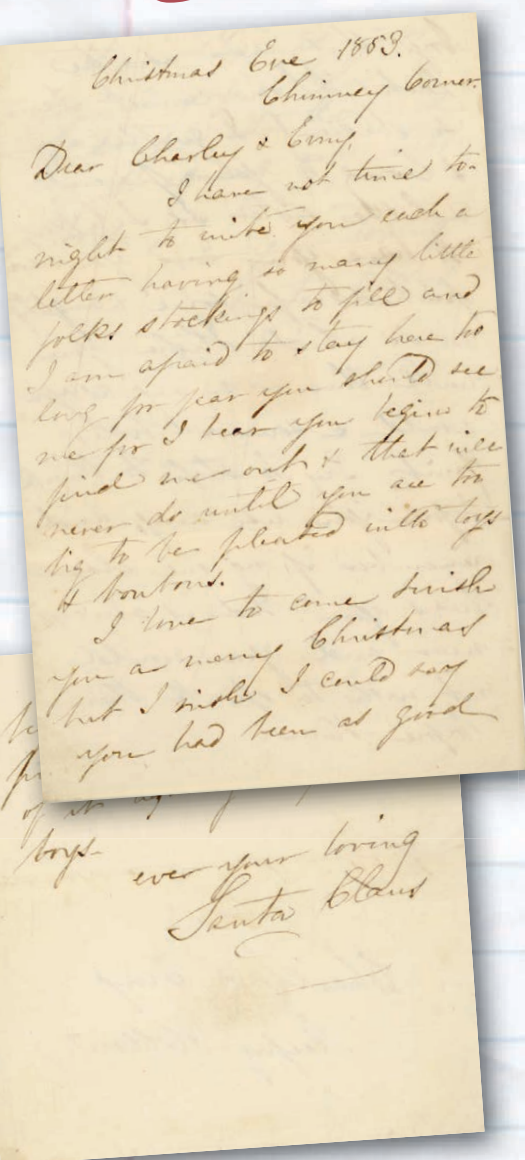


Dear Santa



A letter from Santa to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's children

Writing and sending a letter to Santa Claus is a deeply rooted American tradition that has thrived for more than a century. Every year, the Postal Service runs Operation Santa, allowing people to adopt and answer some of the many heartfelt letters sent to St. Nick through the mail. But where did this very American tradition come from?

The idea of a Christian saint who magically delivered treats to coincide with Christmas existed in Europe well before the American Revolutionary War began in 1776. But the name “Santa Claus” wouldn’t come until after the establishment of the United States, with Dutch settlers, primarily in New York, who told legends of St. Nicholas or “Sinterklaas.”

Despite the widely held belief that the first American image of Santa Claus was created and distributed by Coca-Cola, in fact, the New York Historical Society is believed to have distributed the first on Dec. 6, 1810, when it hosted its first St. Nicholas dinner. The organization commissioned artist Alexander Anderson to draw an image of the saint, but it wasn’t quite the tubby jovial man we know now. Instead, it showed him in the clothes of a clergyman and holding a switch, which he “Directs a Parent’s hand to use / When virtue’s path his sons refuse.”

The earliest letters weren’t to Santa, but from him. The letters were reminders about being nice rather than naughty. The minister Theodore Ledyard Cuyler grew up in western New York in the 1820s and recalled receiving “an autograph letter from Santa Claus, full of good counsels.”

Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s wife, Fanny, wrote letters from Santa

for her children in the 1850s that told them explicitly how they could be better. “[Y]ou have picked up some naughty words which I hope you will throw away as you would sour or bitter fruit,” Santa wrote in one of Longfellow’s letters in 1853. “Try to stop to think before you use any, and remember if no one else hears you God is always near.”

Before the Post Office started free city delivery in 1863, Santa letters often appeared near the chimney and any letters to Santa were returned to the same spot. Many children and parents would burn the letters, believing that the ashes would rise and reach Santa.

When city delivery began, the *Chicago Tribune* described the letter carrier in 1864 as “a genuine Santa Claus [visiting] households on his beat.” So, it’s not a surprise that families soon started using their letter carriers to deliver Santa letters.

The idea gained traction when, in 1871, *Harper’s Weekly*—the most widely read journal in this era before radio and television—published an illustration by cartoonist Thomas Nast of Santa sorting letters he had received from “Good Children’s Parents” and “Naughty Children’s Parents.” In 1879, Nast drew an illustration of a child posting a letter to Santa.

But where were families supposed to send these letters? At first, many sent them to newspapers, which would print selections and some would offer prizes for the best. A correspondent for the *Stark County Democrat*, in Canton, OH, wrote in 1874, “Two bright little children entered the *Democrat* office and wanted us to print letters to Santa Claus, from them.”

Historians have examined these early Santa letters to see how gift



giving has evolved. In *Dear Santa: Children's Christmas Letters and Wish Lists, 1870-1920*, children in the 1870s requested gifts such as writing desks, prayer books, and in one memorable letter, “a stick of pomade” for “papa.” As time went on, the children whose letters were reprinted in the book started to ask for toys and other fun items, such as candy, dolls and roller skates.

For the Post Office, these letters presented a problem—most letters to Santa didn’t have a deliverable address. Nast’s illustrations showed Santa living in the North Pole, but didn’t include a street address. Until the 1900s, most Santa letters would go to the Dead Letter Office with other mail that couldn’t be delivered and were destroyed.

Charitable organizations asked if they could respond to these letters and after some stops and starts, Operation Santa began. In 1913, the Post Office instituted a policy allowing local postmasters to grant permission to give the letters to charity groups to answer the letters.

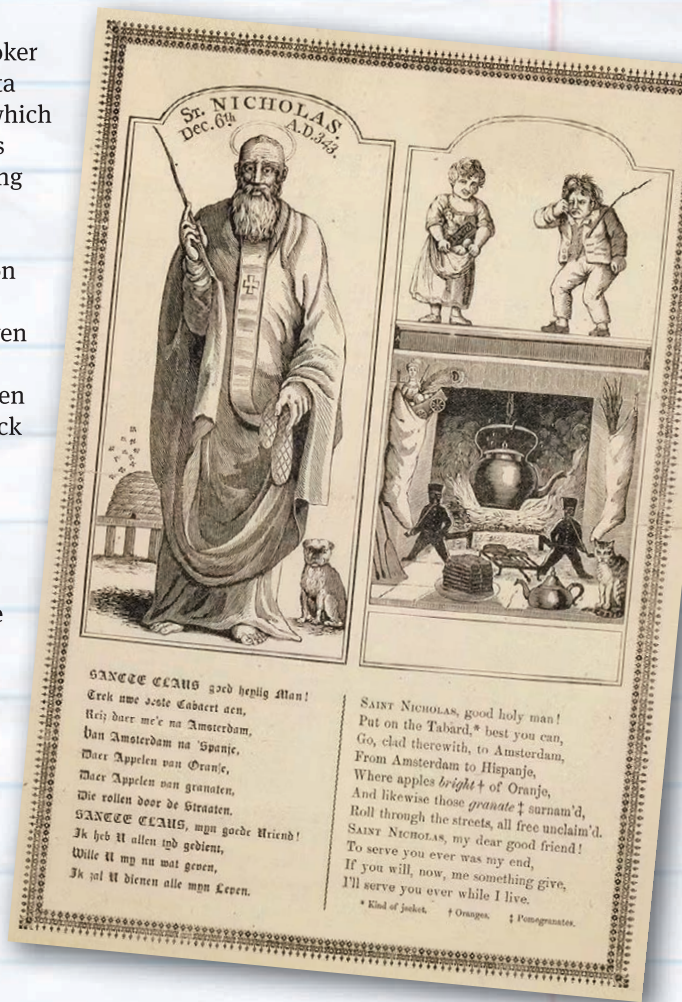
In Winchester, KY, one organization delivered the odd combination of sweets and fireworks to letter writers. In Santa Claus, IN, Postmaster James Martin wrote letters responding to the city’s large pile of Santa letters him-

self. He soon brought in volunteers, as children around the country thought the city was the home of the real Santa.

In New York, customs broker John Gluck created the Santa Claus Association in 1913, which answered tens of thousands of letters each year by pairing letters with citywide volunteers who delivered gifts to the children. The association requested donations to pay for postage and gifts and even \$300,000 for a Santa Claus Building in Manhattan. When it came out in 1928 that Gluck had embezzled hundreds of thousands of dollars, the Post Office revoked the association’s Santa mail and changed its policy.

Soon after, the Post Office Department changed the program to allow individuals to answer a Santa letter through the mail, as well as to buy the requested gift and bring it to the post office to send to the child. Postal workers then delivered the gifts to children. The program grew over the years when it was spotlighted in the

Above: Santa by cartoonist Thomas Nast
Below: The New York Historical Society’s flyer for its first St. Nicholas dinner



USPS
OPERATION
Santa®

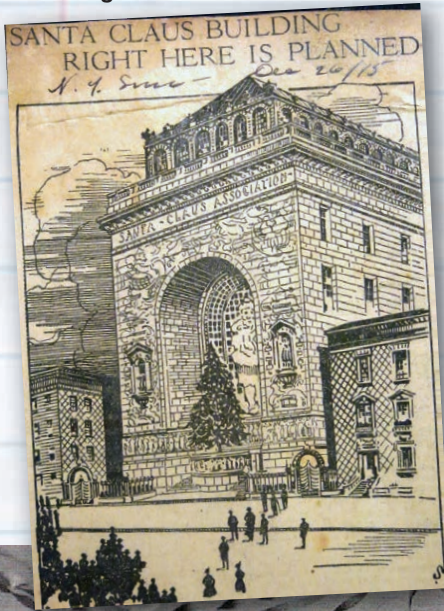
I helped Santa today!

Adopt letters at USPSOperationSanta.com



An ad for USPS's Operation Santa

The Santa Claus Association responded to Santa letters in New York City in the 1910s and '20s (bottom). They solicited donations to construct a Santa Claus Building.



movie “Miracle on 34th Street” in 1947, and by Johnny Carson on “The Tonight Show” decades later.

In 2006, the Postal Service created a new set of guidelines for the program requiring donors to present a photo ID when they pick up Santa letters and redacting the children’s full names and addresses. But what the donors choose to do is still up to them.

“The range is incredible, from the very basic where they can’t afford to buy anything but a token, to the opposite end where they will invest in a school and redo a playground,” Pete Fontana, the then-chief elf officer in New York City, told *Smithsonian* magazine in 2015.

Many letter carriers and NALC branches volunteer each year to be part of the Operation Santa program, such as Lafayette, IN Branch 466. At the December branch meeting, members will open up the letters, draft a short response,

and mail them back to the children as though they came from Santa.

“It’s a fun way to read the letters, to kind of break up some of the long days and get a little bit of joy,” Branch 466 Vice President **Jeremy Swift** told *The Postal Record* in a December 2024 article.

“We’ve had letters from newborns that a parent wrote in, just talking about how the child’s been a good boy or girl, just kind of letting us know how they’ve been,” he said.

“Sometimes we’ll get a big envelope from a teacher from one of the schools. We’ve encouraged the schools to participate. And then we just send a big envelope back.

“We’ve received letters from kids that are pretty heartbreaking that just talk about their current situation and how they just want their parents to get a new job or to not have to struggle or not be sad.

“We’ve received letters from parents who are struggling and asking for help. They don’t know how they’re going to provide a Christmas for their children.

“So, yeah, I mean, it is a big mix of emotions as you’re reading through those letters, for sure,” Swift said. He said they receive all kinds of letters and individual members will sometimes answer a letter with a gift or other donations.

In 2017, USPS introduced online tools for kids to write to Santa through their electronic devices. Despite the advent of new technology, one thing is constant: The magic of Santa letters never seems to diminish. **PR**

