
CHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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“Shall Christmas Be Observed?”

By John Garvey

If someone asked you this question today you might think they are referring to the growing commercialization of the season, the endless commercial onslaught that begins before Thanksgiving and distracts anyone pursuing a quieter observance of the season. Or perhaps you might think that it refers to the growing reluctance to use the word Christmas, instead replacing it with “Seasonal” and “Holiday”, so as not to exclude those celebrating other religious or ethnic traditions at this time of year.

In fact, this question is the title of an editorial in the December 23, 1854 edition of the Springfield Republican. The editor of that paper, Samuel Bowles, is wondering aloud whether the Puritan-led suppression of the celebration of Christmas might finally be over. As far as Chester was concerned, he had the year just about right, but those Puritan-descended Chester families who led the suppression of Christmas in our town didn’t go down without a fight.

Those who think that the celebration of Christmas

that we recognize today is a tradition as old as New England will be surprised to learn that in the European-settled history of Massachusetts, Christmas has been suppressed for many more years than it has been celebrated. That suppression began with the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620 and lasted until the mid-1850’s here in Chester, and even later than that in some Western Massachusetts communities.

It’s easy to attribute the Pilgrim and Puritan suppression of Christmas to their reputation as dour individuals who disliked any hint of frivolity in themselves or others. But their disdain of Christmas was due to their deep religious convictions rather than any reluctance to enjoy themselves.

They had come here to form a church and community based solely on the teachings of the Bible, and there was no Biblical justification for celebrating the birth of Jesus. They also knew that the date of December 25 had been somewhat arbitrarily chosen by the Roman Catholic Church in the 4th century. The fact that the date was chosen by the Roman Catholic Church would in itself make the Puritans disinclined to recognize it, but they also suspected that it was chosen more to supplant ancient pagan solstice rituals than from a strong conviction that it was the true birth date of Jesus. Finally, if the day did have to be recognized in some way, they were horrified at the Christmas celebrations they had witnessed in England at the time, which were characterized more by drunken revelry than religious observation. Better to not recognize it at all, they decided.

The Pilgrims set the tone early that December 25th would be just like any other day. In their first December at Plymouth, William Bradford’s diary entry

2008 Historic Calendars

How often is it that the price of something goes down? The 2008 edition of the Historic Chester calendars have arrived and are available for purchase at \$5.00, a substantial savings over previous years. It is the same high quality calendar, we are just offering them for less money this year.

Calendars may be purchased at Carm’s Restaurant, The Village Shoppe on Main Street, Chester Village Market and Pease General Store.

for the 25th recorded that the Pilgrims “began to erect the first house for common use to receive them and their goods.” This practice of “business as usual” on December 25th would continue in Massachusetts for centuries.

It didn’t take long for the first conflict between celebrators and non-celebrators to occur. The very next year, Bradford recorded that on December 25th he called the community out to work but some of the newcomers (newcomers meaning they had arrived on the second ship from England, the *Fortune*) told him that it went against their conscience to work on that day. Bradford went off to work with the rest of the community but when they came home at noon for lunch they found the newcomers “in the street at play, openly; some pitching the bar, and some at stool ball, and such like sports.” He took away their games telling them that it went against his conscience that they should play while others work. “If they made the keeping of it a matter of devotion, let them keep their houses, but there should be no gaming or reveling in the streets.”

While the Pilgrims seemed content to allow quiet and reverent observances of Christmas within one’s home, the Puritans, who flooded into Massachusetts in the next few decades, were not so accommodating. Massachusetts Puritans soon showed their control of the colony by passing a law outlawing Christmas, thus leaving Massachusetts with the distinction of being the only state to ever make celebrating Christmas a crime. It was said that constables roamed the streets on Christmas, literally trying to “sniff out” anyone who might be breaking the law by cooking a Christmas dinner.

The Massachusetts ban was passed after the English Civil War had resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy and the Massachusetts Puritans found themselves under a friendly Puritan-led Parliament in England. But with the restoration of the monarchy some years later the new royal governor assigned to Massachusetts, the Anglican and Christmas-celebrating Sir Edmund Andros, quickly repealed the law. It was the first of many acts that angered Massachusetts Puritans. (The Puritans had their revenge in 1689 when they seized Andros and shipped him back to England in chains, an act many

historians consider the first serious show of independence in the colonies).

However, with the Puritans in control of the churches, businesses, schools and civil government there was really little need of a law banning Christmas. No church would hold services on Christmas (unless December 25th fell on a Sunday), schools would remain in session, and businesses would remain open and fire anyone that did not show up for work.

The Puritans campaign against Christmas was almost universally successful in Massachusetts and would remain so right up to the time that Chester was settled in the 1760’s. While there were slight increases in religious and ethnic diversity in Massachusetts during those hundred years, the Puritan families and their descendants successfully maintained their stranglehold on the celebration of Christmas.

Chester was settled by two groups of families; third and fourth generation descendants of English Puritans and first and second generation descendants of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. Those wishing to celebrate Christmas in Chester would find little support among the Presbyterians, they were as opposed to Christmas as the Puritans. In fact, we have found no mention of Christmas in Chester in any diary, church or town record for close to 100 years after its settlement.

We can jump ahead about 80 years to the 1838 diary of Chester resident Moses Lyman to see that December 25th was just another day on the calendar to the Chester descendants of the Puritans.

December 25, 1838

Went to Springfield with two horse sled carried 55 lb. butter for A. B. Lyman sold at 22 per. Bought for said Lyman 100 lb. Salienates at 8 ½ per lb. Bought for myself at Westfield one barrel flour. Also 12 bushels of rye at 6/9, also 6 bushels of corn at 6.

Moses Lyman would have been shocked had he found any of the stores that he visited on December 25th closed. In other years on December 25th he records all the normal activities of a normal day –

snowstorms, deaths in the neighborhood, etc. - but never a mention of Christmas.

It's safe to say that Christmas was not observed in Chester at least through this time, but things were rapidly changing. A dramatic transformation was occurring across Massachusetts fueled mostly by the Industrial Revolution, which brought numerous immigrants into the cities of Massachusetts; Irish, Italian, French, German.....and all from cultures that celebrated Christmas.

Rural Chester was, at first, sheltered from much of the change brought about by this revolution but when change did arrive in Chester it was sudden. Almost overnight hundreds of immigrants, mostly Irish, arrived to build the railroad through Chester. Some of the shanties they built along the rail line were likely close enough to town so that the sound of their Christmas revelries reached the homes of the old Puritan-descended families still trying to ignore Christmas.

By the early 1840's, when Moses Lyman was ignoring Christmas by going about his "business as usual" in Chester, Puritans in the larger towns of Western Massachusetts had been enduring groups celebrating Christmas in their midst for years, first the Episcopalians and now the growing Catholic population, but with no Episcopal or Catholic church in Chester, no such celebration would have yet occurred here.

Proof that change was coming was seen in the December 24, 1841 editorial in the Westfield News, in which the first chink in the local Puritan armor was noticed. The suggestion was made that Christmas ought to be more universally recognized, and while it was mildly worded it was a bold departure from the previously united front of the Puritans.

Christmas - Tomorrow will usher in this blessed anniversary. Some tell us that this is not the precise period of his incarnation. It is near enough for all practical purposes – and rightly considered it is the most important day of the year. His birth was celebrated by angels, and shall it not be by men?

The Puritan families likely dismissed this editorial as political. Newspapers at the time were aligned with one or another political party and this was probably

viewed as mere pandering for the vote of these new Christmas-celebrating immigrants, but nevertheless the idea was planted. The Westfield News was quiet on the subject for the next few years but in 1845 they were ready to take a stronger step in their campaign for Christmas, and they confronted the Puritan tradition head on.

This day is celebrated with great pomp by the Catholic Church; three masses are performed – one at midnight, one at daybreak and one in the morning. The Church of England also observes this day, as well as the great body of European Protestants; but in New England, where the Puritans, who were opposed to all the pompous forms of the established Church, have established our customs. The Puritans had none the less respect for the memory of our Saviour, but they regarded it as foolish and simple to select a day arbitrarily, and with long ceremonies, celebrate such an event.

But Christmas will always be a holiday, and as regularly as its light dawns, the cheerful cry, "I wish you a merry Christmas" will be heard; and accordingly to all our patrons and friends we wish a happy and "merry Christmas".

Two years later this newspaper-led campaign had a surprising new standard bearer, Samuel Bowles, the publisher of the Springfield Republican. In Western Massachusetts Springfield was widely considered the most Puritan of any town, the Springfield Republican the most Puritan of any newspaper, and the Bowles family one of the most Puritan of Puritan families. When old Puritan families read this 1847 editorial written by one of their own, they likely had to admit that, finally, their successful suppression of Christmas was coming to an end.

Merry Christmas.

It is with no little pleasure that we embrace the opportunity of wishing our readers, one and all, old and young, a Merry Christmas.

Although our Merry Christmas is not of Puritanical origin, we wish that its return might be more generally honored and observed in the land of the Puritans than it has been.

Bowles goes on to appeal to local pride by mentioning other large cities that were observing

Christmas. Surely, he thought, Springfield would want to be in this list.

We understand the day will be observed in Boston, as is done in many other places, by the closing of the Custom House, the Banks, and by a general suspension of business. In that city, Hartford, New Haven, Albany, New York, and other large cities, no papers will be published today.

Each group of Christmas-celebrating immigrants brought their own traditions to Massachusetts, and a native population that didn't know how to celebrate Christmas began to take something from each group and merge them together.

By 1850 a new newspaper in Westfield, the Westfield Standard, had abandoned all subtlety and was forcefully calling for Christmas to be celebrated. Perhaps to appease the Puritan families they advocated that part of the day be spent in church but then included the very unPuritan-like suggestion that the churches actually be decorated for Christmas. After dispensing with their advice concerning church-going on Christmas they move on to how Christmas should be celebrated at home, the most controversial of which would have been the suggestion that there be no labor on Christmas. From the way they list the ways to celebrate Christmas it certainly does seem as if they are trying to teach the untrained how to go about it. In their list we can see the emergence of some of the traditions that we recognize today.

CHRISTMAS DAY, with its thousand pleasant memories, has again dawned upon us, and as we hear upon every side the exchange of pleasant wishes, we also feel inclined to wish the readers of the Standard a "MERRY CHRISTMAS". Among all the days which have been set apart in commemoration of the past, it seems to us that Christmas day should be most sacredly observed. From every pulpit throughout the length and breadth of the land, ministers of the gospel should to-day with eloquent tongues send home to the hearts of all who listen, the great truths of the Saviour's Mission.

We are no advocate for forms and ceremonies of outward show, but we confess that we think it a pleasant custom to adorn churches and altars upon this occasion with the outward symbols of

rejoicing.

We repeat it, of all seasons of the year, Christmas should be a "merry" day. Let happy faces smile around the festive table; let the huge Yule-block or Christmas log, diffuse its genial warmth at the pleasant fire-side; let garlands decorate the walls and heartfelt greetings be accompanied with enduring gifts; let the laborer rest from his toil, and let the chime of the Christmas bells join in one glad Jubilee through all the land.

We now come back to the beginning of our tale and the question posed in the 1854 editorial of Samuel Bowles in the Springfield Republican, "Shall Christmas Be Observed"? The answer, at least from Chester, was "Yes", and we see it in the December 25, 1855 diary entry of Doctor T.K. DeWolfe.

We have had a Christmas feast today on Homers account and invited some of our Chester friends.

Thus we have the first reference to Christmas being celebrated openly in Chester, 93 years after our town was settled and 235 years after the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth. While pockets of resistance remained here and there – stores in Springfield remained open on Christmas well into the 1880's until a Catholic boycott finally forced them to close – the battle to celebrate Christmas openly had been won.

Today, despite some restrictions we might encounter imposed by our Constitutional mandate of the separation of church and state, we are personally free to celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Eid al-Adha, or any other tradition we choose. We are even free to ignore the celebration of Christmas, as our pious Puritan ancestors did.

Regardless of what, how, or if you celebrate at this time of year, we leave you with an excerpt from Samuel Bowles 1847 editorial in wishing our readers the best of the season.

We wish that the cares and the anxieties of life, which belong to all, might this day be banished from the heart, and that the sentiments and testimonials of peace, friendship and good will towards our fellow men may be tendered and received by all.

Thank You For Your Support of the 3rd Annual Snowflake Festival!!

The Chester Historical Society would like to thank everyone who made the 3rd Annual Snowflake Festival and Craft Fair another success. Over \$750.00 was raised for the Chester Museum Restoration Fund and we hope to put that money to good use very soon in the restoration of the former Methodist Church/Masonic Hall across the street from The Old Jail.

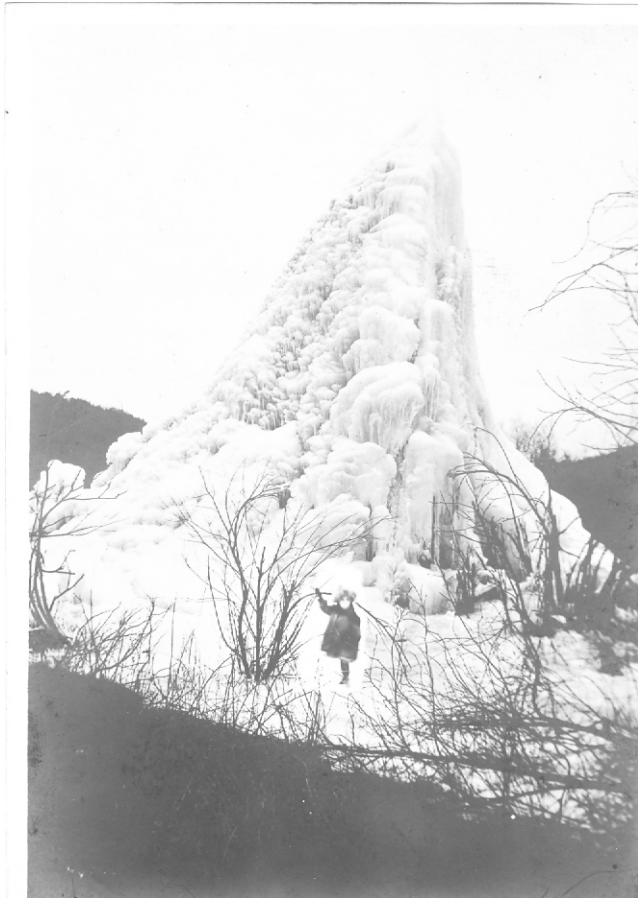
Bidding for the repair of the roof is expected in the spring, paid for by a state grant obtained by the Historical Society with the assistance of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. Once that work is done we will be using the local funds raised from

events like the Snowflake Festival and Penny Socials to start restoration work on the inside. We will keep you posted!

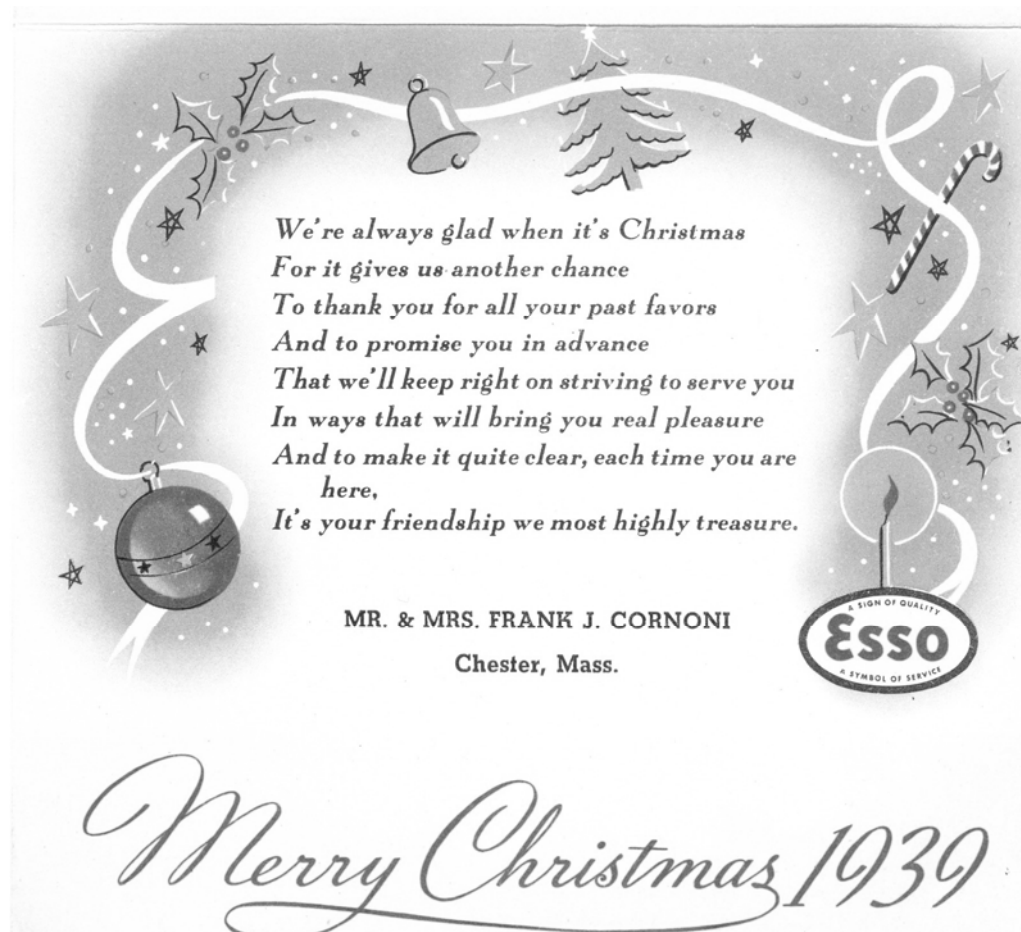
Winner of the 50/50 Raffle at the Festival was Charlotte Pease. Winners of the Yankee Auction were Cathie Brown, Tina Howe, Barbara Bedard, Grace Doble, Barbara Carrington, Laurie M., Teresa Kennedy, Mary Thayer, Nancy Davis, Jackie Conklin, Sue Turgeon, Pat Wellspeak, Dawn Kelly, Terry Andrews, and Dottie Caputo.

Again, a very big thank you to everyone that visited the Festival and to all of the vendors. You made it a success!

From our collections



Two postcards of the "Ice Tower" that would form at the end of the water line in Chester (photos circa 1900). The water was allowed to drip from the end of the pipe to prevent freezing, creating a tower by the end of the winter.



A Christmas greeting card sent in 1939 by Mr. and Mrs. Frank J. Cornoni to customers of their ESSO gas station located in Chester.



Season's Greetings for 1950 from the Maple Street Beauty Salon owned by Grace Oppenheimer.

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Springfield Republican newspaper, various issues from December 1847 to December 1854

Westfield Newsletter newspaper, various issues from December 1841 to December 1850

Westfield Standard newspaper, various issues from December 1850 to December 1855

Item	Price	Size	Qty	Total
"Chester Folks - The Founders of the Town, Their Ancestors and Descendants" by William Mills	\$18.00			
"Memories of the Boston and Albany Railroad" by Norvel Parker	\$15.00			
"Gravestone Inscriptions for Chester" by Francis O'Leary	\$18.00			
"Gravestone Inscriptions for Huntington" by Francis O'Leary	\$20.00			
"Gateway District Towns - A Pictorial History"	\$16.99			
"Chester Cookbook" - A reproduction of a 1960's-era Chester PTA cookbook	\$8.50			
"Entering Chester" magnets - A miniature version of the state highway signs	\$1.00			
"The Mystery of the Old Mine" a mystery for children by Gertrude Whitcher	\$10.00			
Chester Historical Society pens	\$1.00			
Chester T-Shirts - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes (S - XXL)	\$10.00			
Chester Sweatshirts - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes (S - XXL)	\$20.00			
Shipping + handling				\$3.00
SUBTOTAL				
Annual Membership in the Chester Historical Society (fully tax deductible)	\$5.00			
Lifetime Membership in the Chester Historical Society (fully tax deductible)	\$25.00			
Additional tax deductible contribution				
TOTAL				

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