

Famous New Yorker Francis Pharcellus Church

Francis P. Church wrote one of the most famous newspaper editorials in American history, but almost nobody knew that Church had written it until after he died.

Francis Pharcellus Church was born in Rochester on February 22, 1839. After attending Charles Anthon's Latin School in New York City, he graduated from Columbia University in 1859. He planned to become a lawyer but quickly decided to be a writer instead.

Journalism was in Francis' blood. His father owned the *New York Chronicle*, a Baptist newspaper. Francis' older brother William briefly served as publisher of the daily *New York Sun* in 1860. Francis joined the *Chronicle* staff but left to cover the Civil War for *The New York Times*. In 1863, Francis and William founded the *Army and Navy Journal*, which became a leading journal of military affairs.

The Church brothers expanded their little publishing empire with the *Internal Revenue Record*, a journal of tax policy, and an ambitious literary magazine, *The Galaxy*. They corresponded with leading authors of their time, including Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and Henry James. After *The Galaxy* folded in 1878, Francis became an anonymous editorial writer for his brother's old paper, the *Sun*.

Church wrote editorials on many topics but specialized in religion. Influenced by his father's clerical background, he covered disputes over religious doctrines in a manner some considered inappropriate. Colleagues said that Church was simply determined to be "nobody's dupe, not even his own."

If Church sometimes seemed cold-blooded on intellectual matters, he proved to have the common touch as an unofficial advice columnist. After he wrote an editorial answering a serving maid's question about proper conduct, the *Sun* received a flood of letters from advice-seekers. Church's anonymous replies became one of the paper's most popular features.

In September 1897, the *Sun* gave Church an unusual challenge. Knowing his sometimes-sardonic attitude toward spiritual matters, but also aware of his sympathy for ordinary people's concerns, his chief editor assigned him to answer eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon's question about the existence of Santa Claus. When friends said that Santa didn't exist, Virginia wrote to the paper's Notes and Queries department because her father had said, "If you see it in the *Sun*, it's so."

On September 21 the *Sun* published Church's anonymous answer under the title, "Is There a Santa Claus?"

"Yes, Virginia," he wrote, "There is a Santa Claus....The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see." If no one can catch Santa coming down a chimney, that doesn't prove that he doesn't exist. To the contrary, Santa "exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist."

Newspapers around the country reprinted the editorial, but the *Sun* itself didn't reprint it until 1902, when surprised editors responded to popular demand. After Church's death on April 11, 1906, the *Sun* published an excerpt from "Is There a Santa Claus?" and identified Church as the author "to make the friends of the *Sun* feel that they, too, have lost a friend." Francis P. Church already had a small place in the history of American publishing, but his colleagues' tribute secured his place in American folklore and holiday legend.

To read a copy of the entire response to Virginia go to the Newseum Online exhibit "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Clause" at <http://www.newseum.org/exhibits/online/yes-virginia/>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2015.



Francis Church, 1907
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Rochester is the third largest city in New York State and is located about 225 miles west of Albany bordering Lake Ontario.