



Robert Walter Weir, St. Nicholas, ca. 1837. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

JOLLY OLD SAINT NICHOLAS

The song “Jolly Old Saint Nicholas,” first appeared as a poem in *The Little Corporal Magazine* in 1865. Written by Emily Huntington Miller, it was published under the title, “Lilly’s Secret.” The music was first published in 1874, and is believed to have been composed by James R. Murray. The song is bright and lively. It does not include the traditional Christian symbolism found in most carols. Instead, it is a lighthearted American song that captures the excitement and mystery of gifts at Christmastime.

The original St. Nicholas was an early Christian bishop from Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey, who died in the fourth century. He was known for secretly leaving gifts of gold coins in shoes. This tradition is still practiced by those who celebrate his feast day in December each year.



Early 20th-century postcard depicting St. Nicholas in his bishop's garb



Illustration of St. Nicholas by Thomas Nast, 1869

Santa Claus, as he is known in the United States, came to America with Dutch settlers in the 17th century. Originally known as *Sinterklaas*, the name was anglicized to Santa Claus by the American writer Washington Irving in his 1809 book, “A History of New York.” Irving’s description of Santa Claus, with his pipe and potbelly, would lay the foundation of America’s traditional vision of St. Nick. However, without a doubt, it is Clement Clarke Moore’s 1823 description of Santa Claus, which most of us recognize today. In his poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” now known more popularly as “The Night Before Christmas,” Moore depicts Santa Claus as a kindly, chubby, elf-like figure with ruddy cheeks, and the magical ability to ascend a chimney by merely a wink and a nod.