

## *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*

Edmund H. Sears, Lyrics, 1849; Richard Willis, Music; 1850

These inspiring and forthright lyrics were written in December 1849, by a Unitarian priest from Boston, Massachusetts, Rev. Edmund H. Sears. Only a few years before, it would have been unlikely to find a carol being written, let alone performed, in New England. From 1659 to 1681, Christmas celebrations in this "Puritan" region were forbidden by law. A child missing school on Christmas Day in Boston public schools as recently as 1870 would be punished and possibly dismissed. Workmen missing work would also be penalized. At the request of his friend, W. P. Lunt, in Quincy Massachusetts, asked him to write this carol as representation of the emerging acceptance of Christmas in New England as a "Holiday."



It was first sung at the 1849 Sunday School Christmas celebration and was published in Boston's "*Christian Register*" in 1850, as a poem. A year later, a tune by Richard Storrs Willis (1819-1900), set to the hymn "*See Israel's Gentle Shepherd Stand*," was published under the title "*Study No. 23*" in his "*Church Chorales and Choir Studies*". Soon after, possibly that same year, the tune was rearranged to fit Sears' poem, "*It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*" — probably by Willis himself, although some sources state that Uzziah Christopher Burnap (1834-1900) was responsible. It first appeared in Britain in 1870 when Edward Bickersteth included it in his "*Hymnal Companion to the Book of Common Prayer*", rewording the 5th verse to remove the 'unbiblical' 'humanist' reference to a coming 'age of gold'.

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