



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Christmas and the Civil War

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Image: "Christmas in Camp" by Thomas Nast for Harper's Weekly

Historians poem about Santa Claus as creating an American concept of the character based on the former bishop of Myra, in modern-day Turkey. But did you know that Moore's poem has strong ties to Union recruiting and supporters from the Civil War?

Indeed, the poem references many interpretations of Saint Nick by the political cartoonist Thomas Nast, famous for his work in Harper's Weekly. Perhaps best known for his depictions of "Boss Tweed" and Tammany Hall corruption in New York City, Nast was a strong believer in the cause of the Union and the abolition of slavery. He continued to call attention to racial injustice well after Appomattox.

Nast first drew Santa Claus for Harper's Weekly in the winter of 1862. The artist often depicted Santa Claus celebrating Christmas with Union soldiers, as seen in this image. President Lincoln would later designate Nast's depictions of the war, and his annual feature of Santa Claus "as the best recruiting sergeant the North ever had." Other details about Santa Claus were first publicized in Nast cartoons. For instance, Santa's residence at the North Pole was first introduced to readers in 1866. Later, the workshop and the naughty and nice list made appearances.

While Nast portrayed Christmas in camp in rather idyllic terms, the soldiers themselves reported different events. In a letter to family, one soldier from Connecticut 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





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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discussing the menu of the Christmas dinner.”

Whether or not you celebrate the holiday, our office hopes that you have the time to reflect on the ones you love, whether they are nearby or far away. May you spend Dec. 25 in much more pleasant conditions than our two authors.

*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*