

Christmas History

The word 'Christmas' comes from Cristes maesse, an English phrase that means Mass of Christ.

Christmas History - an overview

The history of Christmas dates back over 4000 years. Many of our Christmas traditions were celebrated centuries before the Christ child was born. The 12 days of Christmas, the bright fires, the yule log, the giving of gifts, carnivals (parades) with floats, carolers who sing while going from house to house, the holiday feasts, and the church processions can all be traced back to the early Mesopotamians.

Many of these traditions began with the Mesopotamian celebration of New Years. The Mesopotamians believed in many gods, and as their chief god - Marduk. Each year as winter arrived it was believed that Marduk would do battle with the monsters of chaos. To assist Marduk in his struggle the Mesopotamians held a festival for the New Year. This was Zagmuk, the New Year's festival that lasted for 12 days. The Mesopotamian king would return to the temple of Marduk and swear his faithfulness to the god. The traditions called for the king to die at the end of the year and to return with Marduk to battle at his side. To spare their king, the Mesopotamians used the idea of a "mock" king. A criminal was chosen and dressed in royal clothes. He was given all the respect and privileges of a real king. At the end of the celebration the "mock" king was stripped of the royal clothes and slain, sparing the life of the real king.



The Persians and the Babylonians celebrated a similar festival called the Sacaea. Part of that celebration included the exchanging of places, the slaves would become the masters and the masters were to obey. Early Europeans believed in evil spirits, witches, ghosts and trolls. As the Winter Solstice approached, with its long cold nights and short days, many people feared the sun would not return. Special rituals and celebrations were held to welcome back the sun.

In Scandinavia during the winter months the sun would disappear for many days. After thirty-five days scouts would be sent to the mountain tops to look for the return of the sun. When the first light was seen the scouts would return with the good news. A great festival would be held, called the Yuletide, and a special feast would be served around a fire burning with the Yule log. Great bonfires would also be lit to celebrate the return of the sun. In some areas people would tie apples to branches of trees to remind themselves that spring and summer would return.

The ancient Greeks held a festival similar to that of the Zagmuk/Sacaea festivals to assist their god Kronos who would battle the god Zeus and his Titans.

The Roman's celebrated their god Saturn. Their festival was called Saturnalia which began the middle of December and ended January 1st. With cries of "Jo Saturnalia!" the celebration would include masquerades in the streets, big festive meals, visiting friends, and the exchange of good-luck gifts called Strenae (lucky fruits). The Romans decked their halls with garlands of laurel and green trees lit with candles. Again the masters and slaves would exchange places.

"Jo Saturnalia!" was a fun and festive time for the Romans, but the Christians though it an abomination to honor the pagan god. The early Christians wanted to keep the birthday of their Christ child a solemn and religious holiday, not one of cheer and merriment as was the pagan Saturnalia. But as Christianity spread they were alarmed by the continuing celebration of pagan customs and Saturnalia among their converts. At first the Church forbade this kind of celebration. But it was to no avail. Eventually it was decided that the celebration would be tamed and made into a celebration fit for the Christian Son of God.

Some legends claim that the Christian "Christmas" celebration was invented to compete against the pagan celebrations of December. The 25th was not only sacred to the Romans but also the Persians whose religion Mithraism was one of Christianity's main rivals at that time. The Church eventually was successful in taking the merriment, lights, and gifts from the Saturnalia festival and bringing them to the celebration of Christmas.

The exact day of the Christ child's birth has never been pinpointed. Traditions say that it has been celebrated since the year 98 AD. In 137 AD the Bishop of Rome ordered the birthday of the Christ Child celebrated as a solemn feast. In 350 AD another Bishop of Rome, Julius I, choose December 25th as the observance of Christmas.

In the late 300's, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. By 1100, Christmas had become the most

important religious festival in Europe, and Saint Nicholas was a symbol of gift giving in many European countries. During the 1400's and 1500's, many artists painted scenes of the Nativity, the birth of Jesus. An example of these works appears in the Jesus Christ article in the print version of The World Book Encyclopedia.

The popularity of Christmas grew until the Reformation, a religious movement of the 1500's. This movement gave birth to Protestantism. During the Reformation, many Christians began to consider Christmas a pagan celebration because it included nonreligious customs. During the 1600's, because of these feelings, Christmas was outlawed in England and in parts of the English colonies in America. The old customs of feasting and decorating, however, soon reappeared and blended with the more Christian aspects of the celebration.

In the early 17th century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas. By popular demand, Charles II was restored to the throne and, with him, came the return of the popular holiday.



The pilgrims, English separatists that came to America in 1620, were even more orthodox in their Puritan beliefs than Cromwell. As a result, Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was actually outlawed in Boston. Anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. By contrast, in the Jamestown settlement, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all and passed without incident.



After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor, including Christmas. In fact, Congress was in session on December 25, 1789, the first Christmas under America's new constitution. Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.

It wasn't until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. Americans re-invented Christmas, and changed it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia. But what about the 1800s peaked American interest in the holiday?

The early 19th century was a period of class conflict and turmoil. During this time, unemployment was high and gang rioting by the disenfranchised classes often occurred during the Christmas season. In 1828, the New York city council instituted the city's first police force in response to a Christmas riot. This catalyzed certain members of the upper classes to begin to change the way Christmas was celebrated in America.

In 1819, best-selling author Washington Irving wrote *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, gent.*, a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. The sketches feature a squire who invited the peasants into his home for the holiday. In contrast to the problems faced in American society, the two groups mingled effortlessly. In Irving's mind, Christmas should be a peaceful, warm-hearted holiday bringing groups together across lines of wealth or social status.

Irving's fictitious celebrants enjoyed "ancient customs," including the crowning of a Lord of Misrule. Irving's book, however, was not based on any holiday celebration he had attended—in fact, many historians say that Irving's account actually "invented" tradition by implying that it described the true customs of the season.

Before the Civil War the North and South were divided on the issue of Christmas, as well as on the question of slavery. Many Northerners saw sin in the celebration of Christmas; to these people the celebration of Thanksgiving was more appropriate. But in the South, Christmas was an important part of the social season. Not surprisingly, the first three states to make Christmas a legal holiday were in the South: Alabama in 1836, Louisiana and Arkansas in 1838.

In the years after the Civil War, Christmas traditions spread across the country. Children's books played an important role in spreading the customs of celebrating Christmas, especially the tradition of trimmed trees and gifts delivered by Santa Claus. Sunday school classes encouraged the celebration of Christmas. Women's magazines were also very important in suggesting ways to decorate for the holidays, as well as how to make these decorations.



By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, America eagerly decorated trees, caroled, baked, and shopped for the Christmas season. Since that time, materialism, media, advertising, and mass marketing has made Christmas what it is today. The traditions that we enjoy at Christmas today were invented by blending together customs from many different countries into what is considered by many to be our national holiday.

