



Cartoonist Thomas Nast first drew Santa Claus in January 1863, for *Harper's Weekly*. (Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1929, via Metropolitan Museum of Art under CC 1.0)

A Civil War Cartoonist Created the Modern Image of Santa Claus as Union Propaganda

Thomas Nast is legendary for his political cartoons, but he's also responsible for the jolly St. Nick we know today

By Lorraine Boissoneault
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You could call it the face that launched a thousand Christmas letters. Appearing on January 3, 1863, in the illustrated magazine *Harper's Weekly*, two images cemented the nation's obsession with a jolly old elf. The first drawing shows Santa distributing presents in a Union Army camp. Lest any reader question Santa's allegiance in the Civil War, he wears a jacket patterned with stars and pants colored in stripes. In his hands, he holds a puppet toy with a rope around its neck, its features like those of Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

A second illustration features Santa in his sleigh, then going down a chimney, all in the periphery. At the center, divided into separate circles, are a woman praying on her knees and a soldier leaning against a tree. "In these two drawings, Christmas became a Union holiday and Santa a Union local deity," writes Adam Gopnik in a 1997 issue of the *New Yorker*. "It gave Christmas to the North—gave to the Union cause an aura of domestic sentiment, and even sentimentality."

The artist responsible for this coup? A Bavarian immigrant named Thomas Nast, political cartoonist extraordinaire and the person who "did as much as any one man to preserve the Union and bring the war to an end," according to General Ulysses Grant. But like so many inventors, Nast benefitted from the work of his fellow visionaries in creating the rotund, resplendent figure of Santa Claus. He was a man with the right talents in the right place at the perfect time.

Prior to the early 1800s, Christmas was a religious holiday, plain and simple. Several forces in conjunction transformed it into the commercial fête that we celebrate today. The wealth generated by the Industrial Revolution created a middle class that could afford to buy presents, and factories meant mass-produced goods. Examples of the holiday began to appear in popular literature, from Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (more commonly known by its first verse, "Twas the night before Christmas") to Charles Dickens' book *A Christmas Carol*, published in 1843. By the mid-1800s, Christmas began to look much more as it does today. "From a season of misrule characterized by drink, of the inversion of social roles in which working men taunted their social superiors, and of a powerful sense of God's judgment, the holiday had

been transformed into a private moment devoted to the heart and home, and particularly to children,” writes Fiona Halloran in *Thomas Nast: The Father of Modern Political Cartoons*.

This was as true in the United States as it was in England, even with the Civil War raging. Children received homemade gifts due to the scarcity of materials, Union and Confederate soldiers swapped coffee and newspapers on the frontlines, and some did their best to decorate the camp. “In order to make it look as much like Christmas as possible, a small tree was stuck up in front of our tent, decked with hard tack and pork, in lieu of cakes and oranges, etc,” wrote New Jersey Union soldier Alfred Bellard.



The second of Nast's Christmas illustrations from January 1863. (Thomas Nast)

It was into this world that the talented artist Thomas Nast arrived in the 1850s. Doing his first sketches as a teenager, he became a staff illustrator for *Harper's Weekly*, one of the most popular magazines of the day, in 1862. As Halloran notes, *Harper's Weekly* wasn't just for serious subjects: “It provided political news and commentary on national and international events, but it also offered readers sentimental fiction, humor and cultural news.” What better place for Nast to bring his meticulously detailed image of Santa to life? And so, beginning with the January 1863 drawings, Nast began to

immortalize the mythic figure of Santa Claus.

In addition to repurposing the imagery of the Moore poem—reindeer pulling a sleigh, sack full of presents—Nast also found inspiration in his surroundings. He based Santa's bearded visage and round belly partially on himself and used his wife and children for other characters, says Ryan Hyman, a curator at the Macculloch Hall Historical Museum. Located in Nast's hometown of Morristown, New Jersey, the museum holds a large collection of his work. “The outside pictures that show rooftops and church spires were all here in Morristown,” Hyman adds.

Though they varied from year to year, Nast's Santa drawings appeared in *Harper's Weekly* until 1886, amounting to 33 illustrations in total. Unsurprisingly, the drawings from the Civil War often fell solidly in the realm of propaganda; Nast staunchly supported abolition, civil rights and the Republicans. But even after the war ended, Nast continued to use Santa Claus to make certain pointed political statements.



The "Merry Old Santa Claus" portrait is famous today for cementing Santa's image, but was actually another form of propaganda. (Thomas Nast via Wikimedia Commons)

Take the 1881 image known as “Merry Old Santa Claus,” probably Nast’s most famous portrait of the Christmas deity. To the casual observer, it looks like Santa, with his bag of toys, wearing his characteristic red suit. But actually, Hyman says, it’s more propaganda, this time related to the government’s indecisiveness over paying higher wages to members of the military. “On his back isn’t a sack full of toys—it’s actually an army backpack from enlisted men.” He’s holding a dress sword and belt buckle to represent the Army, whereas the toy horse is a callback to the Trojan horse, symbolizing the treachery of the government. A pocket watch showing a time of ten ’til midnight indicates the United States Senate has little time left to give fair wages to the men of the Army and Navy.

“Nast was always pro-military,” Hyman says. “The military was up for getting a raise and he knew how hard they worked and how they helped shape the country.”

Even though people may know that Nast gave us the donkey for the Democrats and the elephant for Republicans, and that he took on corrupt New York City politicians, few may realize the role he played in creating Christmas. Hyman and his colleagues hope they can change that, in part through their annual Christmas showcase of Nast’s work. “He created the modern image of Santa Claus,” Hyman says—though we don’t tend to think about Civil War propaganda when we’re opening presents today.

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Civil War News

Virtual Reality Lets Users Experience Civil War Combat Like Never Before

The American Battlefield Trust’s new series, *Civil War 1864: A Virtual Reality Experience*, uses immersive storytelling and multisensory techniques to bring the past to life

Mary Koik, **November 26, 2019**

(Washington, D.C.) — Experience Civil War combat like never before with the American Battlefield Trust’s new four-part series *Civil War 1864: A Virtual Reality Experience*. This immersive storytelling approach will put you back in time as you navigate in 360 degrees how it may have looked, felt and sounded to be a Civil War soldier. Viewable in a variety of formats — from desktop computer to mobile device to virtual reality headset — these short films take you inside a Confederate sniper’s lair, into a Union defensive position, along on a reconnaissance patrol and inside a Union field hospital.

“We constantly strive to bring people closer to historical events in hopes that they can better understand or even feel them” said Garry Adelman, the Trust’s chief historian. “The immersive nature of virtual reality can help us approximate the personal experience of Civil War soldiers like nothing else has before.”

The American Battlefield Trust, the nation’s premier heritage land preservation organization, has long worked to educate people to open windows of understanding into the past and providing potentially transformative experiences. The Trust decided to pursue a VR experience because of its unprecedented ability to put the viewer into a scenario. In each video, the action takes place in 360° surrounding the viewer with action, along with sound alerts to indicate where significant action occurs, or pop-up facts appear. Those using a virtual reality headset or cardboard viewer can take best advantage of its directional sound, while mobile devices enable users to pinch-and-zoom for a closer look at specific details.

To employ the emerging technology of virtual reality, the Trust looked to its longtime partners at Wide Awake Films, a Kansas City, Mo.–based creative media group focused on innovative, efficient execution of historical, commercial and corporate films.

“Our goal was to produce shorts that approximated everyday life for Civil War soldiers and civilians,” said the company’s founder Shane Seley. “It is one thing to read about the terror of battle or the drudgery of camp life, but a very different thing to live through it. We wanted to offer a real glimpse into the past that can’t be captured in books or standard documentaries.”

As such, authenticity was paramount. Wide Awake used professional actors and created exacting sets — including digging trenches, on a Kansas City–area farm. For even greater authenticity, the Trust enlisted digital animator Robert Cloutier to perform additional 360 animation, like flying cannonballs.

The results of this effort speak for themselves: *Civil War 1864: A Virtual Reality Experience*, a culmination of all four parts of the story into one, has already become the most popular video ever produced by the Trust, garnering more than 300,000 views in its first two weeks.

Viewers immediately responded to the innovative point-of-view experience, with one noting, “this brings home some of the hard reality that doesn’t always come through when reading books or visiting a battlefield on a sunny summer afternoon... For the soldiers, it wasn't about generals and flags and where this or that regiment stood. It was killing and death. They were trapped in a dirty, brutal horror story come to life.”

“This whole project is absolutely unrivaled in terms of realism by anything,” wrote one YouTube reviewer. “What a life-changing experience, the Civil War was instantly redefined for me as soon as this was over.” Another was even more succinct: “You’ve just revolutionized history storytelling.”

The Trust is no stranger to the history education sphere. Previous successful avenues have included battlefield tours and events, on-site interpretation, 3D photography and articles published online and in its award-winning magazine, *Hallowed Ground*. Other video formats produced by the Trust include [Battlefield U](#), which tackles commonly asked questions with lightning-strike answers suitable for all

audiences, In4, which offers deeper context on a specific topic, Your State, which traces local connections throughout the broader course of history, and Animated Maps, which provide unparalleled perspectives on individual battles or campaigns — plus long-form videos covering the entire Revolutionary War and Civil War.

Learn more about *Civil War 1864: A Virtual Reality Experience* at www.battlefields.org/virtualreality, or explore the Trust's entire collection — more than 500 videos in all — on its YouTube channel.

The American Battlefield Trust is dedicated to preserving America's hallowed battlegrounds and educating the public about what happened there and why it matters today. To date, the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has protected more than 51,000 acres of battlefield land associated with the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Civil War. Learn more at www.battlefields.org.

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Selective demolition of modern additions at historic Warfield house to begin December 2



Selective demolition of modern additions at historic Warfield house to begin December 2.

NPS Photo

National Park Service November 21, 2019

Contact: [Jason Martz](#),

Gettysburg, PA - Selective demolition work will begin on Monday, December 2 at the historic Warfield house near the intersection of Millerstown Road and West Confederate Avenue. Contractors plan to be on site for about three weeks to complete the first stage of demolition that will include removing the modern 2nd and 3rd floors and the breezeway between the house and garage. A temporary exclusion fence will be erected while work is underway in order to secure the area. Additional demolition work will be completed in the spring. No road closures are expected on Millerstown Road but there may be unexpected intermittent delays.

During the Battle of Gettysburg in July, 1863 the small 1 ½ story tall, two-room stone farmhouse belonged to James Warfield, his wife Eliza, and their family. Purchased within a year of the battle, Warfield operated a successful blacksmith shop in Adams County. The Warfields were members of Gettysburg's African American community. As the Confederate Army approached, they fled, fearful of capture. Confederate troops occupied the Warfield property on the afternoon of July 2, 1863, and launched attacks against Union troops occupying the nearby Sherfy Peach orchard. The Warfield family returned to find their property damaged and their belongings taken by the two armies—James Warfield calculated his losses at \$516.

National Park Service preservationists are at work restoring the James Warfield

home. Subsequent owners of the house made changes and additions to its size and footprint. Luckily, physical evidence of the many modifications to the house are visible to trained Park Service staff, and will allow preservation experts to stabilize and restore the home to its 1863 appearance. Restoration work will include re-establishing the original roofline and roof height; stabilizing and reconstructing sections of masonry walls; and recreating missing window and door components.

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CIVIL WAR LETTERS OF TILLMAN VALENTINE

Letters from Tillman Valentine to Annie Elizabeth Valentine

Morises island south Carolina

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December the 26 1863

my dear wife

i am very glad and thankful to god that i enjoy this oportunity of wrighting to you to let you know that i am very well and and i hope these few lians [lines] may fi nd you the same i hope clara is better by this time you must not let her go out of dorse untill she is purfectly well i received your letter and it give me joy to think you are in good sparets [spirits] and more over that you have plenty to eate for sum times when i am away out on picket the furthest post out and the rebels is not far frum me i look up at the stars and ask god to bless you and take care of you i do not walk a poste but i am sirgent

of the gard and have to go at the hed of my men or be called a coward so i will not give them a chance to call me that for in the grates [greatest] of danger i walk bold ly [boldly] at the hed of my men knowing that god is able and willen to to ancer [answer] my prayers which is for him to spear [spare] me to see my famly agane so my dear wife you must keepe in good sparets for the war will be over soon i think for the rebes is disurting every day and a coming over to our people yester day christmus morning there was a raped [rapid] fi ring aboute 10 miles from us and it is reported that the rebels was after four hundred prisners that got away frum them that morning and come to us but we cante tell how true it is yet but we hope it is so i want to see you and the little ones so bad that i donte know to wate little [illegible word] o may must kiss oh ho kiss & kiss little girl well you must give my love to father and mother and mary ann and joseph and tell them that nelson is well and is big as vince anderson and he wears a greate tall hat that sum of the soldiers give him and is hard and hearty as a stone and a good soldier he never was in the gard house but once and that was for going to fi ght with a felow that throwed a bay net [bayonet] at him he run and nelce [nelson] after him and i lafed [laughed] at nelce for his eyes was so big the felow run in to the captins tent and nelce in after him the lieutenant cot [caught] them and put them in the garde house for a little time and took nelson out and kept the other one in a good while john barnes is funey as ever his legs is [illegible word] as thick as ides [?] and he wears 3 shirts and 2 coats with out his overcote well lizy would you like to see me i am as purty [pretty] as ever and way [weigh] just as much as i ever did i would like to see you and kiss you tell saley ritchson that hir [her] brother is here and well and i will tell him to wright to hir we canot tell how soon we will get payed off but we think it will come on next month our

ful pay and then i will sende you sum money
are you a going to sende me that poetry
[poetry] soon i want to see it i would like to
see elijah does he talk about me and laff as
much as ever well the lord knowes what is
best but i think i will get saftely back they
say ann mareah Elbert has a little one and
tanson johnson33 to is it so dear wife i must
close i think mebey [maybe] i will [get] to
[come] home on furlow sum time next
sumer if i live the wether is very colde here
know [now] we had all Christmust for a
holaw day [holiday] we played ball and run
races and whealed wheal barows blinde
folded and had a heepe of fun to it is a quear
[queer] place here the water is all a round us
and we can see the rebs at work i think
misses taylor is very clever to you and she is
a good friend tell john that he shant loose
nothing by what he does for you father does
not seam to be much of a friend to you does
he have you got that watch or the meet tell
joseph that i think a little harde of him not
wrighting to me for he can wright and i
think he might have you herde any thing of
milt litely [lately?] how is moth [mother?]
give my love to all the people and all of it
but a thimble full for yourself kiss the
children for me no more

god bless you all

your loving husband

Sirgen Tillman Valentine

keep your sparets up i think we will be hapy
sum day learn the children to read