

# Santa Letters: Gateway to Kindness

## The First Postal Policy: Return to Sender

Santa Claus became a popular figure in the United States following the publication of Clement Moore's poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas" in 1823. Inspired by the poem, Cartoonist Thomas Nast created the modern image of Santa Claus in a series of illustrations in *Harper's Weekly* beginning in the 1860s. Soon more and more children were writing letters to the jolly, red-suited fellow, telling him their Christmas wishes.

One popular early method of mailing letters to Santa was to put them in the chimney, because smoke was believed to magically transport wishes to the North Pole. But by the 1890s many children were putting greater faith in the Post Office Department. In 1901 *The Chicago Daily Tribune* noted that

*whereas in former days [children] were accustomed usually to consign [Santa letters] to the fireplace . . . children today, as a rule, have more faith in the post.*<sup>1</sup>

Some children addressed their letters succinctly to "Santa Claus, North Pole." Others were more elaborate, like the little boy who addressed his letter to "Mr. Santa Claus, Frost Mansion, In the Land of Snow, North Pole," and the child who wrote to "Mr. Santa Claus, Toy and Candy Palace, Christmasville, Joyland."<sup>2</sup> But no matter how finely addressed, initially postal policy defined all letters with "fictitious" addresses as unmailable and directed that they be returned to the sender, if possible. Failing that, the letters were to be sent to the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C., where postal clerks opened them, returned them if they could identify the sender, and destroyed them if not.

## Responding to Letters Despite Official Postal Policy

Not every postal employee followed the official policy of either returning or destroying children's letters to Santa Claus. The first known policy violations occurred in the Dead Letter Office at Post Office Department headquarters, where it is said that for several years in the mid-1890s the clerks let a "rich old man" take "20 or 30 of the many letters addressed to Santa Claus" and fulfill the children's requests "as coming from their patron saint."<sup>3</sup> The clerks also occasionally collected money among themselves to respond to needy children.

Some postmasters also violated the rules. In 1894 Harris Eames, a postmaster in Connecticut, engineered a Christmas miracle for a seven-year old child in his community after opening a letter to "Sandy Clous" mailed by a girl he knew named Fannie. Fannie had asked Santa to please visit her house because he had not done so the previous year – she included elaborate directions and listed each of her brothers and sisters and their ages. Eames knew Fannie's family had fallen upon hard times but had not realized how profoundly. He was so touched by the girl's simple plea that he immediately shared the letter with the town's business owners, each of whom wanted to contribute. With only two days until Christmas and in a rush of organized activity, donations were taken, gifts purchased, and agreement obtained from the girl's somewhat embarrassed mother for a Christmas Eve surprise.



**Santa Reading His Mail, 1871**

*courtesy Library of Congress*

This image of Santa Claus reviewing his mail, by Cartoonist Thomas Nast, appeared on the front cover of the December 30, 1871, issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

<sup>1</sup> *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 22, 1901, 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*, December 23, 1898, 12; *The [Lowville, NY] Journal & Republican*, December 19, 1901.

<sup>3</sup> *Ticonderoga [New York] Sentinel*, December 21, 1899. The story of the rich old man was retold in the December 16, 1905, issue of *The Washington Post*, only this time he was a "wealthy old bachelor" who picked out the letters of "several hundred children whom he took to be poor and in need." Both accounts stated that the practice ended upon the old man's death.

As Eames described it:

*On Christmas eve . . . everybody walked up the steps on tiptoe and deposited the load of presents against the front door . . . When everything was safely in place the door was given a thunderous knock, and the crowd fled in haste to the gate and then all hid behind the little fence. . . The door slowly opened, and for a moment Fannie's night-gowned figure stood framed in the doorway. She saw Santa Claus' gifts and with shrieks of delight, called to her mother.*<sup>4</sup>

In 1897 Francis Wilson, the new postmaster of Brooklyn, New York, turned over letters written by that city's poor children to the Christmas Tree Society, a local charity dedicated to bringing Christmas cheer to needy youngsters. Wilson was an active member of the society, which got its start in 1892 and provided food, clothing, entertainment and toys to thousands of children each Christmas. George Roberts replaced Wilson as postmaster in 1901 and continued the Brooklyn Post Office's charitable tradition. In 1906 Roberts assured his customers that children's letters would be distributed to local charitable organizations as in past years, stating:

*Old Santa Claus is not dead, so far as the Brooklyn Post Office is concerned . . . I will see to it personally that he gets every message written him by the little ones of Brooklyn.*<sup>5</sup>

In 1902 Assistant Postmaster John Dare and Clerk Edgar Sharp of the Patchogue, New York, Post Office, responded to a Santa letter that had been handed to Sharp at the Post Office by a seven-year old boy, stamped but unsealed. They formed a "Santa Claus committee" and "found enough to satisfy the little fellow's modest needs."<sup>6</sup>

On Christmas Eve 1906 Chicago Postmaster Fred A. Busse released Santa letters to a wealthy bachelor who had been inspired to play Santa Claus by a front-page cartoon in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* that morning, which had depicted a wealthy businessman picking up Santa letters from the Post Office and giving gifts to the poor children that wrote them.

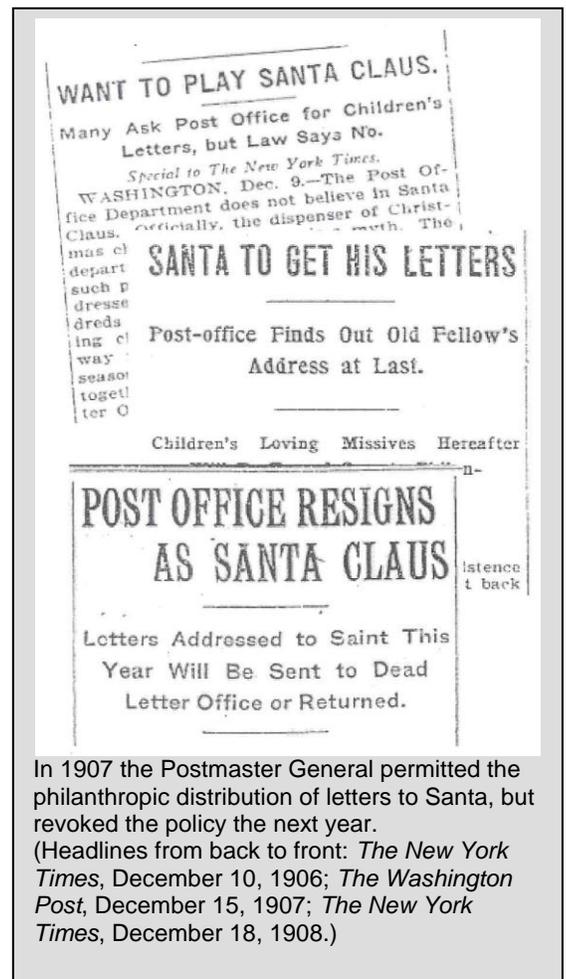
All these postal employees acted on their own initiative – had they asked for permission to open or distribute the letters, it would have been denied. Until 1907 the Postmaster General refused to let postmasters open or share letters to Santa Claus – "rules are rules" was the official policy.

### Permission to Distribute Letters Granted in 1907; Revoked in 1908

On December 13, 1907, Postmaster General George von L. Meyer authorized postmasters to distribute letters addressed to Santa Claus to charitable institutions or individuals for "philanthropic purposes."<sup>7</sup> An editorialist in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* enthused:

*Postmaster General Meyer has multiplied the delights of childhood . . . letters written to Santa Claus from now on will be turned over to men and women whose tenderness of feeling ever goes out to the boys and girls.*<sup>8</sup>

Meyer did not renew the permission the following year due to complaints received from many charitable organizations. An article in the December 5, 1908, issue of the philanthropic journal *Charities and the Commons* noted that the number of Santa letters at the New York Post Office had increased more than 13-fold following Meyer's 1907 announcement, that charities had not had enough



In 1907 the Postmaster General permitted the philanthropic distribution of letters to Santa, but revoked the policy the next year. (Headlines from back to front: *The New York Times*, December 10, 1906; *The Washington Post*, December 15, 1907; *The New York Times*, December 18, 1908.)

<sup>4</sup> *The Brooklyn Eagle*, December 20, 1902. Eames served as postmaster of West Haven from 1889 to 1895; in 1902 he was a reporter for *The Brooklyn Eagle*.

<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*, December 23, 1906, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *The Brooklyn Eagle*, December 20, 1902, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Postal Bulletin* 8475, December 16, 1907.

<sup>8</sup> *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 17, 1907, 10.

time to investigate the letters, and that some presents had fallen into undeserving hands.

## Permission to Distribute Santa Letters Again Granted, from 1911 to the Present



On November 1, 1911, Postmaster General Frank H. Hitchcock granted permission for postmasters to once again distribute Santa letters for philanthropic purposes. He renewed the permission the next year and in 1913 such permission was incorporated into the *Postal Laws and Regulations*. It has appeared in postal regulations since that time.<sup>9</sup>

Postal employees, on the front lines of letters to Santa, have always been prominent responders. An article in the December 1954 issue of *McCall's* magazine noted that "every year New York postal workers buy toys, food and clothing for 250 families." Thousands more families were aided by charities and philanthropists – from little old ladies who looked like they were barely scraping by to wealthy businessmen who took joy in engineering Christmas Day miracles for needy youngsters. Beginning in the 1960s talk show host Johnny Carson helped popularize the Letters to Santa program by reading select letters on the "Tonight Show" every December.

By the early 1950s some charities had started calling their annual Christmas gift-giving project "Operation Santa Claus." This term was eventually applied to the Letters to Santa program at the New York City Post Office, and by 2006 the national program was sometimes called "Operation Santa."

Also in 2006, national policy guidelines for how to handle Santa letters were created and distributed to postal employees. Due to concerns about privacy, customers who volunteered to "adopt" Santa letters were required to present photo identification and fill out a form listing their name and address and the letters they were adopting. Beginning with the 2007 Christmas season, customers were also required to sign a form agreeing not to misuse any of the information in the letters. The Postal Service introduced stricter guidelines in 2009 to further protect the safety and privacy of children. It changed the letter adoption process by blacking out all references to the child's address, assigning the letter a number, and providing a redacted copy of the letter to the individual interested in adopting it. The volunteer who selects the letter brings a gift for the child back to the Post Office to present to a postal employee. Postal employees weigh the package, collect the postage from the volunteer, and then apply a mailing label and mail the package without the volunteer ever seeing the child's address.

Participation in the Letters to Santa program has always been voluntary and practices have varied by Post Office. Some cities and towns work with their local schools to respond to the children as if they were Santa; some work with established groups and help with the collection of gifts; and others invite the public to adopt Santa letters to help children and their families.

Even as computers and smartphones have opened up new avenues of communication, children today continue to entrust their most important messages – letters to Santa – to the United States Postal Service.



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<sup>9</sup> On August 30, 1979, postal regulations concerning the philanthropic distribution of Santa letters were broadened to include not only letters to Santa Claus but also to "the Easter Rabbit, Mother Nature, or similar addresses" (*Postal Bulletin* 21206).