



A Yuletide Genealogical Resource: “Dear Santa” Letters

David A. Norris looks at online newspapers and how ancestors' letters to Santa may shine some light on their holiday wishes

INFLUENCED BY THE DRAWINGS OF AMERICAN CARTOONIST THOMAS Nast, the European “Father Christmas” and “Saint Nicholas” was quickly becoming the familiar modern-day Santa Claus in the mid-to-late 19th century. Children in US families who celebrated Christmas expected (or demanded) that Santa Claus bring them gifts of candy, nuts, fruit, and toys. How would Santa know what to bring, unless children sent him letters to tell him what they wanted? This

Thomas Nast shaped not only the appearance of Santa Claus, but his address. He hated the notion of Santa Claus being used for war propaganda. So, Nast drew pictures of him living at the North Pole, so he would belong to the children of the world and not just one nation.

In the years after the Civil War, post offices in the US began receiving hundreds of undeliverable letters written by children. They bore addresses such as “Santa Claus, Greenland, North Pole”, or “Santa Claus, sleigh drawn by eight reindeer”. Under postal regulations, such letters ended up in the Dead Letter Office. Some postal clerks noted that there were two kinds of letters. Many had a normal two-cent stamp, which then covered domestic postage. But, some more thoughtful children chose a 5-cent stamp, as you'd need to pay the international letter rate to send a letter to the North Pole!

At least two such letters eluded the Dead Letter Office. In 1890, one Mr. Schmidt was the manager of a cryolite mine in Ivigtût, Greenland. He was puzzled to receive two letters from the US early in 1890. One was addressed, “Mr. Santa Claus, Ice Mountains, Greenland”; the other, to “Mr. Santa Claus, 52 Iceland Street, Greenland”. Both letters had bounced around in the mail systems for months before being



Two Victorian-era girls play with their dolls in front of a Christmas tree. (Library of Congress)

tradition of writing letters to Santa Claus grew at the same time that rising literacy and affluence brought weekly or daily newspapers into the lives of most families. By the 1870s, newspaper editors realized that printing such Christmas letters would appeal to children and their parents. Today, tens of thousands of such letters can be found in digitized newspaper collections, bringing an enjoyable source of sometimes unexpected family history information.