



Christmas in Early America

THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS IN AMERICA has been through a lot of changes down through the decades and centuries. In fact, there was a time in New England when it was illegal to celebrate what is now perhaps our favorite holiday. But at least as early as 1608, Americans, white- and red-skinned alike, made merry on that special day.

BY DONALD N. MORAN



In 17th and early 18th century Colonial America, a Christmas celebration did not resemble the festivities that we are familiar with today. Christmas was considered the first day in a season of celebration, a season which would last, in some areas, until the end of January.

The Christmas Advent season consisted of: December 25th, the Nativity of Jesus; December 27th, the Feast of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist (celebrated by the Masons); January 1st, the Circumcision of Jesus; January 6th, the Epiphany (visit of the Wisemen); and February 2nd, the Purification of the Virgin. Christmas celebrations varied throughout the Colonies, from the Puritans in New England who did not celebrate Christmas, to the Southern Anglicans whose revelries somewhat match modern Christmas celebrations.

The ever-scribbling Capt. John Smith, on a 1608 expedition, wrote an account of what may have been the first Christmas celebrated in what is now the United States: “[W]inde, rayne, frost and snow caused us to keep Christmas among the Savages, where we were never more merry, nor fed on more plentie of good Oysters, Fish, Flesh, Wildfoule, and good bread; nor never had better fires in England, then in the dry smoaky houses of Kecoughtan.” (Kecoughtan, in Virginia, was originally named Kikotan and was part of Powhatan’s confederation of tribes.)

In 1621, Plymouth Governor William Bradford’s diary records that “on the day called Christmas,” their first at Plymouth, the Pilgrims were called out to work as usual, but some of them said it went against their consciences and, instead, played games such as “stoolball” (an ancestor of baseball) and “pitching the bar.” In stoolball a milking stool was used as a goal, and a leathern ball was thrown at it. One

player threw at the stool, while another defended it with a wooden bat. Allegedly it was first played by milkmaids, probably in old Sussex. Pitching the bar was a game requiring more strength, a log-throwing, or pole-throwing, competition akin to the Highland Scots’ tossing the caber.

The Puritans did not believe December 25 was the date of the Nativity, and believed it had more to do with pagan Sun worship than the actual birth date of Jesus. Some Christian scholars today take the same stance. Thus, the Puritans prohibited any “pagan revelry.” In 1659 they enacted a law in Massachusetts that provided: “Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like . . . shall be subjected to a fine of five shillings.” It was not until the middle of the 19th century that Christmas became a day of gift-giving and a general festivity in New England or among those “Yankees” who first settled farther west.

Although Christmas wasn’t outlawed outside of New England, several denominations, mostly found in the middle Colonies, were opposed to the celebration. In 1749, a visitor among the Quakers in Philadelphia noted: “Christmas Day. The Quakers did not regard this day any more remarkable than other days. Stores were open. There was no more baking of bread for the Christmas festival than for other days; and no Christmas porridge on Christmas Eve!”

At first the Presbyterians did not care much for celebrating Christmas, but when they saw most of their members going to the Anglican Church on that day, they also started to have services. Philip Fithian, a Presbyterian missionary working among the Virginia Scotch-Irish in 1775, remarked: “Christmas Morning—Not a Gun is heard Not a Shout—No company or Cabal assembled—To Day is like other Days every Way calme & temperate.”

To the Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Lutherans, the Christmas season was embraced and celebrated mainly by

the Church of England and the Roman Catholics, and primarily in the Southern Colonies. One exception is the Dutch in New York, who celebrated religious services on this day.

The Christmas tree, first popularized in the Old World by Martin Luther, was introduced in the Colonies during the War of Independence by Hessian soldiers, who later founded "Pennsylvania Dutch" communities. It didn't gain popularity in America until after 1842 when introduced in Williamsburg.

The celebration of the Christmas season in the Southern Colonies consisted of parties, hunts, visiting, feasts and church services. There, the traditional feast varied from household to household (depending on how wealthy the family was) but generally consisted of wines, rum punches, hams, beef, goose, turkey, oysters, mincemeat pies and various other treats.

The season was considered a grown-up celebration, but presents would generally be given to children. Irena Chalmers notes that in 1759, George Washington gave the following presents to his children: "a bird on Bellows; a Cuckoo; a Turnabout Parrot; a Grocers Shop; an Aviary; a Prussian Dragoon; a Man Smoking; a Tunbridge Tea Set; three Neat Books, a Tea Chest. A straw parchment box with a glass and a neat dress'd wax baby." Southern families usually supplied rum and presents (often candy) to their slaves.

Life on the American colonial frontier was, as it would be expected, quite different from the East Coast.

The frontier at that time was heavily populated with the Scotch-Irish. They organized their lives by the events of the Christian calendar, but differed greatly from the rest of British America. They seemed to have preserved some of the ancient Christian rituals that had lingered along the borderlands between England and Scotland decades after they were abandoned in other regions of the British Isles.

Our frontier people seemed to have kept a day which they called "Old Christmas," about January 6. On that day, even in the poorest of homes, feasts were common, and they lit bonfires that night. They also celebrated by discharging their muskets. This had been the custom in the British borderlands. On the Southern frontier some of these customs continued to the 20th century. Visitors to Appalachia and the highlands of North Carolina may find that the firing of guns, along with fireworks, still occurs on Christmas.

One visitor noted: "In some parts of this country it is the custom to observe what is known as 'Old Christmas'." Some



The Christmas Coach, by J.L.G. Ferris, 1795.

believe it was the 5th and some the 6th of January. This day is believed by these people who keep it to be the real date of the birth of Jesus. January 6 is Christmas in Armenia. But Orthodox churches generally celebrate on January 7.

The first Christmas in Chicago was observed in 1674 in a log hut on the shore of the south branch of the Chicago River by Father Jacques Marquette, who, true to his promise, had returned from Green Bay, bringing four large pictures of Mary, mother of Jesus, for the Illinois Indians. At midnight he celebrated mass for 60 Indians clad in buffalo robes, and then they had a feast: a big wooden bowl of porridge mixed with grease and meat of bison and also boiled dogmeat.

There was quite a celebration at Fort Dearborn (near today's Chicago) at Christmastime, 1804. It had snowed for a week, and the lake was frozen as far as the eye could see. A party of soldiers, led by Francis Ouilmette, had gotten a spruce tree from the forest north of the Chicago River. Other soldiers and *coureurs de bois* brought evergreens, a fat buck, wild turkeys, raccoons, rabbits and prairie chickens. There was also a roast pig and a grand pudding blazing with brandy. Toasts were drunk to President Jefferson and Henry Dearborn, secretary of war, out of silver goblets made by Chicago settler John Kinzie. There was music by the fife and drum, and by Kinzie's fiddle, and folks danced a reel. Black Partridge and his band of Potowatomies did a corn dance while wolves howled outside the stockade. ♦

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