

Name: _____

Date: _____

When Christmas Was a Crime



[par. 1] Imagine waking up on Christmas morning and finding out that celebrating it could get you fined or even arrested. This might sound strange today, as we associate Christmas with festive decorations, presents, and family gatherings. But during the 17th century in America, especially in the New England area, celebrating Christmas was considered illegal.

[par. 2] To understand why Christmas was once banned, we need to look back at the history of the Puritans. The Puritans were a group of people who left England in the early 1600s because they wanted to practice their religion freely. They were a very strict group,

valuing hard work and simplicity, and believed that a lot of traditional celebrations were too extravagant and distracted from their religious devotion.

[par. 3] In England, Christmas had become a time of merriment and plenty, filled with feasting, drinking, and what the Puritans considered unnecessary festivities. When the Puritans came to the American colonies, they wanted to eliminate what they saw as any excess or frivolity inconsistent with their beliefs. This view extended to Christmas.

[par. 4] In 1659, the government of the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law making it illegal to celebrate Christmas. The law stated that anyone found celebrating the holiday could be fined five shillings, which was a considerable amount of money at that time. This might seem unusual, but the Puritans had strong religious reasons for their decision.

[par. 5] The Puritans saw Christmas as a holiday that had become mixed up with pagan traditions, meaning practices that originated from non-Christian celebrations. They believed that

December 25th was not the actual birth date of Jesus Christ, but a date chosen because it coincided with popular ancient festivals celebrating the winter solstice, a time when days start getting longer.

[par. 6] Because of this mixture, the Puritans did not see Christmas as a true Christian holiday but rather as a human invention that distracted from their worship. They took it so seriously that on Christmas Day, instead of celebrating, they would go about their work like any other day, and shops remained open.

[par. 7] The ban on Christmas continued to be enforced for about 22 years, until 1681, when new leaders took over and the laws changed. However, the impact of these strict views lingered in New England for a long time, with some areas not fully embracing Christmas until the mid-1800s.

[par. 8] So, how did Christmas become the joyful holiday we know today? Over time, different traditions from various immigrant groups in America blended together. The influence of these groups, including German settlers and their Christmas trees, and the Dutch with Sinterklaas, eventually shaped the modern celebration of Christmas.

[par. 9] In conclusion, Christmas issues like the ones faced in Colonial New England remind us that traditions can change drastically over time, and what was once controversial can become widely accepted and cherished. The story of the Puritans and the anti-Christmas laws gives us a glimpse into how cultural values can shape and sometimes challenge the way we celebrate important events in our lives.

Multiple-choice Questions:

1. Why did the Puritans leave England and come to America?
 - A. To find better job opportunities
 - B. To practice their religion freely
 - C. To explore new lands
 - D. To escape harsh weather conditions

2. What was the main reason the Puritans banned Christmas celebrations?
 - A. They believed it distracted from religious devotion
 - B. They wanted to promote other holidays
 - C. They thought it helped in conserving resources
 - D. They regarded it as a waste of time

3. What conclusion can we draw about how traditions like Christmas change over time?
 - A. They always become more extravagant
 - B. They often blend with other cultural traditions
 - C. They usually become less popular
 - D. They completely disappear over time

4. Which practice did the Puritans engage in on Christmas Day instead of celebrating?
 - A. They sang religious hymns
 - B. They had special meals with families
 - C. They went about their work as usual
 - D. They held community gatherings

5. How do the historical views on Christmas impact modern celebrations?
 - A. They have no impact
 - B. They remind us how cultural values shape festivities
 - C. They make celebrations less enjoyable
 - D. They lead to less widespread celebration

Open-ended Questions:

1. Explain why the Puritans considered December 25th an inappropriate date for celebrating Christmas.
2. Discuss the long-term impact of the Puritan's ban on Christmas celebrations in New England.
3. How did immigrant groups help in shaping the modern celebration of Christmas in America?

True-False Questions:

1. The Puritans left England mainly to find gold and other resources.

True
False

2. Christmas was made illegal in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the mid-1800s.

True
False

3. The Puritans thought Christmas was too closely associated with pagan traditions.

True
False

4. Many New England communities immediately embraced Christmas after the ban was lifted in 1681.

True
False

5. Some traditions from different immigrant groups contributed to how Christmas is celebrated today in America.

True
False

Answer Key

Multiple-choice Questions:

1. B
2. A
3. B
4. C
5. B

True-False Questions:

1. False
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. True