Santa Claus and Little Virginia
On September 21, 1897 an editorial piece appeared in The Sun (New York) entitled “Is There a Santa Claus?” Its reply, “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Clause” has become a Christmas event all its own. To better understand the letter and its reply, one must take into account the icon that is today’s Santa filtered through the lens of the era. Santa, circa 1890, had just recently been solidified as the jolly man in red that we know today thanks to the drawings of Thomas Nast. Before this time the Santa character came in all forms, shapes, and colors, and was dependant on one’s heritage or culture. It was only in the mid 1800s when Christmas began to be celebrated in the United States.

Thomas Nast (1840 - 1902)
More than a cartoonist, Thomas Nast was an inventor of icons, popularizing now familiar subjects such as his illustration of Santa Claus.

Although virtually every school child today knows who invented the electric light and the telephone, how many know the name of Thomas Nast, the man who invented Santa Claus?

Thomas Nast was a young and rising political cartoonist of twenty-two when he drew his first Christmas picture for the January 3, 1863, issue of Harper’s Weekly. From then until the issue of Christmas Day, 1866, scarcely a year was ever to pass without Nast laying aside, however briefly, his formidable political battles to draw his annual gift for the readers of Harper’s Weekly.

As a creator of American symbols and caricatures, Nast has no equal. Today’s cartoonists still employ the Republican elephant that charged from his pen and the Democratic donkey that he popularized.

William Glover, Excerpt from The Christmas Drawings of Thomas Nast

The Letter
In 1897 Dr. Philip O’Hanlon was asked by his 8-year-old daughter, Virginia (pictured at right), if Santa Claus really existed. Dr. O’Hanlon instructed his daughter to write to The Sun because as she writes “Papa says ‘If you see it in The Sun its so’.”

The reply from veteran correspondent Francis P. Church addressed more than the simple question posed by Virginia, it served as a reminder to all that some of the most interesting and wonderful things in the world are those that are unseen and unknown. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus addresses the fundamental attitude of the Christmas spirit and the way we should view our world, not only as facts and figures, but as something truly fantastic.
The Reply
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 they 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 may 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, fancy, 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 he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Farm House Museum
Is There a Santa Claus?

Additional information on the Farm House Museum and University Museums is available at the University Museums office - 290 Scheman building (2nd floor) 515-294-3342. Visit us online at www.museums.iastate.edu.