

## WHEN CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS WERE A CRIME

"Thanksgiving brought a social season. There was much visiting and distribution of good cheer for a week or two after that holiday. Towards Christmas the fat hogs were killed, the pork salted, the hams hung in the wide chimney to cure, and the sausages made. The women began to comb flax and spin linen thread; the men went daily to cut and haul the year's firewood. We were too good Puritans to make much account of Christmas, though sometimes the young people at the main road got up a ball on Christmas eve, but at New Year, there was a general interchange of good wishes, with gifts and festivity." [Reminiscences of a Nonagenarian, by Sarah Anna Emery, Newburyport, 1879, p. 9.]

Since Pilgrims and Puritans had banned European holidays, there was no Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter. The Sabbath was kept; but, since the Bible did not mention these holidays, it was felt they were Church of England or, worse, Catholic.

However, by 1621, Governor William Bradford had problems with some of the new settlers refusing to work on Christmas. The General Court of Massachusetts banned Christmas in 1659, calling it a (continued next column)

"disorder" and superstition." Observance of Christmas in any way was punished by a fine. The Puritans had made a crime of Christmas observances.

In 1685, Judge Samuel Sewell wrote in his diary that "carts came to town and shops open as usual. Some somehow observed the day, but are vexed I believe that the body of people profane it, and blessed be to God no authority yet to compel them to keep it."

But, at the same time, the Church of England was gaining ground in Massachusetts. Reverend Robert Ratcliffe was the first Church of England minister in America, arriving in 1686. He performed weddings, celebrated the Last Supper, and prayed at funerals; as well as observing Christmas.

Sir Edmund Andros, the governor, was a member of the Church of England. He took over the Old South Meetinghouse in the Spring of 1687 for Church of England services.

Although the anti-Christmas law was revoked in 1681, not until 1895 did Christmas as we know it today come to Massachusetts, with accompanying caroling and exchange of Christmas cards and gifts.