

The Origins of North America's Santa Claus

Professor Stephen Nissenbaum, in his book *The Battle for Christmas*, contends that St. Nicholas/Santa Claus was not naturally imported to North America by Dutch immigrants, but rather deliberately established in the early 19th century by the elites of New York City.

- The Industrial Revolution completely changed the nature of work. In some causes employers expected labourers to work through Christmas season, while others laid-off workers during the winter months. The traditional time of feasting before a long period of being indoors had been disrupted.
 - The traditional festivities that were part of Old/Father ("misrule") Christmas became an outlet for the working class to "blow off steam" in the face of the inequities they were facing concerning the middle and higher classes.

In New York . . .

- Nissenbaum writes that " . . . by 1820 Christmas misrule had become such an acute social threat that respectable New Yorkers could no longer ignore it or take it lightly."

He goes on:

By the 1820s bands of roaming young street toughs, members of the emerging urban proletariat, were no longer restricting their seasonal reveling to their own neighbourhoods; they had begun to travel freely, and menacingly, wherever they pleased. Often carousing in disguise . . . these street gangs marauded through the city's wealthy neighbourhoods, especially on New Year's Eve, in the form of callithumpian¹ bands, which resemble (and may have overlapped with) the street gangs that were now vying for control of the city's poorer neighbourhoods.²

- Something was needed to keep these roving bands of people in line . . .

¹ In the 19th century, the noun "callithumpian" was used in the U.S. of boisterous roisterers who had their own makeshift New Year's parade. Their band instruments consisted of crude noisemakers such as pots, tin horns, and cowbells. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

² Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, (New York: Vintage, 1997), 54.

- New Yorker Washington Irving published the very popular *Knickerbocker's History of New York* in 1809. The book was a satirical allegory about life in 19th century New York but disguised as an authoritative history of the city when it was known as *New Amsterdam* during the time of Dutch colonial administration of the settlement. The book was published on St. Nicholas Day (December 6th) and mentioned the saint 25 times.³ **Irving's mention of the saint marks St. Nicholas' arrival, or rather reincarnation and repurposing, in North America.**⁴



Portrait of Washington Irving by John Wesley Jarvis, 1809.

- Washington Irving, and his social circle, were called *The Knickerbocker Set* by Nissenbaum. They were:
 - New York Elites
 - British heritage
 - High Episcopal (Anglican) Church
 - Wealthy
 - Politically conservative
 - Fearful of the working class and emerging middle class (lumping them together under the heading of *plebians*⁵).
- Irving's *New Amsterdam*, as depicted in *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, was a place of piety and whose population followed the customs of old Holland . . . including reverence to the settlement's patron saint: St. Nicholas.⁶

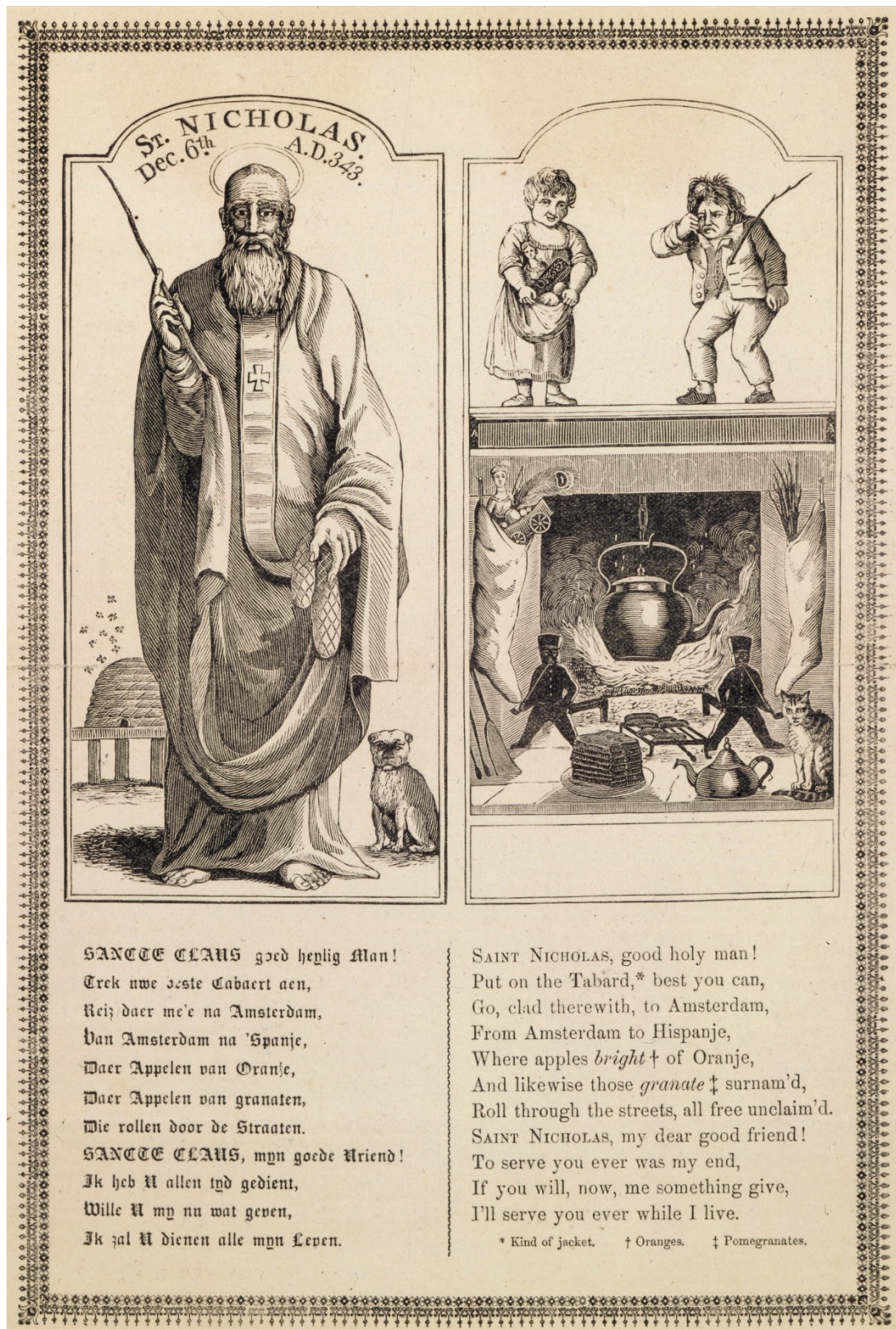
³ Nissenbaum, 64.

⁴ Washington Irving is also credited with establishing the popular narrative that persists today in the United States that Christopher Columbus was a brave explorer that "discovered" America. Irving's popular history of the 15th century seafarer ignored Columbus' incompetence as an explorer and his pivotal role in perpetrating a genocide on the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean lands.

⁵ Meaning "the common people."

⁶ Nissenbaum, 65.

- This image of St. Nicholas would soon be promoted by the elites of New York to those of the working and middle classes.



Print of St Nicholas by "Knickerbocker set" John Pintard (1810).

- Two weeks after John Pintard's image was unveiled, the following poem was published in a New York newspaper with the following conclusion:

*Then holy St. Nicholas! all the year,
Our books we will love and our parents revere,
From Naughty behaviour we'll always refrain,
In hopes that you'll come and reward us again.⁷*

What is happening here?

- *The Children's Friend* (1821) appeared in an illustrated book. What changes have occurred since 1809?

Old SANTECLAUS with much delight
His reindeer drives this frosty night,
O'er chimneytops, and tracks of snow,
To bring his yearly gifts to you.

The steady friend of virtuous youth,
The friend of duty, and of truth,
Each Christmas eve he joys to come
Where love and peace have made their home.

Through many houses he has been,
And various beds and stockings seen,
Some, white as snow, and neatly mended,
Others, that seem'd for pigs intended.

Where e'er I found good girls or boys,
That hated quarrels, strife and noise,
I left an apple, or a tart,
Or wooden gun, or painted cart;

To some I gave a pretty doll,
To some a peg-top, or a ball;
No crackers, cannons, squibs, or rockets,
To blow their eyes up, or their pockets.

No drums to stun their Mother's ear,
Nor swords to make their sisters fear;
But pretty books to store their mind.
With Knowledge of each various kind.

But where I found the children naughty,
In manners rude, in temper haughty,
Thankless to parents, liars, swearers,
Boxers, or cheats, or base tale-bearers,

I left a long, black, birchen rod,
Such, as the dread command of God
Directs a Parent's hand to use
When virtue's path his sons refuse.⁴⁶

⁷ Nissenbaum, 72.

- In 1822 Clement Clarke Moore (very much part of the “Knickerbocker set”) wrote the iconic *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (Troy [NY] Sentinel on December 23rd, 1823) which is credited with popularizing the image that was taking root in New York – here we find the foundations of the North American Santa Claus.

What observations can you make?

*'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds;
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,
Gave a lustre of midday to objects below,
When what to my wondering eyes did appear,
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny rein-deer,
With a little old driver so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment he must be St. Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:
"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now Prancer and Vixen!
On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Dunder and Blixem!
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"
As leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too—
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound*

*He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
 And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
 A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
 And he looked like a pedler just opening his pack.
 His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!
 His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
 His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
 And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow;
 The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
 And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath;
 He had a broad face and a little round belly
 That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.
 He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
 And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;
 A wink of his eye and a twist of his head
 Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;
 He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
 And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
 And laying his finger aside of his nose,
 And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;
 He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
 And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
 But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight—
 “Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”*



*The first illustration of St. Nicholas created for book-length publication of *A Visit from Nicholas* in 1848.*

What have the “Knickerbocker set” effectively used St. Nicholas/Santa Claus to do? What is their legacy?