Union Santa Claus – based on an 1863 cover of Harper's Weekly by Nast – who interacts with the public, welcomes children to the reconstructed Officers' Hut, and visits soldiers in camp. Reenactors interpret army life in winter camps decorated for the season, celebrate by opening Christmas boxes from home, sing carols of the period around the campfire, and prepare holiday meals. This year's program took place on Dec. 10.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.