

CHRISTMAS AND THE PURITANS

by Marie Coady

History has recorded, and accurately so, that the Puritans were hardly party animals. In fact, they had a habit of putting a damper on just about anything that stood a chance of bringing a smile to your face. So stern and rigid were their practices, they even managed to put a damper on Christmas in New England for nearly two centuries.

When the Puritan majority took over the General Court of Massachusetts, their first act was to essentially outlaw Christmas. To accomplish this end, they passed a law in 1659 that made celebrating Christmas punishable by a fine.

This obviously didn't go over too big, because the ban was effectively repealed in 1681. But by then the standard had been set and became a way of life well into the 19th century.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the early editions of Woburn's newspapers. As late as 1850, any mention of Christmas was rare and brief. It wasn't until an influx of German and Irish immigrants broke through that dour, Puritan legacy, that it was slowly undermined in favor of a more joyous Christmas celebration.

The change in attitude was recognized by none other than Henry Wordsworth Longfellow in 1856 when he noted, " We are in a new transition state about Christmas here in New England. The old Puritan feeling prevents it from being a cheerful, hearty holiday; though every year makes it more so.

"The Woburn Journal published on Christmas Day of 1858 made note of this fact also.

"Although the time had been when it was unlawful to keep the day (Christmas) in New England as a religious festival, and a penal enactment was actually in force to prevent its observance, it may now be said that there is no Puritanism so rigid, no sectarian so absurd as to refuse the observance in some way."

By 1868, Charles Dickens' classic tale, A Christmas Carol, was beginning to have a profound effect on how Christmas was observed in Woburn as well as in England.

Editor H. C. Gray of the Middlesex County Journal in his Christmas editorial to the people of Woburn wrote, "We think Charles Dickens is the Santa Claus of English literature. He certainly is the best living embodiment of the Santa Claus spirit...We devoutly wish that more of the old English love for the enjoyment of Christmas were to be found in New England."

Suffice is to say, from then on the Christmas spirit took hold, held fast and is alive and well in Woburn. Yet in spite of the changes that are noted in celebrating Christmas, human nature is the one constant.

Below is a weekly summary of news as reported in the Woburn Journal on Christmas Day 1852.

"A green Christmas makes a full graveyard" is an old saying. If there is any truth in it, we may experience it this year.

Railway accidents are about as plentiful as usual.

Several disastrous shipwrecks are recorded without much loss of life.

Mexico is still in an unsettled position; strong indications of a revolution have appeared.

There are all sorts of rumors as to General Pierce's (President Franklin Pierce--sworn in January of 1853) cabinet, but we don't believe he has yet selected it.

A fire in the Charlestown Navy Yard damaged a new sail loft of \$500.

A successful fraud was practiced on the Exchange Bank in Boston last week to the amount of \$500.

An earthquake at Guerrero in Mexico opened the earth in which six houses and a tree fell in.

The Lawyers in Cleveland, Ohio, have struck for higher fees and the people have determined not to go to the law.

A youngster, 7 year-old, set fire to the Primary School House in South St. Court in Boston last Monday.

A child, 3 years old, was burnt to death in Oliver St. Boston, on Tuesday by being left alone.

The Marblehead fishermen have all arrived safe at home.

Horatio Grennough, the eminent sculptor died at Somerville of brain fever last Saturday, a great loss to our country.

Deaths in Boston last week---77. The scarlet fever is quite prevalent amongst children, 12 deaths from it last week in Boston.

A verdict of \$1,000 has been rendered against the Firo Company in Buffalo for running over a boy on the sidewalk contrary to the law.

A woman has been sent to the Cambridge House of Correction for stealing clothes from schoolhouses.

Two members of the British Parliament have had a fracas and were bound over for trial for breaking the peace.

Mr. John Smith's house at Newburyport was destroyed by fire last week and his daughter, 28 years of age, was burned to death. She was blind.

The gas works in Charlestown are nearly completed.

One hundred fifty eight deaths from cholera and one hundred sixty five from yellow fever in New Orleans during four weeks in November.

Twenty-five casks of liquor were seized in Maine last week and condemned.

The author of Uncle Tom's Cabin is about to pay a visit to England."

As I browse through old newspapers, I'm constantly reminded that the more things change the more they stay the same. And that's not always a bad thing.

God bless us, everyone!

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