

Don Vruwink: Now is the time for peace & goodwill

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As 2020 nears its end – and for many of us, it can't come soon enough – I have been thinking about how the Christmas holiday developed in America.

Finding the perfect Christmas tree was not always a holiday tradition. The first record of a lighted and decorated tree occurred during the Revolutionary War on Christmas Eve when a group of Hessian soldiers (German soldiers hired by the British) lit a tree as a backdrop for their holiday celebration. Surprised by General George Washington's army, they were defeated the next day. After the war, 3,000 Hessian soldiers stayed in America and the idea of the Christmas tree slowly took root.

In Colonial times, Americans of different sects and national origins kept the holiday in ways they carried over from the Old World. Even in the early 1800s, many Americans, churched and unchurched, Northern or Southern, hardly took notice of Christmas at all.

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But by the mid-1800s, communication and transportation evolutions made once isolated parts of America more aware of each other. Immigration vastly widened the ethnic and religious pluralism that has been a part of America's settlement from the beginning.

Slavery and westward expansion brought moral, political and economic tensions between America's regions, raising new questions about the nature of the Union. New wealth and larger markets superseded the old, the population swelled, and the

pace of life greatly accelerated.

This evolution made many Americans reconsider the notion of community in larger terms, on a national scale, but modeled on the ideal of a family gathered around the fireplace. At this crossroads of progress and nostalgia, Americans found Christmas a holiday that ministered to their needs.

The strongest push for a Christmas holiday came from the areas most affected by the social, economic and technological revolutions of the pre-Civil War period. These were the northern cities where village and town culture was being challenged by city and factory. People felt the need for explicit symbols of common and shared purposes. Christmas emerged as a way to forge a national culture. By the 1850s, it had captured the Northern imagination and was making inroads in the South.

The Establishment Clause in the United States Constitution says “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” And yet in 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant signed legislation making Christmas a federal holiday in the District of Columbia. Some states had already made Christmas a legal holiday prior to that. President Grant wanted to make Christmas a federal holiday as part of his commitment to unite the country after a brutal Civil War.

Not everyone observes Christmas as a religious holiday, but the tradition has been embraced by many people of many religious faiths. It’s hard not to become engaged in the festivities ... the magnificent light displays, Christmas movies and songs, the tradition of Santa Claus and gift-giving, cookie baking, and so on.

Christmas tree sales became part of the American market and tree decorations became big business. Christmas cards and other images featuring Santa with his bag full of gifts, reindeer, dancers, and special treats suggested bounty and joy.

Although Christmas has its roots in Christianity, it is embraced by people of many faiths or no faith at all. Religions – be it Christianity, Judaism, Muslim, Buddhism, Hinduism or others – are founded on basic tenets like kindness, generosity, humility, community, and the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

As Christmas nears, my wish is to unite as a community, a state, and a nation to work together for the common good. People of any religion or no religion can embrace the spirit of joy, peace and goodwill embodied by all religions.

May you and yours have a safe and blessed holiday.

— *Vruwink, D-Milton, represents the 43rd Assembly District.*