

A History of Christmas

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TOP: Kindergarten children wearing Santa Claus costumes listen to a priest (not pictured) explain the history of the Christmas holiday at a Catholic church in Hanoi, Vietnam, December 19, 2013. Photo: AFP/Getty. SECOND: Painting entitled 'Saturnalia' (1783) by Antoine Callet, showing the festival of joy celebrated in December in Ancient Rome. BOTTOM: The three wise men greet the baby Jesus.

Christmas is a church holiday and a worldwide marvel. For 2,000 years, people around the world have been observing it with many customs.

Christians celebrate Christmas Day as the birthday of Jesus.

Popular customs include exchanging gifts and decorating Christmas trees. People also attend church, share meals with family and friends, and wait for Santa Claus to arrive. Christmas Day has been a national holiday in the United States since 1870.

An ancient holiday

The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Centuries before Jesus, Europeans celebrated light in the darkest days of winter. Many people rejoiced during the winter solstice. It is the longest night of the year, but it marks the beginning of more hours of sunlight.

In Scandinavia, the Norse celebrated Yule from December 21, the winter solstice, through January. To mark the return of the sun, people would burn large logs. They would feast until the log burned out, which could take as many as 12 days.

The end of December was a perfect time for celebration in most areas of Europe. At that time of year, most cattle were killed so they would not have to be fed during the winter. For many people, it was the only time they had a supply of fresh meat.

Saturnalia

In Rome, where winters were not as bad as those in the north, Saturnalia was celebrated. It was a holiday to honor Saturn, the god of agriculture.



Going on for a month, Saturnalia was a time of plenty of food and drink, and the Roman social order was turned upside down. Slaves would become masters. Poor workers were in command of the city. Businesses and schools closed so that everyone could join in the fun.

Romans also observed Juvenalia, a feast honoring the children of Rome. In addition, rich Romans often celebrated the birthday of the god Mithra on December 25.

In the early years of Christianity, Easter was the main holiday. The birth of Jesus was not celebrated. In the 300s, Catholic Church officials decided to make the birth of Jesus a holiday. The Bible does not mention a date for his birth. Pope Julius I chose December 25.

It is believed that the church chose this date to absorb the customs of the Saturnalia festival. Christmas celebrations continued to spread. Today, in some Greek and Russian churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25th. This is the day it is believed that the three wise men found Jesus in the manger.



By holding Christmas at the same time as winter festivals, church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popular. However, they gave up the ability to say how it was celebrated. On Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated in a party-like way.

An outlaw Christmas

In the early 1600s, changes in church affected the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When the Puritans took over England in 1645, they wanted simpler ways and canceled Christmas. By popular demand, King Charles II was restored to the throne. Then, he brought back Christmas.

The pilgrims who came to America in 1620 were firm in their Puritan ways, so Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was outlawed in Boston, Massachusetts. Anyone showing Christmas spirit paid a fine. However, in the Jamestown settlement of Virginia, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all.

After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor, including Christmas.

Irving reinvents Christmas

The early 1800s was a time of trouble. Jobs were few, and fighting by poor people often occurred during the Christmas season.

In 1819, Washington Irving wrote "The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.," a series of stories. The stories show a rich man who invited poor workers into his home for Christmas. Irving thought Christmas should be a peaceful holiday bringing groups together.

"A Christmas Carol"

Also around this time, English author Charles Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol." The story's message about kindness toward all got attention in the United States and England. It showed the benefits of celebrating the holiday.

As Americans began to enjoy Christmas as a family holiday, old customs were uncovered. Celebrations included parts of other customs. People decorated trees, sent holiday cards and gave gifts.

Quiz

- 1 Based on the article, which statement is TRUE?
- (A) Saturnalia was a holiday that honored Jesus.
 - (B) Washington Irving is the author of a book about different holidays.
 - (C) Christmas is celebrated by people around the world.
 - (D) Christians used to celebrate Christmas before Jesus was born.
- 2 Which sentence from the section "Saturnalia" supports the idea that different groups of people celebrate Christmas on different days?
- (A) In addition, rich Romans often celebrated the birthday of the god Mithra on December 25.
 - (B) In the 300s, Catholic Church officials decided to make the birth of Jesus a holiday.
 - (C) Today, in some Greek and Russian churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25th.
 - (D) On Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated in a party-like way.
- 3 What is the overall structure of the article?
- (A) cause and effect
 - (B) compare and contrast
 - (C) order of importance
 - (D) order of chronology
- 4 What is the connection between the introduction [paragraphs 1-3] and the last paragraph of the article?
- (A) The introduction explains why people celebrate Christmas and the last paragraph describes when people celebrate Christmas.
 - (B) They both describe some examples of Christmas customs.
 - (C) The introduction describes some Christmas customs and the last paragraph describes the effects of those customs.
 - (D) They both explain how Christmas first became a family holiday.