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“Thanksgiving at Plymouth: The Christmas Substitute (or, You Can’t Stop a Good Party)”

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The celebration of Thanksgiving as a national holiday in late November was not enacted until the 1870s. The official reason was to commemorate the landing at Plymouth of the nation's Puritan forefathers and foremothers. The holiday's national designation stemmed from two forces. The first was the unceasing will of author Sarah Josepha Hale, who spent 40 years of her adult life campaigning for the declaration of Thanksgiving as a national holiday.

The second was the Civil War and its aftermath. Thanksgiving celebrates the American nation and the country's citizens' unity within it and subordination to it. So, it is not surprising that Abraham Lincoln issued the first national proclamation for its observance and that his successors, encouraged by Hale, instituted the national date of a Thursday in late November.

Before the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday, states held their own observances on a variety of dates under different names. As the location of the Pilgrims' landing, Massachusetts commemorated the first arrival of the Puritans on the Mayflower at the site of Plymouth Rock, which they identified as Dec. 22.

In the town of Plymouth itself, public celebrations began to take place in 1798, and accounts of celebrations over the next 25 years appear in the Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 17.

Plymouth's observances contained three main parts: a religious ceremony that included a procession around the town and a sermon or "oration"; a large dinner followed by the drinking of numerous toasts to leaders past and present; and a festive ball filled with dancing and merriment. This last item is usually accompanied by thanks to the town's women for organizing such an enjoyable evening.

Toasts feature prominently in the local news reports, which often list them. The dinner of 1798 features 29 separate toasts. Unsurprisingly, later reports reveal worries about public drunkenness.

Plymouth's annual observance of the "Pilgrim Anniversary" took place just three days before the traditional date of Christmas, Dec. 25. True to their Puritan heritage, most people in Massachusetts during the 18th and early 19th centuries did not celebrate Christmas.

On Dec. 25, shops were open for their normal hours, children attended school, and daily life continued as normal. Merrymakers were often prosecuted for disturbing the peace. Massachusetts continued this treatment of Christmas until well after the Civil War.

Puritans disliked Christmas intensely. It was not a biblically ordained celebration. Nowhere in Scripture appears any encouragement for a celebration of Jesus' birth. When the Reformation took place, many Protestants saw Christmas (and Easter) as part of Catholicism's "pagan corruption" of Christianity and removed them. American Puritans held to this view long after most other Protestants abandoned it.

Perhaps more importantly, Puritans disapproved of the rowdiness, drunkenness and inappropriate actions that accompanied Christmas celebrations of the time. They believed the celebration of the Savior's birth, who was God's Son, should not be a time for encouraging irreligious behavior.

From the 1880s onward, despite changing attitudes in Massachusetts, American Christmas stories and poems decry and ridicule this dour Puritan denial of Christmas and its celebratory joy and festivities.

The stories usually imply and even state outright that the rejection of joyous activity on Christmas day is typical of daily life in New England: No one ever smiles; children are quiet and subdued; there is no pleasure in living; happiness is never expressed.

Such tales overlook the festivities of the Pilgrim festivals just three days before. Celebrating the foundation of America as a nation, these revelries were secular (despite occasional religious overtones). So drunkenness, and loud and exciting activities like dancing, did not offend religious sensibilities, because they did not take place on a religious holiday.

The people of Plymouth did not shun merriment; they didn't even shun it in late December. They simply avoided associating it with a day that their Puritan heritage linked to "pagan worship." In many ways, they exemplify what happened in Boston and other Massachusetts towns and cities. And, it should be noted, they engaged in the much despised activities that caused their Puritan forefathers to reject Christmas.

Plymouth's early celebrations of what later became Thanksgiving, then, gave them a day of celebration that they could enjoy at the same time the rest of the country was celebrating Christmas. Their secular observance of the nation's founding provided a substitute for Christmas religious festivities.