

# TRUE STORIES FROM THE AMERICAN PAST



Volume II: Since 1865

SECOND EDITION

Edited by William Graebner

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VOLUME II: SINCE 1865

EDITED BY

William Graebner

State University of New York  
College at Fredonia

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VOLUME II: SINCE 1865

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# Preface

*True Stories* is a special kind of reader. It consists of fifteen stories, each thoroughly researched and impeccably crafted by scholars who are authorities in their respective fields. Each story deals with a significant and compelling episode in the history of the United States since the Civil War. Every decade of that history is represented by at least one story.

In selecting the stories, I have been moved by the sense that the American past is too rich and varied to be bound and contained by the traditional and comfortable narratives with which most historians are conversant. Nonetheless, some of our stories—the story of the nation’s imperial adventure in the Philippines, or the account of Francis Townsend’s confrontation with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Dealers over pensions for the aged—will be generally familiar to instructors, if not students. Other episodes, including the opening of Disneyland and the rock concerts at Woodstock and Altamont, will have resonance for many Americans, yet received their first serious historical treatment in the first edition of *True Stories*. Still others, including the story of the debate over an early artificial insemination, concern issues and incidents that are not even mentioned in survey textbooks. After surveying readers of the first edition, I have added stories on the nineteenth-century West, the South, World War II, and the late-twentieth-century religious right. The Reconstruction era is represented by a new story on the “Christmas Riots” of 1865. I hope readers will appreciate the remarkable diversity of *True Stories*.

Together, the stories cover a wide variety of fields of historical inquiry, many of them new to the study of history in the last two or three decades. These include popular culture; the history of medicine; sexuality; rural life; youth culture; women’s history; the history of African-Americans; crime and violence; the aged; urban history; and the history of science and technology. Most important, each episode was selected because it promised to make, well, a good *story*.

Why use stories to study and learn history? The idea is not as unusual as it might seem. We live in a culture steeped in stories: the myths of ancient Greece,



Biblical narratives, bedtime stories, fairy tales, newspaper accounts, Hollywood epics, neighborhood rumors, one's personal account of the day's events after a hard day at school or at the office. Even the standard history textbooks are essentially stories—longer, more general, more familiar, and more generally accepted stories than the ones found in this book—but stories, just the same.

The accounts that make up *True Stories* are obviously not myths, or fairy tales, or rumors. They are a certain kind of story that we easily recognize as “history.” Indeed, history might be understood as a set of analytical stories about the past whose authors think are “true.” When we read an historical account, we expect it to be balanced, to be based on historical research and “facts,” and to show respect for the past; by these standards, the stories in *True Stories* certainly qualify as history. But it is not quite the history one finds in a history textbook. *True Stories* features people who live and act in specific places and times and in precise historical circumstances. Its flesh and blood protagonists—some of them resembling mythic heroes or anti-heroes—build bridges, march on nation's capitol, take money to throw baseball games, justify the marketing of hazardous substances, speak from the big stage at the Woodstock Music & Art Fair, engage in armed combat with the federal government, or confront the nation's racist heritage on the sidewalks of World War II Hawaii. In short, one function of any story—and one purpose of *True Stories*—is to put people, and people's deeds, back into history.

There is another lesson to be learned from these stories, one that has to do with what a story is. Although the stories presented here often involve individuals acting in specific situations, they have significance that goes far beyond the setting or the actors. The people in *True Stories* (indeed, all of us) inevitably live their lives on the stage of history. The things that they do—even the odd, eccentric, or criminal things—are ultimately historical deeds, carried out within the economic, political, social, and cultural frameworks of a particular historical era. Therefore, a good story provides the insights of the traditional textbook, though in a very different form.

Sometimes it can be difficult to see the connections between a story and history, between the text and its context. When one sees a movie, or watches the 11 o'clock television news, one does not easily or automatically think of these “stories” as part of history; and making the connections between a specific event and the larger past can be more difficult when the event occurred decades ago. To help students make these connections, and to see the need for making them, each episode concludes with an interpretive section that pulls together the themes in the story and links the story proper with some larger and familiar historical context. For example, the epic hill-country feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys in the 1880s emerges as a product of industrialization and urbanization; and the Iranian hostage crisis that began in 1979 is shaped as a moment in America's decline as a world economic and political power.

Each episode, then, has two distinct parts. The first part is the narrated story. Our goal was to keep this story section as free as possible from analysis and interpretation, in the hope that students would fashion their own perspectives once freed, if only relatively and momentarily, from the learned authority of the historian. The second part of the episode is a shorter interpretive conclusion, where

the authors have been given free reign to bring their considerable analytical skills to bear on the body of the story.

As students and instructors will discover, the attempt to separate narrative and interpretation has been only moderately successful. Even the most rudimentary collections of “facts” and the simplest narratives begin with preconceptions, proceed from moral and ethical premises, and imply interpretive frameworks. So do our “true stories.” Despite our efforts to put these elements in the background, they inevitably appear in the stories. Indeed, one purpose of the collection is to draw attention to the inescapable subjectivity of historians. Nonetheless, we also believe that the effort made here to separate narrative and analysis can assist students in generating their own readings of the past and, by doing so, in becoming active participants in the complex process of understanding and creating their own history.

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*William Graebner*

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# Contents

Preface      xi

- Chapter 1    **Stephen Nissenbaum** An Insurrection That Never Happened: The “Christmas Riots” of 1865      1
- Chapter 2    **Alan Trachtenberg** Building the Brooklyn Bridge      18
- Chapter 3    **Altina L. Waller** The Hatfield-McCoy Feud      36
- Chapter 4    **Carlos A. Schwantes** Coxey’s Army: Dramatizing the Malaise of the 1890s      55
- Chapter 5    **Stuart Creighton Miller** Empire in the Philippines: America’s Forgotten War of Colonial Conquest      74
- Chapter 6    **Elaine Tyler May** Artificial Insemination: the First Debate      93
- Chapter 7    **Leonard Dinnerstein** The Leo Frank Murder Case      106
- Chapter 8    **Ronald Story** The Black Sox Scandal      125
- Chapter 9    **David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz** Deadly Fuel: Autos, Leaded Gas, and the Politics of Science      143
- Chapter 10   **William Graebner** The Townsend Movement and Social Security      158

Chapter 11	<b>Beth Bailey and David Farber</b> Harlem Hellfighters: The 369th in World War II Hawaii	175
Chapter 12	<b>George Lipsitz</b> The Making of Disneyland	193
Chapter 13	<b>Michael Frisch</b> Woodstock and Altamont	210
Chapter 14	<b>Walter LaFeber</b> The Iranian Hostage Crisis	232
Chapter 15	<b>Paul Boyer</b> Apocalypse in Waco: David Koresh and the Branch Davidians	251

# AN INSURRECTION THAT NEVER HAPPENED: THE “CHRISTMAS RIOTS” OF 1865

STEPHEN NISSENBAUM

*At the end of the Civil War there remained the unresolved question of what was to be done about the more than three million African-Americans who had been freed from slavery. White Southerners were fearful about their own economic futures, to say nothing of fears for their physical safety if their former slaves united in retribution. Freed slaves had every reason to expect that a government which had been willing to sacrifice over 300,000 lives to end the slave system would also be willing to provide them with the essential economic means—land—to allow them to become contributing members of society. Yet the fate of both white Southerners and freedmen and freedwomen was in the hands of Northern politicians who had never been able to agree that the rights of freedpeople were a high priority in the war. What was universally celebrated at war's end was the subjugation of the South and the preservation of the Union. Considering that so many lives had been sacrificed, it was almost inevitable that the Union had become a “holy” cause, couched, by the President himself, in terms of a religious cleansing that would lead to a sanctified nation.*

*This emphasis on the preservation of the Union rather than the rights of African-Americans was clear from the beginning of the war right through to the end. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, for example, was a very controversial, politically sensitive document. The President stood to lose much of his support for the war if he were to issue it in the early stages; such a proclamation only became feasible when the Union was in a militarily strong position after the bloody battle of Antietam. Even then the proclamation did not free slaves in slave states that had sided with the Union—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri. In the South, of course, with the Confederacy in control, the proclamation had no effect until the military situation changed. Another example is the decision to use African-American troops in the Northern army. Northerners demonstrated their racism by initially denying the right of free blacks in the North to fight for the Union cause. Even when it became clear that enthusiasm for the war was waning and conscription was necessary to fill the ranks of the army, there was resistance to allowing African-Americans to fight. Only because of that shortage of men combined with extensive politicking and lobbying on the part of African-American leaders such as Frederick Douglass did black regiments become*

*grudgingly acceptable to Northerners. Despite the not inconsiderable accomplishment of ending slavery as an institution, the still rampant racist attitudes in the North made the future of African-American freedpeople in the South very precarious.*

*Stephen Nissenbaum's story of the rumored Christmas insurrection reveals much about the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, when the hopes of freedpeople soared and white Southerners' fears reached almost hysterical proportions—emotions that were exacerbated by contested and ambiguous Northern policies. But this story also explores the nature of human relations in the plantation South before the war, the human give-and-take that was impossible to avoid, even though whites attempted to deny the essential humanity of their slaves. Embedded in the rituals of Christmas was reinforcement of the unequal and oppressive power hierarchy juxtaposed with the potential for resistance and the ultimate destruction of that hierarchy. What we know now is that despite the sacrifices of the Civil War, the Reconstruction era was not to overturn the hierarchy at all; that would have to wait another hundred years.*

This is the story of an insurrection that never happened—a revolt that was never even planned. It is a story that would never have taken place at all except for the convergence of three elements, each involving a different kind of “history.” The first element, one of *military history*, was the defeat of the South at the end of the Civil War. The second element, one of *political and economic history*, was the liberation of slaves and a new federal policy that promised them their own land. The third and final element, one of *social and cultural history*, was Christmas.

It is that final element, Christmas, which requires the most explanation. The Christmas season had long been a special occasion in the American South for both white and black people. And for the most part the season did not involve what we might expect—church services, or elegant balls, or Santa Claus. Instead, this was a season of hard drinking, noisemaking, and generally rowdy behavior. (It can best be considered as a New Year's Eve, Mardi Gras, and Halloween, all rolled into one.) Christmas was a time when the ordinary rules that governed social behavior simply ceased to operate, or when those rules were actually turned upside down. Children were allowed to demand gifts from grown-ups, women from men, and the poor from the rich. This was an occasion when “the world turned upside down.” And those who really controlled Southern society—wealthy adult males—were generally willing to go along with this topsy-turvy state of affairs: they knew it would only last a short time.

As early as 1773, one visitor recorded in his diary on Christmas day that “I was waked this morning by Guns fired all around the House.” In 1823, a rural white Southerner attacked the Christmas season for being a “general scene of dissipation and idleness.” Some folks spent the time making “rough jokes.” “Apprentice boys and little negroes” fired guns and crackers. And everyone—“parents, children, servants, old, young, white, black, and yellow”—drank hard. “And if you inquire what it is all for, no earthly reason is assigned . . . , except this, ‘Why man! It is Christmas.’” More than three decades later, a teenage Virginia girl named Amanda Edmonds was awakened “by the repeated blows of the fire-crackers, and the merry voices shouting ‘hurr[a]y for Christmas,’ and then the nog was on the wing until the eggs were foaming, in went the milk and all ingredients

poured together; lastly it was foaming in our glasses, till they were drained of the contents."

Everybody commented at the time about how much Southerners drank during the Christmas season. It is clear that people—women and even children among them—commonly began drinking at breakfast. Teenager Amanda Edmonds began Christmas day in 1857 drinking "glass after glass" of spiked eggnog. Once again, in 1861, the first thing Edmonds did in the morning was to have "a joyful eggnog drink—I really got tight. The first signs of Christmas that I've seen."

The American South was not unique in celebrating the Christmas season in such a fashion. In much of the North, and in Europe, too—in most early agricultural societies—late December was taken as a time of carnival. Here was the one time of the year in which there was fresh food and drink aplenty from the recently completed harvest and an extended period of leisure in which to consume it—leisure that followed hard upon months of grueling and intensive labor. (In a way, it was much like the same holiday season in modern college communities, in which the conclusion of final examinations is similarly celebrated with boisterous drinking and letting off steam.)

But in one important particular, Christmas in the antebellum South was unique. For, in that society, all those carnivalesque holiday rituals extended across the color line—they encompassed black slaves as well as their white masters. If Southern society was "turned upside down" at Christmas, that inversion involved not simply age, class, and gender (as it did in other places); above all, it involved race.

First of all, Christmas in the slave quarters meant *freedom*—for a little while. Christmas was the one time of year when slaves were released from the obligation to work, usually for several days in a row. Slaves became, in a sense, free—free from labor, free to do whatever they wished, free even to travel off their masters' property. One Northerner, living on a plantation as a tutor to the owner's children, reported that "[t]hroughout the state of South Carolina, Christmas is a holiday, together with 2 of the succeeding days . . . especially for the negroes. On these days the chains of slavery . . . are loosed. A smile is seen on every countenance."

Slaves employed their freedom in a variety of ways, from visiting friends and family members to participating in religious meetings. But perhaps the activities that were most often reported involved revelry: eating, drinking, dancing, making noise, and making love. Solomon Northup, a free black who was kidnapped into slavery in Louisiana, later wrote of Christmas as "the times of feasting, and frolicking, and fiddling—the carnival season with the children of bondage . . . the only days when they are allowed a little restricted liberty, and heartily indeed do they enjoy it." A white Southerner used the same term, calling Christmas "the time of the blacks' high carnival," while another white man described the period as "times of cramming, truly awful. [T]hey stuffed and drank, and sang and danced." The wife of ex-U.S. President John Tyler wrote in 1845 that the family's slaves "have from now a four days' holiday and have given themselves up completely to *their* kind of happiness—drinking, with nothing on earth to do."

It seems clear that sex was involved in all this, too. More than one visitor explicitly described the slave Christmas as a modern version of the old Roman Sat-

urnalia, an orgiastic occasion. One writer who did so employed language whose euphemisms were not intended to conceal the author's meaning: "From three to four days *and* nights are given as holiday, during which every indulgence and license consistent with any subordination and safety are allowed."

Christmas misrule entailed even more than leisure and "liberty." It also meant a symbolic turning of the tables between masters and slaves. Christmas was the one occasion of the year when slaves were actually allowed to demand gifts from their masters, even to do so in an aggressive fashion that might have led to a whipping at any other time of the year. One common seasonal ritual was termed "Christmas Gift." "Christmas Gift!" usually amounted to a boisterous wake-up call combined with a demand for presents. A former slave described one version of the ritual: "The cock crowing for sunrise is scarcely over when the servants steal into the Big House on tiptoe so they can catch everybody there with a shouted 'Christmas Gift!' before the kitchen fire is even started or the water put on to boil for the early morning coffee." In response, each member of the white family who is thus "captured" must hand over a gift to the slave who has "caught" her. Years later, a planter's daughter, Susan Dabney Smedes, described the game with nostalgic affection:

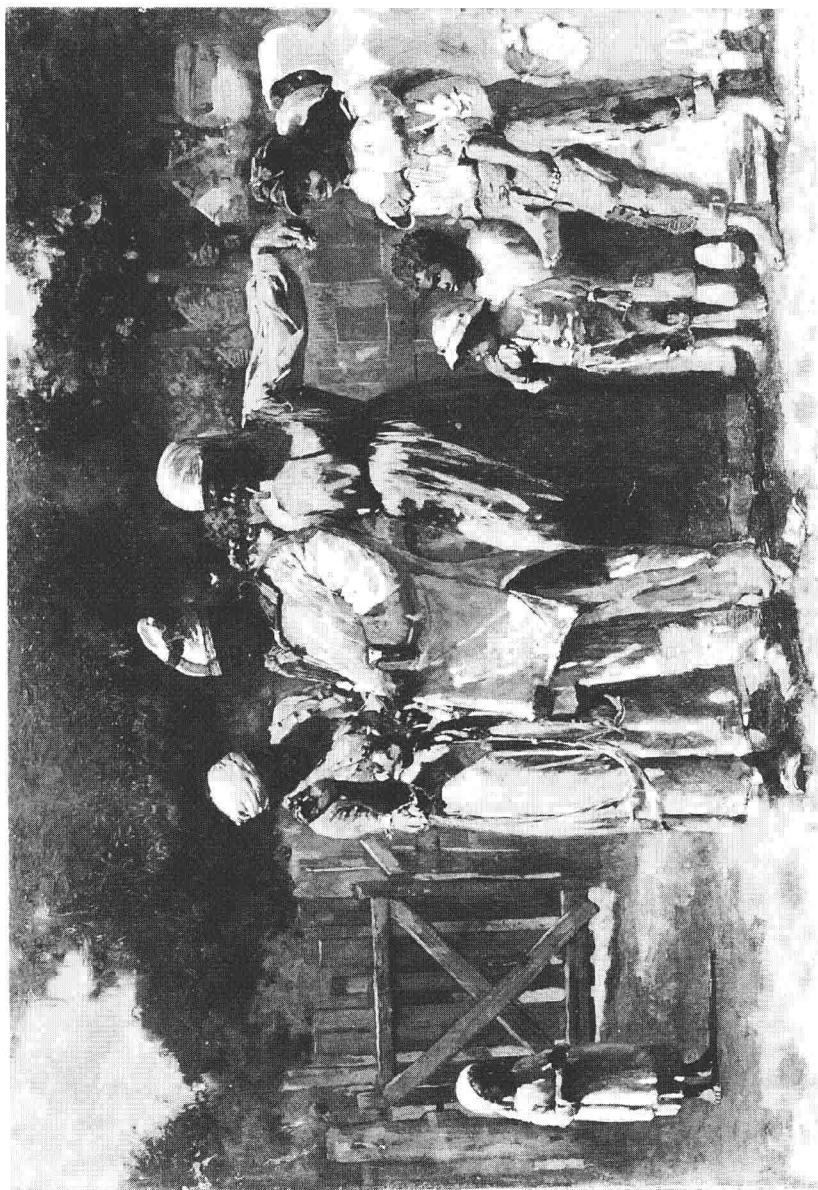
On Christmas mornings the servants delighted in catching the family [i.e., the owner's family] with "Christmas giff!" "Christmas giff!" betimes in the morning. They would spring out of unexpected corners and from behind doors on the young masters and mistresses. At such times [she adds in explanation] there was an affectionate throwing off of the reserve and decorum of every-day life.

Young Amanda Edmonds, the same teenager who got tight on eggnog at breakfast, wrote to her diary in 1857 that "'Christmas Gift' was heard from every tongue this morning before we hardly saw the first gleam of morning in the far east." The recollections of a one-time slave, a Georgia field hand named James Bolton, suggest that the custom was not always limited to house servants: "We runned up to the big house early Christmas morning and holler out, 'Morning, Christmas Gif!' Then they gave us plenty of Santy Claus, and we would go back to our cabins to have fun till New Year's Day."

Christmas was the one occasion of the year on which plantation owners would formally offer presents to their chattel slaves. It was a rare planter who did not give something to his slaves at Christmas. At a minimum, the gifts were small—the kinds of things we might dismiss today as "trinkets" but which the slaves had good reason to value: sugar, tobacco, or hats, along with ribbons, bannanas, and other decorative items for the women. Some slaveholders distributed money. An especially lavish (and ostentatious) example of this practice was reported by Richard Jones, a former slave from South Carolina, whose account also reminds us how demeaning such ritualized generosity could be:

Marse allus carried a roll of money as big as my arm. He would come up to de Quarter on Christmas, July 4th and Thanksgiving, and get up on a stump and call all the chilluns out. Den he would throw money to 'em. De chilluns got dimes, nickels, quarters, half-dollars and dollars. At Christmas he would throw ten-dollar bills. De parents would take de five and ten dollar bills in change, but Marse made dem let de chilluns keep de small change. I ain't never seed so much money since my marster been gone.





**Dressing for the Carnival (1877).** The great American artist Winslow Homer painted this large oil canvas while traveling in southern Virginia at the very end of Reconstruction. An immensely respectful and dignified portrayal, it shows a man being dressed for the John Canoe Christmas ritual by his wife and another woman as the children watch in fascination. (Metropolitan Museum of Art Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1922).