

## Christmas In America Had A Difficult Beginning

WASHINGTON (AP) — Christmas is a solid and almost secular — part of American life, but it had to battle to establish itself in North America. The holiday was banned in Boston in 1659 and anyone caught feasting could be fined five shillings.

The ban was lifted 22 years later, but two staunch Puritan Congregationalist scholars and clerics — Increase Mather and his son, Cotton kept up the crusade against observing the holiday in New England.

Increase thought Christ probably had been born in September, while Cotton said the occasion, in any event, hardly justified ‘mad mirth.’

No such misgivings moved the South. In Virginia, where Anglicanism held sway, there was no doubt: Christmas was meant to be celebrated.

John Smith and his Virginia companies recorded that they ate oyster, fish, meat, wild fowl and bread on Christmas day in 1608. Smith later recorded that, ‘Wherever an Englishman may be, and whatever part of the world, he must keep Christmas with feasting and merriment.’

In a new book, ‘Keeping Christmas: The Celebration of an American Holiday,’ historian Philip Reed Ruton of Northern Arizona University recounts the battle Christmas had to fight before it "embedded itself into the marrow of the people."

The Christmas chasm was largely a carry over from England where, Ruton notes, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, members of the Reformed sect and Moravians kept the holiday, while Quakers, Scotch-Irish, Methodists, Baptists, and the ‘Plain dutch’ - Mennonites, Brethren and Amish joined Congregationalists and Presbyterians in rejecting Christmas.

Christmas was something the Puritans wanted to ‘purify’ the Church of England from. And the Pilgrims, founders of another American holiday. Thanksgiving, intended to start fresh in the new world, free of any of the Roman Catholic traditions that had been retained by the Anglicans.

Against the iron will of the Mathers, Pastor Henry Scougal preached a Boston sermon that told the Christmas story and made the case for celebration.

He asked: ‘Can we be insensible of our happiness when angels do so heartily congratulate it?’

Thomas Jefferson championed separation of church and state, and that allowed Christmas to become a festival free of both. It was years later, Ruton says, that Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians ‘brought the holiday back to the pulpit and pew.’ (MMT 12/25/1990)