

# *Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus*

*By Francis P. Church, first published in The New York Sun in 1897*

We take pleasure in answering thus prominently the communication below, expressing at the same time our great gratification that its faithful author is numbered among the friends of *The Sun*:

*Dear Editor—*

*I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, "If you see it in The Sun, it's so." Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?*

*Virginia O'Hanlon*

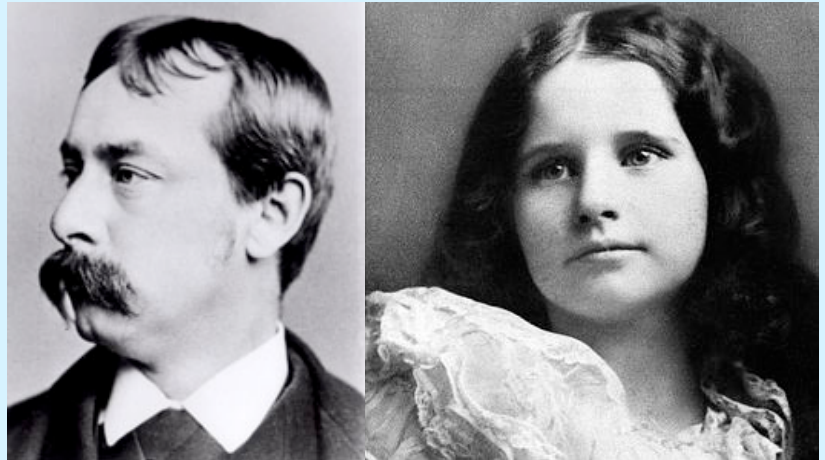
Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours, man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies. You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if you did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived could tear apart. Only faith, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.



*Francis P. Church and Virginia O'Hanlon*

## **About the Exchange**

Francis P. Church's editorial, "Yes Virginia, There is a Santa Claus" was an immediate sensation, and went on to become one of the most famous editorials ever written. It first appeared in the *The New York Sun* in 1897, almost a hundred years ago, and was reprinted

annually until 1949 when the paper went out of business.

Thirty-six years after her letter was printed, Virginia O'Hanlon recalled the events that prompted her letter:

"Quite naturally I believed in Santa Claus, for he had never disappointed me. But when less fortunate little boys and girls said there wasn't any Santa

Claus, I was filled with doubts. I asked my father, and he was a little evasive on the subject.

"It was a habit in our family that whenever any doubts came up as to how to pronounce a word or some question of historical fact was in doubt, we wrote to the Question and Answer column in *The Sun*. Father would al-

ways say, 'If you see it in the *The Sun*, it's so,' and that settled the matter.

" 'Well, I'm just going to write *The Sun* and find out the real truth,' I said to father.

"He said, 'Go ahead, Virginia. I'm sure *The Sun* will give you the right answer, as it always does.' "

And so Virginia sat down and wrote her parents' favorite newspaper.

Her letter found its way into the hands of a veteran editor, Francis P. Church. Son of a Baptist minister, Church had covered the Civil War for *The New York Times* and had worked on the *The New York Sun* for 20 years, more recently as an anonymous editorial writer. Church, a sardonic man, had for his personal motto, "Endeavour to clear your mind of cant." When controversial subjects had to be tackled on the editorial page, especially those dealing with theology, the assignments were usually given to Church.



Now, he had in his hands a little girl's letter on a most controversial matter, and he was burdened with the responsibility of answering it.

"Is there a Santa Claus?" the childish scrawl in the letter asked. At once, Church knew that there was no avoiding the question. He must answer, and he must answer truthfully. And so he turned to his desk, and he began his reply which was to become one of the most memorable editorials in newspaper history.

Church married shortly after the editorial appeared. He died in April, 1906, leaving no children.

Virginia O'Hanlon went on to graduate from Hunter College with a Bachelor of Arts degree at age 21. The following year she received her Master's from Columbia, and in 1912 she began teaching in the New York City school system, later becoming a principal. After 47 years, she retired as an educator. Throughout her life she received a steady stream of mail about her Santa Claus letter, and to each reply she attached an attractive printed copy of the Church editorial. Virginia O'Hanlon Douglas died on May 13, 1971, at the age of 81, in a nursing home in Valatie, N.Y.

## The Story Behind The Famous Quote

"Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

That sentence from American journalism's best-known Santa Claus editorial (the *New York Sun*'s "Is There A Santa Claus?") is still so popular that 112 years after it first ran, Macy's is basing its holiday advertising campaign on it for the second consecutive year.

This year, Macy's and the CBS television network are co-sponsoring an animated children's program about Virginia O'Hanlon, the eight year old girl who sent her inquiry "Please tell me the truth. Is There A Santa Claus?" to the *Sun* in 1897.

Due to its popularity now, people assume the editorial was an immediate hit when published in 1897 and that the *Sun* enthusiastically reprinted it every year at Christmastime until the newspaper folded in 1950. Not true, says W.

Joseph Campbell, a journalism professor and an expert on media myths at American University.

"Readers, not newspaper editors, helped make sure 'Is There A Santa Claus?' lived on," Campbell said about the myth surrounding the editorial.

Campbell attributes the editorial's enduring appeal among readers to four main traits:

- It offers a connection to another, distant time. It is reassuring to know that what was appealing in 1897 remains appealing today.
- It is a cheery, reaffirming story: one without villains or sinister elements.
- The editorial reminds adults about Christmases past and a time when they, too, were believers.
- It has been a way over the years for parents to address children's skepti-

cism about Santa Claus without having to fib. They can point to the editorial and its timeless answer to an inevitable question.

### Readers Know Better

Campbell, whose research about the editorial's history won him the American Journalism Historian Association's top faculty research award in 2004, said the *Sun* was hesitant in embracing "Is There A Santa Claus?," and did not regularly run it until the 1920s.

"Before then, it was reprinted only sporadically," Campbell said. "The *Sun*'s reluctance stemmed from the newspaper's disinclination to promote its journalists as star reporters or celebrities."

Readers repeatedly asked the *Sun* to republish the editorial and in the

end, they prevailed. “Newspaper editors are not always as perceptive as their readers in identifying and calling attention to journalism of significance and lasting value,” Campbell said of the readers’ push to publish.

### Odd Timing

According to Campbell, the editorial’s odd timing—three months before Christmas in 1897—is best explained by the anticipation of Virginia O’Hanlon, the little girl whose letter prompted the *Sun*’s editorial.

Years after the editorial was published, O’Hanlon recalled that as a child she began wondering at the time of her July birthday in 1897 what gifts she would receive at Christmas. This prompted her to write to the *Sun* later that summer. But O’Hanlon said that weeks went by before the *Sun* replied with its famous editorial, which the *Sun*’s editor said was written in less than a day by Francis P. Church.

“The explanation that reconciles those two accounts—O’Hanlon’s extended wait for an answer and Church’s quickly written response—is that the *Sun* for a time ignored or misplaced the letter that inspired American journalism’s iconic editorial,” Campbell said.

### Media Myths

The details behind “Is There A Santa Claus?” point to what Campbell says is a widespread, distorted understanding of U.S. journalism in the late 1890s—what most people believe to be true about the period has been perpetuated by myth.

“The anecdote about William Randolph Hearst inciting the Spanish-American War of 1898 in a telegram to the artist Frederic Remington (who was on assignment in Cuba in 1897) is acknowledged by scholars to be fictional,” said Campbell. “Yet the general public largely still believes it is true.”

*Campbell is a professor at American University’s School of Communication. He is the author of the books Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies (Praeger, 2001), The Year That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of the Paradigms (Routledge, 2006), and the forthcoming book Getting it Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism (University of California, 2010).*

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