

A History of Christmas

History.com, adapted by Newsela Staff

Christmas is a religious holiday and a worldwide marvel. For 2,000 years, people around the world have been observing it with religious and other customs.

Christians celebrate Christmas Day as the birthday of Jesus.

Popular customs include exchanging gifts and decorating Christmas trees. People also attend church, share meals with family and friends, and wait for Santa Claus to arrive. Christmas Day has been a national holiday in the United States since 1870.

An ancient holiday

The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Centuries before the arrival of Jesus, Europeans celebrated light in the darkest days of winter. Many people rejoiced during the winter solstice. It is the longest night of the year, but it marked the beginning of more hours of sunlight.

In Scandinavia, the Norse celebrated Yule from December 21, the winter solstice, through January. To mark the return of the sun, fathers and sons would bring home large logs, which they would set on fire. The people would feast until the log burned out, which could take as many as 12 days.

The end of December was a perfect time for celebration in most areas of Europe. At that time of year, most cattle were slaughtered so they would not have to be fed during the winter. For many, it was the only time they had a supply of fresh meat.

In Germany, people honored the god Odin during the mid-winter holiday. Germans were afraid of Odin, as they believed he flew through the sky to observe his people and then decide who would thrive or suffer. Because of his presence, many people stayed inside.

Saturnalia

In Rome, where winters were not as harsh as those in the far north, Saturnalia was celebrated. It was a holiday to honor Saturn, the god of agriculture.

Beginning in the week before the winter solstice and continuing for a month, Saturnalia was a time when food and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. For a month, slaves would become masters. Poor workers were in command of the city. Business and schools closed so that everyone could join in the fun.

Also around the time of the winter solstice, Romans observed Juvenalia, a feast honoring the children of Rome. In addition, rich Romans celebrated the birthday of the god Mithra on December 25.

In the early years of Christianity, Easter was the main holiday. The birth of Jesus was not celebrated. In the fourth century, Catholic Church officials decided to make the birth of Jesus a holiday. The Bible does not mention a date for his birth. Pope Julius I chose December 25.

It is believed that the church chose this date to absorb the customs of the Saturnalia festival. First called the Feast of the Nativity, the custom continued to spread. Today, in some Greek and Russian churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25th. This is the day it is believed that the three wise men found Jesus in the manger.

By holding Christmas at the same time as winter festivals, church leaders increased the chances that Christmas would be popular. However, they gave up the ability to say how it was celebrated. On Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated in a carnival-like, party atmosphere similar to today's Mardi Gras.

An outlaw Christmas

In the early 17th century, religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When the Puritans took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of indulgence and canceled Christmas. By popular demand, King Charles II was restored to the throne and with him came the return of the popular holiday.

The pilgrims who came to America in 1620 were strict in their Puritan beliefs, so Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was outlawed in Boston. Anyone showing the Christmas spirit was fined. However, in the Jamestown settlement of Virginia, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all.

After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor, including Christmas.

Irving reinvents Christmas

It wasn't until the 19th century that Americans began to enjoy Christmas.

The early 19th century was a period of trouble. Jobs were few, and rioting by poor people often occurred during the Christmas season.

In 1819, Washington Irving wrote "The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.," a series of stories. The stories feature a wealthy man who invited poor workers into his home for

Christmas. The rich and poor got along easily, unlike what was happening in society. Irving thought Christmas should be a peaceful holiday bringing groups together.

"A Christmas Carol"

Also around this time, English author Charles Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol." The story's message about charity and goodwill toward all struck a chord in the United States and England. It showed the benefits of celebrating the holiday.

As Americans began to enjoy Christmas as a family holiday rather than a carnival event, old customs were uncovered. Celebrations included pieces of other customs. People decorated trees, sent holiday cards and gave gifts.

Most families believed that they were celebrating Christmas how it had been done for centuries. However, Americans had really reinvented a holiday to fill the needs of their growing nation.

A Christmas History Questions

Read the following paragraph from the section "A Christmas Carol."

As Americans began to enjoy Christmas as a family holiday rather than a carnival event, old customs were uncovered. Celebrations included pieces of other customs. People decorated trees, sent holiday cards and gave gifts.

1. Which conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- A The custom of giving gifts at Christmas is an old custom.
- B Christmas is the most fun when it is celebrated as a carnival event.
- C The custom of decorating trees is Americans' favorite Christmas activity.
- D Americans stopped celebrating Christmas as a carnival event when old customs were uncovered.

2. How does the section "An ancient holiday" relate to the section "Saturnalia"?

- A They both describe how people a long time ago were afraid of certain gods.
- B They both explain how the birth of Jesus became a holiday.
- C They both describe winter celebrations that took place a long time ago.
- D They both explain how Christmas became popular around the world.

Read the sentence below from the section "Irving reinvents Christmas."

It wasn't until the 19th century that Americans began to enjoy Christmas.

3. How does the sentence help develop the main idea of the article?

- A It explains when Americans first learned about Christmas.
- B It shows when Americans started making Christmas a festive holiday.
- C It suggests why Americans used to avoid celebrating Christmas.
- D It shows when Americans first made Christmas a holiday.

4. Based on the article, which statement is TRUE?

- A Saturnalia was a holiday that honored Jesus.
- B Washington Irving is the author of a book about different holidays.
- C Christmas is celebrated by people around the world.
- D Christians used to celebrate Christmas before Jesus was born.

5. Which sentence from the section "Saturnalia" supports the idea that different groups of people celebrate Christmas on different days?

- A In the fourth century, Catholic Church officials decided to make the birth of Jesus a holiday.
- B Business and schools closed so that everyone could join in the fun.
- C It was a holiday to honor Saturn, the god of agriculture.
- D Today, in some Greek and Russian churches, Christmas is celebrated 13 days after the 25th.

6. What is the overall organizational pattern of the article?

- A chronological
- B cause and effect
- C compare and contrast
- D process

7. How are the introduction [paragraphs 1 - 3] and the last paragraph similar?

- A The introduction explains why people celebrate Christmas and the last paragraph describes when people celebrate Christmas.
- B They both describe some examples of Christmas customs.
- C The introduction describes some Christmas customs and the last paragraph describes the effects of those customs.

D They both explain how Christmas first became a family holiday.

8. Which sentence from the section "A Christmas Carol" explains what people learned from a story that Charles Dickens wrote?

- A Also around this time, English author Charles Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol."
- B Most families believed that they were celebrating Christmas how it had been done for centuries.
- C The story's message about charity and goodwill toward all struck a chord in the United States and England.
- D Celebrations included pieces of other customs.

9. Which of these sections from the article gives information about a city where it used to be against the law to enjoy Christmas?

- A Introduction [paragraphs 1 - 3]
- B "An ancient holiday"
- C "Saturnalia"
- D "An outlaw Christmas"

10. What is the purpose of the section "Irving reinvents Christmas"?

- A to show the difference between rich people and poor people
- B to tell about a book that described Christmas as a peaceful holiday
- C to tell about the life of a man who used to write books
- D to show how a man without a job used to fight at Christmas