

# A History of Christmas in America

クリスマスは今では当たり前の年中行事ですが、最初から今と同じ形で祝われていたわけではありません。時代や社会の背景が変わる中で、人々はさまざまな考え方や習慣を持ちながら、この行事と向き合ってきました。この記事では、アメリカ社会の変化とともに、クリスマスがどのように形づくられてきたのかをたどります。あなたの家族や地域では、今も大切にしている祝日の習慣はありますか？



## 1. Article

Read the following article aloud.

From VOA Learning English, I'm Caty Weaver.

Today, Steve Ember and Shirley Griffith present a special program on Christmas [traditions](#) in the United States during the first half of the 19th century.

During this period, there was no set way of [celebrating](#) the day, which was not yet an official holiday. Communities around the country honored the day in different ways. Some observed Christmas as an important Christian religious day honoring the birth of Jesus. Others celebrated the day with parties, music, drinking and eating. And, some communities did not celebrate the day at all.

But, it was during this period that Americans began to [reinvent](#) the holiday. They combined [ancient](#) Christmas traditions from different cultures with modern American influences.

Here are Steve Ember and Shirley Griffith.

In 1819, the popular American writer Washington Irving wrote a series of five essays published in a book called *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*.

The essays describe a wealthy British landowner who invites his farm workers into his home to celebrate Christmas. The landowner recreates a traditional Christmas as it would have been celebrated in the distant past. Irving praised this looking back to ancient traditions. He liked the idea of different levels of society coming together to enjoy a festive and peaceful holiday. Washington Irving seemed to express concern about the lack of such unifying Christmas traditions in modern America.

## Immigrants shape Christmas traditions

Penne Restad wrote a book *Christmas in America: A History*. It shows how Americans began to slowly shape Christmas into a unifying national holiday during the first half of the 19th century. She describes how Christmas had different meanings for Americans who came from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Many immigrants brought Christmas traditions from their own countries.

Religion played a big role in how an American might celebrate the holiday. Calvinist Christians banned the celebration of Christmas. But groups such as Episcopalians and Moravians honored the day with religious services and seasonal decorations.

By mid-century, Christian groups began to ignore their religious differences over the meaning of Christmas and honored the day in special ways.

Christmas became an important time for families to celebrate at home. More and more Christian Americans also began to follow the European traditions of Christmas trees and giving gifts. Christians believed that the tree represented Jesus and was also a sign of new beginnings. German immigrants brought their tradition of putting lights, sweets and toys on the branches of evergreen trees placed in their homes.

This tradition of setting up a Christmas tree soon spread to many American homes. So did the practice of giving people presents. As these traditions increased in popularity, the modern trade and business linked to Christmas also grew.

## Christmas as a holiday

As Christmas became more popular, some states declared the day a state holiday. Louisiana was the first state to make the move in 1837. By 1860, 14 other states had followed. It was not until 1870 that President Ulysses Grant made Christmas a federal holiday.

Americans already knew old Christmas songs that came from England and other areas of Europe. But many new American Christmas songs started to become popular. For example,

in eighteen forty-nine, a religious leader from Massachusetts wrote the words to *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*. The song *Jingle Bells* appeared seven years later. And, a year later, a religious leader in Williamsport, Pennsylvania wrote the song *We Three Kings of Orient Are*.

And of course, no discussion of Christmas would be complete without talking about one of the holiday's most famous representations, Santa Claus.

This character is based on the story of Saint Nicholas, a Christian holy person believed to have lived in the third century. Saint Nicholas became known as a protector of children. Different cultures have given him different names. These include Sinterklaas, Kris Kringle and Father Christmas. But for most Americans his most popular name would become Santa Claus.

In the 19th century, many Dutch immigrants living in the United States celebrated the feast of Saint Nicholas on December 6. Saint Nicholas was especially important to New Yorkers because of their history as a Dutch colony. In 1809, Washington Irving published his *History of New York*. It lists Saint Nicholas as the patron saint of New Yorkers. He describes the saint wearing a low hat, large pants, and smoking a pipe. Does this description sound familiar?

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Source: *A History of Christmas in America*

VOA

## 2. Key phrases and vocabulary

First repeat after your tutor and then read aloud by yourself.

**1. tradition (n.) a custom passed down over time**

Eating noodles on birthdays is a tradition in some families.

**2. celebrate (v.) to do something special for an important day**

They celebrated her promotion with a dinner.

**3. reinvent (v.) to change something in a new way, often to fit a new time or situation**

After moving to a new country, she tried to reinvent her career.

**4. ancient (adj.) very old; from a long time ago**

The museum displays ancient tools made of stone.

**5. evergreen (adj.) staying green throughout the year**

The park is surrounded by evergreen forests.

## 3. Questions

Read the questions aloud and answer them.

**1. Why did Americans not have one set way of celebrating Christmas in the early 1800s?**

**2. How did immigrants affect Christmas traditions in the United States?**

**3. Who made Christmas a federal holiday in the United States?**

**4. What holiday traditions are most important to your family or community?**

**5. How do you feel about the commercial side of modern holidays?**