

Carroll Yesteryears
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The Evolution of Holiday Greetings
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

In addition to baking cookies and decorating homes, many people still follow the long-standing tradition of sending Christmas cards to friends and family. Cathy Baty, curator at the Historical Society of Carroll County, recently posted the following brief history behind American Christmas cards on the Society's website.

“Well into the 19th century, the tradition was to write lengthy holiday letters and deliver them to friends. Since there were no copiers or home printers, each letter had to be handwritten – a very time-consuming task. In 1843, Sir Henry Cole, an English government official, commissioned John Calcott Horsley to design and print the first-ever Christmas card. This not only saved Cole from the task of writing all those letters but also encouraged more people to use the postal service.

“Some Christmas cards were imported into the U.S. starting in the 1850s but they were very expensive. In 1873, Louis Prang started producing holiday cards (Christmas and New Year) and featured beautiful chromolithographed designs. The cards caught on and by the 1880s Prang was producing over five million cards a year. Unfortunately, the popularity of his cards led his competitors to produce cheap imitations that eventually drove him out of business.

“The development of the postcard spelled the end for elaborate Victorian-style cards. Postcards were colorful, inexpensive, and only had room for a quick note rather than a long letter. In 1898, the cost for mailing a postcard was lowered to one cent. In addition, the expansion of the Rural Free Delivery system allowed mail to be delivered to more American households than ever before. Nearly a billion postcards were mailed per year in the United States from 1905 to 1915.

“By 1912, a new technique called “offset” printing was becoming widespread. Instead of the heavy metal plates previously used, the process used rubber rollers on the presses to develop sharper, more color-saturated designs. In 1912, the Hall brothers – Joyce, William, and Rollie – switched from making postcards to producing greeting cards with envelopes. Eventually, the company name changed to Hallmark.”

Fast forward to the age of home computers. Sending holiday greeting has changed dramatically for many people. Stationery stores sell paper with holiday motifs on which you can print lengthy letters using your home printer, then “snail mail” them anywhere. Gone are the days of the one-cent stamp or the three-cent stamp, but thanks to planes snail mail is usually fast.

E-cards are another, even easier option for sending your holiday greetings in this electronic age. Thanks to the internet, e-cards travel everywhere, often with music accompanying them. You have your choice of designs ranging from humorous to traditional. No need for expensive stamps. No need to keep track of home addresses when your friends move frequently, but you do need to know email addresses.

Perhaps one of the nicest, most personal ways to keep in touch is via Zoom, FaceTime, or Skype. Each of these products allows you to see and hear others from the comfort of your home – maybe even sitting in front of your fireplace having a cup of coffee, opening presents on Christmas morning, or gathered around your dining room table complete with a turkey! If you didn't have time to send traditional cards or even e-cards, on the spur of the moment you can get in touch with someone somewhere around the world and wish them Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Image 1: Credit Historical Society of Carroll County – Caption: One of many Christmas cards from the collection of the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Image 2: Credit Library of Congress – Caption: Advertisement for Prang's very popular American Christmas and New Year cards circa 1877.