HERE COMES SANTA CLAUS

Many European cultures had stories of a magical old man who brought gifts to children in the winter, and the Santa Claus that emerged in England was a blend of figures from the three cultures that influenced their island the most - the Anglo-Saxons' Father Christmas, who symbolized the coming of spring, the Vikings' Odin, who in some tales came to Earth and gave presents to the worthy, and the Normans' St. Nicholas, the patron Saint of giving. The name "Santa Claus" comes from the name of the 4th century Greek Saint, as it is derived from the Dutch "Sinterklaas" - their name for St. Nicholas.

The still-popular 1821 poem *The Night Before Christmas* by Clement Moore merged the old traditions into a new figure: a "jolly old elf" riding a flying sleigh of "eight tiny reindeer" who placed gifts into hung stockings for children. Santa's image was finalized by the American cartoonist Thomas Nast, who in the 1860s pictured the figure as a fat old man dressed in red.

An 1881 image of Santa Claus by American cartoonist Thomas Nast.

CARDS & DECORATIONS

The practice of sending Christmas cards was one wholly invented during the period. In 1843, businessman Henry Cole introduced the first Christmas cards to Britain, selling them for one shilling each. Cole had trouble selling them, but the tradition caught on and many children, even the royal children of Queen Victoria, were encouraged to make their own. As the century continued, the price of the cards dropped, and by 1880 sending cards to loved ones was quite common.

"A Merry Christmas to you and don't forget the mistletoe." This was the cheerful message shared on a card (as shown above) on display in the upstairs hallway in the Fultz House Museum.

Traditionally, homes would be decorated with sprigs of evergreen trees, to symbolize the hope for spring's return. This practice became unfashionable during the Victorian era, and instead many people began to decorate their home with more elaborate manufactured decorations in order to show off their wealth and to resist the appearance of being old-fashioned. By the early 1900s, however, traditional decorations made a comeback and again became popular.
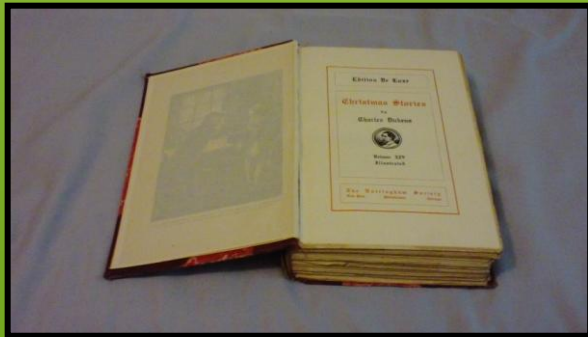
VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert enjoying Christmas with their children.

FULTZ HOUSE MUSEUM

THE VICTORIAN ERA & CHRISTMAS

Prior to the ascension of Queen Victoria to the British throne in 1837, the celebration of Christmas was almost unheard of in Britain. While in the Middle Ages Christmas had been a prominent and popular holiday, Protestant reformers in the 1500s had derided the celebrations as superstitious and un-Christian and it declined in popularity. By the 1800s, Christmas had become so unknown many businesses did not even consider it a holiday and stayed open on December 25. The transformation of Christmas to the behemoth it is today happened rapidly thanks to the influence of Victoria's husband Prince Albert, who introduced many of the popular Christmas customs of his native Germany. By the end of her reign in 1901, Christmas had spread all over the globe, and had become the popular holiday that it remains today.

For the Victorians, the first event of Christmas morning was to attend mass. After church the family returned home to open their gifts from their loved ones, a practice which became much more central as the years progressed, and then would begin to cook the evening meal.

This is a copy of *Assorted Christmas Stories* by Charles Dickens, found in the Teacher's Room of the Fultz House Museum.

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

This *biscuit tin*, brightly decorated for the holiday season, can be found in the Teacher's Room of the Fultz House Museum.

The oldest Christmas custom and the one most central to the holiday during the Middle Ages was the Christmas dinner. On Christmas day, extended families would come together and eat a large meal of beef or goose. Eventually, a new meat from America - turkey - became the dinner of choice, as the British people grew wealthier and could afford the larger bird. Another food popular at Christmas time was mince pie, originally made of meat with fruits and nuts, but gradually the meat began to be phased out in favour of the sweeter filling. A common practice for families was to cook twelve pies each holiday season - one for each of the Twelve Days of Christmas and for the twelve months of the year - to bring luck to the family.

Prior to the revitalization of Christmas, the major gift-giving holiday in Britain was New Year's Day, or what the Scots called "Hogmanay". As Christmas regained its popularity during the Victorian era, the holiday of charity instead turned towards Christmas. Early gifts were often inexpensive and small, and hung on the Christmas tree for family members to collect on Christmas morning. As the years went on, gifts became more expensive and more central to the theme of the holiday, and by 1880 it had largely replaced the dinner as the central event of Christmas.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

This Victorian Christmas *tree stand* would play music, and is part of the Fultz House Museum collection.

Christmas trees were another holiday practice introduced to Britain during the Victorian period. Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert introduced the tradition from his native Germany in 1841, when he began to decorate the royal palaces with these decorated trees during the Christmas season, and the popularity of the practice exploded after 1848 when the *Illustrated London News* published a drawing of the royal family celebrating the holiday around an elaborately decorated tree.

In the earliest days, trees were trimmed with simple decorations such as candles, sweets, fruit, homemade ornaments, and small gifts. As the wealth of the nation grew with industrialization, the decorations gradually became more elaborate. By the turn of the 20th century, Christmas trees were decorated with tinsel, wax figures, and manufactured wood ornaments.