

Christmas now not what it once was

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Christmas, once a sacred day, has unfortunately, in the past few decades, become a highly commercialized "season." Rather than a day of religious services and family gatherings, it is now a six- to eight-week period during which the manufacturers and storekeepers employ every known merchandising technique to convince the public that the true Christmas spirit depends upon the number of items purchased. Materialism is the "in" thing. The quiet observance of this holiday with friends and family a century ago is now considered by many to be a quaint relic of the past.

This is just the most recent of several changes that have occurred in the way Yuletide has been celebrated over the years.

To Chelmsford's early citizens, Christmas was no different from any other day; work was carried on as usual and there was no feasting or celebrating. Even the church took no notice of the day. Our Puritan ancestors took a dim view of this year-end festival that dated back to 336 A.D. They deplored it as an "abomination," a "wanton Bacchanalian feast."

Not only was the Christmas holiday ignored by the early New Englanders, its celebration was declared illegal in 1659 when the Massachusetts Bay Colony levied a fine of five shillings on anyone who dared keep Christmas by "abstinence from work, or feasting."

This strict prohibition was slowly eroded by immigrants arriving from other countries with their native traditions, but it was not until 1856 that Christmas became a legal holiday in Massachusetts.

century ago, Christmas was a family

The way It was

By George A.
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oriented holiday — a holiday except for a majority of our citizens who were farmers and had animals to care for regardless of the festival.

An evergreen tree from the family woodlot would be set up in the parlor and decorated with strings of popcorn and cranberries. Candles would be attached to the ends of the branches and lighted — a frightening fire hazard by today's standards.

The few gifts were usually utilitarian with the children receiving a doll, a sled and, perhaps, a pair of warm mittens. Toys were expected to last; planned obsolescence was a concept whose day had yet to come.

Public Christmas activities were generally limited to special church services and children's parties run by each church. The local press reported in 1886 that, in Chelmsford Center, the Unitarians gathered in the upper hall of the Town Hall for their annual party on Friday, December 24th and, at the same time, members of the Orthodox society (the Central Congregational church) greeted Santa Claus in the lower hall.

According to reports, "The Episcopal society had a well-laden tree in the chapel and

the gathering was one of the most enjoyable in the history of the parish," while "The Baptist society, as usual, observed Christmas evening and their vestry was well filled with young people eager for the arrival of Santa Claus."

In more recent years, the ~~South~~ Chelmsford Village Improvement Association sponsored the annual Christmas eve program for the benefit of the townspeople. Trumpeters played carols from the First Parish belfry for an appreciative audience gathered in front of the church and on the Town Hall lawn. Later, carolers gathered around the lighted tree on the Common before departing to sing to shut-ins throughout the town. Hot coffee was served to the singers upon their return to the Town Hall for an informal party.

The members of the Fireman's Relief Association began the custom of lighting a Christmas tree in the park in Central Square in the 1950's. In order to avoid any appearance of commercialism, the lights were not turned on until Christmas eve, but continued through New Years.

Shrubs on the Center Common and around the Old Town Hall, as well as a tree on the little park in Central Square, have been illuminated in the past few years by a group of public-spirited citizens. Electric candles in the windows of the Old Town Hall and the private and public buildings around the Common add to the festive atmosphere in the Historic District, providing a small but welcome relief from the blatant commercialism that has been thrust upon us from all sides.

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