

Christmas in America

Christmas in Early America

The Pilgrims and Puritans of New England found no Biblical precedent for a public celebration of Christmas (recall that the goal of these groups was to simplify religious worship and to cut away all religious rituals and celebrations not specifically cited in the Bible). Nothing in the Bible established any date for the birth of Christ. The holiday was instead established by Roman Catholic tradition, thus making it – in their view – one of the many “pagan” holidays that had been inculcated into the corrupt church that had persecuted them, and which they and other religious leaders wished to reform. Consequently, Christmas in New England remained a regular working day. In fact, Massachusetts passed an anti-Christmas law in 1659 declaring: “Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas ... shall pay for each offense five shillings as a fine to the country.” The law was repealed in 1681, but the holiday still was not celebrated by religious non-conformists or dissenters (i.e., the Puritans and Pilgrims), and was usually only celebrated by a few Anglicans (later Episcopalians), Catholics, and other more formal or high-church-tradition New England families. It was not until the 1830s and 1840s that Christmas celebrations were just beginning to be accepted in New England (primarily due to the influence of large-scale Christmas celebrations in cities like New York). Although as late as 1870 in Boston public schools, a student missing school on Christmas Day could be punished or expelled. By the 1880s, however, Christmas celebrations had finally become as accepted in New England as they were in other parts of the country.

Christmas in the White House

- 1789-1797: At a time when Christmas was still quite controversial in a new nation, Martha Washington’s holiday receptions were stiff and regal affairs, quite befitting the dignity of the office of President of the United States. A Christmas party was given by the Washington for members of Congress on Christmas Day, 1795, at which a bountiful feast was served to the guests – all men with the exception of the First Lady. However, the festivities at the Mount Vernon plantation in Virginia would start at daybreak with a Christmas fox hunt. It was followed by a hearty mid-day feast that included “Christmas pie,” dancing, music, and visiting that sometimes did not end for a solid week.
- 1829-1837: From the earliest times memorable parties have been held for the president’s children or grand-children. One of the most elaborate was President Andrew Jackson’s “frolic” for the children of his household in 1834. This party included games, dancing, a grand dinner, and ended with an indoor “snowball fight” with specially made cotton balls.
- 1861-1865: During the first Christmas of the Civil War (1861), Mrs. Lincoln arranged flowers, read books, helped serve meals, talked with the staff, and cared for the wounded at Campbell’s and Douglas hospitals. She personally raised a thousand dollars for

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Christmas dinners and donated a similar amount for oranges and lemons when she heard that there was a threat of scurvy. And during the Christmas season of 1863, the Lincolns' son, Tad, accompanied his father on hospital visits and noticed the loneliness of the wounded soldiers. Deeply moved, the boy asked his father if he could send books and clothing to these men. The President agreed and packages signed "From Tad Lincoln" were sent to area hospitals that Christmas.

- In 1889, the tradition of a placing an indoor decorated tree in the White House began on Christmas morning during the Presidency of Benjamin Harrison.
- In 1895, First Lady Frances Cleveland was the first to decorate the White House indoor Christmas tree with electric lights (electricity was introduced in the White House in 1891).
- 1901-1909: Teddy Roosevelt, an avowed conservationist, did not approve of cutting trees for decorations, so he banned the Christmas tree from the White House. However, he and his family did celebrate Christmas. On Christmas Eve, they would pile into the family sleigh (later the motor car) and travel to Christ Church in Oyster Bay, New York. Following the pastor's sermon, TR would deliver one of his famous "sermonettes" on the meaning of the holiday. And on Christmas morning, gifts would be opened and then the family would spend the day hiking, playing games, and going for sleigh rides. Also, for many years TR played Santa Claus at a school in Oyster Bay, New York, listening to the children and then giving them Christmas presents that he had selected himself.
- In 1923, President Calvin Coolidge started the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony now held every year on the White House lawn.
- In 1929, First Lady Lou Hoover established the custom of decorating an official (not just a personal) tree inside the White House – a tradition that has remained with the First Ladies.
- 1933-1945: For President Franklin Roosevelt, Christmas was a time for family and friends. The tree was set up on Christmas Eve and the President directed his grandchildren in the placement of every ornament. After the tree was decorated, FDR had the grandchildren gather around while he read Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" or recited it from memory. Following the reading, the children would race upstairs to the President's bedroom where they would hang their stockings on his mantel.
- In 1945, President Harry Truman gave the following Christmas message: This is the Christmas that a war-weary world has prayed for through long and awful years. ... We meet in the spirit of the first Christmas, when the midnight choir sang the hymn of joy: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Let us not forget that the coming of the Savior brought a time of long peace to the Roman World. ... From the manger of Bethlehem came a new appeal to the minds and hearts of men: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another." ... Would that the world would

accept that message in this time of its greatest need! ... We must strive without ceasing to make real the prophecy of Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." In this day, whether it be far or near, the Kingdoms of this world shall become indeed the Kingdom of God and He will reign forever and ever, Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

- In 1953, the Eisenhowers sought out Hallmark Cards to assist them in creating a presidential Christmas card – the beginning of the official White House Christmas card.
- In 1954, the annual Christmas tree lighting ceremony was named the Pageant of Peace. It is held each year in early December to light the National Christmas Tree and includes performances by popular entertainers before the lighting of the National Christmas Tree by the President. The National Christmas Tree remains lit through January 1.
- In 1963, the first Christmas card to include an explicitly religious element was the Kennedy card featuring a photo of a Nativity Scene set up in the East Room of the White House.
- In 1963, President Lyndon Johnson gave the following Christmas message: We were taught by Him whose birth we commemorate that after death there is life. ... In these last 200 years we have guided the building of our Nation and our society by those principles and precepts brought to earth nearly 2,000 years ago on that first Christmas.
- In 1969, the Pageant of Peace was in a legal controversy over the use of religious symbols.
- 1979,1980: Under President Jimmy Carter, the hostage crisis in Iran dominated the holiday celebrations of 1979 and 1980. In 1979, the National Christmas Tree and fifty surrounding trees each showed a single light, one for each of the hostages. The President promised to turn on the other lights when the hostages were freed. Because the hostages were still in captivity, in 1980 the lights on the tree were turned on for 417 seconds on Christmas Eve – one second for each day they had been held.
- In 1981, President Ronald Reagan authorized the first official White House ornament, copies of which were made available for purchase.
- In 1981, Barbara Bush took the first of twelve rides in a cherry-picker to hang the star at the top of the National Christmas Tree.
- In 1985, President Ronald Reagan gave the following Christmas message: We do not know the exact moment the Christ Child was born, only what we would have seen if we'd been standing there as we stand here now: Suddenly, a star from heaven shining in our eyes, shining with brilliant beauty across the skies, a star pointing toward eternity in the night, like a great ring of pure and endless light, and then all was calm, and all was bright. Such was the beginning of one solitary life that would shake the world as never before or

since. When we speak of Jesus and of His life, we speak of a man revered as a prophet and teacher by people of all religions, and Christians speak of someone greater – a man Who was and is Divine. He brought forth a power that is infinite and a promise that is eternal, a power greater than all mankind’s military might, for His power is Godly love, love that can lift our hearts and soothe our sorrows and heal our wounds and drive away our fears. ... If each of us could give but a fraction to one another of what He gave to the whole human family, how many hearts could heal, how much sorrow and pain could be driven away. (If you would like to listen to Ronald Reagan’s 1981 Christmas messages, go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU0tuah-x7M>)

- In 1989, President George Bush gave the following Christmas message: During the beautiful and holy season of Christmas, our hearts are filled with the same wonder, gratitude, and joy that led the psalmist of old to ask, “When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained, What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou visitest him?” At Christmas, we, too, rejoice in the mystery of God’s love for us – love revealed through the gift of Christ’s birth. Born into a family of a young carpenter and his wife, in a stable shared by beasts of the field, our Savior came to live among ordinary men. Yet, in time, the miraculous nature of this simple event became clear. Christ’s birth changed the course of history, bringing the light of hope to a world dwelling in the darkness of sin and death. Today, nearly 2,000 years later, the shining promise of that first Christmas continues to give our lives a sense of peace and purpose. Our words and deeds, when guided by the example of Christ’s life, can help others share in the joy of man’s Redemption.
- In 1999, President Bill Clinton gave the following Christmas message: Saint Matthew’s Gospel tells us that on the first Christmas 2000 years ago, a bright star shone vividly in the eastern sky, heralding the birth of Jesus and the beginning of His hallowed mission as teacher, healer, servant, and savior. ... His luminous teachings have brought hope and joy to generations of believers. ... His timeless message of God’s enduring and unconditional love for each person continues to strengthen and inspire us. ... Love, peace, joy, hope – so many beautiful words are woven through our Christmas songs, prayers and traditions.
- In 2001, Laura Bush chose the first White House Christmas card to contain a Scripture.
- In 2005, President George W. Bush gave the following Christmas message: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel which means, God with us.” Matthew 1:23 More than 2,000 years ago, a virgin gave birth to a Son, and the God of heaven came to Earth. Mankind had received its Savior, and to those who had dwelled in darkness, the light of hope had come. Each Christmas, we celebrate that first coming anew, and we rejoice in the knowledge that the God who came to Earth that night in Bethlehem is with us still and will remain with us forever. Christmas is a season of hope

and joy, a time to give thanks for the blessing of Christ's birth and for the blessings that surround us every day of the year. We have much to be thankful for in this country, and we have a responsibility to help those in need. Jesus calls us to help others, and acts of kindness toward the less fortunate fulfill the spirit of the Christmas season. On Christmas, we pray for freedom, justice, and peace on Earth. We remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country and for our freedom, and we ask for God's blessing on their loved ones. We ask God to watch over all of our men and women in uniform. Many are serving in distant lands, helping to advance the cause of freedom and peace. Our entire Nation is grateful to them and prays for their safe return. Laura and I send our best wishes for a blessed and merry Christmas.

- In 2014, President Barack Obama gave the following Christmas message (this is the official version from the White House): Merry Christmas, everybody! (Applause) We saw this party going on out back and we thought we'd join you. I want to thank Secretary Jewell for not only the introduction but for all that you and everybody who is part of the Interior Department and the Park Service do to protect the magnificent outdoors for our children and for future generations. And I want to thank Jonathan Jarvis, Dan Wenk, and everybody at the National Park Service and the National Park Foundation for putting on this special event each and every holiday season. I want everybody to give it up for our charming Christmas hosts tonight, Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson. (Applause) We have so enjoyed the incredible performers, including the one and only Patti LaBelle. (Applause) And, finally, thanks to all of you who are here and watching at home for joining us to celebrate this wonderful holiday tradition. Back in 1923, school kids here in Washington wrote a letter to the White House asking if they could put a Christmas tree on the South Lawn. And more than 90 years and a few different evergreens later, (laughter) the National Christmas Tree still stands as a symbol of hope and holiday spirit, and we still gather as a country each year to light it. We still have school kids involved, too. But this year, they've given all the state and territory trees surrounding the National Christmas Tree their first digital upgrade. Young women from all 50 states used their computers – using their coding skills to control the colors and patterns of the lights on the trees. (Applause) So thanks to those wonderful students. It is incredibly impressive. It's actually one of the few things that Tom Hanks cannot do. (Laughter) But while lighting the tree has entered into the 21st century, the story that we remember this season dates back more than 2,000 years. It's the story of hope – the birth of a singular child into the simplest of circumstances – a child who would grow up to live a life of humility, and kindness, and compassion; who traveled with a message of empathy and understanding; who taught us to care for the poor, and the marginalized, and those who are different from ourselves. And more than two millennia later, the way he lived still compels us to do our best to build a more just and tolerant and decent world. It is a story dear to my family as Christians,

but its meaning is one embraced by all peoples across our country and around the world, regardless of how they pray, or whether they pray at all. And that's to love our neighbors as ourselves. To be one another's keepers. To have faith in one another, and in something better around the bend. Not just at Christmastime, but all the time. And, finally, this Christmas, we count our blessings and we give thanks to the men and women of our military who help make those blessings possible. And as we hold our loved ones tight, let's remember the military families whose loved ones are far from home. They are our heroes, and they deserve our heartfelt gratitude and our wholehearted support. (Applause) So on behalf of Michelle, Malia, Sasha, mom-in-law (laughter) and our reindeer Bo and Sunny, (laughter) I want to wish all of them and I want to wish all of you a very, very merry Christmas, and a holiday filled with joy. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

Concluding Thoughts

In recent years, there has been a relentless push from secularists and progressives to transform Christmas. Schools, government offices and many commercial stores have replaced Merry Christmas with Happy Holidays to appease critics, not seeming to care that 93% of Americans celebrate Christmas, and 97% are not bothered by the use of the phrase "Merry Christmas." Unfortunately, far too often, the 3% seems to drive public policy.

Gratefully, religious Jews have been some of the strongest advocates for keeping Christmas a religious celebration. For example,

Burt Prelutsky, a Jewish columnist for a number of national publications, has declared:

I never thought I'd live to see the day Christmas would become a dirty word. ... How is it, one well might ask, that in a Christian nation this is happening? ... Speaking as a member of a minority group – and one of the smaller ones at that – I say it behooves those of us who don't accept Jesus Christ as our savior to show some gratitude to those who do, and to start respecting the values and traditions of the overwhelming majority of our fellow citizens, just as we keep insisting that they respect ours. Merry Christmas, my friends!

Orthodox Jewish Rabbi Daniel Lapin agrees:

Secular fundamentalism has successfully injected into American culture the notion that the word "Christmas" is deeply offensive. ... Anti-Christianism is unhealthy for all Americans, but I warn my brethren that it will prove particularly destructive for Jews. ... Let us all go out of our way to wish our many wonderful Christian friends – a very merry Christmas. Just remember, America's Bible belt is our safety belt.

So...**Merry Christmas!!!**