

A History of Christmas in Alexandria

By the Office of Historic Alexandria
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While Christmas has been part of Alexandria's history since the beginning, did you know that our current traditions, including Santa Claus, were adapted more recently?

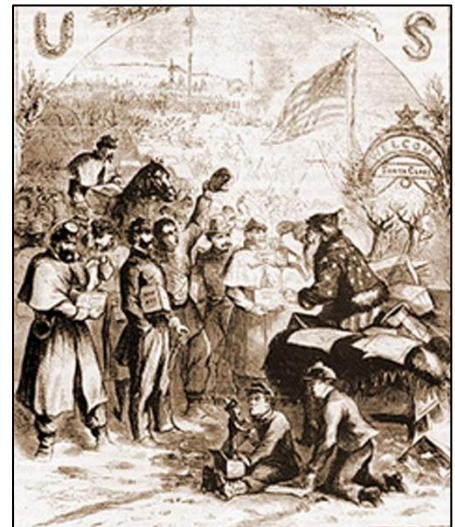
The Office of Historic Alexandria's 2020 holiday ornament commemorates the restoration of the 1858 Prettyman Fire Hose Reel.

Alexandria, VA – While Christmas has been part of Alexandria's history since the beginning, did you know that our current traditions, including Santa Claus, were adapted more recently?

The American concept of Santa Claus was popularized during the Civil War. Alexandria's merchants bought into the new tradition whole-heartedly, including organizing a Christmas Parade on King Street during the first half of the 20th century. During this most unusual of holiday seasons, we'd like to highlight some of the traditions that will continue this year and some that have been suspended.

In 1862, Harper's Weekly began depicting Santa Claus as a jolly man with a beard celebrating Christmas with Union soldiers.

Our common image of Santa Claus first made its appearance in the winter of 1862 of [Harper's Weekly](#). Thomas Nast, better known for his portrayal of the political machines of New York City, began depicting Santa Claus as a jolly man with a beard celebrating Christmas with Union soldiers. Nast later added details to the image, like Santa's residence at the North Pole and the Naughty and Nice List in later editions of Harper's.



This image of King Street dates to the 1960s when decorations were suspended across the 300 block of King Street.

In 1932, Alexandria's merchants, obviously with some element of self-interest, organized an evening parade that started on Fayette Street and proceeded down King Street, and circled City Hall. The tradition included city officials reviewing children dressed in costumes, band performances, and Santa Clauses.



The end of World War II brought even grander decorations to our city, with “evergreen trees being decorated with lights and tinsel and attached to every light pole,” according to The Washington Post. In 1958, the mayor flipped a switch to reveal 12 blocks of holiday lights. That year’s festivities included performances by the [Alexandria Harmonizers](#) and the [Alexandria Citizens Band](#).

The city’s traditions changed after the completion of urban renewal, as the tree lighting ceremony was moved to the new Market Square, where it continues to this day. A new tradition started in 1996 when the [Office of Historic Alexandria](#) offered its first holiday ornament. Now an annual tradition, that first ornament depicted the weathervane at the top of [Friendship Firehouse Museum](#). Twenty-four years later, there is a certain symmetry, as the 2020 ornament commemorates the continuing restoration of the 1858 Prettyman Fire Hose Reel.

Commissioned and built in Alexandria, the Fire Hose Reel was named Virginia’s Top Endangered Artifact in 2018. Thanks to generous donations and the prize money from winning that contest, the hose reel is being restored to its original appearance, which includes a dark blue and gold paint job that predates the standard use of red to represent fire engines. The Prettyman Hose Reel includes two bells that were used to sound the alarm and to bring attention to the Friendship Fire Company during parades. You can view the 2020 ornament and previous editions at alexandriava.gov/shop.

Whether you can maintain your holiday traditions, or have to suspend them for this year, the Office of Historic Alexandria wishes you the best this season!