

**AP United States History**  
**Unit 4- The New Republic**  
**Topic: The Development of a New American Culture**

**Washington Irving and the Development of a New American Culture by Andrew Burstein**

What do Halloween, Christmas, and Columbus Day have in common? These national holidays share the wit and creative imagination of America's first full-time professional author, Washington Irving (1783-1859), who had a major role in their popularization. Best known for his short stories "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle," Irving was a native New Yorker who ranged far and wide in his travels and in his literary life. He was born just as the Revolution ended and was named after the victorious general. By the time of his death, the year before Abraham Lincoln's election, Irving had met eight American presidents and was even an informal advisor to one of them, Andrew Jackson.

Irving gained national attention in his mid-twenties, with an 1809 satire on the politics of the young republic, *A History of New-York*. He removed himself from his text by narrating the tale in the voice of a mock-historian he named "Diedrich Knickerbocker." (Knickerbockers were men's baggy trousers.) As would so often be the case in the beloved author's career, the character became so popular that New Yorkers were dubbed "Knickerbockers," a nickname that has endured for more than two centuries – it's where the New York Knicks basketball team got its name.

During the War of 1812, Irving altered his tone. Leaving political satire behind, he took over the editorship of a patriotic magazine, *The Analectic*, and penned heroic portraits of military figures. When the war concluded, relations with England were repaired and Irving moved to Liverpool, then London. There his popularity soared in 1819-1820 with the publication of *Sketch Book*, a collection of twenty-eight sentimental stories. "Diedrich Knickerbocker" was now "Geoffrey Crayon." Two centuries later, the *Sketch Book* has never been out of print.

"Rip Van Winkle" takes place in the shadow of the Catskill Mountains of New York, sometime in the late colonial era. It tells the history of a roguish young father in a small village. Rip, Irving writes, was "one of those happy mortals of foolish, well-oiled dispositions, who take the world easy." One day, Rip goes into the hills to hunt for squirrels, falls asleep, and hears voices. Startled, he finds himself in the company of miniature Dutchmen playing at ninepins (bowling). Joining them, he grows tired again, and the next time he wakes, nothing makes sense to him anymore. He has grown a foot-long beard, and on returning to his village, he no longer recognizes the townsfolk. He then comes upon "an urchin begetting his own likeness," who turns out to be his son – all grown up. Twenty years have passed! Rip has even slept through the American Revolution. His grown daughter takes him in, and he becomes a local celebrity, delighting his fellows with the story of a twenty-year sleep that felt like a single night.

"Rip Van Winkle" delighted citizens all across the republic Irving had left behind when he moved to England. Readers embraced the title character's playfulness and welcomed the story's dreamy, escapist quality. The colonial past was dead but not buried: The writer's imagination had turned back time and reinvented an age that rejected hard-nosed politicking in favor of neighborly communion. Rip was a new kind of national mascot, the antidote to the unscrupulous, money-hungry men that many in the United States had begun to feel were apt symbols of their expanding nation.

Washington Irving created humane characters: simple, honest, vulnerable, average. He delivered something else, too, by using the supernatural as a means to talk about the value of sympathy in an increasingly busy and complex world.

Also from the *Sketch Book* came “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” which introduced another historic character, the hapless schoolmaster Ichabod Crane, fleeing for his life from a pumpkin-headed demon on horseback. Like Rip’s Catskill village, Ichabod’s Sleepy Hollow was a spot where a “drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land.” Ancient spells linger there, and the ghost of a mercenary Hessian rider, killed by a cannon blast during the American Revolution, rules over the dark imaginations of the descendants of a war-torn village. Fear outstrips reality, until the reader realizes it is time to laugh at the absurdity of Ichabod’s refusal to think in practical ways. Irving did not wish to scare anyone, even when his tales hinted at deadly stirrings; the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow is only a prankster, after all. It’s a tale of terror without any actual evil. Indeed, the author was never satisfied until he had transported readers to a kinder, softer place than the workaday world they inhabited.

Journeying across the continent of Europe in search of new stories to tell, Irving hit pay dirt in Spain. Here, he became a biographer, using sixteenth-century Spanish sources to compose a four-volume life (the first in the English language) of Christopher Columbus, published to international acclaim between 1829 and 1832. Single Handedly, Irving produced an enduring portrait of an honorable and ingenious mariner, “lofty” in character and with “pious” purposes. Irving’s conquering hero did not face the charges for which he would have to answer to modern historians, who see him as a slave-taking destroyer of Native American culture.

After seventeen years in Europe, the renowned writer came home to Manhattan and a hero’s welcome in 1832. His stories about Christmas had truly taken hold. It had all begun with the patron saint of the colonial Dutch, whom Irving transformed into jolly St. Nicholas in Knickerbocker’s history. The magical gift-giver whose wagon sailed through the skies had by now merged with his *Sketch Book* renderings of a traditional English country Christmas, replete with stockings over the fireplace and mistletoe suspended from above. When the celebrated English novelist Charles Dickens prepared to sail to the United States for the first time, he wrote to his fellow author and praised him: “There is no living writer, and there are very few among the dead, whose approbation I should feel so proud to earn.” He went on to say, “Diedrich Knickerbocker I have worn to death in my pocket.” Without Irving’s urgings, there would probably have been no such book as *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens’ immortal tale was not published until 1843, and many wrongly assume him to be the original writer behind modern Christmas lore.

In 1832, after visiting the frontier-bred President Andrew Jackson at the White House, Irving embarked on a daring expedition into mostly unsettled territory that is now the state of Oklahoma. He accompanied a party of U.S. Army rangers for weeks, dined with them on such homely fare as venison fritters fried in salt pork, and saw firsthand how rough life amid the elements was for both would-be settlers from the eastern states and such Indian tribes as the Creek, Osage, and Pawnee. His colorful memoir of the journey, *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), featured a buffalo hunt on the Great Plains and a series of encounters between his army companions and unexpected parties of Indians. Taken by the West’s open skies and natural enchantment, Irving went on to narrate the harrowing Rocky Mountain adventures of the West Point graduate and accomplished fur trapper Captain Benjamin Bonneville. The West was a picturesque proving ground for young men, Irving attested, a vast terrain on which to learn American-style courage.

Step by step, Irving mastered several genres of literature. After contributing to the art of satire, he indulged in popular tear-jerkers. Then he advanced the Gothic imagination, with acknowledged influence on horror-story specialist Edgar Allan Poe. He gave life to a tradition of wild west adventures. In the spirit of his Columbus

biography, he produced an abundance of patriotic literature, capping his career in the 1850s with a multivolume *Life of George Washington*.

Before Washington Irving, writing was a gentleman's hobby. Irving tapped the popular imagination and opened authorship to new kinds of writers. He believed that a republic was more than a political form: A republic of the imagination invested in the promise of a spirited people by keeping alive the memory of a host of appealing characters, whether fictional or real.

**Thought Questions:**

- a. Explain how Washington Irving helped to define an "American" identity.
- b. Explain the characteristics of Washington Irving's work that made him a Romantic writer.