

First Noel

The First Noel is probably the oldest of the familiar Christmas carols in the English language. No one knows who wrote it; probably it was handed down over the course of several centuries. Apparently the original included dozens of verses. Because of this and oral tradition, many different versions of it have been sung.

The song first appeared in print in a book of ancient Christmas Carols published by Davis Gilbert in 1823, using what appears to be traditional music from Western England.

The hymn was called the first Nowell NOWELL. Some have suggested that the word is from French or Latin for nativity, but it seems more likely, given the original spelling, that Nowell was a combination form of Now All is Well, just as the phrase God be with Ye became shortened to Good Bye. In that case, the hymn was intended as assurance that because of Christmas, Now All is Well in the world.

Joy to the World

It is hard to imagine, given its current usage, that Joy to the World was not originally written for Christmas or Advent. Or that it was once a radical, cutting edge hymn.

Joy to the World was written by Isaac Watts. When Watts was a teenager, the only songs allowed in many churches were Psalms, many of them poorly translated, amateurish efforts. Watts frequently complained bitterly about the quality, until his father angrily scoffed, “Why don’t you write something better?”

Challenge accepted. By the next Sunday, Isaac had one ready to go, the start of a career that would produce 600 hymns. He was still traditional enough to use the Psalms as the basis for most of his work, but he tried to inject them a New Testament meaning and a more accessible style.

In 1719 Watts published a book of his Psalm-based hymns, including one he first titled “The Messiah’s Coming and Kingdom,” that was based on Psalm 98. Ever since England’s Puritan Parliament abolished the celebration of Christmas in 1627, there had not been much call for Christmas carols. But eventually, the holiday was revitalized, and

this hymn, which was part of that revitalization, became what we now know as *Joy to the World*.

Traditionalists of his time ridiculed Watts songs as “whims, instead of hymns.” Ironically, this once-despised, new-fangled song has for decades been a mainstay of traditional Christmas.

What Child is This?

The tune of *What Child is This?* is an old British melody called “Greensleeves,” that was originally a melancholy ballad about a man pining for his lost love. It was so popular that Shakespeare referred to it twice in his play, “The Merry Wives of Windsor.” Greensleeves was licensed in 1580.

The words that we sing to that tune were written by William Chatterton Dix over 250 years later. Dix was the son of a surgeon in Bristol England who expected his son to follow his career path. William had no interest in medicine and instead moved to Glasgow Scotland, where he earned a living as an insurance agent. Dix enjoyed writing poems in his spare time. One of these was a lengthy composition that was condensed down to the verses we know today.

Hark the Herald Angels.

Thanks to the Gospel of Luke’s nativity account, angels have been a primary theme of Christmas carols. Perhaps the most common theme in Christmas carols is the attempt to imitate the chorus of angels that sang to the shepherds out in their fields. And perhaps that is one of the main reasons we sing hymns in the first place.

Charles Wesley was just one of many Christmas carol writers who followed this course. The younger of the two founders of the Methodist movement, Charles far outdid Isaac Watts in volume, with over 6000 hymns to his credit. He liked to include theology lessons in his hymns, in the hopes that the people could “sing their way into knowledge,”

It was a common practice in the 18th century to modify the hymns of others when reprinting their hymns. Wesley hated this when it happened to his compositions, but in the case of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, it was a good thing they did.

Wesley started this hymn: “Hark, how all the welkin rings.” Welkin was an archaic word for the vault of heaven. While it may have conveyed the image Wesley wanted, hardly anyone knew what it meant. George Whitefield, a well-known English evangelist, changed the words when he published a collection of hymns to what we have today.

Hark the Herald Angels Sing has been sung to many different tunes. The version we have now is by classical composer Felix Mendelssohn, who wrote it in 1840 as part of a celebration of the anniversary of the printing press.

Although he wrote music for many hymns, Mendelssohn would have been shocked by its later adaptation to Wesley’s words. When he wrote it, he declared the melody was not suitable for sacred words. I wonder what he would think now as we sing our way into knowledge.

Angels from the realms of glory

Just before the American Revolution, when John Montgomery was 6, his parents placed him in a Moravian community in England while they sailed away to be missionaries in Barbados. John never saw them again as they died in Barbados before they could return.

Forced to make his own way in the world, Montgomery tried many different trades, but had trouble sticking with anything. What he loved to do was write, and he was thrilled to get a job with a local newspaper in Sheffield, England. When the owner had to flee the country to avoid being thrown in jail for publishing an article in favor of the French Revolutionaries, Montgomery took over the paper.

He did not learn his lesson about government censorship. When he wrote against social injustices, particularly slavery, Montgomery, like his predecessor ran afoul of the law. He was twice imprisoned for publishing controversial views. The second time, he continued to write while in prison. When he was released he found that the poems he had published in his paper during his incarceration had made him a local celebrity.

On Christmas Eve, 1816, he opened his Bible to that Luke 2:13 passage about the angels, reflected on the imagery, and wrote a poem which he published that day in his paper. This poem, *Angels From the Realms of Glory*, was set to music five years later.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear was one of the first Christmas carols written by an American. Unlike Watts and Wesley, the hymn's author, Edmund Hamilton Sears wrote only two hymns in his life. He never thought of himself as having any ability with poetry. A graduate of Harvard's School of Divinity, he was content to be a quiet country pastor in New England.

Sears was both a Unitarian and a Christian, which gave him a different perspective on Christmas than those who had written before him. His hymn was first published in a Unitarian newspaper. The carol is unusual in that it never specifically mentions Jesus, but it clearly recognizes the social implications of Jesus' birth for peace on earth.

Angels we have heard on high.

This is the first non-English/American carol in our service. It dates from France in the mid1700, where it appeared in several versions. The hymn combines verses written by anonymous French poets with the Latin phrase Gloria in Excelsis Deo, which means "Glory to God in the Highest," again following the version of the angel chorus that Luke cited in his gospel.

I Heard the Bells.

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day is not a part of many hymnals, and I could not find it in any Lutheran hymnals. It was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the celebrated poet for whom Eau Claire's Longfellow Elementary school was named.

In the early 1860s, it seemed the world was crashing down on Longfellow. In 1861, his wife died when her dress caught fire at their home in Cambridge, Mass. That same year, the nation plunged into a terrible Civil War.

One of the Union soldiers was Longfellow's son Charley, who ran away from home at age 17 to join the fighting. Charley contracted malaria and typhoid fever, but recovered enough to return to battle in late 1863. In Virginia, he was shot through the shoulder and nearly paralyzed.

Desperate with worry, Henry traveled to Washington D.C. and took his son home with him. He spent weeks sitting by Charley's bedside, nursing him back to health.

On Christmas Day, 1863, Longfellow put to words the emotions he had felt during this tragic time, very nearly giving in to despair, until he heard the Christmas bells that gave him hope.

Away in a Manger 1887

Away in a Manger is commonly known as Luther's cradle hymn but that is legend that sprang up among some Pennsylvania Lutherans in the late 19th century.

The first it appeared in print was in 1885 in a little book of songs published in Cincinnati by some Lutherans, who included this notation: "Composed by Martin Luther for his children and still sung by German mothers to their little ones."

Extensive research done since that time has uncovered no evidence for this; in the 300 years between Luther and this publication, the song does not appear in any publication, nor is there any reference to such a hymn.

Away in a Manger, quickly became one of America's favorite children's songs. The words have been sung to at least 40 different tunes. Modern day Lutherans are familiar with two: this is the version I grew up with.

Go Tell

Go Tell it on the Mountain is often considered a more recent addition to Christmas hymns, but it dates back a long ways to the days of slavery in the United States, when African slaves drew upon old musical traditions to create the songs that consoled them in their bondage.

The tradition of Negro Spirituals was brought to public attention by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University in Tennessee. Many of these spirituals were published in the late 19th century. One of the last to be put in print was *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, published in 1907, with two new verses added by Fisk's master curator, John Work.

Work developed a tradition of rising before the sun on Christmas morning and taking students caroling on campus, singing "Go Tell it on the Mountain." It is in that spirit that we turn to this carol as our closing hymn.