

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Classic Book Notes #79

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## A-Caroling We Will Go! Part One

*Editor's note: Throughout December we are reprising four of Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth's Classic Book Notes about the origin and meaning of our favorite Christmas songs, from the most ancient carols to the current #1 Christmas tune in American popular music. Spoiler Alert: It's not "White Christmas." Following is the first of the four-part series that was first published as Book Notes #79 in December 2021.*



*Season's Greetings!*

Whether you're thinking *Zombie-chic* and *Anna and the Apocalypse's* Marli Siu suggestively cooing to Santa Baby that the ...

"Snow is falling on the frosty ground  
Christmas cheer is spreading all around  
It's that time of year  
But I'm feeling so blue  
There's a lack of presents in my stocking  
And my chimney needs a good unblocking" [1]

or, orders of magnitude tamer, Disney's TV flop *The Rocketeer's* Hughesville citizens caroling

"It's that time of year  
Hang the lights and decorations  
Wrap the gifts for celebration  
Good friends and relations  
It's that time of year  
Celebrate joy and splendor  
Get together and remember  
What we cherish each December  
It's that time of year" [2]

... it is, indeed, that “time of year” again when “A-caroling we will go.” Or, if you will personally not be going door-to-door singing Christmas cheer, you will still be wrapped in a cozily warm musical envelope of Christmas songs bidding us *Good Cheer, Happy Holidays, Season’s Greetings* and *Merry Christmas*.

Where did this custom originate?

What is a “Christmas carol”? Or, for that matter, what is a *carol*?

What are the original American Christmas carols? Who wrote them? What is their backstory?

We’ll be answering those and other questions in a month-long series of **Book Notes** exploring American Christmas carols. In today’s Part One, we’ll examine caroling’s ancient origins, the oldest known Christmas carols, such as the “Angel’s Hymn,” several classic English tunes and the mid-19th century’s earliest American Christmas carols.

In Part Two on December 14, we’ll look into American Christmas music from radio, TV, and film, including the curious fact that many of the classic American Christmas songs were composed by Jewish artists such as Irving Berlin, Jule Styne, Johnny Marks and Mel Torme.

Part Three on December 21 will examine what Albert and Shirley Menendez in their Christmas Songs Made in America call “Whimsical Songs,” like “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” and “Frosty the Snow Man.” [3]

December 28th’s Part Four surveys lists ranking the most popular Christmas carols. The lists include several very recent additions to the caroling canon, such as Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” Wham’s “Last Christmas” and, although a bit older, The Ronette’s version of “Sleigh Ride.”

For a more complete Christmas caroling experience to actually hear these songs, you will want to tune into my ***The American Tapestry Project’s*** “A-Caroling We Will Go: The Origins of Classic American Christmas Carols” on WQLN/NPR on Sunday December 12 at 4 p.m. As always, it will also be available on WQLN’s website, which can be accessed [here](#) and other popular podcast sites.

What is a *carol* and where and when did the custom originate?

The word *carol’s* meaning and origin give a hint about the custom of *caroling’s* evolution. According to ***Etymology Online***, *carol* has two meanings. First, as a noun, it means “joyful song;” as a verb, it means “to dance in a ring.” Thus, a

carol is a joyful song sung while dancing in a ring, in a circle or a round. It comes “from the Old French *carole* “kind of dance in a ring, round dance accompanied by singers.” It means “to sing with joy or festivity.” It follows then that a *caroler* is someone who sings carols. *Caroling* means to sing carols. These roots are ancient and predate Christianity and hearken back to our pagan past. *Carol’s* meaning as a “Christmas hymn of joy” only dates from approximately 1500 C.E. [4]

But what about the dancing?

In pagan, pre-Christian Europe, carols were sung and danced the year round at the major seasonal festivals. At the Spring equinox they had overtones of fertility rituals, and at the Winter Solstice they celebrated the Sun on the year’s shortest day as the folk danced around stone circles exhorting the Sun’s return. There is even a tradition of peasants dancing and singing in orchards in hope of an abundant harvest.

As we have learned in previous ***Book Notes*** and in my ***American Holidays*** series, Christian evangelists converting Europeans adapted pagan holiday celebrations to the new creed. The Roman Lupercalia became St. Valentine’s Day then Valentine’s Day; the Norse Ostarra became Easter; and the Celtic Samhain became All Hallow’s Eve (Halloween). So, too, the custom of carols and caroling, which as Penne L. Restad notes “originated as pagan round dances, which became popular as “occasional entertainments” throughout Europe before 1020 C.E. [5]

The earliest Christmas hymns were Church songs written and sung in Latin, such as the second century’s “Angel’s Hymn” [6] or St. Hilary of Poitiers’ “Jesus Refulsit Omnium” (“Jesus Light of the Nations”), [7] but by the 16th century and the Protestant Reformation, people wanted songs they could sing. This led to writing songs in the vernacular available to the common people who adapted the ancient custom of public singing to Christmas carols. Although denounced by the Catholic Church, the custom of singing carols and going door-to-door seeking favors in return for a song became well-established by the late Middle Ages.

Caroling’s roots are similar to trick-or-treating’s origins we discovered in my ***Book Notes*** on Halloween, in which the ancient Celts went cottage-to-cottage in the guise of their departed dead seeking soul cakes – small baked goods – as sustenance. There were two kinds of carols – religious and festive. The religious carols were sung on Christmas Eve by bands of people called “waits,” because Christmas Eve was known as “watchnight” or “waitnight.” The bands were led by local leaders and public officials who had the authority to take money from people. They went about the village and from door-to-door singing in exchange

for gifts. [8] Penne Restad says that the festive carols were sung by professional minstrels hired to entertain in homes. [9]

This practice gave rise to wassailing – note the Christmas carol “Here We Come A-Wassailing,” a version of which sung by the U.S. Army Band Chorus can be found [here](#). Wassail is a “liquor for drinking and wishing health to others on festive occasions, especially spiced ale, as on Christmas Eve and Twelfth Night.” [10] This custom evolved in England and came to America with the earliest settlers. Bands of singers go caroling (wassailing) door-to-door either offering a drink or seeking a drink. It led to much revelry; in fact, so much revelry that from time to time authorities sought to stamp it out. [11]

So, carols and caroling’s roots reach back to pagan fertility and seasonal rituals, and evolved by the late Middle Ages into the custom of singing in the town square and going door-to-door celebrating and seeking gifts. Finally, by the early-modern period they gave rise to the first formal Christmas carols that a 21st century person might recognize.

Dating from 1521C.E., among the oldest is the English “Boar’s Head Carol,” as is the “Coventry Carol,” which also dates from the 16th century. [12] The one from this era most familiar to Americans almost certainly is “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,” in which we are reminded “that there is no reason to despair because the birth of Christ means the triumph of good over evil.” [13] It is the carol Dickens references in *A Christmas Carol*. A version of it sung by the Bach Choir can be found [here](#).

Christmas carols came to America in the early to middle 19th century as Americans began to develop their *American Way of Christmas*. To somewhat arbitrarily pick a date, the *American Way of Christmas* did not begin to emerge until the 1820s. Prior to that the American celebration of Christmas, when it was celebrated at all, was fragmented. The New England Puritans actually banned Christmas in 1659; the Middle Atlantic states gave it scant notice because of the heavy Quaker presence in Pennsylvania; the Dutch influence in New York lingered on as Sinter Klaas was acknowledged; and Christmas Day was a day of feasting. In Catholic Maryland and the Anglican colonies to the south, Virginia and the Carolinas, however, Christmas was celebrated as it was in the south of England. With nominal church attendance, feasting, partying, gambling, and horse racing.

By the early 19th century, however, Americans began to realize they needed to create cultural institutions to bind together their newfound government “Of the people” into a nation of common interests, values, and beliefs. In short, they needed to create a common culture. One of the strategies that emerged was a focus on holidays as a communally bonding activity. Early American holidays

were limited to the Fourth of July, Washington's Birthday, New Year's Day, and an occasionally observed Valentine's Day. Thanksgiving Day was essentially a New England regional holiday, although there were irregular observances elsewhere in the country. As noted, while observed, Christmas observances were fragmented and inconsistent.

Five people changed this and, in the process, invented the *American Way of Christmas*. They were Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, Charles Dickens, Thomas Nast, and Sarah Josepha Hale. In his ***Knickerbocker's History of New York***, Irving tells of Sinter Klaas and his Christmas wagon; in his ***Old Christmas***, he tells five stories about how Christmas was celebrated in Old England, whose customs he wished to bring to America. The stories were *Christmas*, *The Stage Coach*, *Christmas Eve*, *Christmas Day*, and *The Christmas Dinner*. They tell of feasting, gift giving, family reunion, church going, and sharing.

Clement Clarke Moore, although his authorship is now sometimes questioned, transformed Sinter Klaas into Santa Claus in his ***A Visit from St. Nicholas***, sometimes known as ***'Twas the Night Before Christmas***, which I wrote about in a previous ***Book Notes***, which can be found [here](#). Charles Dickens, while obviously not American, was immensely popular in America. His ***A Christmas Carol*** transformed Christmas, at least for a time, from a holiday of feasting, frivolity, and gift giving into one of personal redemption and a celebration of actually trying to live by the Golden Rule of treating others as you would have them treat you.

Thomas Nast, a German immigrant who came to America after the failed European revolutions of 1848, was the foremost political cartoonist of the 19th century. He made the elephant the emblem of the Republican Party and transformed his German notion of Kristkindel, St. Nicholas, and the gift-giver into the American character of Santa Claus – a rotund burgher-type smoking a pipe, keeping a tally of which children were naughty or nice and dispensing gifts on Christmas Eve from his Workshop at the North Pole. If you close your eyes and imagine Santa Claus with a white beard and a red suit, you are envisioning Thomas Nast's creation.

Sarah Josepha Hale was the foremost arbiter of taste and community values in 19th century America. From her position as editor of ***Godey's Ladies' Book*** magazine, she set standards and created cultural norms. For more than 36 years she sought to make Thanksgiving a national holiday, succeeding in 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln declared the last Thursday in November a national day of giving thanks. During and after the Civil War, Hale focused on Christmas as a holiday that could bind national wounds and bond people back together again as one. She became an apostle for the *American Way of Christmas*.

You can learn more about all of this on the Jefferson Educational Society website and my presentation with Jefferson Vice President Ben Speggen on the concluding episode of my *American Holidays* series, ***Christmas: A Brief History***, which can be found at American Holiday Series at [jeserie.org](http://jeserie.org).

What were the first American Christmas carols? Part of creating the *American Way of Christmas* in the 19th century was encouraging Christmas music. Previously, American Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians, and assorted Calvinists opposed Christmas as at best a pagan custom and at worst a Popish blasphemy. By the 1820s-1830s, they were relenting. As James H. Barnett, the pioneer of the systematic study of American Christmas customs, said in his 1954 book, ***The American Christmas***, “As the evangelical Protestant denominations gradually accepted the observance of Christmas during the 1800s, they sought to develop appropriate religious services for both the church and the church schools.” [14] Among the earliest Christmas carols that have endured are Phillips Brooks’ 1868 “O Little Town of Bethlehem”; Edmund Sears’ 1850 “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”; and John Hopkins’ 1859 “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” [15]

In 1863, at the height of the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the preeminent American poet of the era, wrote “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” He later set it to music. Penne Restad points out that secular Christmas and seasonal music also made their first appearance during this era. Originally published as “The One Horse Open Sleigh” in 1857, J. Pierpont Morgan’s uncle, John Pierpont, wrote “Jingle Bells.” In 1863, Sarah Josepha Hale’s ***Godey’s*** published new music she claimed “appropriate to the season,” such as “Christmas Chimes,” “Happy New Year’s Schottische” ... “Under the Mistletoe” ... and “Kris Kringle.” [16]

As Restad says, “The Christmas songs Americans liked revealed a wholly American perspective. Simply arranged and heartily sung, the carols straightforwardly interpreted religious and secular sentiment. They transcended time and change ... and characteristically avoided the earthly issues of poverty, irreligion, or revelous high spirits.” [17] They sang to an *American Way of Christmas*.

Let’s take a closer look at three. First, the religious **“O Little Town of Bethlehem,”** then Longfellow’s religio-secular, to coin a phrase, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” and, lastly, the purely secular, it doesn’t even mention Christmas, “Jingle Bells.”

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written by Episcopal priest Phillip Brooks in 1868 based upon reflections he made after a trip to the Holy Land in 1865. Scion



of two old New England families, Brooks was descended on his father's side from the Rev. John Cotton, who would not have approved of his return to the Anglican/Episcopal fold, and on his mother's from Samuel Phillips Jr., founder of Phillips Academy (Andover). He was a graduate of the Boston Latin School, attended Harvard University, and graduated from the Virginia Theological Seminary. [18]

Brooks was one of the most renowned preachers of his day. His sermons, in part, defined the age. He was pastor at both the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia and Boston's Trinity Church, where in collaboration with architect Henry Richardson, muralist John LaFarge, and artists William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones he created one of America's architectural masterpieces. He is remembered in the Episcopal Church every January 23 on the anniversary of his death. [19]

After dedicating himself to serving Union troops during the Civil War, his parishioners at the Church of the Holy Trinity on Philadelphia's fashionable Rittenhouse Square sent Brooks to the Holy Land. There he visited Bethlehem, where he conducted a lengthy religious service at the Church of the Nativity. Inspired by the trip, he wrote a poem, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." [19]

Annually, Brooks composed a carol for Christmas services. In 1868, he asked church organist Lewis H. Redner to set "O Little Town of Bethlehem" to music. As it is told, Redner couldn't think of a tune for the poem, but the night before Christmas Eve he heard a melody in his sleep. He jotted it down the next day and later added the harmony. [20] The song increasingly became famous as the first great American Christmas carol, which bemused Brooks who wrote in a letter, "It has been printed in hymn books and sung at a good many Christmases. Where the newspapers found it all of a sudden I do not know." [21]

The poem's and the carol's acceptance rests upon its unabashed religious sentiment and Brooks' faith in the incarnation of the Son of God expressed throughout its lyrics, which begin ...

*from O Little Town of Bethlehem*

Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.  
For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above  
While mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love  
Oh morning stars together, proclaim thy holy birth.  
And praises sing to God the king, and peace to men on earth. [22]



Nat King Cole's inimitable version of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" can be found [here](#).

Although styles change and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is now not recognized as the master poet he never claimed to be, he was the most famous American poet of the 19th century. He was the first American poet to be honored in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. Among his many works are "Paul Revere's Ride," "Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie," "The Building of the Ship," and the now questioned "Song of Hiawatha."

Longfellow wrote "I Heard the Bells On Christmas Day" in 1863 as the Civil War raged. It tells of hearing the Christmas bells but also sings that in this time of war "hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men."

1863 was a difficult time for Longfellow. His second wife of 18 years had died in an accidental fire two years previously and during 1863 his son Charles enlisted in the Union Army against his father's wishes causing a temporary estrangement. [24] That November he was seriously wounded at the Battle of Mine Run, adding to Longfellow's gloom. Although the poem begins with an expression of doubt, it concludes with a Dickensian renewed faith fired by "the bells on Christmas Day."

Here is the poem:

#### I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day or Christmas Bells

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along  
The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
Till ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime,  
A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,

And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
"For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"  
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
The Wrong shall fail,  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men." [25]

The song was first put to music in 1872, but the version most 21st century Americans know was composed in 1956 by Johnny Marks. We will meet Marks again next week when examining Christmas music from film and Broadway, particularly music composed by Jewish artists. Among others, Marks wrote the music to "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Holly Jolly Christmas," and "Rocking Round the Christmas Tree." Marks' version of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," sung by Bing Crosby, became a Christmas hit in 1956. With numerous recorded versions in circulation, the song has now exceeded 5 million copies sold. [26]

Bing Crosby's version of "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" can be heard [here](#).

The two earliest American Christmas songs, to the extent dating can be verified, are either "Up on the Housetop" or "Jolly Old Saint Nicholas." Gene Autry recorded "Up on the Housetop," which was composed by Benjamin Hanby, in 1864. [28] "Jolly Old Saint Nicholas" dates from 1865 and its authorship is contested as some attribute its lyrics to Hanby, but others claim authorship for Emily Huntington Miller, who wrote it as a poem "Lilly's Secret" for *The Little Corporal Magazine*. [28]

"Jingle Bells" is from the same era. Its composition and its author's biography shed a revealing light on the tangled complexities of mid-19th century American culture. As Americans sought to create the *American Way of Christmas* to form a common culture, that culture was torn apart by a Civil War to abolish slavery.

The creator of “Jingle Bells,” the son of a Massachusetts abolitionist, rebelled against his father, moved to the South, became a champion of the Confederacy and an apologist for the post-war myth of the Lost Cause. More importantly, “Jingle Bells” was not written as a Christmas song, but in the North it was adopted as a seasonal favorite to serve the cause of culture creation after the Civil War.

The author of “Jingle Bells,” John Lord Pierpont, was an adventurous lad. In 1836, at 14 he ran away to sea and spent almost 10 years aboard a whaling ship. Later, in 1849, he abandoned his first wife and children to join the California Gold Rush. Back in his hometown of Medford, Massachusetts in 1850, he either composed “A One Horse Open Sleigh,” the song’s original title, as a song for his abolitionist and Unitarian minister father, the Rev. John Pierpont, as a Thanksgiving Day service or, as a Massachusetts Historical Marker asserts, he composed it at the town’s Simpson Tavern as a drinking song celebrating the town’s sleigh races held on its Salem Street in the early 1800s.

There’s more. First published in 1857 after Pierpont had decamped for Savannah, Georgia, Savannah now obliquely claims rights to the song’s origin. [29]

Let’s create some clarity. “Jingle Bells” was almost certainly written as a drinking song celebrating sleigh racing – sort of an early 19th century version of “drag racing.” It also celebrates youthful hijinks, teenage boys, and girls together beyond their chaperone’s reach getting “upsot” in a snowbank. “Upsot” was a pun on “upset” with a sly insinuation that perhaps they had had too much to drink!

Proof? Just listen to the lyrics – not the familiar chorus that for many people is now the entire song, but the other stanzas from the original version that are now often omitted. It is not known who edited the song into its modern version.

*from One Horse Open Sleigh (Jingle Bells)*

Dashing thro' the snow,  
In a one-horse open sleigh,  
O'er the hills we go,  
Laughing all the way;  
Bells on bob tail ring,  
Making spirits bright,  
Oh what sport to ride and sing  
A sleighing song tonight.

Chorus:  
Jingle bells, jingle bells,

Jingle all the way;  
Oh! what joy it is to ride  
In a one-horse open sleigh.

A day or two ago  
I tho't I'd take a ride  
And soon Miss Fannie Bright  
Was seated by my side.  
The horse was lean and lank  
Misfortune seemed his lot  
He got into a drifted bank  
And we – we got upsot.

Chorus:

A day or two ago,  
The story I must tell  
I went out on the snow,  
And on my back I fell;  
A gent was riding by  
In a one-horse open sleigh,  
He laughed as there I sprawling lie,  
But quickly drove away.

Chorus:

Now the ground is white  
Go it while you're young,  
Take the girls tonight  
and sing this sleighing song;  
Just get a bobtailed bay  
Two forty as his speed  
Hitch him to an open sleigh  
And crack! you'll take the lead. [30]

Regardless of all of that, “Jingle Bells” has become a Christmas classic floating free of its convoluted origin story. Even today Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters 1943 recording of “Jingle Bells” ranks as its bestselling version, with more than a million copies sold during that World War II year alone. [31]

Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters singing “Jingle Bells” in the original 1943 version can be found [here](#).

Speaking of “Der Bingle,” next week in **Book Notes** we’ll discover American Christmas songs from radio, TV, and film with a bow to Christmas classics written by Jewish composers.

For now, keep those bells jingling and try not to get “upsot”!

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### End Notes

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