

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

When Christmas Wasn't

We've gotten used to the idea of the Grinch stealing Christmas. But as we celebrate this holiday (and holy day) once again, it might be useful to remind ourselves of a time when there *wasn't* a Christmas.

It was against the law.

In the 17th century, after the Puritans had taken power in England, they vowed to rid the country of every shred of decadence. That included Christmas. No revelry. No dancing. No exchanging of gifts. Period. Among other things, the Puritans argued that there was no biblical basis for the holiday, anyway (since scripture doesn't give the date of Christ's birth). The ban lasted nearly twenty years, until it was finally lifted by popular demand.

But by that time, the ban had also spread to the colonies. A court record from the Massachusetts Bay Colony from 1659 put it bluntly:

"Whoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting or any other way, upon any such account, every such person so offending shall pay for such offence five shilling as a fine."

The ban stayed in effect in New England until 1681, when it was finally lifted—along with a similar ban against "festivities" on Saturday nights. But Christmas, as we know it today, would be a long time coming.

After the American Revolution, citizens of the new country generally shunned English customs—and that included Christmas. In fact, on the first Christmas under the constitution—December 25, 1789—Congress was in session.

The day didn't actually become a federal holiday until 1870. (It remains the only religious holiday that is also a national legal holiday.)

One reason for the shift may have been the increasing popularity of one particular work by Washington Irving (who wrote, among other things, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.")

In the early 1800s, Irving published a collection of short stories about Christmas that described sentimental family gatherings—gatherings that, as a matter of fact, were unheard of at that time. (Christmas was not as family-friendly in those days. By most accounts, it was a pretty raucous holiday—closer in spirit to Mardi Gras.)

But Irving's idealized vision caught on. And the sentiment spread.

We hear a lot these days about the "War on Christmas," and the persistent efforts to secularize or de-Christianize the holiday.

We should remember that it's not the first time Christmas has been attacked. History shows that we can't take this day for granted.

The fact is: in a season that celebrates giving, this day itself is a powerful and enduring gift—a treasure that celebrates faith and family, generosity and hope. It also—most significantly—celebrates mankind's own salvation, born on a dark night under a brilliant star.

Our prayer this Christmas, and every Christmas, should be that the light from that star continues to guide us to the Child in the manger, the one who is The Light that no darkness can overcome.

That's what this day is really about. It's something no law can regulate, and no court can ban. Because it lives on, with that light, in the human heart.

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