

This Day in History... December 23, 1823

First Printing of “A Visit from St. Nicholas”

“A Visit from St. Nicholas” was first printed anonymously on December 23, 1823.

Author and professor Clement Clarke Moore is generally considered the author of “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” also known as “The Night Before Christmas.” Clarke claimed he wrote the now-famous poem while riding in a sleigh during a snowy shopping trip.

Moore’s inspiration came from a local Dutch handyman, as well as the historical Saint Nicholas. Many Europeans celebrated the feast of St. Nicholas on December 6. A fourth-century bishop named Nicholas was revered for giving gifts to the poor, and it became a tradition for children to set their shoes by the hearth on the evening before his celebration. During the night, he would fill them with small treats of nuts and fruit. When the Dutch settled in the New World, they brought their customs with them, including visits from Sinterklaas, as they called the saint.

Moore also took inspiration from the writing of his friend, Washington Irving. In his *A History of New York*, Irving wrote about St. Nicholas riding over the trees in a wagon to deliver presents to children while smoking a pipe.

On December 23, 1823, the poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” was

published in Troy, New York’s *Troy Sentinel* with no author listed. Moore had written the poem for his children and hadn’t intended for it to be published. As a respected professor, he didn’t want to be connected to such a fanciful writing.

The poem was popular with readers and continued to be printed in the *Sentinel* and other papers. Several publishers attributed the poem to Moore, though he didn’t acknowledge it as his own work until 1844. At that time, he was publishing a book a of poetry and his children insisted he include it.

Though Moore published the poem in one of his books, there are some that believe he wasn’t the author. They attribute the poem to Henry Livingston Jr. While Livingston never claimed authorship during his lifetime, and no printings of the poem have been found with his name attached, some still believe he wrote it. They believe the poem’s meter and phraseology are similar to Livingston’s. Also, Livingston was of Dutch heritage, which would explain the Dutch naming of some of the reindeer. Meanwhile, Moore’s defenders believe he could’ve gotten these Dutch influences from his friend, Washington Irving.

Moore was one of the earliest authors to suggest the idea of St. Nicholas going down the chimney to deliver toys. Previous traditions simply had him dropping the toys down the chimney before moving on to the next child’s house. As new advancements were made in heating homes, chimneys and fireplaces became less common. With this, the tale of St. Nicholas had to evolve as well. For example, when cast iron stoves were popular, it was said he would squeeze through the stove pipe to enter a home.

Set of 2021 stamps titled “A Visit From St. Nick,” featuring scenes from the famed poem.



There’s a town in Indiana named Santa Claus.

Moore’s poem also introduced the idea of Santa’s sleigh being pulled by reindeer. The names Moore chose are interesting in that they all have a connection to flight or speed. Dashers are fast runners; dancers can move quickly and almost appear to fly when they perform certain jumps. Prancing indicates high steps that make an animal appear light on their feet. A vixen is a female fox, an animal that can reach speeds of up to 45 miles per hour. A comet is an incredibly fast-moving space object that flies across the sky. Cupid is the Roman god of love and is most often depicted as having wings. Finally, Donder and Blitzen come from the Dutch words for thunder and lightning – both powerful natural forces that occur in the sky.



Donder (Donner) and Blitzen come from the Dutch words for “thunder” and “lightning.”



Artist Thomas Nast was one of the first to draw Santa as we know him today.



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Four handwritten copies of Moore’s poem remain today.

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Despite the faction of Livingston supporters, Moore is largely credited as the poem’s author. In the years after its publishing, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” gave Americans the version of Santa we have today – a “jolly old elf” able to slide down chimneys and ride in a magic sleigh. He filled stockings, rather than shoes, with gifts. One of the most traditional stocking stuffers are whole oranges. Their golden-orange color is said to represent the gold coins gifted to a poor family by the original St. Nicholas all those centuries ago.

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