

All About "A Visit from St. Nicholas"



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The History of "A Visit from St. Nicholas"

"A Visit from St. Nicholas" was first published in the *Troy Sentinel* on December 23, 1823 by Mr. Orville Holley. Given to Mr. Holley anonymously, the poem immediately became a Christmas favorite. Only nine days after its debut in the *Troy Sentinel*, it appeared in the *New York Spectator*. Two years later it reappeared in New Jersey and Pennsylvania almanacs. In 1826, it appeared in the literary magazine *The Casket*. It also appeared in the *Poughkeepsie Journal* in 1828, which came just six weeks before the death of Henry Livingston Jr. Although the poem continued to be reprinted, the authorship was unknown for quite some time. It is commonly believed that [Clement Clarke Moore](#) wrote "A Visit from St. Nicholas" on December 24, 1822, while doing some Christmas shopping. When he arrived home, he copied the poem down and recited it at the Christmas feast. A guest who heard the poem then copied it and delivered it to Mr. Orville Holley. This story may be fact or fiction, for Mr. Holley never confirmed who delivered the poem, although Moore did finally take credit for the poem in 1844.

Controversy Behind "A Visit from St. Nicholas"

The well-known poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas," or what has also become known as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas", has become a Christmas tradition, yet it also has created a controversy that many people are unaware of. The true authorship of the poem has been disputed since the 19th century. Years after the poem was published, [Clement Clarke Moore](#) took credit as the author, yet some believe that the true author was none other than [Henry Livingston Jr.](#) In order to investigate the credibility of the authorship of these two men, writers like [Joe Nickell](#) (*The Case of the Christmas Poem*) and [Don Foster](#) (*Author Unknown*), have analyzed the poem and created theories that attempt to prove one of the men as the true author. Their theories and the investigation behind the authorship of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" rely heavily upon [the changing view of Santa Claus](#).

Potential Authors of "A Visit From St. Nicholas"

By means of its many publications, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" quickly grasped the American public's attention and soon spread to papers and journals across the United States. The poem was originally published anonymously and no credit was taken for its authorship until 1844. Almost 20 years after the original publication of the poem, Clement Clarke Moore took credit for the beloved holiday work, and became known as both the creator of the poem and the "founder of modern Christmas". It is widely accepted that Moore wrote the poem; however, discrepancies have arisen between Moore's acceptance of credit for the poem and outside claims that say Livingston might be the author. Heading the argument against Moore are the descendants of [Henry Livingston Jr.](#), who claim that Moore did not write the poem, but that it is Henry Livingston Jr. who deserves the credit.

Clement Clarke Moore

An old-style country gentleman and scholarly professor of Hebrew, Clement Clarke Moore is credited with the authorship of "A Visit from St. Nicholas". As a great Manhattan landowner, Moore played a key role in the emergence of New York landscape. Although much of his work reflects serious pious issues, it is suggested that Moore wrote the poem for his children. Though it is enthusiastically accepted by all of those who read it, Clement Clarke Moore refused to have "A Visit from St. Nicholas" published on the grounds that it was "beneath his dignity". A year after the poem was written, however, the poem resurfaced and became what is commonly known as an "overnight sensation". Apparently, a family member had secretly submitted the poem to an out-of-town newspaper. Despite its success, Moore refused to accept credit for his work until over a decade later (1844) in a volume of his collected works. Even then, Moore attempted to belittle the piece as one of his "mere trifles". Ironically, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" is the work Professor Clement Clarke Moore is most remembered for today.

Henry Livingston Jr.

Livingston never personally accepted credit for writing "A Visit from St. Nicholas". It was Livingston's daughters who made the claim to their father's authorship 20 years after his death. Don Foster, in his book *Author Unknown*, wrote one of the first persuasive essays to support Henry Livingston Jr. as the true author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas". Unlike the man who has been recognized by most people as the true author of "A Visit From St. Nicholas", Clement Clarke Moore, Henry Livingston Jr. is not very well known. Most of his poetry was written for himself and his family and therefore was not published. His published works are clever, amusing, funny, and good natured. Unlike Moore, Livingston's style and personality perfectly match the way in which "A Visit from St. Nicholas" was written. Livingston's personality constitutes a large part of Don Foster's argument in *Author Unknown* in which he lays his argument that Henry Livingston Jr. is the true author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas".

Although Henry Livingston Jr. never accepted credit for "A Visit From St. Nicholas", many of his descendants, such as [[Mary Van Deusen](http://www.iment.com/maida/familytree/henry)], are determined to prove that he wrote the poem. Some of Livingston's other works have been promoted by those who want to prove his authorship.

The Controversy: Don Foster's *Author Unknown*

[Don Foster's](#) *Author Unknown* dedicates a chapter, titled "Yes, Virginia, There Was a Santa Claus", to the justification of the belief that Henry Livingston Jr. is the true author of the poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas". The idea came to him when [Mrs. Van Deusen](#) contacted Foster in hopes of gaining some help towards a website she was building to defend Livingston. Hearing that Van Deusen's distant cousin (fourth-cousin-twice-removed), Stephen Livingston Thomas, had in his possession many original documents and manuscripts of Livingston's works which would support the case, Foster was persuaded to take on the project. After reviewing many of his works, Foster was convinced that Livingston had written the piece.

Although the authorship of the famous poem is still uncertain, Foster helps to shed light on the complex controversy surrounding the issue.

The Usual Suspects: Henry Livingston Jr.

Henry Livingston Jr. was always known for creating charming and clever poems for his children. He had published many articles and poems long before "A Visit from St. Nicholas". His works were always known to be "witty, sometimes hilarious, never sarcastic; full of love for humanity and driven by and irrepressible joie de vivre..." (Foster, 237). Being that he was a naturally joyful person, one could easily infer that he wrote the poem. Foster also uses anecdotal evidence to argue that Livingston may have indeed written "A Visit from St. Nicholas". Other evidence came in the form of his structure as well as his vocabulary in other pieces. For example, his eldest daughter, Eliza, states that her father would, "entertain us on winter evenings by getting down the paint-box, we seated around the table. First he would portray something very pathetic, which would melt us to tears. The next thing would be so comic that we would be almost wild with laughter. And this dear, good, man was your great-great-grandfather" (Foster, 236).

The Usual Suspects: Clement Clarke Moore

Clement Clarke Moore is the man depicted as the thief of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in Foster's book. For now, he is the credited author of the poem, however many of Livingston's Poughkeepsie, NY descendants wish to correct this "lie." Foster describes Moore as a cold and critical scrooge that could not possibly have written a warm, lighthearted, family-oriented poem like "A Visit from St. Nicholas". Furthermore, a plethora of Moore's works, such as his book of poetry, *Poems*, depict children as annoyances, and he was known for advocating strict morals over human indulgences. Foster's claim is based strongly on this idea that Moore's character must have held him back from ever being able to write a poem with the tone and theme of "A Visit from St. Nicholas".

The Historical Record

There is evidence both for and against each author's claim to "A Visit from St. Nicholas". Livingston's relatives claim that Moore stole the poem from a governess, who was one of the nieces of Livingston, in 1801. Moore, however, didn't have children until 1815. Moore was considered a "crotchety" man, and advocates for Livingston say that Moore could never have written such a good-natured poem. In the early twentieth century, the first article was published to raise the argument of authorship by a niece of Henry Livingston Jr. Since then, numerous historians have written articles supporting Livingston as the author. The Moore supporters simply deny this, since Moore is the long time accredited author (Foster, 231).

Manuscript Evidence

An analysis of many of the syntactic and other literary aspects of each poet's writings is used by Foster to support Livingston's authorship. For example, the use of the word "all" in the famous poem holds more significance than the average reader would guess. "All" can be used as either a pronoun or an adverb, and the majority of writers use it as a pronoun rather than an adverb. However, the author of the poem in this case does not. Furthermore, Foster found that, "in Livingston's early verse, and in Livingston's late verse, and in his verse in between, the pronouns and adverbs are about evenly divided. In Moore's poetry, the the pronouns outnumber the adverbs 10 to 1 (and in Moore's prose by more than 100 to 1)" (Foster, 259).

Additionally, the use of the term "snug" to mean cozy or comfortable, is first used by Christopher Anstey in *The New Bath Guide* (1776). This poem was, "a major influence on both Henry Livingston and on the author of 'A Visit from St. Nicholas'". The "second earliest instance" of the use of this term was located in *The Highland Reel* (1789) by John O'Keefe. Foster notes that the "two latest items in Henry Livingston's music book (1776-1784) are from John O'Keefe" (Foster, 260). Clearly, Foster is suggesting that Henry Livingston and the author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" had much in common, and are thus one in the same.

Furthermore, the phrase "Happy Christmas" was used in the original version of the poem, through a closing line that reads, "Happy Christmas to all." During the questionable time period in which the poem was created, Foster contends that the use of the term "Happy Christmas" was "rare" (Foster, 261). At one time Livingston wrote, "A happy Christmas to my dear Sally Welles" in one of his many writings. However, there is no available evidence to prove that Moore ever used the "rare" term "Happy Christmas" (Foster, 260).

The Santa Context

Who is the real "Santa Claus"?

We may never know the true author of this famous poem. Evidence can be found both supporting and contradicting Foster's *Author Unknown*. The only certainties are that there will be strong and determined advocates in both corners, and that no matter who the author is, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" will always be a significant part of many children's fondest Christmas memories.

The Controversy: Joe Nickell's *The Case of the Christmas Poem*

The Usual Suspects: Henry Livingston Jr.

[Joe Nickell](#) views Henry Livingston Jr. (1748-1828) as a relatively obscure figure who lacks much formal recognition for his works. Never stating claim himself for the authorship of "A Visit from St. Nicholas", it has been Livingston's family members who have assumed the responsibility of promoting his life and its accomplishments.

The Usual Suspects: Clement Clarke Moore

Clement Clarke Moore (1779-1863) is described in this portion of Nickell's book as both a pious and creative man. Moore was a biblical study professor as well as a father. Moore's claim to the authorship of the poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas", is that he wrote it for his children at Christmas time. Those who argue against Moore, and therefore against Joe Nickell's thesis in *The Case of The Christmas Poem*, often use the argument that Moore's religious background would have prevented him from ever writing such a secular poem. Others defend Moore's position as a father and also use the apparent religious connections to "A Visit from St. Nicholas".

The Historical Record

Looking at the history of the poem strongly helps to prove that Clement Clarke Moore was the author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in Nickell's *The Case of the Christmas Poem*. Nickell raises several interesting points to help disprove that Henry Livingston Jr. had any connection to the poem and its publication. Nickell states that Livingston's family have neither an exact date of writing, a copy of the poem, or a record of when it was published (Nickell 295). Nickell also questions why Livingston's family did not accept credit for the poem before the death of Henry Livingston Jr. (Nickell 296). Finally, it becomes apparent in *The Case of the Christmas Poem* that Livingston had no connection to the original publication of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in New York City in 1823, while Moore has several possible connections.

Manuscript Evidence

The controversy over who authored "A Visit from St. Nicholas" continues due to the "disappearance" of the original manuscript. A librarian of the General Theological Seminary, Dr. Neil Sonne, is convinced Clement Clarke Moore is the author due to a manuscript he distinctively wrote himself. There is no copy or proof of the original manuscript, but there are a few theories as to where it may have ended up if written by Moore. One idea is it could have been ruined by his three young daughters in the course of their playtime, as he had written a poem just for their pleasure before. Another possibility is that the manuscript was used for the larger manuscript of his *Poems*, and sent to his New York publishers, never to be reclaimed. Moore later created four autographed copies of the manuscript in 1853, 1856, 1860, and 1862. These copies are owned and kept by Strong Museum and Huntington Library, privately-owned by Kaller's America Gallery and the New York Historical Society. In addition to these four copies, his daughter also calligraphed a copy in 1855. With this being the only existing proof, the evidence is strongly against Livingston. His only piece of evidence is a claim made by a relative after the supposed copy had been burned long before, to which Don Foster responded with "Word of this injustice passed from the major's children to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, none of whom, however, were able to prove that the attribution to Moore was indeed erroneous. It was more a matter of faith." This claim was made by Elizabeth Brewer, Livingston's daughter-in-law. She supposedly read the poem and told a descendent: "Some one has made a mistake! Clement Moore did not write 'The Night Before Christmas'. Your grandfather, Henry Livingston wrote it." Having been written in 1918 by yet another descendent, even this anecdotal evidence is both distant and trivial. The fire in which the original manuscript was supposedly destroyed occurred circa 1847 in the Wisconsin home of Livingston's oldest daughter, Susan.

The Santa Context

Who is the real "Santa Claus"?

In the controversy of who wrote "A Visit from St. Nicholas", no one knows exactly who wrote the poem. In *The Case of the Christmas Poem*, Joe Nickell states that the author of the poem used certain cultural contexts in order to create the image of St. Nicholas. This evidence helps to prove whether the poem was more likely written by Livingston in the period between 1780 and 1810 or by Moore in the year of 1822. By examining [the changing view of Santa Claus](#), Nickell explains how Clement Clarke Moore is the better candidate for the true authorship of the poem. Before writing "A Visit from St. Nicholas", Moore wrote the first poem in the style of a letter to Santa Claus entitled, "From Saint Nicholas". This poem, written for his daughter and in the same material form as "A Visit", proves that Clement Clarke Moore may actually be the true author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas".

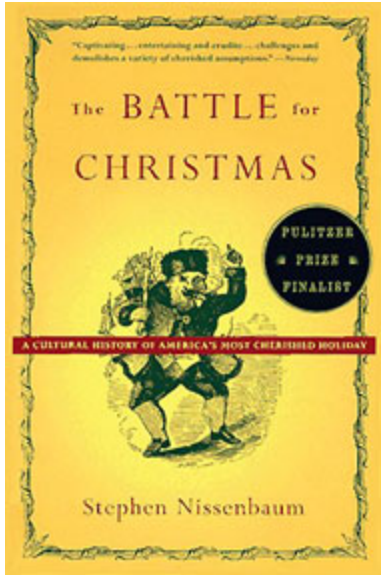
The Significance of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in The Changing View of Santa Claus

Prior to the publication of "A Visit from St. Nicholas", St. Nicholas was often represented as an individual of both great authority and great charity. He had a majestic, yet serious, fashion depicted by authors such as John Pintard.

However, this serious depiction of St. Nicholas changed in the context of "A Visit from St. Nicholas". In this poem, St. Nicholas is portrayed as a jolly and cheerful old fellow. He takes on the character of the Santa Claus that millions of children know and love today. "A Visit from St. Nicholas" not only created the current Christmas tradition, but the current image of Santa Claus as well. With his "bowl full of jelly" stomach and rosy cheeks, Santa Claus was born. He was finally introduced and placed in the public eye where all of society fell in love with him. The spirit of Christmas, as well as the spirit of Santa, is what makes "A Visit from St. Nicholas" such a significant poem.

Stephen Nissenbaum's *The Battle for Christmas*

Author [Stephen Nissenbaum](#) (*The Battle for Christmas*), analyzes "A Visit From St. Nicholas" with the assumption that Clement Clarke Moore wrote the poem. He uses the poem to explain its significance and how it has shaped past and present Christmas traditions.



In "Revisiting 'A Visit from St. Nicholas'", chapter two of the book *The Battle for Christmas* by Stephen Nissenbaum, Nissenbaum uses the assumption that Moore wrote "A Visit from St. Nicholas" to discuss the poem's significance. Rather than discuss the poem's authorship controversy, he places his focus on understanding the poem's meaning and its role in transforming the holiday. The reader is enlightened by the information that Moore chose to omit a longstanding characteristic that St. Nicholas previously possessed. According to Nissenbaum, Moore's poem only states that there is a pleasant Christmas for everybody who celebrates the holiday season, and neglects to add the "prospect of judgement". Nissenbaum concludes that St. Nicholas lost his "authority, his majesty, even his patrician dignity" in this poem by straying from the actions of God on "Doomsday" and rewarding some individuals for a virtuous life, while punishing others for their lack of faith. Nissenbaum thinks that Moore "defrocked St. Nicholas and declassified him". Through much evidence from "A Visit from St. Nicholas", Nissenbaum establishes the view that Moore is calling St. Nicholas a peddler. In Nissenbaum's eyes, a peddler is similar to a beggar or a tradesman. Through an in-depth understanding of the historical context, it can be assumed that prior to "A Visit from St. Nicholas", the characterization of a peddler was an individual who "knocked" on the door of wealthy New York residents, making a loud "clatter," and then rudely invited himself into the home. Moore is virtually calling St. Nicholas a "plebeian", but with better intentions and more respectable actions.

Nissenbaum believes that Moore degraded the image of St. Nicholas with his choice of the wording used throughout his poem. Considering the fact that Moore was a Manhattan landowner, Nissenbaum concludes that Moore's views on St. Nicholas are coming from a wealthy perspective and he therefore characterizes St. Nicholas as a "lower" figure. Nissenbaum emphasizes the fact that "A Visit from St. Nicholas" was the product of Moore's distrust and dislike for the lower class in a developing New York City society. The poem served as a means by which to control the lower class' misbehavior around the holidays. Had Livingston written the poem, or if Livingston did write the poem, Nissenbaum's views on the societal read and what the poem meant would have drastically been altered and proved to be irrelevant.

Nissenbaum not only analyzes the history and core meaning of the poem, but also discusses its important role in helping to shape Christmas. The Knickerbockers were looking to make Christmas more of a family tradition and less of a pagan festival. After "A Visit from Saint Nicholas" was published in the *Troy Sentinel*, many newspapers began printing the poem. Thousands of people read this poem and felt its influence in their lives. Toward the later half of the 1800's, parents began to focus more on their children during this time of year. As a result, the poem was now being published in numerous childrens books, and was given as presents during the holiday season. Children were then given a more definite idea of who Santa Clause was and what he did every year. Essentially, this poem presented the world with a more definite idea of the Santa Claus known today.

What The Critics Have To Say

[X.J. Kennedy](#) didn't leave anyone guessing about his viewpoints of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in his December 1993 'New York Times' book review. In his article, "The Man Who Hitched the Reindeer to Santa Claus's Sleigh", he not only gives Clement Clarke Moore credit for the poem but ranks it alongside other American classics such as "[The Raven](#)", "[Casey at the Bat](#)", and "[Daddy](#)".

X.J. Kennedy starts his article with a personal touch, with the memory of him listening to "A Visit from St. Nicholas" on his mother's lap right before he would retire to bed on Christmas Eve night. After that, it was pure praise of Clement Clarke Moore's ingenious mind and his immortal poem. Kennedy first goes into detail about Moore's invention of eight reindeer being the mode of transportation for St. Nicholas. Kennedy was not only impressed that Moore disregarded the Norwegian lore that Kriss Kringle was the chauffeur of St. Nick, but that he named each one of his eight reindeer. What also fascinates Kennedy is the choice of features he gives St. Nick. "Moore removes St. Nick's bishop's miter, decks him out in fur, gives him a ruddy face and a pot belly, hands him a sack of toys and calls him an elf." Kennedy is so boastful in his praises that he dares his readers to compare Moore's version of St. Nicholas to [Washington Irving's](#) in "Knickerbocker's History of New York". While not a "myth maker", Moore is described by X.J. Kennedy as being "a great myth refiner". He celebrates Moore's ability to create this figure by altering and merging old models.

Not only does X.J. Kennedy rave about Clement Clarke Moore's imagination of St. Nicholas, but how action packed his poem is. From an elf who storms down the chimney, assembles gifts with no sign of fatigue, and commands a rather loud team of reindeer, "A Visit from St. Nicholas" is no lullaby. But what Kennedy thinks separates "A Visit from St. Nicholas" from all other poems is Moore's "skill in music making". Moore goes where few poets dare, according to Kennedy. While some poets shy away from "obvious rhythms" and alliteration, Moore highlights his poem with them. Not only is it hard to ignore the clattering and pounding of eight reindeer on a rooftop, but it is impossible to find yourself not taken away with Moore's poem.

After reading X.J. Kennedy's article on "A Visit from St. Nicholas", you're ready to give Clement Clarke Moore the keys to the city. Kennedy's praises may seem a little over the top, but you can't argue what "A Visit from St. Nicholas" does for a boy on his mother's lap.

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"A Visit from St. Nicholas", more commonly known as "The Night Before Christmas" and "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" from its first line, is a poem first published anonymously in 1823 and later attributed to Clement Clarke Moore, who claimed authorship in 1837. The poem has been called "arguably the best-known verses ever written by an American" and is largely responsible for some of the conceptions of Santa Claus from the mid-nineteenth century to today. It has had a massive effect on the history As I drew in my head, and was turning around, Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound. He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot, And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot; A bundle of Toys he had flung on his back, And he looked like a pedler just opening his pack. His eyesâ€”how they twinkled! his dimples how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!Â He was the author of Poems (Barlett & Welford, 1844), which included the poem â€œA Visit from St. Nicholas.â€ More Clement Clarke Moore >. sign up for poem-a-day.Â About This Poem. On December 23, 1823, a poem called "A Visit from Saint Nicholas" was published anonymously in the Sentinel, the local newspaper of Troy, New York.