

**Merry damn
already!** **Christmas,**

The History of Christmas

The crystalline mists of pagan pre-history verily swarm with mid-winter and solstice celebrations, attended one way or another by most peoples of the northern hemisphere.

But much as that splendid shrine to religious martyrdom – St. Peter's Basilica – is built on the ruins of Nero's Circus, or the Al Aqsa mosque surmounts the Jewish Temple, the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity in either 313 or 326 A.D. (depending on how you look at it), gave rise to the custom of celebrating either Jesus' birth (Catholics and Protestants, generally but not exclusively) or the Feast of the Epiphany (Orthodox Christians, generally but not exclusively), on or around the 25th of December which – depending on which calendar you happen to be using – more or less coincides with the winter solstice; all despite the absence of any evidence in the Gospels or elsewhere that Yeshua was born on Christmas, or even during what passes for winter in the southeastern Mediterranean.

Confused yet?

Christmas in America

Those fun-loving Puritans – the first permanent Christian European residents of North America – banned Christmas. The Puritans – while surely quite devout in their own special way – didn't even keep the Sabbath, believing that only temperance and strenuous work could lead to salvation, and that Christmas like all holidays was nothing more than an excuse for the (mostly German) workmen to booze and laze off. In 1659 the Massachusetts Bay Colony banned the holiday outright to "prevent disorders... dishonor of God and offense of others."

Thankfully for us, the Puritans' joyless fundamentalism barely outlasted the founding of Roger Williams' Providence and Rhode Island Plantations, and the arrival on our shores of the principal of religious freedom. Still, as late as the outbreak of the American Civil War in the 1860s, celebrating Christmas was considered rather boorish, if not downright venal, by better Boston society.

Like so many of the quainter cultural traditions in European history, many of the customs we now associate with Christmas – including "Old" St. Nick, Christmas trees and eggnog (not necessarily in that order) – arrived courtesy of hard-drinking Germans on holiday, and the Queen of England's marrying one. When newly-immigrated German workers came wassailing on Christmas Day, it was nigh impossible to deny them gifts, as they so helpfully confined themselves to their tenements the rest of the year, and besides, many were carrying knives. And when Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert of Germany, gave her a Christmas present of a fully-decorated tree, as was the custom of his country, she allowed a lithograph of it to be reproduced in the American periodical, *Godey's Lady's Book* – the *People Magazine* of its day – igniting (quite literally in more than a few instances) a decorating sensation the intervening century-and-a-half has done nothing to abate.

Christmas as a Federal Holiday

As is its wont, Congress got around to making Christmas an official holiday in the 94th year of the American Republic. It is not entirely clear what motivated the legislation, but rumor has it that Mrs. President General Ulysses S. Grant was a secret avid reader of *Godey's Lady's Book*, as the General was known to be mostly preoccupied with his real estate investments, his memoirs, and his drink.

She is buried in Grant's Tomb.

Christmas Today

Despite all the best efforts to the contrary, Christmas is still celebrated in America. Parents everywhere gallantly joust for mall parking spaces. Lovers tuck themselves in by the warm glow of the Yule log on DVD. And yes, even you've got to admit, Snoop Dog's rendition of "White Christmas" indeed brings tears to your eyes.

Nothing can dampen the spirit of the holiday. Not the drenching, freezing rain that's fallen non-stop since Labor Day. Not that showoff who outbid you for the Virgin Mary grilled cheese sandwich on eBay. Not even those year-end financials which really – I mean really – are due this week, I don't care what kind of plans you've made with your sister-in-law. It's Christmas, damnit!

Midnight Christmas Eve arrives and you finally realize what they've been saving all those empty seats in church for. The heaven-bound rush-hour crowd drowns out the choir, swaying sweetly nonetheless in the unexpected warmth of their itchy woolen suits, spirits raised by the music and that quick Red Bull and vodka you took to tide you over the service. Carols are sung, turkeys deep-fried. Low-carb sugarplums adorn every aisle-cap.

On the way home from church, you stop off for what has become a family ritual. But the cashier at 7-11 is drunk, keeps mumbling something about his friend "Felix," and can't make a proper chili dog to save his life. It's Christmas morn! The neighbor's decorations have short-circuited and there's a small smoldering fire on his roof. Not to mind, they'll be up soon to open presents. You have a sudden panic attack when you realize that they celebrate Kwanzaa, but by that time the fire department has arrived and they are all safely on the street. You invite them to join you for a hearty Christmas breakfast of ham and eggs and figgy pudding, but they politely decline, gently reminding you that they keep kosher.