# This Day in History… December 6, 343

# The Feast of Saint Nicholas

Saint Nicholas of Myra died on December 6, 343. This date has long been celebrated as Saint Nicholas Day or the Feast of Saint Nicholas.

Saint Nicholas is believed to have been born on March 15, 270, in Patara, Roman Empire, near Myra, present-day Turkey, to wealthy parents. Many of the details of Nicholas's life are based on older written stories and oral traditions. No writings from his lifetime survive, and most of the stories about his deeds were written centuries later.



*1984 Berlin stamp picturing Saint Nicholas*

According to tradition, Nicholas's parents died in an epidemic when he was young and he moved in with his uncle – a bishop. Young Nicholas was deeply religious and took to heart the readings and teachings of Jesus. He began using his inheritance to anonymously assist the sick and needy. Although he left gifts down chimneys at night, a few found out he was behind the generosity. Nicholas begged for them to keep it a secret because he didn't want the attention on himself. He became known as the protector of children and sailors before his death on December 6, 343.



*Stamps feature depictions of Santa created between 1880 and 1920.*

Over the years, stories from Nicholas's life spread and his feast day, December 6, was considered a lucky day to make large purchases or get married. In the Middle Ages, French nuns began leaving pouches of coins, food, and treats in the homes of the needy at night. When asked where these gifts came from, the nuns would simply say "it must have been Saint Nicholas." This inspired the anonymous gift giving as well as the carols.

By the Renaissance, Nicholas was the most popular saint in Europe, particularly in Holland. There he was known as *Sinter Klaas*, a shortened form of *Sint Nokolaas*, which was Dutch for Saint Nicholas. Soon it became a tradition for children to set their shoes by the hearth on the evening before his celebration. During the night, they believed he would fill them with small treats of nuts and fruit. When the Dutch settled in the New World, they brought their customs with them, including visits from Sinter Klaas. New York newspapers began reporting on these Dutch celebrations in 1773, making Saint Nicholas Day more widely known. Washington Irving further popularized Nicholas in 1809 when he referred to him as the patron Saint of New York in one of his books.

An 1822 poem changed the image of Saint Nicholas in the US. The common title comes from the first line: "'Twas the night before Christmas." This poem introduced us to flying reindeer and a red-clad driver able to slide down chimneys effortlessly. Santa Claus, as he became popularly known, filled stockings, rather than shoes, with gifts. Artist Thomas Nast is often credited with creating the modern image of Santa Claus with his 1863 *Harper's Weekly* illustration.

Stores began to include Santa in Christmas advertisements in the 1800s, with some offering children a chance to see Santa Claus in person. When the Salvation Army needed money to provide Christmas meals to needy families, they hired unemployed men to dress as Santa to collect donations.

Some other countries celebrate Saint Nicholas Day on December 5 or December 19. Many countries have different figures that bring children gifts. Germany has Kris Kringle, an angel that accompanies Saint Nicholas. Scandinavia celebrates the elf Jultomten, who brings gifts in a sleigh led by goats.



*The first US stamp to picture Santa*

The English have Father Christmas and in France, Pere Noel leaves gifts in children's shoes. In Russia, an elderly woman named Babushka leaves children gifts in the hopes that one is baby Jesus. According to Russian stories, she intentionally gave the three wise men incorrect directions to Bethlehem and gives these gifts to make up for her bad deed. In Italy a nice witch named La Befana rides a broomstick to deliver toys to children.

# This Day in History…  December 6, 343

# The Feast of Saint Nicholas

Saint Nicholas of Myra died on December 6, 343. This date has long been celebrated as Saint Nicholas Day or the Feast of Saint Nicholas.

Saint Nicholas is believed to have been born on March 15, 270, in Patara, Roman Empire, near Myra, present-day Turkey, to wealthy parents. Many of the details of Nicholas's life are based on older written stories and oral traditions. No writings from his lifetime survive, and most of the stories about his deeds were written centuries later.



*1984 Berlin stamp picturing Saint Nicholas*

According to tradition, Nicholas's parents died in an epidemic when he was young and he moved in with his uncle – a bishop. Young Nicholas was deeply religious and took to heart the readings and teachings of Jesus. He began using his inheritance to anonymously assist the sick and needy. Although he left gifts down chimneys at night, a few found out he was behind the generosity. Nicholas begged for them to keep it a secret because he didn't want the attention on himself. He became known as the protector of children and sailors before his death on December 6, 343.



*Stamps feature depictions of Santa created between 1880 and 1920.*

Over the years, stories from Nicholas's life spread and his feast day, December 6, was considered a lucky day to make large purchases or get married. In the Middle Ages, French nuns began leaving pouches of coins, food, and treats in the homes of the needy at night. When asked where these gifts came from, the nuns would simply say "it must have been Saint Nicholas." This inspired the anonymous gift giving as well as the carols.

By the Renaissance, Nicholas was the most popular saint in Europe, particularly in Holland. There he was known as *Sinter Klaas*, a shortened form of *Sint Nokolaas*, which was Dutch for Saint Nicholas. Soon it became a tradition for children to set their shoes by the hearth on the evening before his celebration. During the night, they believed he would fill them with small treats of nuts and fruit. When the Dutch settled in the New World, they brought their customs with them, including visits from Sinter Klaas. New York newspapers began reporting on these Dutch celebrations in 1773, making Saint Nicholas Day more widely known. Washington Irving further popularized Nicholas in 1809 when he referred to him as the patron Saint of New York in one of his books.

An 1822 poem changed the image of Saint Nicholas in the US. The common title comes from the first line: "'Twas the night before Christmas." This poem introduced us to flying reindeer and a red-clad driver able to slide down chimneys effortlessly. Santa Claus, as he became popularly known, filled stockings, rather than shoes, with gifts. Artist Thomas Nast is often credited with creating the modern image of Santa Claus with his 1863 *Harper's Weekly* illustration.



*The first US stamp to picture Santa*

Stores began to include Santa in Christmas advertisements in the 1800s, with some offering children a chance to see Santa Claus in person. When the Salvation Army needed money to provide Christmas meals to needy families, they hired unemployed men to dress as Santa to collect donations.

Some other countries celebrate Saint Nicholas Day on December 5 or December 19. Many countries have different figures that bring children gifts. Germany has Kris Kringle, an angel that accompanies Saint Nicholas. Scandinavia celebrates the elf Jultomten, who brings gifts in a sleigh led by goats.

The English have Father Christmas and in France, Pere Noel leaves gifts in children's shoes. In Russia, an elderly woman named Babushka leaves children gifts in the hopes that one is baby Jesus. According to Russian stories, she intentionally gave the three wise men incorrect directions to Bethlehem and gives these gifts to make up for her bad deed. In Italy a nice witch named La Befana rides a broomstick to deliver toys to children.