

**National Civil War Association**

# **Dispatch**

**DECEMBER 2020**



[NCWA1863.org](http://NCWA1863.org)

P.O. Box 266, Santa Clara, California 95052

**NEXT COMBINED BOARD MEETING:**

**Saturday, January 9, 2021 at 12:05 p.m.**

**Venue to be announced; details to follow.**

# FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear NCWA members,

This year is drawing to its close, and it has been a very strange year at that. I feel sad and letdown in retrospect that we were unable to put together any significant events, despite ongoing attempts at being as flexible as practicable. My thanks to those who helped with the workday that we had in the spring, cleaning out the old storage unit and taking care of the club's baggage. And to Matthew, who hosted an activity for those who chose to take advantage of it. Also, thanks to those who attended all the phone conference Board and committee meetings.

We had many people who kept working on projects and improvements for the club, behind the scenes. Many of those efforts were an attempt to make things happen this year. Unfortunately none of those came to fruition, but not for lack of trying. Other projects were worked on, and continue to be worked on, to be prepared for the coming reenacting year. You might be surprised at how difficult it can be to keep event possibilities open for an upcoming year and schedule, after a year of cancelled events! I want to really, really THANK everybody who helped keep the NCWA going throughout 2020. The Admin Board, Unit and Branch leaders, committee members, and all the individuals that I leaned on throughout the year.

I hope that all of you will take the time to vote. We had a dedicated bunch of folks who carried us thru this strange year (that many feel didn't really happen), and if you feel that they did a good job representing your reenacting interests please show it by taking the time to make your voice heard. Even if you vote new leaders into positions, it tells each and all of us that the work that is done on behalf of the membership matters to the membership. There are many really great people in this club, and it will be good to see who steps up and become the next leaders of the National Civil War Association.

Respectfully,  
Skott Borello  
President, NCWA



# LET'S TAKE FLO ON THE ROAD!

Hello, Everyone,

I need the help of some dedicated club members. Early this year, a group of volunteers from our club gathered at Skott Borello's place to refurbish the club's cannon, Flo. As agreed upon at one of our NCWA Board meetings, Flo is to be used as a promotional instrument to drum up interest in our events and to recruit new members. No matter what part you play in the reenacting world, I need your help. With a team of enthusiastic people, I want to take Flo on the road and show her off, and at the same time stir the public's interest in our club and its events. I know that this pandemic thing has scared off some of us, but if we put our heads together, we can do this. If I can count on you please contact me via Facebook Messenger, or call or email me. I sure could use your help.

Thank you,  
Joe Cedillo  
9<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry  
CSA



# HOW THE CIVIL WAR CHANGED CHRISTMAS IN THE UNITED STATES

*By Erin Blakemore, excerpted from Inside History*

Before the Civil War, Christmas was not an official holiday in the United States. Nor was it celebrated uniformly across the country. In early New England, Christmas was looked down upon by Puritans and Calvinists, who felt the day should be observed for strict fasts and rituals, if it was observed at all. During the 17th century, Massachusetts imposed a fine on colonists who celebrated the holiday, and after it became a state, its businesses and schools did not observe the holiday at all.

Elsewhere, Christmas was celebrated in a variety of ways, most depending on the country of origin of the immigrants who celebrated it. But by the mid-19th century, the holiday's importance—and distance from religious tradition—was already starting to grow. Songs and carols like “Jingle Bells” (1857) and poems like “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (1823) set the stage for a fun, secular holiday that revolved around gift-giving and celebration with food and drink. In the antebellum South, plantation owners used the holiday as a way to show off their paternalism toward the people they enslaved, write historians Shauna Bigham and Robert E. May. During lengthy Christmas celebrations, they gave enslaved people passes to marry, provided food and alcohol, and gave gifts.

Though enslaved people managed to create some of their own Christmas traditions, many of which incorporated traditions from Africa, they were also expected to help absolve slaveowners' guilt over the holidays by enthusiastically opening gifts and showing their gratitude. “So far as their owners could tell,” Bigham and May write, “most slaves played their prescribed role to the hilt throughout the holiday.”

But the Civil War disrupted not just the relations between plantation owners and the people they enslaved, but those within families and communities. As both sides shifted their resources to war, the ability to give gifts and celebrate was dramatically curtailed. People cast their decision to have more modest Christmas celebrations as a patriotic one, and children got in on the act, too. Instead of giving and receiving store-bought gifts, they made more humble gifts like popcorn balls or crude homemade toys. And they learned to temper their expectations of Santa.

“A crotchety slave told the Howell-Cobb children not to expect a visit from St. Nick because the Yankees had shot him,” writes historian James Alan Marten, “while other parents offered more sensitive explanations. As a Yankee, Santa would be held up by Confederate pickets or perhaps Union blockading vessels had interrupted his journey.”

Meanwhile, those children's mothers, aunts and sisters experienced Christmas as an agonizing reminder of the danger faced by men who had gone to war. Civil War-era diaries and letters document how many women felt anxiety, grief and depression around Christmas. In 1861, Margaret Cahill wrote to her husband, Thomas, a Union officer, that she felt so “nervous and lonely” that she could not write to him on Christmas. “Will you say? Why did you not write to me on Christmass [sic] Day” she wrote. “Well to tell you the truth I was not able.” “Never before had so sad a Christmas dawned upon us,” wrote Sallie A. Brook, a Confederate woman from Richmond, of Christmas 1861.

On the battlefield, men on both sides tried to celebrate Christmas by giving gifts, eating and drinking, and taking time off. In his memoir, James A. Wright, a sergeant in the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment, recalls eating beef soup and greeting his fellow soldiers on Christmas in camp. “The men had been allowed as much liberty as consistent with discipline and were ‘circulating around’ among





their acquaintances in other regiments,” he recalled. “I was frequently invited to ‘smile,’ ” or take a drink. In 1863, a Confederate soldier from North Carolina wrote to his mother asking for a bottle of brandy and some sugar so he could make eggnog for his fellow soldiers.

Popular media did its best to increase the morale of both soldiers and their families at home around Christmas. *Harper’s Weekly*, the most popular periodical at the time, published a variety of Christmas stories and illustrations during the war. The most famous were drawn by illustrator Thomas Nast, who portrayed not just sad wives and husbands but happy Christmas Day traditions. He is credited with solidifying how the nation imagined Santa Claus with illustrations of a jolly, bearded St. Nick who handed out good cheer to soldiers and families alike.

Though individual traditions still varied, the upheaval of the Civil War made the holiday seem more and more important to separated families. “The Christmas season [reminded] mid-19th century Americans of the importance of home and its associations, of invented traditions,” writes historian David Anderson.

When the war ended, the magazines and newspapers that had underlined the importance of the holiday kept promoting it, and reunited families, devastated by the losses of the war, kept cherishing it. In 1870, in the aftermath of the war, Congress passed the first federal holiday law and made Christmas an official holiday. Four years of war had changed the holiday from a loose celebration to an essential one.

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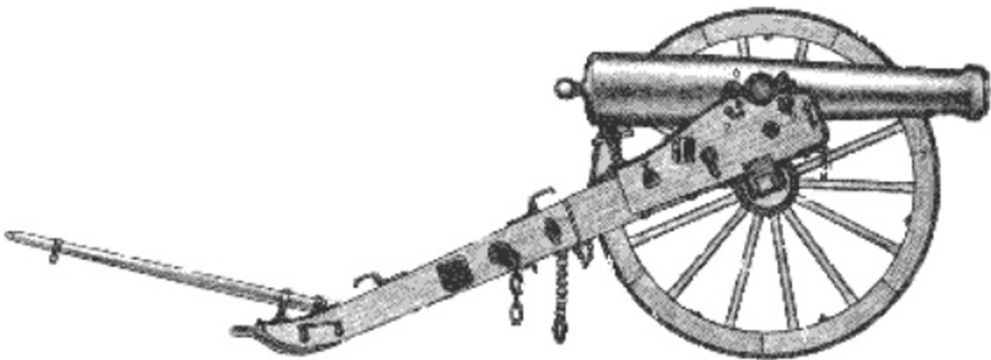
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**WE  
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MEET  
AGAIN!**