

**\*\*This information has been compiled from several sources and can be used to learn more about topics presented in the Olde Fashioned Christmas and Winter Festivals exhibit.**

## The History of the Nativity Scene

The first-ever Nativity scene recorded in history was created by St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis was concerned that the meaning of Christmas was becoming lost as most people were more focused with the ritual of gift giving than they were of the true message of Christmas.

Determined to remind people what Christmas is really about, he set about creating the world's first known Nativity scene to help tell his people of The Nativity Story. It was created in a cave and near Greccio, Italy, and involved real people and animals, making it a living Nativity scene.

Today, nearly 800 years later, we still hear religious leaders echoing St. Francis's words. The true message of Christmas is becoming lost; buried underneath layers of secular traditions. Yet at the same time, we also still see nativities everywhere come Christmas time.

While living Nativity scenes still exist today, much more popular are static versions that require no real people or animals. Some of the most famous Nativity scenes can be found at the Vatican, the White House, and in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

### How Nativity Scenes Came to our Homes

Nativity scenes and sets as we know them today found their roots in the 1300's. They started as display pieces for Italian churches. Often made out of terracotta, these early Nativity sets were displayed year round.

In the mid-1500's, Nativity sets began to appear Not only in churches, but in the homes of wealthier citizens, even though some prominent religious groups in Italy at the time were attempting to move away from nativities altogether.

These are much smaller versions than the large statue found in churches. Instead of being constructed solely of terracotta, artisans began using wax and wood as well. They were also dressed in beautiful clothes.

Over the years, the nativities spread to practically all Christian countries, each region adding its own influence and unique style. Traditions were also developed in some countries, most notably in Central American and Mediterranean countries.

The home Nativity was picked up more than anybody by the Germans, where Catholic and Protestant families alike display them in their homes. It is still tradition in Germany to display all

parts of the Nativity set with the exception of baby Jesus, who is only displayed after Christmas Eve, as before that time he is not yet been born. Most other regions, including America, do not follow this tradition.

### Today's Nativity Sets

Today, the typical Nativity set is made out of more modern materials, such as porcelain, ceramic, resin, and sometimes china, but some sets are still carved out of wood, or even a more expensive olive wood.

The basic nativity set should consist of at least five pieces. The stable, of course, is the setting. The manger where baby Jesus will rest, is placed front and center in the stable. This is because Jesus is the most significant piece in any Nativity set. Mary and Joseph are also prominent, but not as prominent. Mary is often placed right beside the manger, fondly looking over her son, while Joseph can either be placed on the other side of the manger looking down on Jesus, or slightly away from the manger looking away. Together, these five pieces, stable, manger, Christ child, Mary and Joseph, make a complete yet basic set.

In addition to the basic set, it is not uncommon to add the star of Bethlehem, the Angel Gabriel, the shepherds, the Wisemen, and various barn animals. Some nativity set creators, such as Fontanini, have hundreds of sets and figurines available, giving you endless opportunities to make your nativity scene truly unique.

Many people consider keeping a Nativity on display over the Christmas holidays is a great way to remind us of the true message of Christmas. Nativity scenes can start out small, and become hobbies for families, where a new piece or pieces are added each year.

From: <https://festivenativities.com/history-nativity-scene/>

## The History of the Santa

Every December 24th millions of people are visited by a short, fat guy in a red suit. Where did he come from, why does he do it, and how does he accomplish this seemingly impossible task?

Santa Claus... Kris Kringle...Old Saint Nick... We see him on advertising posters, in parades, at departments stores...who is this guy and why does he have so many aliases? Well, the original St. Nicholas lived in southwestern Turkey in the 4th century. As the bishop of Myra he was credited with doing a number of miracles involving sailors and children. After his death this led him to become the patron saint of both groups as well as for unmarried girls. As a saint he was given his own "feast day" that was celebrated on December 6th.

At about the same time Nicholas lived, Pope Julius I decided to establish a date for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. As the actual time of year for this event was unknown, the Pope

decided to assign the holiday to December 25th. There had long been a pagan midwinter festival at this time of year and the Pope hoped to use the holiday to christianize the celebrations.

Eventually, Saint Nicholas's feast day also became associated with December 25th and his connection with Christmas was established. A tradition developed that he would supposedly visit homes on Christmas Eve and children would place nuts, apples, sweets and other items around the house to welcome him. As the reformation took a hold of much of Europe, however, the popularity of St. Nicholas dropped in most Protestant countries, with the exception of Holland where he was referred to as "Sinter Klaas." After this tradition came to the United States, "Sinter Klass" would eventually be corrupted to "Sancte Claus."

### America's Santa

It's been said that Dutch settlers brought the tradition of Saint Nicholas to the North American city of New Amsterdam (which the British would later rename "New York"). However, research shows there's little evidence that Nicholas played much of a part in these early settlers' celebrations. It seems more likely that Saint Nicholas became an American tradition during a wave of interest in Dutch customs following the Revolutionary War. Washington Irving (of Sleepy Hollow fame) included him a comic History of New York City written in 1809. John Pintard, founder of the New York Historical Society, took an especially keen interest in the legend and the Society hosted its first St. Nicholas anniversary dinner in 1810. Artist Alexander Anderson was commissioned to draw an image of the Saint for the dinner. He was still shown as a religious figure, but now he was also clearly depositing gifts in children's stockings which were hung by the fireplace to dry.

Perhaps nothing has fixed the image of Santa Claus so firmly in the American mind as a poem entitled A Visit from St. Nicholas written by Clement Moore in 1822. Moore, a professor of biblical languages at New York's Episcopal Theological Seminary, drew upon Pintard's thinking about the early New Amsterdam traditions and added some elements from German and Norse legends. These stories held that a happy little elf-like man presided over midwinter pagan festivals. In the poem, Moore depicts the Saint as a tiny man with a sleigh drawn by eight miniature reindeer. They fly him from house to house and at each residence he comes down the chimney to fill stockings hung by the fireplace with gifts.

Moore had written the poem for the enjoyment of his own family, but in 1823 it was published anonymously in the Troy Sentinel. It became very popular and has been reprinted countless times under the more familiar title, The Night Before Christmas.

Where did Moore get the reindeer? The Saami people of northern Scandinavia and Finland often used reindeer to pull their sledges around and this found its way into the poem. Reindeer, which are much sturdier animals than North American deer, are well adapted to cold climates with their heavy fur coats and broad, flat hooves for walking on snow.

As time went by, more and more was added to the Santa Claus legend. Thomas Nast, a 19th century cartoonist, did a series of drawings for Harper's Weekly. Nast's vision of Santa had him

living at the North Pole. Nash also gave him a workshop for building toys and a large book filled with the names of children who had been naughty or nice.

The 19th century Santa was often shown wearing outfits of different colors: purple, green and blue in addition to red. This slowly faded out so that by the beginning of the 20th century the standard image of Santa Claus was a man in a red suit trimmed with white. The Coca-Cola company has often been cited for cementing the image of Santa with the colors red and white through a series of popular advertisements in the 1940's depicting Saint Nick enjoying their product (Coca-Cola's company colors are red and white). However, Santa was already well associated with these colors by that time. American artist Norman Rockwell had done a number of paintings with Saint Nick wearing red and white including A Drum for Tommy which appeared on the cover of The Country Gentleman in 1921. The truth is that by the time the Coke ads came out, Santa, in the public's mind, was already wearing only the modern version of his colors.

From: <http://www.unmuseum.org/santa.htm>

## Santa Physics

Santa has been very popular in the 20th and 21st centuries but in the past few years he has had a few detractors. In January of 1990, an article appeared in Spy magazine under the name of Richard Waller that was skeptical of Santa's capability to do what he supposedly does each Christmas Eve. The article, after its initial appearance in the magazine, was republished innumerable times on the web and emailed all over the Internet.

Among other things Waller calculated that Santa, moving from east to west around the globe, could use the different time zones and the rotation of the Earth to extend his night for as long as 31 hours. Since he needs to visit approximately 92 million households (the number of Christian children divided by the average number of children per household) according to Waller this means he needs to travel approximately 75.5 million miles. The article states that the distance divided by the time means Santa's sleigh must move at a speed of 650 miles per second, 3000 times faster than the speed of sound, to complete its route.

Waller then went on to calculate that if every child gets a two-pound present, Santa's sleigh must weigh about 321,300 tons. He then ups that figure to 353,430 tons to account for some 214,200 reindeer he thinks would be needed to pull that heavy a sleigh. This total weight is about four times that of the Queen Elizabeth.

The article ends by noting that if the sleigh and team attempt to move through the atmosphere at 650 miles per second they would be exposed to enormous air resistance (the same way a spacecraft gets heated upon reentering the atmosphere) and they would explode in flames. Waller sarcastically ends the article noting that if there ever was a Santa, given the acceleration forces such a flight would subject him to, he must now be dead.

From: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-saint-became-santa-laws-physics-bethan-davies>

## High-Tech Saint Nick

Numerous rebuttals have been written to the Spy magazine article. Some point out that there are flaws in Waller's calculations or assumptions. For instance, the payload problem could be handled by making numerous returned trips to the pole. It increases the length of the total trip by a tiny fraction, but divides the weight of the sleigh by the number of return trips.

Other writers note that Christmas does not come on the same day in all countries. Orthodox churches celebrate Christmas a few days after December 25th which means Santa gets at least two shots a year to complete his mission. One writer noted that the number of stops needed in the calculation is incorrect since dividing the total number of children by the average number of children per household to get the number of stops does not consider families where there are no children at all.

Roger Highfield, who wrote the book *Can Reindeer Fly? The Science of Christmas*, suggests that Wallers has not considered that Santa might have some high tech solutions to his problems. For example, "inertial dampers" - a device that's referred to in the Star Trek movies to keep the crew from getting shmoshed as the Enterprise accelerates to Warp 8 - could be used by Santa to solve his high-acceleration problems. The technology isn't known to our science, but to Santa, well, who knows?

In fact some people have even suggested that Santa has the technology to manipulate time. By creating an artificial time bubble around his sleigh and his person, he could speed himself up as much as he needed. Again, this is far beyond human technology, but...

However Santa does it, he seems to manage each year to delight millions of children on Christmas morning as he has done for over a century. Perhaps it's just magic.

## What about Rudolph?

Almost as popular as Santa himself is his sometimes lead reindeer with a glowing red nose, Rudolph. Unlike Santa's history, the story of Rudolph can be traced back to a specific author: Robert L. May. May was a copywriter for Montgomery Ward department stores in 1939. The company had been buying and giving away coloring books at Christmas time for many years. May's boss thought they could save some money by printing their own books and asked May to come up with a story. May thought up the idea of a misfit reindeer who saves the day for Santa on a foggy Christmas Eve.

The story took off, but unfortunately May did not own the rights. His employer, Montgomery Ward, did. With a generosity not often seen in the corporate world, in 1947 the company's President turned the rights over to May, who was in debt because of his wife's terminal illness. With a hit song written in 1949 by May's brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, and a TV special in

1964, May's financial security was assured and Rudolph earned a permanent spot in American Christmas pop culture.

From: <http://www.unmuseum.org/santa.htm>

## The History of the Gingerbread

Tis the season to be gingerbread! The sweet-and-spicy treat flavored by a lumpy little root is a ubiquitous celebrity in fall and winter, starring in everything from cute cookies and overpriced lattes to edible construction projects. You can even buy gingerbread-scented mascara or dog shampoo, if you really can't get enough of the stuff.

As I bit the head off a gingerbread man the other day, I wondered: Whose bright idea was this delicious concoction, anyway?

Fueled by a piece of Starbucks gingerbread loaf (which proved rather disappointing), I followed a trail of crumbs (okay, just a helpful librarian) to "The Gingerbread Book." According to sugarcraft scholar Steven Stellingwerf (I want his job!), gingerbread may have been introduced to Western Europe by 11th-century crusaders returning from the eastern Mediterranean. Its precise origin is murky, although it is clear that ginger itself originates in Asia.

Gingerbread was a favorite treat at festivals and fairs in medieval Europe—often shaped and decorated to look like flowers, birds, animals or even armor—and several cities in France and England hosted regular "gingerbread fairs" for centuries. Ladies often gave their favorite knights a piece of gingerbread for good luck in a tournament, or superstitiously ate a "gingerbread husband" to improve their chances of landing the real thing.

By 1598, it was popular enough to merit a mention in a Shakespeare play ("An I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst have it to buy ginger-bread..."). Some even considered it medicine: 16th-century writer John Baret described gingerbread as "A Kinde of cake or paste made to comfort the stomacke."

Stellingwerf notes that the meaning of the word "gingerbread" has been reshaped over the centuries. In medieval England, it referred to any kind of preserved ginger (borrowing from the Old French term *gingebras*, which in turn came from the spice's Latin name, *zingibar*.) The term became associated with ginger-flavored cakes sometime in the 15th century.

In Germany, gingerbread cookies called *Lebkuchen* have long been a fixture at street festivals, often in the shape of hearts frosted with sugary messages like "Alles was ich brauch bist du" (All I need is you) or "Du bist einfach super" (You're really super). As far as I can tell, Germans also invented the concept of making gingerbread houses, probably inspired by the witch's candy cottage in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel.

North Americans have been baking gingerbread for more than 200 years—even George Washington's mother gets credit for one recipe—in shapes that ranged from miniature kings (pre-revolution) to eagles (after independence).

These days, as *The New Food Lover's Companion* (a lovely early Christmas present from my in-laws-to-be) explains it, "gingerbread generally refers to one of two desserts. It can be a dense, ginger-spiced cookie flavored with molasses or honey and cut into fanciful shapes (such as the popular gingerbread man). Or, particularly in the United States, it can describe a dark, moist cake flavored with molasses, ginger and other spices."

Of course, when gingerbread cookies are shaped like everything from popular politicians to baby animals, polite consumption can be tricky. Is it barbaric to bite off the head first? Or worse to start by amputating an extremity? If you nibble on decorations first, does the plaintive voice of that character from *Shrek* echo in your imagination ("Not my gumdrop buttons!")?

## Tracing the Origins of the Gingerbread House

For many families, the tradition of decorating a gingerbread house is an annual holiday event. Little do they know that they are participating in a tradition that is centuries old.

Though the English are credited with being the first to bake and sell gingerbread when they introduced the Gingerbread Man, they weren't the first people in Europe to bake this unique treat. In fact, it was an Armenian Monk who is actually credited for bringing gingerbread to Europe back in the 10th century. He taught the skill of baking the treat to both Christians and French priests.

Gingerbread was prominent with other religious institutions across Europe such as the Swedish Nuns. It is widely known that monasteries were one of the first places to sell gingerbread. In the 16th century, gingerbread was also available for purchase in farmers' markets and pharmacies. It wasn't until gingerbread found its way to Britain that it started being painted. It was displayed in shop windows and became the popular holiday treat we now know today.

Though decorating gingerbread cookies had become a growing trend, the popular activity of decorating gingerbread houses didn't take hold until the publishing of *Hansel and Gretel* by the Brothers Grimm. This well-known German tale also resulted in German settlers bringing gingerbread to America, where it continues to be popular today.

From: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-brief-history-of-gingerbread-50050265/>

## The History of the Hanukkah

The story of how Hanukkah came to be is contained in the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which are not part of the Jewish canon of the Hebrew Bible. These books tell the story of the Maccabees, a small band of Jewish fighters who liberated the Land of Israel from the Syrian Greeks who occupied it. Under the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Syrian Greeks sought to impose their Hellenistic culture, which many Jews found attractive. By 167 B.C.E, Antiochus intensified his campaign by defiling the Temple in Jerusalem and banning Jewish practice. The

Maccabees--led by the five sons of the priest Mattathias, especially Judah--waged a three-year campaign that culminated in the cleaning and rededication of the Temple.

Since they were unable to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot at its proper time in early autumn, the victorious Maccabees decided that Sukkot should be celebrated once they rededicated the Temple, which they did on the 25th of the month of Kislev in the year 164 B.C.E. Since Sukkot lasts seven days, this became the timeframe adopted for Hanukkah.

About 250 years after these events, the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote his account of the origins of the holiday. Josephus referred to the holiday as the Festival of Lights and not as Hanukkah. Josephus seems to be connecting the newfound liberty that resulted from the events with the image of light, and the holiday still is often referred to by the title Josephus gave it.

By the early rabbinic period about a century later--at the time that the Mishnah (the first compilation of oral rabbinic law included in the Talmud) was redacted--the holiday had become known by the name of Hanukkah ("Dedication"). However, the Mishnah does not give us any details concerning the rules and customs associated with the holiday.

From: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hanukkah-history/>

## The History of Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is a week-long celebration held in the United States and also celebrated in the Western African Diaspora in other nations of the Americas. The celebration honors African heritage in African-American culture, and is observed from December 26 to January 1, culminating in a feast and gift-giving. Kwanzaa has seven core principles (Nguzo Saba). It was created by Maulana Karenga, and was first celebrated in 1966–67.

### History and etymology

Maulana Karenga created Kwanzaa in 1965 as the first specifically African-American holiday.<sup>[2]</sup> Karenga said his goal was to "give Blacks an alternative to the existing holiday and give Blacks an opportunity to celebrate themselves and their history, rather than simply imitate the practice of the dominant society."<sup>1</sup> According to Karenga, the name Kwanzaa derives from the Swahili phrase *matunda ya kwanza*, meaning "first fruits of the harvest". The choice of Swahili, an East African language, reflects its status as a symbol of Pan-Africanism, especially in the 1960s, although most East African nations were not involved in the Atlantic slave trade that brought African people to America.

Kwanzaa is a celebration that has its roots in the black nationalist movement of the 1960s, and was established as a means to help African Americans reconnect with their African cultural and historical heritage by uniting in meditation and study of African traditions and Nguzo Saba, the "seven principles of African Heritage" which Karenga said "is a communitarian African philosophy".

During the early years of Kwanzaa, Karenga said that it was meant to be an "oppositional alternative" to Christmas. However, as Kwanzaa gained mainstream adherents, Karenga altered his position so that practicing Christians would not be alienated, then stating in the 1997 Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture, "Kwanzaa was not created to give people an alternative to their own religion or religious holiday."

Many African Americans who celebrate Kwanzaa do so in addition to observing Christmas.

From: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kwanzaa>

## The History of the Winter Solstice

The Northern Hemisphere Winter Solstice, between December 20 and 23, is the time of year when the night is longest and the day shortest. What happened to the sun? If, in ancient times, you believed in gods and goddesses who take an active interest in human life, you might have thought it smart to do something to make the gods happy again so they might bring back the light. Why not honor them either with a great festival to persuade them to bring it back or a kind of gift-giving birthday party for the sun's annual rebirth? This may be at the origin of the winter solstice holidays.

From: <https://www.thoughtco.com/winter-holidays-celebrating-the-solstice-121472>