

The Cupola

Scholarship at Gettysburg College



Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil
War to the American Public

Civil War Era Studies

12-24-2013

Tarnish'd with Ashes and Soot: A Classic Poem's Dank Corners

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and
the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rudy, John M., "Tarnish'd with Ashes and Soot: A Classic Poem's Dank Corners" (2013). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 97.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/97>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Tarnish'd with Ashes and Soot: A Classic Poem's Dank Corners

Abstract

The legend is striking: Clement Clarke Moore, sitting with his children on a Christmas Eve in 1822, reading them a poem he has scrawled out that day, inspired by a winter shopping trip. Little Charity and Mary were likely entranced at six and three. Clement, a one-year-old, and Emily, a newborn, likely weren't as enrapt by the lilting rhymes.

The poem for Moore's children found new life a year later, published in a Troy, New York newspaper. And since then, *A Visit From Saint Nicholas* has been embedded in our culture. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Christmas, *A Visit From Saint Nicholas*

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

License



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Tarnish'd with Ashes and Soot: A Classic Poem's Dank Corners

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2013

He sprung to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew, like the down of a thistle:
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight —
Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night.

The legend is striking: Clement Clarke Moore, sitting with his children on a Christmas Eve in 1822, reading them a poem he has scrawled out that day, inspired by a winter shopping trip. Little Charity and Mary were likely entranced at six and three. Clement, a one-year-old, and Emily, a newborn, likely weren't as enrapt by the lilting rhymes.

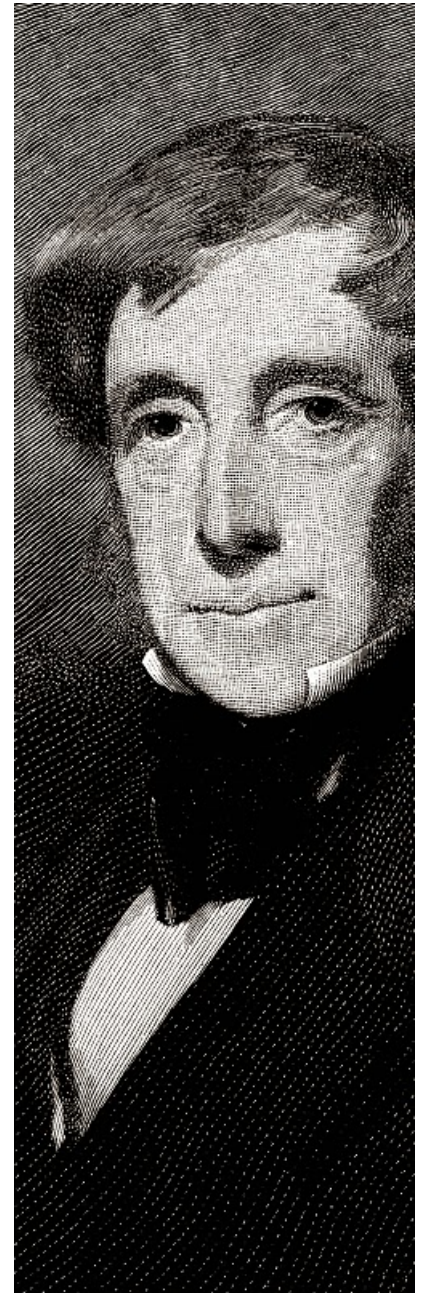
The poem for Moore's children found new life a year later, published in a Troy, New York newspaper. And since then, *A Visit From Saint Nicholas* has been embedded in our culture.

But who is the man who wrote that poem?

Moore lived in the northern edges of a nascent New York City. His home was less than a mile west of what today is Herald Square, where Maureen O'Hara and Natalie Wood found their *Miracle* on 34th street. But there was no Macy's (nor arch nemesis Gimbles) in 1822. The area was verdant fields, sprawling lawns, iron gates and palatial mansions.

The Clarke-Moore family manse was Chelsea. Moore's grandmother Mary Stillwell Clarke left the home to his mother when she died at the turn of the 19th century. The family was rich and prosperous. Mary Clarke and her husband had built their land holdings and fortunes together. Her husband died just before the American Revolution, which was likely for the better. The family penchant was toward fierce loyalty to the Crown. The Clarks, from whom grandson Clement Clarke Moore took his middle name, were stalwart Tories.

The Clarke conservatism was a strong suit in the bloodline. Clement Clarke Moore was born into a world at war and a dying breed. The day after he first breathed the sweet oxygen of Earth, American General



"Mad Anthony" Wayne trounced the British at Stony Point on the Hudson. America seemed set on a path toward democracy; the newborn child was set toward ancient aristocracy.

The mansion at Chelsea wasn't the only thing Moore's grandmother bequeathed to her daughter and her, "heirs in fee," upon her death. Samuel Patterson, in his 1956 *The Poet of Christmas Eve* helpfully reprints a portion of the will. Four slaves were left to Charity and Benjamin Moore: Thomas and Ann, a husband and wife, Charles and Hester. Another slave, Richard, was not yet, "of full age." He was likely one of the slaves caught in the limbo of New York's gradual emancipation law. When he reached 28 years-old, he would be free. Rachel, however, the sixth slave mentioned in the will, was to be sold outright. She was gone forever into the mists of the peculiar institution's icy grip.

Clement Clarke Moore was in his 20s when his family inherited the peculiar property. Slavery in New York might be dying, but it wasn't dead yet. For two more decades, men and women were held in bondage throughout the state, particularly in the conservative New York City.



And when Moore wrote about how Saint Nicholas, dragged in his miniature sleigh across the sky by eight flying deer, shouted, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night," that, "all," was still a distinct, largely-white subset of the American whole. As he read his new poem to his children on Christmas Eve, as he nestled them in their beds, other families weren't so lucky. Visions of sugar plums and other candied nuts might dance in the Moore childrens' heads, but Thomas and Ann, Charles, Hester, Richard and Rachel, wherever she was now after hitting the auction block twenty years before, likely were dreaming of something very different. While Moore could lazily muse about the fanciful flights of fur-bedecked elves, the slaves of New York could only dream of freedom, hoping it might come one day.

That dream came true just five years later in 1827. Slavery died in New York for good.

Moore's poem soon became famed the world over.

By the time the Civil War raged, it was printed and reprinted countless times. But the Christmas of 1863 was the first Moore wouldn't see since he penned those words. The aged conservative aristocrat, from his New York family of slaveholders, died that summer.

And just like the day after his birth, on the day after his death another battle raged: the black soldiers, freed slaves and freemen alike, of the 54th Massachusetts charged headlong at Battery Wagner on the outskirts of Charleston. They martialed their arms to destroy slavery once and for all, everywhere.

America, in spite of everything, still seemed set on a path toward true democracy.