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Christmas and the Civil War

Historians often point to Clement Clarke Moore's poem commonly known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas" as creating an American concept of Santa Claus. But did you know that Moore's poem has strong ties to Union recruiting and supporters from the Civil War?

Moore's poem references many interpretations of Saint Nick by the political cartoonist Thomas Nast, famous for his work in Harper's Weekly. Nast is best known for his depictions of "Boss Tweed" and Tammany Hall corruption in New York City. He believed strongly in the Union cause and the abolition of slavery. The cartoonist continued to call attention to racial injustice well after the end of the Civil War.

Thomas Nast first drew Santa Claus for Harper's Weekly in the winter of 1862. Throughout the war, Nast often depicted Santa Claus celebrating Christmas with Union soldiers, as you can see in this image. President Abraham Lincoln later designated Nast's depictions of the war, especially his annual feature of Santa Claus "as the best recruiting sergeant the North ever had."

Nast cartoons first publicized other details about Santa Claus. For instance, Nast re-



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Image of Santa Claus by Thomas Nast that appeared in Harper's Weekly.

vealed Santa's residence at the North Pole to readers in 1866. Later, Nast's cartoons introduced the workshop and the naughty and nice list.

While Nast portrayed Christmas in camp in rather idyllic terms, the soldiers remembered the experience differently. One soldier from Connecticut stationed near Alexandria wrote:

"At 12:30 a.m. of December 25, 1863, I was relieved from post and was next to being frozen. After night set in the air became very sharp and piercing, and the wind blew up the side of the mountain in anything but a comfortable manner. ... I was too cold to sleep, so I sat by the fire and wrote in my journal. All of the boys were fast asleep except myself

and the sanctity of the day and hour made my thoughts run on those whom I loved at home ..."

Another soldier, this one serving as a drummer boy from Minnesota, wrote in his diary:

"December 25: Cold and windy. Snow still on the ground; but in the afternoon it warmed up and commenced to melt, and by night the ground was entirely clear of snow, leaving the ground very muddy. The camp was very quiet. The boys were standing in groups around the fire and discussing the menu of the Christmas dinner."

You can get in the holiday spirit and learn how Christmas was observed during the Civil War at Fort Ward Museum's annual Civil War Christmas in Camp program on December 9 from noon to 4 p.m.

This popular family-oriented event features a patriotic Civil War Santa Claus, reenactors in winter camp settings, and period decorations. The suggested donation is \$2 per person and \$5 for families. Fort Ward Museum & Historic Site is located at 4301 West Braddock Road. For more information about this program, please call 703-746-4848, or visit alexandria.gov/FortWard.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.