



# The Signal Flag



## BRANDYWINE VALLEY CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

Campaign # 23

Skirmish # 4

December 2009

*From the Rear Ranks:*

### Christian Commission, United States

The United States Christian Commission was organized in New York City 14 November 1861 by the Young Men's Christian Association. The idea was suggested by Vincent Colyer, an influential artist who would become president of the YMCA.

As it expanded throughout the North in the early war years, the commission worked in conjunction with the U.S. Sanitary Commission for the relief of soldiers at the front. Free box lunches and coffee wagons were sent to compete with SUTLERS selling whiskey, and special diet kitchens were provided for the sick and wounded. Ladies affiliated with the commission volunteered their nursing skills in hospitals.

Its members felt it their duty to provide more than physical comforts; consequently, they attempted to uplift soldiers' moral and religious spirit. In the more permanent camps, reading rooms were established and stocked with Bibles, magazines, and newspapers from home. The commission encouraged men to write to their families and provided free writing material and stamps.

The government was grateful for all the benefits provided by the Christian Commission and estimated that over \$6 million was raised and spent for soldiers' aid. The commission held its final meeting 11 February 1866.

Source: Faust, Patricia L. "Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War", 1986, page 140.

I remain your most obedient servant,  
Robert Paul Sprague



Artist Winslow Homer depicts soldiers' joy at receiving holiday boxes from home in this 1861 Harper's Weekly illustration.



By Christmas, 1862, Thomas Nast had allied Santa Claus with the Union Army. From Harper's Weekly, January 3, 1863.



~ Officers ~

**President:** John Walls  
**Vice President:** Chip Crowe  
**Secretary:** Ted Pawlik  
**Treasurer:** Dave Walter

~ Committee Members ~

**Preservation:** Bob Sprague, John Walls

**Nominating Committee:**

Vince Carosella

**Speakers:** Roger Arthur

**Trips:** Greg Buss

**Credentials:** Vacant

**Greeter:**

**Publicity:** Bill Stiman

**Historians:** Bill Sitman and Bob Sprague

**Social Dir:** Flo Williams

~Members at Large ~

David Hoffritz, James Lawler, Lynne Fulton

~ Official Sutler ~

Bob Sprague: Books / Periodicals  
610-644-0353

~ Annual Membership ~

Individual \$25.00; Family \$40.00; Student \$15.00  
(Full time student up to age 23)

? Questions ? Contact:

John Walls  
1109 Debra's Way,  
West Chester, Pa 19382  
610-692-0435

[JohnFWalls@verizon.com](mailto:JohnFWalls@verizon.com)

**BVCWRT Web Site:**

<http://bvcwrt.home.comcast.net>

**Webmaster:** Jim Lawler

[dtownjim@comcast.net](mailto:dtownjim@comcast.net)

**Signal Flag Editor:**

Lynne Fulton  
610-647-1039

[mailto:fultonlm1949@aol.com](mailto:mailto:fultonlm1949@aol.com)

Unsolicited articles from our members are welcome.  
Please contact Lynne!

*\*We are wheelchair assessable*



### What is the BVCWRT all about???

We were founded in 1987. According to our by-laws, "the purpose of the Brandywine Valley Civil War Round Table shall be to provide a congenial medium through which persons having a common interest in the events of the American Civil War - its causes and effects, engagements, personages, units, armaments and other things pertaining thereto - may satisfy their interest and broaden individual knowledge through discussion, lectures, field trips and the exchange of books, paper and other data. The purposed is also to consider the preservation and protection of the battlefields, sites, landmarks, relics and collection of the period."

In plain English, we are an organization of diverse people brought together by our common interest in the American Civil War. This interest can range from the casual to the obsessive. We intend to tailor our activities and presentations to appeal to all our members, novice or expert.

### Welcome New Members & Reenlistments

The Round Table welcomes our new members since our last meeting. Please welcome them and share your Civil War enthusiasm.

### New Members:

*Barbara Pratt and all those that have re-newed.*





*Brandywine Valley Civil War Round Table*  
*Come to our next meeting*  
*December 2, 2009*



**Speaker:** No speaker this month  
**Topic:** "Old Fashion Round Table Discussion and Christmas Social"  
**Time:** 7:00 PM  
**Place:** West Chester Borough Hall, Gay Street

**Questions for our Round Table Discussion**

1. What did the war accomplish? What could have been done that was not done? What was done that should not have been done?
2. If all was clearly lost by the end of September 1864 or finally after Lincoln's reelection, why did the Rebels not husband their blood and treasure and continue the fight?
3. In his book *The Age of Lincoln*, historian Orville Vernon Burton suggests that the war cost America over 6 Billions of dollars. If the value of the slaves in 1860 was somewhere less than \$4,000,000,000 and the loss of manpower in killed, wounded and maimed for life somewhere over 3,000,000, would the country have been better off to buy the slaves at market price and then "reconstruct" the South without the peculiar institution? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. The American Civil War – Factors having the most influence on the outcome of a battle include: Pick any battle and choice the the order from 1 to 5 the factors having the most (#1) influence on the outcome of your battle. Be ready to explain your choices by citing specific examples.

topography - mobility – leadership – equipment -experience

TOPOGRAPHY: refers to terrain, the presence of hills, valleys, woods, rock formations...the lay of the land; it may include farms, homes, streams, fences, etc.; the physical features of a place or a region.

LEADERSHIP: refers to how much of a risk taker is the officer(s), what kind of a role model, does the officer in command have a bearing or presence and/or ability to instill confidence in his men; can OR is the commander able to make good decisions under intense pressure.

MOBILITY: refers to what kind of communications are available between units of the army; can they move quickly and change positions on the field.

EQUIPMENT: refers to what maintains an army in the field or on the march/campaign; rifles, artillery, and ammunition, clothing including shoes, medical supplies, food, horses, mules, beef, engineering.

EXPERIENCE: refers to previous battles fought by the men, their length of time in the field or service; have they seen the frightening horror that you would see on a battlefield: dead, serious injuries, friends being shot, smoke and sound, command structure and company formations.

*Editor's Note:*

**Membership Dues** – it is that time of the year again when memberships are due so if you want to continue receiving a newsletter you must have your dues in before January 2010. Please remember to bring you membership application and check for your dues and give to Dave Walter, our Treasurer at our December's meeting.

**Christmas Social** – Please joins us at our Christmas Social after our December meeting. There will be refreshments and time for members to chat and get to know each other. This year's social will be headed by Flo Williams, if you would like to contribute to the social please contact Flo at email [flokhwms@verizon.net](mailto:flokhwms@verizon.net) .

*We wish all of our membership a Wonderful Holiday Season and Happy New Year.*

**Minutes of the November 4, 2009 Meeting**  
**BVCWRT**

**Presiding: Chip Crowe**

**Treasurer's Report (Dave Walter):**

- The bank balance as of October 1, 2009 was \$2875.03. Expenses for the month of October were \$413.56. This included a \$400 donation to the Civil War Preservation Trust to save the Third Winchester Battlefield. Receipts for the month of October were \$464.00. The bank balance as of November 1, 2009 was \$2925.47.
- To date, there are 68 members who have paid their dues.

**Field Trip (Greg Buss)**

- Greg reminded the members of the field trip to 2<sup>nd</sup> Manassas on April 10, 2010. The bus will leave the West Chester Municipal Building at 6:15 PM. The cost will be \$50.00 per person. Checks are to made payable to the BVCWRT and can be sent to:  
Gregory R. Buss, 502 Langford Drive, Downingtown, PA 19335
- There are 45 spaces on the bus and it will be first come – first served.

**Chip Crowe** made a motion to contribute \$500 to the Civil War Preservation Trust for their efforts with the Chancellorsville and Wilderness Battlefields. The motion was seconded and passed by the members present.

**Bob Sprague** advised the members of the receipt of a letter from the Civil War Preservation Trust thanking the BVCWRT for the contribution for the Third Winchester Battlefield.

**Flo Williams** is organizing the Christmas Social scheduled for the December 2, 2009 meeting. Anyone interested in volunteering to help may contact Flo by e-mail at [flokhwms@bee.net](mailto:flokhwms@bee.net).

**Bob Sprague** asked members to keep him updated on changes to e-mail addresses so that everyone can receive the round table newsletter and the round table telegram.

Speaker for the Evening: **Matthew Borowick – The Count Martial of Fitz John Po**

=====

**The Battle of Stones River - Christmas 1862 Style**

Peace on Earth - at least for a while. Perhaps the most memorable event of the battle took place one night after fighting had ended for the day. It was the holiday season and on both sides of the line, soldiers wished for home and were saddened by the holidays without their families. In order to keep up morale, a military band played for the soldier's entertainment. The battle lines were so close together that the sounds of the opposing army's music carried through the forest. As the night wore on, the troops battled each other in another way --- as one side played a rousing rendition of "Dixie," the other band would try to drown it out with the equally loud strains of "Yankee Doodle." Finally, one of the bands struck up the chords to the song "Home, Sweet, Home" and the rival band joined in. Soldiers on both sides began to sing the familiar words and, for one brief moment, the war was forgotten and the soldiers shared their mutual longings for the comforts of home. The spirit of Christmas drew them together and, for a brief few hours, the men were no longer "Rebels" and "Yankees," but comrades in arms who equally missed the warmth of hearth and home. Grown men wept and raised a toast across the battle lines to the men on the other side. Cheers resounded and northern and southern men greeted one another in good cheer, but it was not to last. When dawn came, the bloody fighting began once again.

see; <http://www.examiner.com/x-1001-Ghost-Hunting-Examiner~y2008m12d24-A-Civil-War-Christmas-story-from-Stones-River> From Temple Website

*Information taken from "We Were Marching on Christmas Day:  
A History and Chronicle of Christmas During the Civil War" by Kevin Rawlings.*

&  
*Information on The Story Behind: "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" the song playing in the  
Background*



## Christmas Hardships & Difficulties

Christmas was an especially difficult time for soldiers and the families they left at home. . On the home front, many women and children widened their responsibilities and suffered hardships caused by the absence of their Husbands, Fathers and Sons. It was not until Christmas 25 days afterwards (after the Battle of Franklin Nov. 30th 1864) that I was enabled to borrow a yoke of oxen, and spent the whole of that Christmas Day hauling seventeen dead horses from this yard. Moscow Carter "Carter House resided" - Speaking about Christmas Day 1864. The same year in Central Virginia, young William Nalle hurried to his grandmother's farm, which Union Cavalrymen were ransacking. Arriving, the boy witnessed "a spectacle I shall not shortly forget." All the stock and forage were snatched up by the Union troopers. Doors were ripped off during the greedy search for provisions and some of the troopers grabbed his grandmother's collar demanding money. Christmas had come to the barren Virginia countryside, one that young William and many others in the region would never forget.

Elisha Hunt Roads - "This is the birthday of our Savior, but we have paid very little attention to it in a religious way... It does not seem much like Sunday or Christmas, for the men are hauling logs to build huts. This is a work of necessity for the quarters we have been using are not warm enough. Most southern children endured meager living during the war, and Christmas only accentuated the hardship. 3yr old Robert Martin said he was "tired of the war" because Santa Clause forgot to come to the Shenandoah Valley". Many southern children were told that "Santa was a Yankee" so Confederate pickets would not let Santa through. By contrast though, many northern children still received gifts and treats because the northern economy actually flourished and expanded as the war dragged on.

One soldier described Christmas 1862 in the union Iron brigade.. " two men from company f provided a temporary diversion on Christmas Day. The two got into a fight that ended with one struck the other over the head with a musket bending the barrel so badly as to render it unserviceable.

### "Ought it not be a Merry Christmas?"



*Lonely camp scene from an 1862 Harper's Weekly entitled "Christmas Eve".*



Even with all the sorrow that hangs, and will forever hang, over so many households; even while war still rages; even while there are serious questions yet to be settled – ought it not to be, and is it not, a merry Christmas?" Harper's Weekly, December 26, 1863.

*Harper's Weekly depicts a family separated by war in its January 3, 1863 edition.*

### Introduction

For a nation torn by civil war, Christmas in the 1860s was observed with conflicting emotions. Nineteenth-century Americans embraced Christmas with all the Victorian trappings that had moved the holiday from the private and religious realm to a public celebration. Christmas cards were in vogue, carol singing was common in public venues, and greenery festooned communities north and south. Christmas trees stood in places of honor in many homes, and a mirthful poem about the jolly old elf who delivered toys to well-behaved children captivated Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

But Christmas also made the heartache for lost loved ones more acute. As the Civil War dragged on, deprivation replaced bounteous repasts and familiar faces were missing from the family dinner table. Soldiers used to "bringing in the tree" and caroling in church were instead scavenging for firewood and singing drinking songs around the campfire. And so the holiday celebration most associated with family and home was a contradiction. It was a joyful, sad, religious, boisterous, and subdued event.



## Before the war

*"The Christmas Tree" by F. A. Chapman.*

Many of the holiday customs we associate with Christmas today were familiar to 1840s celebrants. Christmas cards were popularized that decade and Christmas trees were a stylish addition to the parlor. By the 1850s, Americans were singing "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem," and "Away in a Manger" in public settings. In 1850 and 1860, Godey's Lady's Book featured Queen Victoria's tabletop Christmas tree, placed there by her German husband Prince Albert. Closer to home, in December, 1853, Robert E. Lee's daughter recorded in her diary that her father - then superintendent at West Point - possessed an evergreen tree decorated with dried and sugared fruit, popcorn, ribbon, spun glass ornaments, and silver foil.

Clement Clarke Moore, a religious scholar who for decades was too embarrassed to claim authorship of the 1822 poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas," was now well-known for his tribute to Santa Claus. "Santa Claus" made his first public appearance in a Philadelphia department store in 1849, marking the advent of holiday commercialism.

For enslaved African Americans, the Christmas season often meant a mighty bustle of cooking, housekeeping, and other chores. "Reward" for these efforts was a suspension of duties for a day or two and the opportunity for singing, dancing, and possible brief reunions with separated family members. Further gestures of "goodwill" by masters who saw themselves as benevolent owners were small and the semi-annual clothing allotment. By 1860, many worried about civil unrest, fearful this Christmas would be the last before the outbreak of war. An Arkansas diarist writes:

*"Christmas has come around in the circle of time, but is not a day of rejoicing. Some of the usual ceremonies are going on, but there is gloom on the thoughts and countenances of all the better portion of our people."*



**1861**

*Men of the 5th New Hampshire engaged in a hilarious greased pig chase as their Christmas entertainment. From Frank Leslie's Illustrated History of the Civil War.*

Events proceeded quickly in 1861, hastening war. Abraham Lincoln became the 16th president of the United States in March and the bombardment of Fort Sumter occurred in April. Southern states seceded and the Confederates claimed their first

major victory at the first battle of Manassas. For the shopkeeper or farm boy or student away from home for Christmas the first time, melancholy set in.

Robert Gould Shaw, then a 2nd lieutenant in the 2d Massachusetts Infantry, writes about guard duty near Frederick, MD. He would later earn fame as the commander of the heroic African American unit, the 54th Massachusetts.

*"It is Christmas morning and I hope a happy and merry one for you all, though it looks so stormy for our poor country, one can hardly be in merry humor."*

James Holloway, writing from Dranesville, VA tells his family that Christmas:

*"You have no idea how lonesome I feel this day. It's the first time in my life I'm away from loved ones at home."*

On the civilian front, Sallie Brock Putnam describes Christmas, 1861 in Richmond, VA.

*"Never before had so sad a Christmas dawned upon us. Our religious services were not remitted and the Christmas dinner was plenteous of old; but in nothing did it remind us of days gone by. We had neither the heart nor inclination to make the week merry with joyousness when such a sad calamity hovered over us."*

Yet Christmas 1861 also saw soldiers full of bravado, still relatively well fed and equipped, and eagerly anticipating Christmas boxes of treats from home. Often officers authorized extra rations of spirits and men engaged in greased pig-catching contests, footraces, jumping matches, and impromptu pageants dressed as women. Soldiers erected small evergreen trees strung with hardtack and pork. Some were excused from drills, although other references point to the need to haul logs and forage for firewood no matter what day of the year it was.

**1862** This sad year brought forth the war's impact full force with battles at Shiloh, Manassas, and Antietam, and campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley and the Peninsula. Many Fredericksburg, Virginia citizens were homeless or fled their town just prior to Christmas.

Harper's Weekly illustrator Thomas Nast, a staunch Unionist, is now depicting Santa Claus entertaining Federal soldiers by showing them Jefferson Davis with a cord around his neck. Abraham Lincoln would later refer to a politicized Santa as "the best recruiting sergeant the North ever had." More moderate illustrations show soldiers decorating camps with greens and firing salutes to Santa. Ironically, it was Nast who fixed Santa's home and toy workshop address at the "North Pole" "so no nation can claim him as their own."

John Haley of the 17th Maine, for instance, wrote the day before Christmas. "It is rumored that there are sundry boxes and mysterious parcels over at Stoneman's Station directed to us," Haley continued in his diary. "We retire to sleep with feelings akin to those of children expecting Santa Claus. We have become very childish in some matters--grub being one of them." On Christmas Day, Haley returned to his tent to endure a practical joke from his tentmate:

*On returning to camp, I was informed by my tentmate that there was no parcel at the station bearing my name. My mental thermometer not only plummeted to below zero, it got right down off the nail and lay on the floor. Seeing this, my tentmate made haste to dive under the bed and produce the box, which he had brought from the station during my absence, and in a few minutes we were discussing the merits of its contents. Most of the men have been remembered, and any that have not received something from home are allowed to share with their more fortunate neighbors.*

Officers of the 20th Tennessee gave their men a barrel of whisky to mark the day. "We had many a drunken fight and knock-down before the day closed," wrote one participant. But there were other more somber occurrences recorded for Christmas 1862. One account tells of soldiers being forced to witness an execution for desertion and another grim letter describes how men firing their weapons in a funeral salute were mistakenly punished for unauthorized holiday merrymaking.

Henry Kyd Douglas, formerly of Confederate Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's staff, was wounded in the Battle of Gettysburg and captured. Confined to Johnson's Island Prison, Ohio, as Christmas 1863 approached, Douglas received several boxes containing items to make his confinement more bearable. Again, a practical joke finds its way into the story:

*There came a carload of boxes for the prisoners about Christmas which after reasonable inspection, they were allowed to receive. My box contained more cause for merriment and speculation as to its contents than satisfaction. It had received rough treatment on its way, and a bottle of catsup had broken and its contents very generally distributed through the box. Mince pie and fruit cake saturated with tomato catsup was about as palatable as "embalmed beef" of the Cuban memory; but there were other things. Then, too, a friend had sent me in a package a bottle of old brandy. On Christmas morning I quietly called several comrades up to my bunk to taste the precious fluid of...DISAPPOINTMENT! The bottle had been opened outside, the brandy taken and replaced with water, adroitly recorded, and sent in. I hope the Yankee who played that practical joke lived to repent it and was shot before the war ended.*

Notable residents of Richmond, during the final Christmas of the war, momentarily threw off the dark veil of impending doom and put on a merry holiday face for a gathering of children at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. President Jefferson Davis himself hosted the party with his wife Varina, and their children. Alice West Allen, age 11, and her siblings, who had been sent to Richmond as Major General Philip Sheridan's men destroyed their native Shenandoah Valley, attended the event. She wrote that they had been invited to see "a Christmas tree given to President Davis' children."

*The tree was a lovely holly laden with homemade candles and dolls made out of hickory nuts and Canton flannel; then there were cotton and Canton flannel rabbits, dog and cats, and numerous other presents all homemade, as was everything on the supper table--home-made coffee, tea, sugar, and everything. I never saw anything that looked so pretty to me.*

Varina Davis committed her memories of the affair to paper three decades later. "When at last we reached the basement of St. Paul's Church," she wrote, "the tree burst upon their view like the realization of Aladdin's subterranean orchard, and they were awed by the grandeur." Her husband apparently even surrendered his normally prickly demeanor to the cheerful holiday spirit:

*The orphans sat mute with astonishment until the opening hymn and prayer and the last Amen had been said, and they at a signal warily and slowly gathered around the tree to receive from a lovely young girl their allotted present.*

*The President became so enthusiastic that he undertook to help in the distribution, but worked such wild confusion giving everything asked for into outstretched hands, that we called a halt, so he contented himself with unwinding one or two tots from a network of strung popcorn in which they had become entangled and taking off all the apples he could when unobserved, and presenting them to smaller children....*

Christmas Eve 1862 found Union Brigadier General John Geary in Fairfax Station, Virginia, nearing the end of his convalescence from a wound he had received at Cedar Mountain in August. He took some time to offer holiday and fatherly advice to his daughter at home in Pennsylvania:

*My Dear Little Pet, On this Christmas Eve I have no doubt you have been enjoying yourself, perhaps with the toys of the season, eaten your nuts and cakes, hung up your stockings in the chimney corner for old Kris Kinkle, when he comes along with his tiny horses, "Dunder and Blixen" and his little wagon to fill in Lots and Gobs of sweet things, sugar, candy sugar plums, and if you please, sugar every thing. Well, When I was a little boy, a good many years ago, I was fond of such things myself. And when I look back, they were indeed the happiest days of my life. Enjoy them my little "Pet"--they come but once. The boys, I mean the two Willies, are getting too old for the enjoyment you can have. When ignorance is bliss `tis folly to be wise. I wish you a Merry Christmas and many of them. I must close. There is a lot of soldiers at my door giving me a serenade and I must give it some attention. Your affectionate Papa*



*Children still found Christmas morning joyful in this 1864 Harper's Weekly edition. Note that the youngster on the right is equipped with sword, drum, kepi and a haversack with "U.S." prominently displayed.*

This year saw the battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg and the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. Thomas Nast portrayed Santa Claus in a patriotic uniform, distributing to Yankee soldiers to raise their morale. Southern parents were gently preparing their children that Santa Claus may not "make it through the blockade" to deliver presents this year. Harper's Weekly depicted a tender reunion scene of a soldier husband and father briefly reunited with his family during furlough.

Holiday boxes and barrels from home containing food, clothing and small articles of comfort were highly anticipated by soldier recipients. Depending on their duty assignment, Christmas dinner may have consisted of only crackers, hard tack, rice, beans and a casting of lots for a single piece of beef too small to divide. Those lucky enough to receive boxes from home could supplement a meager meal with turkey, oysters, potatoes, ham, cabbage, eggnog, cranberries and fruitcake.

One of the dreariest accounts of Christmas during the Civil War came from Lt. Col. Frederic Cavada, captured at Gettysburg and writing about Christmas 1863 in Libby Prison in Richmond:

*"The north wind comes reeling in fitful gushes through the iron bars, and jingles a sleighbell in the prisoner's ear, and puffs in his pale face with a breath suggestively odorous of eggnog."*

Cavada continued: *"Christmas Day! A day which was made for smiles, not sighs - for laughter, not tears - for the hearth, not prison."*

He described a makeshift dinner set on a tea towel-covered box. Each prisoner brought his own knife and fork and drank "Eau de James" (water from the nearby James River.) Cavada reported he combed his hair for the occasion and further related that the prisoners staged a "ball" with a "great deal of bad dancing" during which hats were crushed and trousers torn. Sentries called "lights out" at 9 p.m.

Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas of Augusta, Georgia, told how a simple act of faith on the part of her children caused her to dig deeper for a holiday offering on Christmas Eve:

I have written so much that it is now after 9 o'clock and yet I have said nothing of Turner's and Mary Bell's party which we gave them last week in lieu of the Santa Claus presents. Mary Bell has been told that Santa Claus has not been able to run the blockade and has gone to war--Yet at this late hour when I went upstairs Thursday night of the party I found that the trusting faith of childhood they had hung their little socks and stockings in case Santa Claus did come. I had given the subject no thought whatever but invoking Santa Claus aid I was enabled when their little eyes opened to enjoy their pleasure to find cake and money in their socks. Santa Claus apparently had a much easier time visiting homes in the North than those in the South that Christmas. According to a letter Sarah Thetford sent to her brother George, Santa arrived in



Michigan dressed in a buffalo coat "with presents fastened to his coat-tail...[and] a corn-popper on his back." She continued that she had "often heard Santa Claus described, but never before saw the old fellow in person."

The final wartime Christmas came as the Confederacy floundered, Lee's Army behind entrenchments in Petersburg and Richmond. Abraham Lincoln received a most unusual holiday - the city of Savannah, GA - presented by General William Tecumseh Sherman via telegram. Union and Confederate sympathizers were hoping this Christmas would be the last at conflict.

General William Tecumseh Sherman is host at a celebratory Christmas dinner in Savannah after presenting the captured city to President Lincoln as a holiday.

Johnny Green, of the 4th Kentucky's Orphan Brigade, expressed this sentiment:

"Peace on Earth, Good will to men should prevail. We certainly would preserve the peace if they would go home and let us alone..."

Green further reports he and his comrades received an unexpected and very welcome holiday:

"Our commissary sends word for each Orderly Sergeant to come to his wagon & he will issue one piece of soap to each man. This is indeed good news. Since the Skirmish began at Stockbridge Nov 15 we have not had a chance to wash any more than our faces occasional & never our feet or bodies until now...."

Holiday season charity was not forgotten this year. On Christmas Day, 90 Michigan men and their captain loaded up wagons with food and supplies and distributed them to destitute civilians in the Georgia countryside. The Union "Santa Clauses" tied tree branches to the heads of the mule teams to resemble reindeer.

Many other units, however, were on the march, either trying to evade capture or pursuing the opponent for better position. Soldiers left in the squalid conditions of prison camps spent the day remembering holidays at home, as did others in slightly more comfortable settings. Confederate General Gordon, writing from his headquarters near Petersburg, wrote of fighting famine as well as General Grant:

"The one worn-out railroad running to the far South could not bring us half enough necessary supplies: and even if it could have transported Christmas boxes of good things, the people at home were too depleted to send them."

His wife, who was with him at headquarters, presented him with a most precious treat for Christmas 1864 - "real" coffee brought from home 'to celebrate our victories in the first years and to sustain us in defeat at the last.'

Moods were more bouyant in Washington and New York, where celebrants supped on substantial feasts and attended the theatre.



"Snowy Morning on Picket" from Harper's Weekly January 30, 1864.  
**After the war**

Thomas Nast's most famous image of Santa Claus was published in Harper's Weekly on January 1, 1881.



The events of 1865 again influenced holiday celebrations. President Lincoln's assassination shocked the nation, but by mid-summer, the conspirators were hung or imprisoned for lengthy terms. War was ended and many

soldiers had been mustered out of service. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution became law on December 18, 1865, abolishing the institution of slavery. Soldiers and civilians alike were ready to reunite with their families and again embrace Victorian holiday customs.

At the end of hostilities, commerce once again flowed southward, and goods filled Northern shops. Long-held holiday traditions were re-introduced, as ornamental greens and trees filled the markets and toys and other items went on display. Newspaper illustrations were of domestic and wintry scenes.

The final verse of a poem *By the Christmas Hearth* published in the Christmas edition of Harper's Weekly reflected the sentiments of many:

*Bring holly, rich with berries red,  
And bring the sacred mistletoe;  
Fill high each glass, and let hearts  
With kindest feelings flow;  
So sweet it seems at home once more  
To sit with those we hold most dear,  
And keep absence once again  
To keep the Merry Christmas here.*



### **The Story Behind: "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"**

One of America's best known poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), contributed to the wealth of carols sung each Christmas season, when he composed the words to "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" on December 25th 1864.

The carol was originally a poem, "Christmas Bells," containing seven stanzas. Two stanzas were omitted, which contained references to the American Civil War, thus giving us the carol in its present form. The poem gave birth to the carol, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," and the remaining five stanzas were slightly rearranged in 1872 by John Baptiste Calkin (1827-1905), who also gave us the memorable tune. When Longfellow penned the words to his poem, America was still months away from Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9th 1865; and, his poem reflected the prior years of the war's despair, while ending with a confident hope of triumphant peace.

As with any composition that touches the heart of the hearer, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" flowed from the experience of Longfellow-- involving the tragic death of his wife Fanny and the crippling injury of his son Charles from war wounds.

Henry married Frances Appleton on July 13th 1843, and they settled down in the historic Craigie House overlooking the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They were blessed with the birth of their first child, Charles, on June 9th 1844, and eventually, the Longfellow household numbered five children-- Charles, Ernest, Alice, Edith, and Allegra.

Alice, the Longfellows' third child and first daughter, was delivered, while her mother was under the anesthetic influence of ether-- the first in North America.

Tragedy struck both the nation and the Longfellow family in 1861. Confederate Gen. Pierre G. T. Beauregard fired the opening salvos of the American Civil War on April 12th, and Fanny Longfellow was fatally burned in an accident in the library of Craigie House on July 10th.

The day before the accident, Fanny Longfellow recorded in her journal: "We are all sighing for the good sea breeze instead of this stifling land one filled with dust. Poor Allegra is very droopy with heat, and Edie has to get her hair in a net to free her neck from the weight."

After trimming some of seven year old Edith's beautiful curls, Fanny decided to preserve the clippings in sealing wax. Melting a bar of sealing wax with a candle, a few drops fell unnoticed upon her dress. The longed for sea breeze gusted through the window, igniting the light material of Fanny's dress-- immediately wrapping her in flames. In her attempt to protect Edith and Allegra, she ran to Henry's study in the next room, where Henry frantically attempted to extinguish the flames with a nearby, but undersized throw rug.

Failing to stop the fire with the rug, he tried to smother the flames by throwing his arms around Frances-- severely burning his face, arms, and hands. Fanny Longfellow died the next morning. Too ill from his burns and grief, Henry did not attend her funeral. (Incidentally, the trademark full beard of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow arose from his inability to shave after this tragedy.)

The first Christmas after Fanny's death, Longfellow wrote, "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." A year after the incident, he wrote, "I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace." Longfellow's journal entry for December 25th 1862 reads: "A merry Christmas' say the children, but that is no more for me."

Almost a year later, Longfellow received word that his oldest son Charles, a lieutenant in the Army of the Potomac, had been severely wounded with a bullet passing under his shoulder blades and taking off one of the spinal processes. The Christmas of 1863 was silent in Longfellow's journal.

Finally, on Christmas Day of 1864, he wrote the words of the poem, "Christmas Bells." The reelection of Abraham Lincoln or the possible end of the terrible war may have been the occasion for the poem.

Lt. Charles Longfellow did not die that Christmas, but lived. So, contrary to popular belief, the occasion of writing that much loved Christmas carol was not due to Charles' death.

## "Christmas Bells"

*(The original poem, complete with all seven stanzas)*

"I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along  
The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime  
A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
"For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men!"



---

**Next Month - Jan 6, 2010: Mike Kochan – "Monitor"**