



## Patriotic Instructor Christmas Message

During the American Civil War the celebration of Christmas was new to both the North and South. Many of the traditions which we follow today such as; Christmas trees, caroling, and the exchange of gifts were just beginning to enter the popular culture.

On his first Christmas in office; the President and Mrs. Lincoln set aside time to have dinner guests to the White House. This was the only Christmas that included the entire Lincoln family.<sup>1</sup> The evening's entertainment likely included a Christmas tree and the singing of popular Carols such as: *Deck the Halls*, *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* (1840); *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* (1850); *Jingle Bells*(1857); and *Up on the Housetop* (1860)<sup>2</sup>. Here at the end of the first year of a war, filled with disaster and sorrow, there was still joy and hope in the hearts of the Lincoln's but sadly this was the last Christmas filled with such happiness for the Lincolns; Young Willie Lincoln would die just a few months later.

Likewise Young Soldiers, encamped near Washington City, also celebrated Christmas, which while not an official holiday, held special meaning for men far from home and hearth. Soldiers from both sides of the war decorated trees with food or personal items and in some units officers would provide a special holiday meal to their men. Some individuals even sought and obtained furloughs {leave from the front} so they could spend the holidays with their families. On December 25th 1862 Corporal J. C. Williams, Co. B, 14th Vermont Infantry wrote the following;

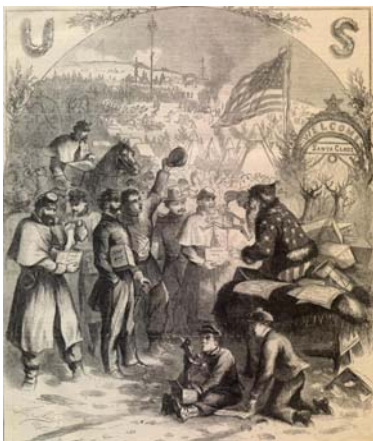
---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whitehousechristmascards.com/category/abraham-lincoln-1861-1865/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Civil\\_War#Celebrating](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_in_the_American_Civil_War#Celebrating)

*"This is Christmas, and my mind wanders back to that home made lonesome by my absence, while far away from the peace and quietude of civil life to undergo the hardships of the camp, and may be the battle field. I think of the many lives that are endangered, and hope that the time will soon come when peace, with its innumerable blessings, shall once more restore our country to happiness and prosperity."* Corporal Williams, like all soldiers, far from home at Christmas wished for the end of war and the institution of peace of Christmas among all men.

As the war years continued to unfold the symbols of Christmas began to take on significant meaning to the Union. In 1862 the illustrator Thomas Nast combined his own personal German traditions of Saint Nicholas, a fourth century bishop known for his kindness and generosity, with another German folk traditions of elves to create his Santa. Nast was a clever man who supported the Union by using his images of Santa to rally the spirits of Northerners throughout the War. Nast first drew Santa Claus for the 1862 Christmas season *Harper's Weekly* cover and center-fold illustration to memorialize the family sacrifices of the Union during the early and, for the north, during the darkest days of the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> Nast's Santa appeared as a kindly figure representing Christmas, the holiday celebrating the birth of Christ. His use of Santa Claus was melancholy, sad for the faltering Union war effort in which Nast so fervently supported, and sad for the separation of soldiers and families. The Harper's Weekly front cover drawing, below, called "Christmas Eve 1862"<sup>4</sup> is an excellent example of Mr. Nast's work which buoyed the spirits of the northern citizenry and army



<sup>3</sup> [http://cartoons.osu.edu/nast/images/santa\\_claus\\_camp100.jpg](http://cartoons.osu.edu/nast/images/santa_claus_camp100.jpg)

<sup>4</sup> [http://cartoons.osu.edu/nast/images/santa\\_claus\\_camp100.jpg](http://cartoons.osu.edu/nast/images/santa_claus_camp100.jpg)

December of 1862 also saw two additional powerful expressions of the Christmas spirit which arose amidst the cruelties of war. During the Battle of Fredericksburg Richard Kirkland, the humane hero of Fredericksburg near the foot of Marye's hill, with light heart and buoyant step, armed only with all of the canteens he could carry filled with water, crossed the now famous wall, and relieved the suffering of his enemies, pouring down their parched throats the life-giving fluid, putting them in a more comfortable positions, and leaving them a canteen filled with water. Amazingly for an hour and a half, amid the plaudits of both armies, this angel of mercy went on his mission from man to man of the wounded enemy. Similarly President Lincoln's son Tad was moved by the plight of the wounded in hospitals surrounding Washington; the boy touched by the images of the men asked his father to ensure that presents would be distributed to each soldier, in the hospitals, at Christmas for the remainder of the war. These two events illustrate the human ability to have compassion and in them we can see the begins of a tradition of mercy and care of the wounded soldiers, which carry on to this very day.

Then as now Christmas has always been an important element in creating hope amid war. A time when men seek to do good; symbols, like Santa, unite us; and carols bring us closer to perfection in spirit. It is the later item, the Christmas carol, which will provide the conclusion for this message. On December 25th 1864 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow contributed to the wealth of carols sung each Christmas season, when he composed the words to "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" For Longfellow the impetus for the words arose from the pain he felt when informed, that very day, that his son Charles had suffered a crippling wound in the war. This carol; like the dinner given by Lincoln, the drawings of Nast, and the humanity of Richard Kirkland give rise to hope and provided a sense of a shared desire to, as Lincoln stated in his Second inaugural address, "Bind up the wounds" brought on by the war

I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet the words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along the unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.