

# Early Americans Frowned On Christmas

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In rustic English the strait-laced Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony solemnly outlawed that most notorious of sacrilegious celebrations, Christmas.

"For preventing disorders arising in several places within this jurisdiction, by reason of some still observing such festivities as were superstitiously kept in other countries, to the great dishonor of God & offence of others," the General Court statute of 1659 read, "it is therefore ordered by this court and the authority thereof, that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing labour, feasting or any other way . . . every such person so offending shall pay for every such offence five shillings . . ."

**OUTLAWED** in England from 1647 to 1660 under Oliver Cromwell, Christmas found no refuge in New England. Gov. William Bedford wrote of the Pilgrims' first American Christmas in 1620: "Munday, the 25th day, we went on shore, some to fell timber, some to saw, some to rive and some to carry; so no man rested all that day."

Spying some children at play on Christmas in 1621, Bedford confiscated their toys and turned them in to their parents.

Nevertheless, the first Christmas celebrated in the New World by English colonists, near Jamestown in Virginia in 1607, had been more relaxed. Captain John Smith, leader of the band of Anglican settlers, wrote:



"The extreme winds, rayne, frost and snow caused us to keep Christmas among the savages where we were never more marrie nor fiddle on more plenty of good oysters, fish, flesh, wild foule, and good bread nor ever had better fires in England."

**COLONIAL.** Puritans, Baptists, Quakers and Presbyterians, finding no scriptural sanction of Christmas but plenty of pagan precedent in the December saturnalias of Rome, steadfastly opposed its observance.

Though the Massachusetts ban was repealed in 1681, the day was not freely observed in New England, save at an Anglican sanctuary in Rhode Island, until 1750.

Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Germans and Dutch dissenters and the Anglican settlers of the Middle and Southern colonies were rather less concerned with the taint of ancient heathenism.

In the South, particularly, the season was celebrated as a two-week affair — the 12 days of Christmas — marked by the firing of muskets and cannon, feasting, visiting, weddings, card playing, dancing, dice, fiddling gossip and a Puritan observed, "such like fooleries."

"NOTHING is now to be heard of in conversation," a Virginia tutor noted in 1773, "but the balls, the fox-hunts, the fine entertainments, and the good fellowship which

are to be exhibited at the approaching Christmas."

In Williamsburg, there was the "grand illumination." A militia fife and drum corps dipped torches in a community bonfire and marched house to house commanding the master to light candles in his windows.

Indoors on the groaning board — a table named for the noise it made under its burden — there were baked ham, bacon, peanut soup, chestnuts, scalloped oysters, turkey, roast beef, game and mince pies, spoon bread, sweet potatoes, plum pudding, fruit cake, dark beer, Maderia and mulled cider.

**COUNTRY** gentry gathered at a prominent man's home, generally a relative, for an equally extravagant and extended feast. It was at one of these that a spirited fiddler named Patrick Henry and a young student named Thomas Jefferson met. Climaxing his celebration of the season in 1759, George Washington took a wife on the 12th day; Jefferson did the same in 1772.

North or South there

celebrated at Trenton, New Jersey in December of 1776.

On Christmas eve, while the Germans were celebrating themselves into a drunken stupor, General George Washington, John Sullivan, Nathanael Greene, Henry Knox, James Monroe, and several thousand other Colonial Patriots who did not celebrate Christmas, crossed the Delaware River in the freezing night, marched 9 miles to Trenton, and at dawn on Christmas day overpowered and captured the bleary, Christmas-morn Hessian garrison.

The victory sent a shock wave of hope through the American Colonies. Disregarding Christmas had brought the free men of America a much needed victory.

was a little gift-giving. Servants might have the day off and a small gift the next day. Children expected a gift or two and the poor were fed. There were yule logs, but apart from mistletoe balls, probably few decorations.

From the Middle Colonies came many of the traditions of our modern Christmas, including Christmas trees and Santa Claus. The Dutch of New Amsterdam gave the season semilegal sanction in 1654 by recessing Manhattan's government for three weeks. It wasn't until 1856 in Georgia that the holiday attained legal status.

**EVENTUALLY** with the arrival of more settlers and the rise of non-denominational concerns, even New Englanders relaxed. By the time Washington crossed the Delaware on Christmas Eve of 1776, these sentiments, first published in the Virginia Gazette 10 years before, probably prevailed

in most American households:

"Now Christmas comes, 'tis fit that we

"Should feast and sing and merry be;

"Keep open house, let fiddlers play,

"A fig for cold, sing care-away:

"And may they who thereat repine,

"On brown bread and small beer dine."

The AP writer implies all Colonists were celebrating Christmas by the time of the War for Independence. However, see the article below with information gleaned from The American Heritage Book of the Revolution.

## A "CHRISTMAS" VICTORY

It was German Catholics who were largely responsible for bringing the tree and other rituals of "Christmas" to America during the great German migrations of the 1800's.

However, the first real "German" celebration of Christmas in America was by Hessian soldiers hired out to the British to help put down those "pesky American rebels."

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