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Who Wrote The Night Before Christmas Poem

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795584033014299

The Enduring Mystery of a Beloved Holiday Classic

For generations, the poem that begins with the immortal line "Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house" has been a cornerstone of holiday celebrations in homes across the English-speaking world. Recited by parents to sleepy children, adapted in countless films and television specials, and referenced in Christmas cards and decorations, it is arguably the most famous festive poem ever written. Yet, for nearly as long as it has been cherished, a spirited debate has raged over a single, fundamental question: who actually wrote it? While the name Clement Clarke Moore has been printed on millions of copies as the author, a compelling body of evidence points to a different writer entirely, Major Henry Livingston Jr. This article delves into the fascinating history of the poem, examining the claims, the counterclaims, and the enduring legacy of a work that helped define the modern image of Santa Claus.

The poem, originally titled **"A Visit from St. Nicholas"**, was first published anonymously in the Troy, New York, *Sentinel*on December 23, 1823. Its immediate popularity was undeniable. The newspaper's editor, Orville L. Holley, was so taken with the manuscript, sent to him by an unnamed source, that he published it without knowing the author's identity. The poem described a rotund, elf-like figure who arrived on Christmas Eve in a sleigh pulled by eight tiny reindeer. It gave names—Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen—to these magical creatures and painted a vivid picture of St. Nicholas descending the chimney with a sack of toys. This was a significant departure from the more severe, bishop-like depictions of St. Nicholas common in earlier European traditions. The poem was so well-received that it was reprinted numerous times in other newspapers and periodicals over the next two decades, almost always without a byline. It was a poem that had captured the spirit of a rapidly modernizing holiday.

Enter Clement Clarke Moore: The Claimant to the Quill

The first public attribution of the poem to Clement Clarke Moore came in 1837, a full fourteen years after its initial anonymous publication. Moore, a professor of Oriental and Greek literature at the General Theological Seminary in New York City, was an unlikely candidate for the author of such a whimsical, domestic piece. He was a serious academic, a man of considerable wealth and social standing, and the author of a dense, two-volume Hebrew lexicon. According to the story that Moore himself later told, he had written the poem for his own children on Christmas Eve in 1822. He was not particularly proud of the work, considering it a trivial piece of doggerel unworthy of his scholarly reputation. It was only when a family friend, Miss Harriet Butler, visited the Moore household and copied the poem into her album that it entered the public sphere. She allegedly sent it to the Troy *Sentinel*, leading to its famous first publication.

Moore's claim to authorship was solidified in 1844 when he included the poem in an anthology of his works,

By this point, the poem had become a national sensation, and Moore was happy to accept the recognition it brought, even if he remained somewhat ambivalent about its literary merits. For more than a century and a half, Clement Clarke Moore was universally accepted as the poem's author. His name became inseparable from "The Night Before Christmas," and his grave in New York is a popular holiday pilgrimage site. The story of a New York professor writing a simple, magical poem for his children felt like a perfect piece of Christmas lore in itself.

The Moore Narrative: A Closer Look at the Evidence

The evidence supporting Moore's authorship is straightforward and, for many years, was considered conclusive. The key pieces are:

- Moore's Own Testimony: He claimed authorship in his 1844 poetry collection and in private letters. He provided specific details about writing the poem in 1822 at his home, Chelsea, which is now a historic landmark.
- The Butler Connection: The account of Miss Harriet Butler transcribing the poem from Moore's original manuscript is a well-documented part of the story's transmission.
- Printing History: By the 1840s, numerous published versions of the poem explicitly listed Clement C. Moore as the author, and he successfully managed the copyright.
- Family Tradition: The Moore family itself consistently and proudly maintained the tradition of his authorship.

For a long time, this body of evidence was more than sufficient. The story of the poem's creation was taught in schools and delighted families every December. However, cracks in the facade of this accepted history began to appear in the late 20th century, fueled by meticulous research and literary forensics.

The Livingston Theory: A Compelling Challenge Emerges

The main challenger to Clement Clarke Moore's authorship is Major Henry Livingston Jr. (1748–1828), a farmer, surveyor, and poet from Poughkeepsie, New York. Livingston was a member of a prominent and politically active family. Unlike Moore, the reserved academic, Livingston was known for his playful, gregarious personality and his love of writing light, humorous, and imaginative poetry for his children and friends. His work frequently featured the same themes found in "A Visit from St. Nicholas": flying sleighs, whimsical characters, and a lively, rhythmic meter known as anapestic tetrameter (the "da-da-DUM" rhythm of the poem).

The modern case for Livingston was most forcefully made by his descendant, the scholar and historian Donald Foster, in his 2000 book, *Author Unknown: On the Trail of Anonymous* (later updated as *Eleven More Days: The True Story of "The Night Before Christmas"*). Foster and other researchers, including Mary Van Deusen (who published a pamphlet on the subject in the 1960s), pointed to a series of striking anomalies and inconsistencies in Moore's claim.

Key Arguments for the Livingston Authorship

The evidence for Henry Livingston Jr. is circumstantial but, to many scholars, cumulatively persuasive. The central arguments include:

1. A Distinctive Poetic Voice: Livingston's known body of work is filled with poems written in anapestic tetrameter. Moore, on the other hand, almost exclusively wrote in more formal, classical meters like iambic pentameter. "A Visit from St. Nicholas" is a stylistic outlier in Moore's published works but fits perfectly within Livingston's established style. His poems often featured the phrase "Twas the..." and its onomatopoeic sound effects.
2. Geographic and Thematic Details: The poem includes specific references that would be familiar to a Hudson Valley resident like Livingston. The mention of "the moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow" evokes the landscape around Poughkeepsie. Moore, who lived in bustling New York City, described the scene as having a "little toy" shops and a house with a "broad" chimney. Livingston's own poems are full of winter imagery, sleigh rides, and the unique regional culture of the Hudson Valley.
3. Livingston Family Oral Tradition: For generations, the Livingston family maintained an unbroken oral tradition that Henry Livingston Jr. was the true author of the poem. According to this tradition, Livingston read

the poem aloud to his children on Christmas Eve 1807 or 1808—more than a decade before Moore claimed to have written it. His daughter, Nancy, is said to have sent the poem to the Troy Sentinel after her father's death, perhaps via a family connection to the editor.

4. Moore's Motivations and Character: Foster and others have argued that Moore, a man of high social ambition and a known Federalist, might have been unlikely to admit to writing a playful, irregular poem that was at odds with his formal image. The suggestion is that he allowed the credit to come to him and never fully corrected the record, especially after its popularity soared.

5. The "Dutch" Influence: The poem's depiction of St. Nicholas as a chubby, pipe-smoking, gift-giving elf is directly rooted in Dutch folklore of the New York colony. The Livingston family had deep Dutch roots, while Moore's lineage was primarily English and Scottish. Livingston's mother was from a prominent Dutch family, making this cultural influence deeply personal. His previous poems also referenced Dutch customs and figures.

Rebuttals and Counterarguments for Moore

Defenders of Moore's authorship do not find the Livingston case convincing. They argue that:

- There is no direct evidence: There is no surviving manuscript of the poem in Livingston's handwriting from 1808. The earliest manuscript we have is from Moore's children, dated 1865 (a copy he made for them).
- The Oral Tradition is Unreliable: The Livingston family tradition was recorded decades after the fact and could be colored by a desire to claim a famous work for their illustrious ancestor.
- Moore's Other Poems: While Moore's other poetry is more formal, he was capable of writing in a lighter vein. A few of his other works, such as "Old, Old Story," show a similar playful tone and rhythm.
- Livingston's Death: Livingston died in 1828, five years after the poem's first publication. He never came forward to claim authorship, even though he lived long enough to see it become a celebrated work. Why would a poet who loved attention and reading his work aloud remain silent?

Modern Scholarship and the Lingering Verdict

The debate over **who wrote The Night Before Christmas poem** has not been definitively settled. Modern scholars are largely divided. Many literary historians and reference works (such as the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*) still list Clement Clarke Moore as the author, but they acknowledge the controversy. Academic papers and conferences continue to be dedicated to the question, using stylistic analysis, computer-based text mining, and historical research to try and find a final answer.

Statistical analysis of word usage, meter, and phrasing has provided ammunition for both sides. Some studies show that the poem's linguistic fingerprint is more similar to Livingston's known works, while others argue that the sample size of Livingston's surviving poems is too small to be definitive. The debate has, at times, been passionate, with advocates on both sides feeling strongly attached to their candidate.

Beyond the academic dispute, the question of authorship has a profound cultural significance. It highlights how a single poem can shape a national mythology. The poem's image of a "right jolly old elf" with a "round belly" and a "little round mouth" became the default image of Santa Claus, later codified by illustrations from Thomas Nast and, eventually, by Coca-Cola's advertising. Whether written by a Manhattan professor in 1822 or a Hudson Valley farmer in 1808, the poem's impact on the holiday is immeasurable. It gave us the reindeer, the sleigh, the chimney entrance, and the joyous, non-commercial spirit of gift-giving that remains at the heart of the season.

Conclusion: A Mystery That Adds to the Magic

The simple question, **who wrote The Night Before Christmas poem**, is a puzzle that may never have a single, universally accepted answer. The evidence for Clement Clarke Moore is a matter of public record and personal testimony. The evidence for Henry Livingston Jr. is a matter of stylistic consistency, oral tradition, and logical inference. Both men lived remarkable lives, and both have passionate defenders who make cogent and

compelling arguments.

Perhaps, in a way, the mystery itself is part of the poem's magic. "A Visit from St. Nicholas" is a poem about wonder, about the magic that exists in the quiet hours of a winter night. It is a story that teaches us to believe in things we cannot see. The uncertainty surrounding its origins invites us to ponder the mystery of creation itself. Was it the product of a scholar's private moment of whimsy, or the culmination of a poet's lifetime of joyful, rustic storytelling? We may never know for sure. What we do know is that the poem endures. It continues to be read aloud in millions of homes every December 24th, uniting generations in a shared experience of anticipation and delight. The names of the authors—Moore and Livingston—may be debated, but the legacy of the poem they created (or one of them created) is a gift that the world receives anew each year. And perhaps that is the only answer we truly need

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