Meetings of the Grimes County Historical Commission are held on the Second Monday of the Month at 7:00 pm in the Courthouse Annex in Anderson, Texas.

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Photo of the Month

Old Grimes County Jail
BARNES, JAMES WILLIAM (1815–1892). James William Barnes, religious leader and Confederate officer, was born in Georgia in 1815. Barnes moved to Grimes County, Texas, in 1840. In 1842 he served on a committee that successfully established the first Masonic lodge in Grimes County at Anderson. In the spring of 1843 he was a leader in the effort to send relief supplies to the surviving members of the Mier Expedition who were imprisoned in Mexico.

Barnes was an active Baptist, serving as an officer and treasurer of the Plantersville Baptist Church in Grimes County in the 1850s and 1860s. He served as treasurer of the Texas State Baptist Association from 1848 to 1862 and as a trustee of Baylor University from 1852 to 1872. By 1854 Barnes was married to a Caroline A. Barnes. This couple produced five children.

In August 1863 Barnes served as lieutenant colonel and later as colonel for the Fourth Infantry Regiment, State Troops. This militia unit was deployed for coastal defense duty in South Texas. Also in 1863 Barnes received an appointment as brigadier general of Brigade No. 5, Texas State Troops. Following the Civil War, he returned to Anderson, where he continued to play a leading role in the religious life of Grimes and Washington counties. He also promoted agricultural development and served as a vice president for the International Railroad Company.

Barnes died in Grimes County on October 22, 1892, and was buried on his estate southeast of Anderson.

The following appeared on 23 October 1892 in The Galveston Daily News: (Anderson, Oct. 22) General James W. Barnes died at his home, about three miles southeast of this place, yesterday at 7 o'clock a. m., in the 75th year of his age. General Barnes was among the early settlers of Grimes County; was one of the commissioners to locate and lay out the town of Anderson, the county seat when the county was organized. The general was always broad and enlightened in his views, and was a successful planter here prior to the civil war. He was during the war elected to a brigadier generalship of state militia. Since the war he had been connected with a number of important business enterprises in Texas. He was the father of Mrs. C. C. Gibbs of San Antonio and the grandfather of Mrs. T. D. Cobb of Houston, who, with Mrs. Dr. R. Quinney and his faithful life partner, are left to mourn his loss. He was interred in the family burying ground to-day at 10 a. m. His death has cast a gloom over this community.

GENERAL BARNES PLANTATION HOUSE
Anderson Vicinity, Grimes County, Texas
HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Earlier known as Prairie Woods, it is one of the earliest and best of the plantation houses in the area. The east, two-story log portion was built in 1842; this was refinished and the major portion of the house was completed in 1858. Originally the headquarters of a nine hundred acre plantation, the house, in its neglected state, still reflects the dignity of the period in which it was built.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History
Original and subsequent owners: Land acquired by James W. Barnes in 1840, a plantation of 900 acres. Title of a portion of the original tract has remained in the family since that date. House and farm now owned by Allen G. Hill, grandson of the original owner, General James W. Barnes.

Date of erection: An original 12’ x 14’ log house was erected near the present site. In 1842 a two-story, two-room log house with fireplaces and exterior stair was “built-Additions and rebuilding of this structure “brought the house to its present form in 1858; these included finishing the log portion inside and out, building a large central hall and adjacent enclosed stairway, the addition of the two large west rooms, and the shed portion to the northward, and the construction of the two-story south porch, A letter of 1884 by General Barnes tells of the completion of the house: "Just before the war in 1858, we made a finish of our dwelling and it was about the best private residence in the county. It was an addition to the old two-story log house and was finished in good, but plain style from cellar to garrett." A letter of General Barnes in possession of the family.

There is no information about the designers or builders. No plans, sketches or notes of the original construction exist. No important old views are available. Originally the kitchen and dining room were in an adjacent building. A bathing room was built in 1858. It had a large bathing tub supplied with water pumped from the cistern, and above it was a bucket with holes in the bottom and a valve operated with a string. "I wish you could see how convenient it is all fixed." (from a letter written by General Barnes’ wife to her sister in 1858)

Historical Events Connected with the Structure: James W, Barnes, born in Hancock County, Georgia, October 5, 1815, lived in Kemper County, Mississippi. Married Carolina A. Greene and moved to Polk County, Texas in 1840. In the fall of 1840 he came to Grimes County and acquired land east of Fanthorp (now called Anderson). He was commissioned a Brigadier General of the Confederacy and served throughout the War. His 17 year old son, Mark, died serving in the Confederate Army.

From 1852 to 1871 James W. Barnes was a trustee of Baylor College at Independence. For a number of years he taught Latin there. He died in 1892 and was buried on the plantation eastward of the house.
Yarboro Community

The town of Yarboro was named for Colonel James Quincy Yarborough who owned a large tract of land which included the townsite. Yarborough came to the area sometime after the Civil War. At the peak of its existence Yarboro boasted three stores, a post office, a liquor store, a cotton gin a train depot, two schools and a church.

The stores consisted of a general store owned and operated by Ferdinand August Meineke, a grocery and dry goods store owned and operated by two brothers, John and Bob McGinty, and a dry goods store owned by Vance Campbell and operated by Baker McGinty. The first post office was located in the store owned and operated by the McGinty brothers but was later moved to the store owned by August Meineke. The post office remained in Meineke’s store for many years until blindness compelled Mr. Meineke to retire as postmaster. His daughter-in-law, Mrs. George Meineke (Mary Mitchell) succeeded him, serving from 1938 until 1953, when the postal service was discontinued.

The liquor store was one in which alcoholic beverages were sold in bottles and which was called a “Hiawatha Joint” by the local people. The cotton gin was owned by Erle Yarborough, a son of Colonel Yarborough’s who also owned large tracts of land in and around Yarboro and who used the land for farming and ranching.

The Santa Fe Depot was a structure which housed two waiting rooms, a ticket office, a loading rack and living quarters for the depot agent and his family. Mr. J. D. (Cap) Richardson and his wife Stella Ashford Richardson, were one of the first families to live in the depot. Other agents were Travis Neeley, Jim Harper, Monroe Martin, Sam Loggins, Dan Syphrett, and Bobby Morris. The agent also operated the telegraph system.

Freight trains and passenger trains passed through Yarboro daily en route from Somerville to Beaumont and return. The passenger trains went north at night at 10:00 o’clock and came back the next morning at seven. The passenger trains made only flag stops, but mail was picked up and delivered daily by means of a crane on which the mail bag was hung and from which the baggage conductor grabbed the mail bag with a hook as the train passed through.

Around 1900 and earlier there would be special railway excursion trips to Galveston. Several young people would get a chaperone or chaperones and make the trip. From Yarboro one took the train to Navasota, hired a hack to Brenham and then took the train from there to Galveston.

From the very early days of the town there was a school for the white students. The black children attended school in the church house used by the black citizens and eventually a school was built for them north of the townsite on Highway 105. The white citizens did not have a church building but they did hold church services and Sunday School in their school building.
Early settlers and citizens would include names such as the Yarborough families, Vance Campbell and wife Mattie (formerly Mattie McGinty), Santa Fe Section Foreman Abby Loftin and his wife Ida (formerly Ida McGinty), Baker McGinty and wife Lucille (formerly Lucille Kelly), F. A. Meineke and wife Bessie Lawther Meineke, Crowder Stoneham and wife Belle Martin Stoneham, Austin Prestwood and family, Rev. W. H. Jones and family, Dr. Hunter Clark and family, Ples and Toonie Sullivan Mask, Lawrence and Margaret Stewart, Anna Smart and Richard and Mandy Mitchell. Northeast of the north end of Bois 'd Arc Lane David White and his wife Lucy A. Lawson and family lived about 1870. Sometime around 1900 or later Jeff Haynie and his wife Myrtle Holderby occupied this house. Haynie died and Miss Myrt married W. C. Mims. The house burned and the Mimses built a two-story structure near the main road using the lower floor for a store and the upper floor for their residence.

Written by Elise Sullivan Lawrence

From “Texas State Gazetteer of 1884”

James Quincy Yarborough served in the 21st Regiment Texas Cavalry Co. H Confederate States Army. He was born Sept 8 1827 in Coosa County, Alabama and died on Dec 23 1890 and is buried in Oakland Cemetery in Navasota, Texas. His wife was Frances Milton Yarborough born July 22, 1852 and died on July 18, 1914 and is buried next to her husband.
August Meineke

Just prior to the turn of the century young Ferdinand August Meineke moved from Waller County to the town of Yarboro after having spent short periods of time in Giddings and Anderson. As a boy of seventeen he had been employed by Dr. Edmund Montgomery at his lumber mill near Hempstead. Dr. Montgomery was the husband of Texas sculptor Elisabet Ney. During the time he worked for Dr. Montgomery, August helped to refurbish Liendo Plantation, the newly acquired home of Elisabet and Dr. Montgomery.

August was born February 26, 1858 and was the son of German parents, both of whom came to Waller from Germany, and he was very adept at carpentry work. Having gained a good deal of experience and skill while working for Dr. Montgomery, he immediately set to work building himself a small store in which he worked and lived while building a house at his new location in Yarboro. The house was built from the very finest pine (heart pine) which August purchased in Conroe. The impressive story and a half structure was surrounded by a white picket fence with a fancy gate which sported the initials FAM at the top. Eventually this dwelling was equipped with running water in the cooking area. This in itself was very unique for a rural home. The water supply to the house was piped from an overhead cypress tank which was filled once a week (usually on Sunday) by means of a gasoline motor and pump which were housed in a building at the back of the house.

Before many moons August met a beautiful raven haired young lady named Elizabeth Dawson Lowther (the spelling of her maiden name was changed some years later to Lawther) who was eventually to become his bride. They were eventually married on December 8, 1899. To this marriage two children were to be born. The eldest child Ruth Elizabeth Meineke was born January 3, 1901 and was the first baby delivered by Dr. W. W. Greenwood. On Sept. 14, 1903 a son, George Albert Meineke, was born.

The town of Yarboro flourished and it wasn’t long before his store housed a general store, post office, and grist mill. In later years he added a gasoline pump for the convenience of neighboring families and motorists traveling from Navasota to Conroe and points beyond as Highway 105 ran directly through Yarboro.

By this time, the couple were fondly known as Mr. Meineke and “Miss” Bessie – Mr. Meineke not only kept the store and the post office, he busied himself with all sorts of odd jobs such as sharpening saws and other tools, repairing motors, guns, clocks, blacksmith work, and built an automobile which actually would run. He never mustered the courage to drive this automobile however. For many years he worked as ticket agent and telegrapher for the local Santa Fe depot.

“Miss Bessie” was never idle either. She provided rooms and board for the school teachers who taught in Yarboro and also kept overnight guests who rode the train as far as Yarboro and had to wait for a friend or family member to arrive to carry them to their destinations.

Many good times were had in this household as the upstairs area of the house provided a large amount of floor space and it was August’s delight to arrange for local musicians to provide music for a dance. Family and friends would ride horseback and in buggies from miles around to dance the night away to the strains of several violins and an accordion.
August was a good provider and not only supported his own family, but aided in the care and upbringing of numerous nieces and nephews and other family members. Before very long, Ruth and George, the two Meineke children, grew up and married and presently August and Miss Bessie had grandchildren to enrich their lives. Mother Meineke or Granny Bessie as the grandchildren called her, prepared many mouth-watering meals at Thanksgiving and Christmas, she taught the granddaughters to sew and to make quilts, how to grow pot plants and kept all of the grandchildren entertained with stories of the olden days.

Christmas was the “ultimate” with Dad Meineke after the grandchildren were born. Each year he trudged off to the woods, selected, cut down and hauled home a large cedar tree. This tree was placed in the spacious upstairs in its stand which he had created, this stand being decorated with a miniature picket fence. Painstakingly he would sire small metal candle holders all along the limbs and on Christmas Eve, small wax candles which had been fitted into the holders were lit. Of course, it was the duty of two or three of the other grownups to keep watch on all the candles lest there be a fire. After the candles were lit, Dad Meineke then would emerge dressed as Santa and would distribute the gifts. Many of these gifts were his own creations, rocking horses with real horse hair tails, wheel barrows, small scale garden tools such as rakes and hoes, wooden dancing dolls and many other toys too numerous to list.

August operated his general store even though blindness had overcome him until shortly before his death March 8, 1942. He had been forced to give up the job of post master by his blindness, but this was passed on to son George’s wife Mary Ellen.

“Miss Bessie” lived on in Yarboro for about eleven years after August’s death. She expired May 10, 1953. A grandson, Gerald Meineke, now owns the Meineke lots in Yarboro. None of the original structures are there now but Gerald has replaced them with a beautiful brick home of his own.

Written by Elise Sullivan Lawrence.

Elizabeth “Bessie” Lawther Meineke
Born March 29, 1876
Died May 10, 1953

August and Bessie Meineke are both buried in Harmony Cemetery in Stoneham
Harmony Baptist Church
And Cemetery

Soon after John Moore McGinty and his wife Mary Loretta Brown settled in Stoneham in 1853, they organized the Grimes Prairie Baptist church. About 1859 the congregation moved to a schoolhouse in this area and changed the name to ‘Harmony’. This property was acquired from Blake and Peggy Brantley and the first church house erected in 1870. Upon the death of McGinty, his wife and son deeded the cemetery land which had been in use for years. About 1924 this building was completed. Services were held here until the 1930’s.

John Moore McGinty

John Moore McGinty was born February 21, 1871 in Grimes County (one of seven children of Robert R. McGinty and Henrietta Dedman who are buried at Haromy Cemetery). He spent most of his life around the Harmony Community and Navasota. At one time in early 1900’s he had a general store in Navasota at at the same time farmed near Yarboro. He built a home off of Highway 105 where he spent the rest of his life. When the new Highway 105 was built in the late 1930’s it bypassed the town of Yarboro and cut through his property to Conroe.

In 1895, he married Falba Eugenia Bauguss, and they had six children. Two boys died as infants and one daughter Mayde died at age 16 while a student in Navasota High School. Their daughter Valerie McGinty married J. J. Sasser, from Bonham, who was a teacher and football coach at Navasota High School. They were divorced two years later. She then married Harold Davis from Huntsville, Texas. The oldest girl, Vivian, died in 1951 and B. B. McGinty died in 1952. He was a druggist for many years at the Camp drugstore in Navasota. John Moore McGinty died on May 19, 1943 and is buried in Oakland Cemetery in Navasota.

Written by Elaine Sasser Kennard
In March of 1863, 18-year-old Charles Appleton Longfellow walked out of his family’s house on Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and—unbeknownst to his family—boarded a train bound for Washington, D.C., traveling over 400 miles across the eastern seaboard in order to join President Lincoln’s Union army to fight in the Civil War.

Charles (b. June 9, 1844) was the oldest of six children born to Fannie Elizabeth Appleton and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the celebrated literary critic and poet. Charles had five younger siblings: a brother (aged 17) and three sisters (ages 13, 10, 8—another one had died as an infant).

Less than two years earlier, Charles’s mother Fannie had tragically died after her dress caught on fire. Her husband, awoken from a nap, tried to extinguish the flames as best he could, first with a rug and then his own body, but she had already suffered severe burns. She died the next morning (July 10, 1861), and Henry Longfellow’s facial burns were severe enough that he was unable even to attend his own wife’s funeral. He would grow a beard to hide his burned face and at times feared that he would be sent to an asylum on account of his grief.

When Charley (as he was called) arrived in Washington D.C., he sought to enlist as a private with the 1st Massachusetts Artillery. Captain W. H. McCartney, commander of Battery A, wrote to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for written permission for Charley to become a soldier. HWL (as his son referred to him) granted the permission.

Longfellow later wrote to his friends Charles Sumner (senator from Massachusetts), John Andrew (governor of Massachusetts), and Edward Dalton (medical inspector of the Sixth Army Corps) to lobby for his son to become an officer. But Charley had already impressed his fellow soldiers and superiors with his skills, and on March 27, 1863, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry, assigned to Company “G.”

After participating on the fringe of the Battle of Chancellorsville in Virginia (April 30-May 6, 1863), Charley fell ill with typhoid fever and was sent home to recover. He rejoined his unit on August 15, 1863, having missed the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1-3, 1863).
Campaign, Charley was shot through the left shoulder, with the bullet exiting under his right shoulder blade. It had traveled across his back and skimmed his spine. Charley avoided being paralyzed by less than an inch.

He was carried into New Hope Church (Orange County, Virginia) and then transported to the Rapidan River. Charley’s father and younger brother, Ernest, immediately set out for Washington, D.C., arriving on December 3. Charley arrived by train on December 5. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was alarmed when informed by the army surgeon that his son’s wound “was very serious” and that “paralysis might ensue.” Three surgeons gave a more favorable report that evening, suggesting a recovery that would require him to be “long in healing,” at least six months.

On Christmas day, 1863, Longfellow—a 57-year-old widowed father of six children, the oldest of which had been nearly paralyzed as his country fought a war against itself—wrote a poem seeking to capture the dynamic and dissonance in his own heart and the world he observes around him. He heard the Christmas bells that December day and the singing of “peace on earth” (Luke 2:14), but he observed the world of injustice and violence that seemed to mock the truthfulness of this optimistic outlook. The theme of listening recurred throughout the poem, eventually leading to a settledness of confident hope even in the midst of bleak despair.

You can read the whole poem below:

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.”
CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

The Christmas that Americans celebrate today seems like a timeless weaving of custom and feeling beyond the reach of history. Yet the familiar mix of carols, cards, presents, trees, multiplicities of Santas and holiday neuroses that have come to define December 25th in the United States is little more than a hundred years old.

Americans did not even begin to conceive of Christmas as a national holiday until the middle of the last century. Like many other such 'inventions of tradition', the creation of an American Christmas was a response to social and personal needs that arose at a particular point in history, in this case a time of sectional conflict and civil war, as well as the unsettling processes of urbanization and industrialization. The holiday's new customs and meanings helped the nation to make sense of the confusions of the era and to secure, if only for a short while each year, a soothing feeling of unity.

In colonial times, Americans of different sects and different national origins kept the holiday (or did not) in ways they carried over from the Old World, Puritans, for instance, attempted to ignore Christmas because the Bible was silent on the topic. Virginia planters took the occasion to feast, dance, gamble, hunt and visit, perpetuating what they believed to be the old Christmas customs in English manors. Even as late as the early nineteenth century, many Americans, churched or unchurched, northerners or southerners, hardly took notice of the holiday at all.

By mid-century, however, new conditions had begun to undercut local customs and create needs for common and visible celebrations. Communication and transportation revolutions made once isolated parts of the country acutely aware of each other. Immigration vastly widened the ethnic and religious pluralism that had been a part of American settlement from its beginning. Moral, political and economic tensions mounted among east, west and south, raising new questions about the nature of the Union itself. Science challenged religion. New wealth and larger markets superseded old. Population swelled. The pace of life accelerated.

The swirl of change caused many to long for an earlier time, one in which they imagined that old and good values held sway in cohesive and peaceful communities. It also made them reconsider the notion of 'community' in larger terms, on a national scale, but modelled on the ideal of a family gathered at the hearth. At this cross-roads of progress and nostalgia, Americans found in Christmas a holiday that ministered to their needs. The many Christmases celebrated across the land began to resolve into a more singular and widely celebrated home holiday.

This new 'revived Christmas of our time' afforded a retreat from the dizzying realities of contemporary life, but cast in contemporary terms. Americans varied old themes and wove new symbols into the received fabric to create something definitively their own. The 'American' holiday enveloped the often contradictory strains of commercialism and artisanship, as well as nostalgia and faith in progress,
that defined late nineteenth-century culture. Its relative lack of theological or Biblical authority – what had made it anathema to the Puritans – ironically allowed Christmas to emerge as a highly ecumenical event in a land of pluralism. It became a moment of idealized national self-definition.

Not surprisingly, the strongest impetus for such a holiday came from those areas most profoundly affected by the various social, economic and technological revolutions of the antebellum era. Especially in the northern cities, where the intimacies of village and town culture had been most forcefully challenged by city and factory, the felt need for more explicit symbols of common purpose and shared past grew first. A number of writers came to see holidays as a tool to meet these ends and even to forge a national culture. New Year's Eve, the Fourth of July and, especially, Thanksgiving had their merits and partisans, but Christmas emerged as the most logical and affecting choice. By the 1850s, it had captured the Northern imagination and was making inroads in the South.

The Civil War intensified Christmas' appeal. Its sentimental celebration of family matched the yearnings of soldiers and those they left behind. Its message of peace and goodwill spoke to the most immediate prayers of all Americans. Yet northern victory in 1865 as much as the war situation itself determined the popularity and shape of the America's Christmas. Now unchallenged in the sphere of national myth-making and in control of the publishing trade, customs and symbols of Yankee origin and preference came to stand for the American Christmas.

We can see this as a broad and unified development only in retrospect. More interesting is the way details of the holiday appeared through accident and personal genius. Each custom had its own history, and only over time merged with others to create a full-blown, national holiday.

As early as 1832, Harriet Martineau had identified what would become one of the most familiar symbols of the American Christmas. She had 'little doubt' that the Christmas tree would 'become one of the most flourishing exotics of New England'. By the 1850s, many Americans, not just New Englanders, had fallen in love with the German custom. Some had seen Christmas trees for the first time when they had toured Germany and then recreated their experience of German Christmas celebrations for friends at home. Others viewed them first-hand in the homes of German Americans. The media introduced the custom even more widely, inspiring Americans throughout the nation to adopt the tradition as their own.
As the tree gained prominence in front parlors, it also assumed a place in the market. During the 1850s, town squares began to bristle with trees cut for seasonable profits. Seamless, the 'German-ness' of the tree receded as it became an icon of an American festival and, to some, an index of acculturation. Even in the homes of 'the Hebrew brethren', 'Christmas trees bloomed', noted a Philadelphia newspaper in 1877. 'The little ones of Israel were as happy over them as Christian children'. By 1900, one American in five was estimated to have a Christmas tree.

At first, the decoration of these fragrant evergreens reflected the whim of folk tradition. Celebrants added nuts, strings of popcorn or beads, oranges, lemons, candies and home-made trinkets. However, widely-read newspapers and ladies' magazines raised the standards for ornamentation. (One suggestion: cotton batting dipped in thin gum arabic then diamond dust made a 'beautiful frosting' for tree branches.) Homely affectations gave way to more uniform and sophisticated ones, the old style overtaken by the urge to make the tree a showpiece for the artistic arrangement of 'glittering baubles, the stars, angels, etc'.

Tree decoration soon became big business. As early as 1870, American businessmen began to import large quantities of ornaments from Germany to be sold on street corners and, later, in toy shops and variety stores. Vendors hawked glass ornaments and balls in bright colors, tin cut in all imaginable shapes and wax angels with spun glass wings. 'So many charming little ornaments can now be bought ready to decorate Christmas trees that it seems almost a waste of time to make them at home', one advertisement declared.

The rise of Christmas cards revealed other aspects of the new holiday's profile. R.H. Pease, a printer and variety store owner who lived in Albany, New York, distributed the first American-made Christmas card in the early 1850s. A family scene dominated the small card's center, but unlike its English forerunner (itself only a decade older), the images on each of its four corners made no allusion to poverty, cold, or hunger. Instead, pictures of Santa, reindeer, dancers and an array of Christmas presents and Christmas foods suggested the bounty and joys of the season.

It took Louis Prang, a recent German immigrant and astute reader of public taste, to expand the sending of cards to a grand scale. Prang arrived in America in 1850 and soon made a name as a printer. By 1870, he owned perhaps two-thirds of the steam presses in America and had perfected the color printing process of chromolithography. After distributing his trade cards by the thousands at an international exposition in 1873, the wife of his London agent suggested he add a Christmas greeting to them. When Prang introduced these new cards into the United States in 1875, they proved such a hit that he could not meet demand.

Behind Prang’s delight in profits lay a certain idealism. He saw his cards as small, affordable works of art. Through them he hoped to stimulate popular
interest in original decorative art and to educate public taste. In 1880, Prang began to sponsor annual competitions for Christmas card designs to promote these ends. These contests made Christmas cards so popular that other card manufacturers entered the market. By 1890, cheap imitations from his native Germany drove Prang from the Christmas card market entirely.

Whatever Prang's plans for democratizing art in his accepted land, the advent of Christmas cards in the marketplace soon served functions in keeping with the increasing pace and essential nature of American society. In a hurried and mobile nation, more and more Americans resorted to cards instead of honoring the older custom of writing Christmas letters or making personal holiday visits. The cards' ready-made sentiments drew together friends and families spread across a rapidly expanding national geography, making them a staple of December's mail. 'I thought last year would be the end of the Christmas card mania, but I don't think so now', one postal official complained in 1882. 'Why four years ago a Christmas card was a rare thing. The public then got the mania and the business seems to be getting larger every year'.

Christmas cards also made modest but suitable presents. 'Worn out from choosing gifts' for old friends and school mates, one writer noted, 'we usually fall back on Christmas cards, which constitute one of the most precious and at the same time inexpensive contributions of these latter days to the neglected cause of sentiment'.

Decorated trees and cards, however, were only window dressing to the custom of Christmas gift giving that blossomed in the 1870s and 1880s. Gifts had played a relatively modest role in Christmases of the past. Now they lavishly gilded the already popular holiday. Clearly a product of the new world of commerce and consumerism, Christmas presents also served more subtle ends. The getting and giving of gifts provided a means of grappling with jarring social change. Through personal gifts, Americans mediated the fragile relationships of an increasingly fragmented society. Through charitable gifts, they sought at least symbolic solutions to the problems of extreme economic inequality that threatened social peace and individual conscience. Gift giving itself became controversial, sometimes perceived as a worrisome, materialistic perversion of a holy day.

Such fear has not stemmed the growth of Christmas commerce. Indeed, by our own day, Christmas gift-giving has become the single most important sector of the consumer economy. No wonder that some have read backwards in time to make the new Christmas almost a conspiracy of retailers. Yet evidence suggests that the transition to a Christmas economy occurred only gradually, with both merchant and consumer acting as architects. In the 1820s, '30s and '40s merchants had noticed the growing role of gifts in the celebration of Christmas and New Year.

Starting in the mid- to late- 1850s, imaginative importers, crafts persons and storekeepers consciously reshaped the holidays to their own ends even as shoppers elevated the place of Christmas
gifts in their home holiday. However, for all the efforts of businessmen to exploit the season, Americans persistently attempted to separate the influence of commerce from the gifts they gave.

What emerged was a kind of dialogue between consumers and merchants. Many gift-givers, for instance, ranked handmade gifts over purchased or totally manufactured ones. Retailers responded by marketing partially assembled goods to which givers applied the finishing touches. Americans also moderated the relationship between commerce and giving by wrapping the gifts they gave. The custom had once been merely to give a gift unadorned and uncovered, but a present hidden in paper heightened the effect of the gesture, fixing the act of giving to a moment of revelation. Wrapping also helped designate an item as a gift. As gifts came increasingly from stores, factories and homes of cottage laborers, paper and string helped redefine an object to meet its social use. The commercial work comprehended the importance of this symbolic transformation of goods. Grander stores began to wrap gifts purchased from their stock in distinctive, colored papers, tinsel cords and bright ribbons, as part of their delivery services. Thus, while paper might have blurred a present's association with commerce in some cases, in others it advertised a material status associated with patronizing the 'right' store.

The spiraling custom of giving and petting gifts did not simply reflect the materialism of the age. The felt need to demonstrate kinship ties and communal bonds more vividly helped to insure the importance of Christmas gifts. Some scholars have explored the important role that kinship plays in determining the value of an object. In what one observer has called our 'materials-intensive way of life', gifts often serve as 'social statement[s]'. Given within families, another has commented, gifts 'provide continuity in one's life and across generations'. The Gilded Age, a time of particularly challenging social and economic upheaval, underlined the importance of family ties even as it threatened them. Gifts symbolized and helped secure these important relationships. The magazine Harper's gave early voice to the link between gifts and givers in 1856: 'Love is the moral of Christmas ... What are gifts but the proof and signs of love!'

Charity functioned in a related manner, but more as a symbolic, cathartic exercise in selflessness. The same social changes that fostered gift-giving as a means of reinforcing familial and social attachments at the private level also inspired charitable gifts as a way of declaring, if only symbolically, a unity and safety in society that extended even to the most impoverished.
It was but one more large step to extend those good feelings and generosity to the homeless, hungry and unemployed, and to target Christmas as the time for the amelioration of those conditions (or at least the assuaging of guilt over them). 'Nowhere in Christendom are the poor remembered at Christmastide so generously as they are in American cities, especially our own,' the New York Tribune contended.

In their comprehension of poverty and its solutions, most Americans moved little beyond Ebenezer Scrooge's personally fulfilling but ultimately narrow patronage. Their sentimentalization of 'worthy paupers' at Christmas time, especially virtuous but destitute women and vagabonds children, did not question the essential goodness of the market economy that had, directly and indirectly, produced the poverty. As in Dickens' evocation of charity, the rich man escaped condemnation if he recognized that his money meant little compared to his responsibility to humanity. That truth perceived and acted upon in highly public, seemingly generous fashion, the wealthy man could make his peace.

In this glow of self-congratulation, Americans persisted in seeing poor relief as a matter of individual action to be undertaken on much the same terms as gift-giving within the circle of family. The best and largest gifts, of course, went to those closest to the circle's centre. Lesser gifts, in descending order of value, went to relatives and acquaintances of decreasing importance. The deserving poor, as the outermost members of the larger community, received gifts too, though often the least valuable and certainly the least personal of all. An 1894 advertisement for Best and Company illustrated the hierarchy. It suggested that 'while busy buying "things for Christmas"' the shopper might think of other children who are 'less fortunate than your own'. For them, the store advised that 'a gift of serviceable clothing', chosen from its special group of marked-down goods, 'would be more than welcome'.

This material means of salvation indicated a broader truth about Christmas and its gifts. In a world dominated by commerce, one important ritual of grace was spending money on others. Indeed, charity and gifts, and the increasingly munificent expenditures on them, emphasized the relationship between affluence, which many saw as a reward from God, and Christian duty. Mixing traditional Protestant and American doctrines of individualism with the newer vision of Social Darwinism, many in the Christian community felt that American prosperity was proof and extension of God-ordained success, a link confirmed by Christmas giving.

If gifts became the currency of an almost theological vision of affluence, their transcendent symbol was an updated version of an old saint. Santa Claus, with his fur-trimmed red suit, sackful of toys, reindeer, sleigh and home at the North Pole, emerged as a major folk figure.

He first appeared in semi-modern form in the 1820s, in Clement Moore's An Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas. By the 1850s and '60s, artists and writers had given wide
circulation to the genial and generous American saint that Moore had introduced. Thomas Nast's fanciful Christmas drawings widened the sphere of Santa’s rule in the late nineteenth century. Moore had already supplied eight reindeer to pull the sleigh. Nast gave him a workshop and ledgers to record children's conduct. He made him taller and dressed him in red. To this, Nast and others added a home at the North Pole, elves, a wife and even, by some accounts, children.

These amplifications imparted to Santa an ever more human and credible dimension and idealized troublesome aspects of the nation's material and spiritual life. For example, the charming notion that Santa and his tiny helpers supplied all the Christmas toys encoded a highly romantic vision of American capitalism. This Santa reigned without opposition over a vast empire. In a world of practicality, he prospered as a highly successful manufacturer and distributor of toys. From his fur coat to his full girth, he resembled the nation's Gilded Age presidents and its well-fed captains of industry.

Labor conditions were idealized as well. A work force of skilled and reliable elf-labor helped secure Santa's place in the pantheon of American business. These North Pole elves were not unlike immigrants working in the nation's sweatshops. Unassimilated, isolated from the rest of society, and undifferentiated by individual name or character, the best of them worked hard, long and unselfishly; Their existence made manifest a maxim that hard work and a cheerful attitude benefited all.

Yet any analogies that might be drawn between Santa's work and late nineteenth-century capitalism lay enmeshed in paradox, for, in significant was, Santa Claus also represented values at odds with the system. He was a robber baron in reverse. Rather than acquire wealth, he shed it yearly. He never purchased gifts, but (with elf help) made his own to give away without regard for financial profit, rewarding lest the most innocent and naive of all – the children. His world lay at some distance from the calumnies and banalities of everyday life. Santa Claus exemplified the realm of dreams, hopes, wishes and beliefs, not from the realities and compromises necessary to negotiate contemporary life.

So powerful a symbol did Santa become that a number of writers and preachers worried that he had become a substitute and rival to Jesus. Centuries earlier Puritans had expressed the same fear about saints in general. Although the faith not only of Puritan Calvinists but of all
Christians had modified over the intervening years, America's Protestant culture still looked upon an iconographic, human-like embodiment of Christmas with great suspicion. An evangelical magazine gave a succinct illustration of the danger when it reported in 1906 that one little girl, when told that Santa did not exist, refused to attend Sabbath School. 'Likely as not this Jesus Christ business will turn out just like Santa Claus', she reasoned.

The fear that children might equate Santa with Jesus or God, however, missed an important point. In an age of science, Santa, while not a religious figure per se, represented a palpable medium through which children and adults in late nineteenth-century America could experience and act upon spiritual impulses. In that age (and ours) of material wealth and rational discourse, the ascetic saints of Christianity held no wide appeal, but Santa allowed one to give and get and also to believe.

Therein lay the significance of the New York Sun's famous discourse on the spiritual meaning of Santa. In 1897, Virginia O'Hanlon asked a plain question of the editor: 'Is there a Santa Claus?' 'Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus', came the terse reply. The answer, though, was not a patent fib designed to placate a youngster, but an exposition on belief itself. 'Virginia, your little friends are wrong', the editor wrote. 'They have been affected by the scepticism of a sceptical age. They do not believe except they see'. Without Santa, he argued:

... there would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence ... Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

The durability of the American Christmas may, in fact, rest on its ability to bring to our material and scientific world, against daunting odds, a broadly shared hint of the sacred. It is in the brief December season that Americans, using the language and objects of their culture, recapture ideals and act according to their better selves. In this sense, the nation's Christmas truly brings together the culture's two most disparate yet similarly unbounded projects – to seek wealth and to secure salvation.

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