

PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS



NEWSLETTER OF THE PANNEBAKKER FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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A Brief History of Sending a Letter to Santa Dating back more than 150 years, the practice of writing to St. Nick tells a broader history of America itself

The earliest Santa letters usually came *from* St. Nicholas, rather than written *to* him. The minister Theodore Ledyard Cuyler recalled receiving “an autograph letter from Santa Claus, full of good counsels” during his childhood in 1820s western New York. In the 1850s, Fanny Longfellow (wife of the poet Henry Wadsworth) wrote her three children letters each Christmas that commented on their behavior over the previous year and how they could improve it.

“[Y]ou have picked up some naughty words which I hope you will throw away as you would sour or bitter fruit,” Santa explained in an 1853 letter. “Try to stop to think before you use any, and remember if no one else hears you God is always near.” In an era before childhood was celebrated as a distinct period of a person’s life, gratifying kids’ imaginations was less important than teaching them manners that would speed them toward adulthood.



Longfellow’s letter bore a return address of “Chimney Corner,” likely because she left it on the family hearth. During these early decades of Santa’s evolution in the U.S., not only did the saint travel in and out of homes via the chimney, so did his mail. Parents left their notes to children by the fireplace, or in one of the nearby stockings, and soon children put their replies to him there.

As postal workers began hand-delivering mail to urban centers during the Civil War, Americans began to view the mail as a pleasant surprise arriving at one’s door, rather than a burdensome errand. The *Chicago Tribune* captured this shift in the experience of receiving mail in an 1864 story, commenting that the addition of 35 deliverymen had changed the city’s whole understanding of postage. Instead of “the annoyance of having to carry letters to the office,” now, as each postman brought mail directly to residents’ doors, it transformed the mail carrier into “a genuine Santa Claus [visiting] households on his beat.” As the postal system became more formalized and efficient, partly in response to the explosion of mail during the Civil War, the cost of postage began dropping in the mid-1860s.

Parents grew more comfortable with paying for stamps, and children began to view the postman as an actual conduit to the Christmas figure.

Pictures, poems, and illustrations of St. Nick— particularly Thomas Nast’s 1871 depiction in the widely read *Harper’s Weekly* magazine —sorting letters from “Good Children’s Parents” and “Naughty Children’s Parents”— helped spread the idea of sending Santa mail. Nast is also credited with popularizing the idea that Santa lived and worked in the North Pole — for example, with an 1866 illustration that named “Santaclausville, N.P.” as his address — giving kids a destination to send Santa’s mail. The use of the post office to contact St. Nick began as a particularly American phenomenon. Scottish children would shout their wishes up the chimney, while Europeans simply left out stockings or shoes for the gift bringer.

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Soon newspapers across the country were reporting the arrival of Santa letters to local postal departments, and then to their own offices (recognizing the emotional power of the letters, many papers published the children's scrawls and even offered prizes for the "best" letters). "The little folks are getting interested about Christmas," wrote a reporter for Columbia, South Carolina's *Daily Phoenix* in December 1873. A correspondent for the *Stark County Democrat*, in Canton, Ohio, noted the following year: "One day last week two bright little children entered the *Democrat* office and wanted us to print letters to Santa Claus, from them."

The gifts that kids requested in this period tended to be simple and practical. Letters written during the 1870s ask for gifts such as writing desks, prayer books, and "a stick of pomade" for "papa." As society changed, the children started to ask for more fun items, such as candy, dolls, and roller skates.

But as the letters piled up, so did tensions about who should answer them.

While some newspapers published letters sent to them and invited readers to respond, most missives sent to the post office ended up in the Dead Letter Office where they were destroyed, along with other mail sent to unreachable addresses. By the turn of the 20th century, the public and press began complaining that children's wishes were treated with such neglect. Institutions ranging from charitable societies to the *New York Times* asked if an alternative could not be found.

After a few stopgap attempts, the Post Office Department (as the United States Postal Service was known until 1971), saw little other option but to permanently change the policy in 1913, allowing local charity groups to answer the letters, as long as they got the approval of the local postmaster.

In Winchester, Kentucky, an organization began delivering Christmas goodies like nuts, fruits, candy—as well as firecrackers and roman candles

—to letter writers. In the city of Santa Claus, Indiana, the city's postmaster, James Martin, started answering the city's large pile of Santa letters himself, then tapped local volunteers as the city's name brought in ever-more mail for the man in the red suit.

But New York City had the most prominent letter-answering program. In 1913, customs broker John Gluck launched the Santa Claus Association, which coordinated the answering of tens of thousands of letters each year, matching children's requests with individual New Yorkers who often hand-delivered the gifts to the letter writers. The effort earned accolades from the press, public and celebrities including John Barrymore and Mary Pickford. But each year, the group requested funds to cover ever-more gifts and postage costs, and even \$300,000 to pay for a vast Santa Claus Building in Midtown Manhattan. Fifteen years after its initial launch, it was found that much of the money was unaccounted for and Gluck was exposed as having pocketed much of the money (as much as several hundred thousand dollars in donations) for himself.

As a result, the Post Office Department revoked the Association's right to receive Santa's mail, and changed its policy nationally, restricting which groups could receive the letters. This led to the department's establishment of Operation Santa Claus, at first an informal group of postal employees who pooled their own donations to send gifts in response to children's pleas. The program evolved after being spotlighted in the climactic courtroom scene in *Miracle on 34th Street* in 1947, then enjoyed a significant boost when Johnny Carson made a practice of reading several letters each December on "The Tonight Show," urging viewers to take part in the program.

"The range is incredible, from the very basic where they can't afford to buy anything but a token, to the opposite end where they will invest in a school and redo a playground," says Pete Fontana, the "Chief Elf Officer" in New York City, who has overseen the Operation Santa Program the past 17 years (though he will be retiring after this season). This program avoids fundraising by simply facilitating donations of willing donors. Individuals can volunteer to answer a Santa letter (or several), then it is up to that donor to buy the requested gift and bring it to the post office to send to the child. While the postal employees shuttle the gifts to children, it is the donors who pay for them. "It's amazing how it can vary from almost nothing to the extreme," says Fontana.



While post offices throughout the country managed most of these answering campaigns, the city of Santa Claus has taken its own approach. In 1976, a number of the local volunteers established Santa's Elves, Inc., separate from the post office. In 2006, the Santa Claus Museum & Village opened, merging with the Elves. It is this organization that is behind the book *Letters to Santa Claus*, drawing on its archives of missives going back to the 1930s.

"It goes from very simple letters to far more expensive wish lists—you watch the progression from 'I'd like some blocks' to 'I'd like a VCR' and 'I'd like an iPad,'" says Emily Weisner Thompson, the executive director of the museum who compiled *Letters to Santa*.

The letters reflect the changing wants of children, from spurs and a cowboy hat so the writer can "play Roy Rogers" to an Xbox with *Assassins Creed 3*, from a Shirley Temple doll to an American Girl doll. There are also some more unusual requests, such as a child in 1913 who asks Santa for a glass eye. One letter in *Letters to Santa* comes from an adult woman asking Santa to bring her a "tall, stately, well-bred...man of wealth with a steady income," while in another, a boy negotiates with Santa to "trade you my sister when she comes from the



stork for an elf." A number of poorer children writing at the start of the 20th century even ask for coal—seeking warmth rather than viewing it as a punishment for naughtiness.

The letters tell a larger history as well. From World War I (a mother wrote to Gluck's Santa Claus Association "We had to break up our home last winter, for my husband who is a longshoreman could not get work since the war began") to the Great Depression; from 9/11 to Superstorm Sandy (a child writing in 2012 promises to "ask for much less this year so you can focus on the kids that are less fortunate than me").

"I love the idea that we can see history through these letters," says Thompson.

In more recent years, the process of answering Santa's letters has been more regulated. In 2006, the Postmaster General formalized Operation Santa Claus nationally, putting in place a set of guidelines for all post offices taking part in the program. These include requiring donors to present a photo ID when they pick up Santa letters, and redacting the children's full names and addresses—assigning each letter a number and storing the delivery info in a database that only the postal employees who actually deliver the gifts can access.

"It was different in every place it was done—some only had a letter-response campaign where they would send form letters out to the kids, there was no gift giving," says Fontana. "In New York, we send only the gifts."

It's a much more modern approach to playing Santa than Fanny Longfellow or John Gluck could have imagined. Fontana hopes to see the program evolve further, scanning the letters and uploading them where people can fulfill children's wishes from their laptop or smartphone. Programs such as EmailSanta.com and PackagefromSanta.com are already giving Santa the powerful tool of the Internet to help him accomplish his annual duties.

The Envelopes Bruce Pennypacker

My brother, Ron, was a district director for the Veterans Outreach and Assistance Center in Pennsylvania and when he retired a few years ago, he cleaned out his office. One of the things that he kept, that would have been thrown away, was a box of envelopes. These envelopes were used by military personnel to mail ballots for the election in 1944.

The ballots are long gone but the envelopes have some interesting information on them: unit name and location, address, serial number and signature.

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Ron and I didn't want this information to be lost. So, I've been helping him track down the families of the soldiers and sailors from the Royersford, PA area who sent in their ballots. We grew up in Royersford, and as kids delivered the Sunday newspaper to many of the addresses on these envelopes.

LOYCE PENNYPACKER, b. 11 Aug 1921, d. 29 Jul 1996. WAVES SK 3/c
Address on the envelope from 1944 is 865 Church Street, Royersford.

This envelope was the first one I worked on. Being the same last name and from the same town, she most likely was a relative, but I had never heard of her.

Even though the name on the envelope was Loyce Pennypacker, my search in the Census records kept coming up with Joyce Pennypacker. Since she was in the WAVES, I knew she was female, and most likely she knew her own first name. I guess the census taker had never come across a Loyce before so he wrote down Joyce.

Turns out Loyce is a 3rd cousin, 1 time removed. Her daughter graduated from the same high school as my brother and me. I guess I didn't know Loyce or her daughter because her married name was Mattis. I didn't know anyone named Mattis either. I tracked down the Mattis family and mailed the envelope to them.

LEROY W. MATTIS, b. 1915, d. 7 Feb 1945. Private
Address on the envelope is 502 Church Street, Royersford.

I found LeRoy quickly in the military records. He is listed in a family tree as having died during the Battle of the Bulge. The Battle of the Bulge took place in the densely forested Ardennes region of Wallonia in Belgium, France, and Luxembourg on the Western Front toward the end of World War II in Europe. The dates given for the battle are, 16 December 1944 – 25 January 1945. I'm not sure if LeRoy died from wounds suffered between those dates, or was killed after the actual battle. He is buried in the American Cemetery in Margraten, Belgium. The records indicate that LeRoy had a son, born in 1944, who he never met.

I later found out that LeRoy was a brother of Robert Mattis, who was the husband of Loyce Pennypacker. I mailed the envelope to the descendants of Loyce and Robert.

More on "The Envelopes" in the next edition.

Message From The President

Merry Christmas everyone,

It is that time of year again! Again, a comment on the strange weather we are experiencing. I can look out the window and actually see green grass. No snow and none in the forecast. That is a bit unusual for us here though I remember Carol and I sitting outside by our fire pit on Christmas Eve about 5 years ago. At the rate it is going, we might get to do it again this year.

I hope everyone has had a reasonably happy year I believe we have a lot to be thankful for.

As I have mentioned in essentially every newsletter we have published in the past few years, I need to have a replacement for my office as President. No one is responding to my request so there are other options being explored which will have lasting effects on the Pannebakker Family Association.. Therefore I am imploring you once again to give me some ideas or suggestions of how we can keep going. Don't be afraid to step forward and assume a position for which you can be proud.

Meanwhile, hoping you have a wonderful Christmas and the happiest of New Years.

Sincerely,

Ron Mitchell, President, Pannebakker Family Association.

Pannebakker Family Association Web Site

If you would like a user name and password, you must contact Bruce Pennypacker at, throwcoach@gmail.com and the necessary information will be sent to you.

Below is the URL for the web site:

<http://www.pannebakkerfamilyassociation.com>

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Pannebakker Family Association



The Pannebakker Family Association is an outgrowth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999.

The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699.

In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pfannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."