

A Brief History of Christmas

Part Three: Wars on Christmas and the Dawn of Kris Kringle

The Original War on Christmas

- In the years leading up to the 17th-century English Civil War, the Puritan faction began cracking down on Christmas because of its (well-deserved) reputation as a season of drunken reveling and focus on Mary rather than Christ. Catholics liked it too, which scored more points against it with the Puritans.
- Across the pond (that would be on our continent), William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth Colony (remember that turkey you ate this week?), made observing Christmas a criminal offense. Meanwhile the German immigrants in Pennsylvania were celebrating Christmas with great abandon.
- It was the Christian pastors, not grumpy misers, who demanded in these days that people go to work all day on December 25 to cut down on the immorality. It was Christian pastors, not atheists, who first made use of Saturnalia to present a case against Christmas.
- In the years immediately preceding and following the American Revolution, German immigrants observed Christmas far more enthusiastically than did American patriots, who viewed the celebration as a vestige of the monarchy and (among Protestants and atheists) of papacy. Taking advantage of this, George Washington famously crossed the Delaware late Christmas night to launch a surprise attack on the party-weary German mercenaries that the British empire employed to guard the city of Trenton, New Jersey.

The 19th Century Renaissance

- In the span of time between the English Civil War and the War of 1812, Christmas was on a decided decline, celebrated among Tories in the English countryside (and celebrated more like modern Mardi Gras than like 21st-century-style Christmas) but considered too Catholic in London and too English in America.
- Between 1820 and 1843, three English-language publications started Christmas's meteoric comeback: *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon* by Washington Irving (1820), "A Visit from St. Nicholas," an poem published anonymously (1823), and "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens (1843). All three works brought the Christmas customs of the landed English aristocracy to the people of the cities (and the colonies) by means of publication in magazines.
- That two of the world's first purpose-built shopping malls, the Burlington Arcade in London and the Arcade in Providence, Rhode Island, appeared in 1819 and 1828, respectively, is no coincidence.
- By 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe had published a short story lamenting the commercialization of the Christmas season.

Santa Claus: The Early Years

- St. Nicholas of Anatolia had long since been transformed into Father Christmas, Santa Claus, and other Christmas figures, but his 1820 poem made him into the clandestine delivery man on Christmas Eve and gave him a reindeer-sleigh.
- As far as linguists can tell, Kris Kringle came from a bad transliteration based on anti-immigrant bias. English-speakers would complain about the Germans and their *Kristkinder* (festival of the Christ-child), and the rest (according to some) is mispronounced history.