

When Christmas Was Against the Law

The Mayflower Arrived With a Strange Embargo

by
RALPH
HOLLENBECK

ONCE UPON A TIME it was against the law to observe Christmas in this country. Ironically, the same people who gave you that festive holiday opener, Thanksgiving, were to blame for banning Yule celebrations. The Puritans were so set against any display of merry-making on December 25th, that they enacted laws against observing the holiday. Their denunciations dampened the Christmas spirit in New England well into the 18th century.

The trouble began with the Mayflower landing in 1620. The Puritan separatists from the Church of England, Pilgrims, who landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, that December were a different breed than their English brethren in the

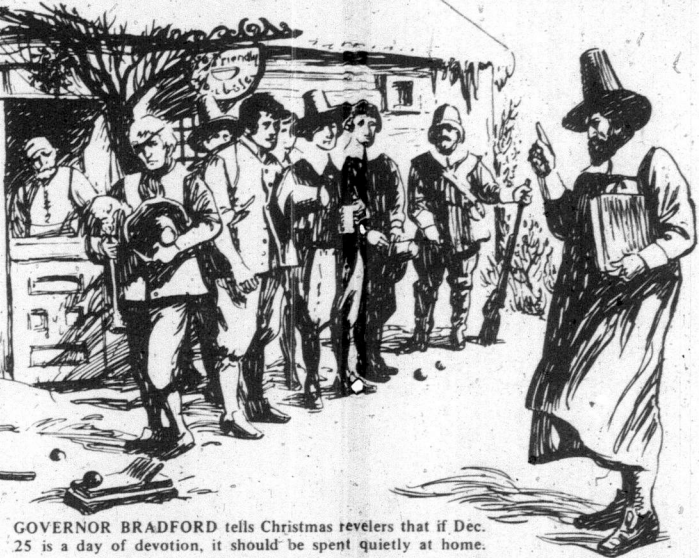
colony of Jamestown. In the southern outpost Christmas was celebrated in the traditional manner. Indeed, one Jamestown chronicler, caught on a journey in bad weather, took refuge with the Indians. He recorded on December 25, 1613: "The extreme wind, rain, frost and snow caused us to keep Christmas among the savages where we were never more merry, nor fed on plenty of good oysters, flesh, wild fowl and good bread, nor never had any better fires in England."

EARLIER EUROPEANS on American shores also made merry in their fashion. Vikings who wintered over in Vinland feasted; Spanish in Florida and the Caribbean and the French in Canada celebrated mass and

held galas; later Dutch and Swedes in New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey also knew how to keep the holiday. But not the Puritans.

The 35 "Pilgrims" who sailed aboard the Mayflower had earlier gone into exile in Holland. There, they and their pastor, John Robinson, had antagonized the hospitable burghers with their scorn of Christmas as a "human invention" having no warrant in scripture. They railed against the revelry of the day as a survival of pagan custom dating back to the days of the saturnalia. Those who made the Mayflower crossing carried hatred of the "wanton Bacchanalian" feast with them to America.

ALTHOUGH THE MAYFLOWER had made landfall at Cape Cod in November, it wasn't until late December that selection of a site for the Plymouth colony was made. On Christmas Day, 1620, work began in earnest on providing shelter for the survivors of the hazardous crossing. The men came ashore that day "some to fell timber, some to saw, some to rive, and some to carry, so no man rested all that day," to begin construction of a Common House. The Mayflower, however, contained 66 other persons—sailors, craftsman, servants—who did not share the Pilgrims' disdain of the holiday. The master of the Mayflower, Captain Christopher Jones, was a good host. William Bradford,



GOVERNOR BRADFORD tells Christmas revelers that if Dec. 25 is a day of devotion, it should be spent quietly at home.

the Pilgrim leader, noted in his diary: "Monday the 25th being Christmas Day, we began to drink water aboard. But at night the Master caused us to have some beer." The men left ashore were not so lucky. They endured a Christmas night of storm and Indian alert.

THE ARRIVAL the following year of the ship Fortune was a mixed blessing for the colony. The ship brought needed supplies after that disastrous first winter, but not all of the newcomers were Puritans, and Christmas of 1621 caused a rift in the settlement. Bradford again recorded: "The Governor (Bradford) called the people out to work as usual; but most of the new company excused themselves, and said it went against their consciences to work on that day. So the Governor told them, if they made it a matter of conscience, he would spare them till they were better informed. So he

went with the rest, and left them."

The matter didn't end there. Bradford, returning from work with the other Pilgrims, was shocked when "... he found them at play in the street, some pitching the bar, some at stool ball and such like sports. So he went to them and took away their games, and told them that it was against his conscience that they should play and others work. If they made the keeping of the day a matter of devotion, let them remain in their houses. But there should be no gaming or revelling in the streets."

SUCH DISAGREEMENT on celebration of Christmas continued between the theocratic rulers of the colony and later non-Puritan colonists. Finally, to curb further "outrages" against Puritan belief, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay in 1659 enacted: "Whoever shall be found observing any such days

as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or any other way... shall pay for every such offense five shillings."

As late as 1685, Judge Samuel Sewall, reflecting opposition of Puritan clergy to the revelry indulged in by increasing numbers of the new arrivals, noted in his diary on Christmas Day: "Carts come to town and shops open as usual. Some somehow observe the day, but are vexed I believe that the Body of the People Profane it, and blessed be God no authority yet to compel them to keep it."

However, time, the people and Yule influences from surrounding English and Dutch colonies continuously worked against the Puritans, and in time, the country where Christmas was outlawed became the snow, steeple and sleigh Christmas card idea of the land of Merry Christmas.



THE HARVEST was celebrated with Thanksgiving by the Puritans, but Christmas was believed a remnant of the pagan saturnalia.



"I'll tell you what, white-eyes...you keep the sackfull of junk and give us one of the reindoers!"

We wish you a Happy and Joyful Season



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