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Chapter & Chatter Café PowerPoint Opening Slide

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How Did Christmas Come to Be Celebrated on December 25?

While Christmas is a centuries old tradition, it was never an official American national holiday until 1870. When Burton Chauncey Cook, House Representative from Illinois, introduced a bill to make Christmas a national holiday which was passed by both the House and Senate in June 1870. President Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill which made Christmas a legal holiday.

- Before the Civil War

North and South were divided on the issue of Christmas, as well as the issue of slavery. Many of the North saw sin in the celebration of Christmas, to those people Thanksgiving was more appropriate. But in the South, Christmas was an important part of the social season. Not surprisingly, the first three states to Christmas a legal holiday were in the South: Alabama in 1836, Louisiana and Arkansas in 1838.

For most people, Christmas is all about the presents. But how did such a supposedly sacred holiday become a festival of greed?

Not many people know the history behind Christmas gift giving, and it will probably shock you.

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This year, Americans will spend somewhere in the neighborhood of **900 billion dollars on Christmas**, but most people have no explanation for why they are buying all of these gifts.

Those that are Christian will tell you that they are doing it to celebrate the birth of Christ, but gift giving on this holiday actually originated long before Christ was born.

Others will tell you that they are just following tradition, but most of them have absolutely no idea where the tradition of Christmas gift giving originally came from.

The truth is that most people simply don't care about the history. They are just excited about all of the stuff that they are going to get on December 25th.

But you all know me. I just can't pass up the chance to talk history. So here we go.

In early America, there was no Christmas gift giving. In fact, the Puritans disapproved of celebrating the holiday, and in some areas the celebration of Christmas was actually banned by law.

On May 11, 1659, the Massachusetts Bay Colony legislature even went so far as to officially ban Christmas and gave anyone found celebrating it a fine of five shillings.

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The legislature stated the ban was needed ***“For preventing disorders arising in several places within this jurisdiction, by reason of some still observing such festivalls as were superstitiously kept in other countrys, to the great dishonor of God & offence of others. It is therefore ordered ... that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labour, feasting, or any other way, upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offence five shillings, as a fine to the county.”***

The ban remained in place for 22 years until it was repealed in 1681 after a new surge of European immigrants brought a demand for the holiday.

However, opposition to the holiday lingered well into the 19th century, when many New England children were required to attend school on Christmas Day.

But weren't the Puritans Christians?

Didn't they want to honor the birth of Jesus?

Of course, they were Christians. They took their faith incredibly seriously. But they also knew their history a lot better than we do.

Most Christians do not realize this, but Christians did not celebrate anything in late December for the first 300 years after the time of Christ.

The only people that celebrated anything at that time were the pagans.

Some of you may be aware of the great Roman celebration known as Saturnalia.

But most people don't know that our tradition of gift giving can be traced back to that holiday.

Saturnalia was an ancient Roman festival in honor of the God Saturn, held on the 17th of December and later expanded with festivities through to the 23rd of December.

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The holiday was celebrated with a sacrifice at the Temple of Saturn, in the Roman Forum, and a public banquet, followed by private gift-giving, continual partying, and a carnival atmosphere that overturned Roman social norms: gambling was permitted, and masters provided table service for their slaves.

Eventually, the Romans began holding a festival at the end of Saturnalia on December 25th called Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, which means "the birthday of the unconquered sun".

Throughout the empire, the "rebirth of the sun" was celebrated. The winter solstice was past and now the days were starting to get longer again. It was therefore a logical time to honor "the rebirth of the sun god".

When the Roman Empire legalized Christianity in the early 4th century, the Roman government began to put a lot of pressure on church leaders to fit into the broader society.

So eventually the birthday of the Son of God was moved to the time when the rest of society was celebrating “the rebirth of the sun god”.

December 25th was first celebrated as the birthday of Jesus in about 336 AD, and in the year 350 AD Pope Julius I officially decreed that Christians would celebrate that day from then on.

Of course, Jesus was not actually born in late December. The evidence that we have indicates that he was most probably born in the fall.

The only reason people celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th today is because the Catholics of the 4th century wanted to appease the pagan Roman government and the pagan culture at large.

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In the Middle Ages Christmas was a two-week period of celebration from Christmas Eve to the twelfth night of January 6th, hence the Twelve Days of Christmas Carol written in 1780.

In the Middle Ages the twelve days was a time of feasting, parties, and of course the giving and receiving of seasonal gifts.

The Christmas gifts would include generous lords giving items such as clothing and firewood to their serfs.

The origin of the English word ‘Christmas’ is from the Old English middle age ‘Cristes Maesse’ which literally means ‘Mass of Christ’.

Over time, the practice of gift giving during late December faded, and by the early 19th century the big tradition was actually to open presents on New Year’s Day.

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But then merchants saw an opportunity. According to historians, advertisements for “Christmas presents” began appearing in newspapers in the United States in the 1820s.

During the mid-1800s, entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to sell holiday trinkets and gifts in the streets, from carts and stalls.

Children, in particular, liked this way of celebrating Christmas. It was around 1840 that children began to hang their stockings by the fireplace, according to the Connecticut Historical Society.

New York's population grew nearly tenfold between 1800 and 1850, and during that time elites became increasingly frightened of traditional December rituals of "social inversion," in which poorer people could demand food and drink from the wealthy and celebrate in the streets, abandoning established social constraints much like on Halloween night or New Year's Eve.

These rituals, which occurred any time between St. Nicholas Day (a Catholic feast day observed in Europe on December 6th) and New Year's Day, had for centuries been a means of relieving European discontent during the traditional downtime of the agricultural cycle.

In a newly congested urban environment, though, aristocrats worried that such celebrations might become vehicles for protest when employers refused to give workers time off during the holidays or when a long winter of unemployment loomed for seasonal laborers.

In response to these concerns, a group of wealthy men who called themselves the Knickerbockers invented a new series of traditions for this time of year that gradually moved Christmas celebrations out of the city's streets and into its homes.

They presented these traditions as a reinvigoration of Dutch customs practiced in New Amsterdam and New York during the colonial period.

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Using two story collections written by Washington Irving, their most well-known member, these New Yorkers experimented with domestic festivities on St. Nicholas Day and New Year's Day until another member of the group, Clement Clark Moore, established the tradition of celebrating on

Christmas with his enormously popular poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (better known as "The Night Before Christmas") in 1822.

The St. Nicholas that Moore presented in his famous poem was like the other traditions the Knickerbockers borrowed and transformed.

His delivery of presents to children gave department stores a helping hand in selling toys, and by 1888, children were invited to meet a real live Santa at these stores.

By the early 1900s, newspapers even carried Page 1 stories about how Santa in his sleigh, filled with gifts, was on the way to reward those well-behaved children.

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Around this same time, Charles Dickens', "A Christmas Carol", became a hit as it spread throughout the nation in 1867-68.

Being cheap and stingy at Christmas time would convey that you were too much like that money-grubbing Ebenezer Scrooge.

The story of Santa, family rituals, and the desire to be generous have helped make this the most giving time of the year. The average consumer is expected to give 24 presents and spend about \$900, according to the National Retail Federation's survey.

However, for all the efforts of businessmen in the 1800's 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.

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Americans started wrapping the gifts they gave. The custom had once been merely to give a gift uncovered, but a present hidden in paper heightened the effect of the gesture, making the act of giving a moment of revelation.

Wrapping also helped designate an item as a gift. Large stores began to wrap gifts purchased from their stock in distinctive, colored papers, with tinsel cords and bright ribbons, as part of their delivery services.

Over time, Christmas gifts came to be associated with a magical gift giver in cultures all over the globe.

Of course, in the United States this magical gift giver is known as “Santa Claus”.

So, what about this whole Black Friday mess?

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Historians believe the name started in Philadelphia in the mid-1960s. Bus drivers and police used “Black Friday” to describe the heavy traffic that would clog city streets the day after Thanksgiving as shoppers headed to the stores.

Businesses, however, didn't like the negative tone associated with the Black Friday name. In the early 1980s, a more positive explanation of the name began to circulate.

According to this alternative explanation, Black Friday is the day when retailers finally begin to turn a profit for the year. In accounting terms, operating at a loss (losing money) is called being “in the red” because accountants traditionally used red ink to show negative amounts (losses).

Positive amounts (profits) were usually shown in black ink. Thus, being “in the black” is a good thing because it means stores are operating at a profit (making money).

Well, even in the first decade of the 20th century, people and organizations began to criticize this new pattern of gift-giving that had emerged in America.

Given the poor quality of the gifts and the considerable time that it took to purchase, wrap and deliver them, no wonder Progressive Era reformers

looked for alternative ways to celebrate the holiday that were less burdensome and more gratifying.

That's right folks, even back then, the liberal progressive movement was there telling us how things should be.

Their movement paved the way for Christmas cards, which became the ideal small gift for acquaintances and business associates.

A survey of the mail system in 1911 reflected the shift, showing that the total number of items posted had increased while their total weight had dropped significantly.

In 1906, the Consumer's League formed the Shop Early Campaign to discourage last-minute purchasing, a practice that strained everyone in the retail trade.

The league also pressured stores to maintain regular store hours throughout the holiday season so that their employees could fully enjoy the celebration.

They maintained and publicized a list of stores that complied in the hope of encouraging shoppers to choose them over stores that placed more burdens on their employees.

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In 1912, Progressives also established the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving (known as SPUG).

Its goals were to curtail the presentation of gimcracks (showy but shoddily made gifts), and to curb the practice of store clerks giving presents to their supervisors (which they felt were "extorted" rather than heartfelt).

The general success of the Progressives in reforming Christmas, as well as previous efforts to mold the festivities, shows that the celebration can be changed, just like any other cultural phenomenon.

So don't accept current complaints that Christmas has spun out of control and dictates our holiday behavior, driving us to ever-higher levels of spending.

What do you think folks? Are we stuck at the mercy of an ever expanding Christmas buying season? Or can we as consumers, reign in the control that retailers now have over the holiday season?

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We called the North Pole earlier this year and requested Santa and Mrs. Claus appear at the Camdenton Library for a very special storytime. They will read Clement Clark Moore's poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas." Families are invited to join us for storytime on Friday, December 20, 2024, starting at 4 p.m. After storytime, we will take family portraits with Santa and Mrs. Claus if anyone is interested. We will also have a station set up for cookie decorating.

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Local author M.E. Weyerbacher will be at the Stoutland Library on Saturday, December 21, 2024, at 10 a.m. to discuss her published books and books in progress, her writing process, and her publishing journey. She is an essayist, poet, and inspirational romance author who loves tall pines and even taller cups of coffee.

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For those who cannot attend our event with Santa and Mrs. Claus on Friday evening at the Camdenton Library, we invite families to join us at the Macks Creek Library on Saturday, December 21, 2024, starting at 10 a.m. for a story and cookies with Santa and Mrs. Claus.

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Families are invited to the Osage Beach Library on Monday, December 23, 2024, beginning at 10:30 am, where we will be reading Chris Van Allsburg's book, "The Polar Express." Kids are encouraged to wear their

pajamas and bring their favorite stuffed animals. We will be serving hot cocoa for families to enjoy.

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All Camden County Library District branches will be closed for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day on Tuesday and Wednesday, December 24 & 25, 2024. On a quick note, the Stoutland Library will close at noon on Saturday, December 28, 2024.

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All Camden County Library District branches will close at 3 pm on Tuesday, December 31, 2024, for New Year's Eve and will be closed all day on Wednesday, January 1, 2025.

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Adults 19 and older are invited to the Osage Beach Library on Friday, January 10, 2025, at 3 p.m. For our next Upcycled Craft event, we will transform vintage salt shakers into beautiful tassels. The library will provide all supplies. Registration for this event is required. Registrations can be made by calling the library at 573-348-3282, visiting our calendar of events, or clicking on the link in this video's description.

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Beginning Wednesday, January 8, the Osage Beach Library will offer Hatha yoga and Yoga Nidra meditation from 6:30 to 8 p.m. with master yoga instructor Linda Garcia. Hatha yoga focuses on posture and breathing, allowing us to channel vital energy. Linda will lead our weekly sessions, which will engage participants in breathing, asanas (yoga poses), and meditation. As our guide, Linda will help us adapt and create a yoga flow that can be done by all ages, levels, and physical abilities. If you have your own yoga mat, you are encouraged to bring it with yoga blocks and eye pillows. If you do not have a mat, we have some that can be borrowed for these sessions. Registration for these events is required. Please call

573-348-3282, visit our calendar of events, or click on the link in the description below to get signed up today!