



Happy Holidays!



The Christmas Tree - Winslow Homer 1858

Today it would be difficult for the average American to overlook the Christmas holiday, with displays at most retail stores, Christmas specials on television, and lights illuminating neighborhoods around the country. How was Christmas celebrated in the 1800s? How did the Lincoln family celebrate the holiday?

Popular Culture

Santa Claus, also referred to as Father Christmas, Kris Kringle, and/or St. Nicholas, is a combination of many different legends and mythical creatures as told through the centuries by a multitude of cultures and faiths. The modern image of Santa Claus had not fully solidified in the public's eye until the later half of the nineteenth century, when Thomas Nast's drawing of the fat jolly elf with a bag full of presents appeared in *Harper's Weekly*

in the 1870s and 1880s. Christmas literature of the time period included *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, written by Clement Moore in 1822 and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which was published in America in 1843. Christmas carols of the Lincoln era included *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, written in 1850, and *We Three Kings of Orient Are*, written in 1857.

Decorations/Dining



Godey's Lady's Book - 1850

The Christmas tree was first represented in popular print in a woman's magazine, *Godey's Lady's Book*, in 1850. The image was an Americanized version of a very popular image of Queen Victoria and her family from the *Illustrated London News*. America's fondness for Queen Victoria helped popularize the idea of having a Christmas tree inside the home. While we have no evidence that the Lincolns had a Christmas tree, the family may have visited the Christmas tree exhibited at the First Presbyterian Church located a few blocks away.

Decorations were minimal and often not put up until Christmas Eve after the children had gone to bed. Garland, holly,

and evergreen boughs covering the mantels, pictures, chandeliers, and door and window frames, and perhaps a sprig of mistletoe tucked in some opportunistic spot decorated the homes. The poinsettia became a popular decoration in the United States in the 1850s and spring bulbs "forced" to bloom were also popular.

Then, as now, the holidays were a time for special foods. A typical menu for a special holiday season may have included boned turkey, oysters, venison, chicken salad, biscuits, bullion, glazed fruit, fruit cake, ice cream, cake, candy, macaroon pyramids, citrus fruit, preserves, wine, eggnog, and hot coffee.

Stockings/Gifts



Lincoln Home Stocking

There is evidence to suggest that the Lincoln family participated in the Christmas tradition of stuffing stockings with small gifts. Lincoln family biographer Ruth Painter Randall's 1955 work, *Lincoln's Sons*, tells of the Lincolns hanging Christmas stockings. The eldest son, Robert, "was careful not to disturb the illusions of Willie and Tad as to the one who had filled those stockings."

Popular Christmas gifts for boys in the mid-nineteenth century included wooden toys, books, popcorn balls, and candy. The

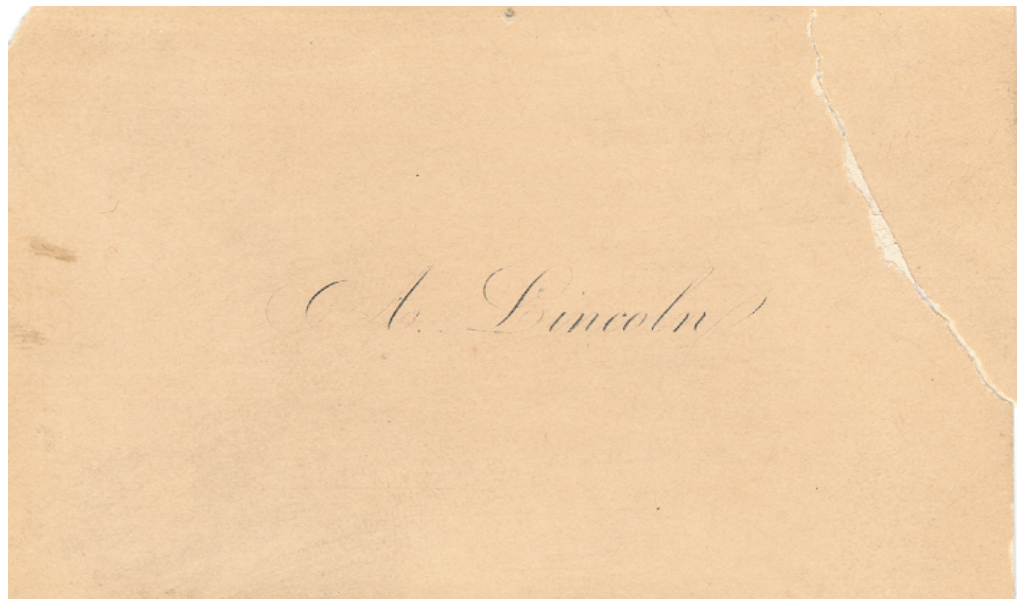
list also included firecrackers, guns, cannons, and horns which were used for noise-making. Research suggests that most firecrackers of the time period were large, made from gunpowder instead of flash powder, dangerous, and very loud.

Adults often gave each other books, note paper, pens, fancy perfumes, soaps. Mr. Lincoln was recorded in the store register of John Williams & Co. as buying 4 linen handkerchiefs, 3 gentlemen's silk handkerchiefs, and 4 children's silk handkerchiefs on December 24, 1860.

New Year's Day

A very popular holiday tradition for the Lincolns was hosting and attending open houses on New Year's Day. A part of this tradition, practiced year-round, was the presentation of calling cards when visiting someone's home. Calling cards were often placed on a silver dish or in a calling card basket. The size of a card differed on the

basis of the sex of the caller--a man's card was half the size of a woman's card. Cards with their upper right-hand corner folded over were sent to inform the receiver of a visit. Cards with their upper left-hand corner folded over were sent to inform the receiver of any necessary congratulations.



Abraham Lincoln's Calling Card - NPS Artifact