

## How the Unitarians and Universalists Saved Christmas

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There's nothing like Christmas in New England.

In fact, for hundreds of years, there was nothing like Christmas in New England at all.

For the first two centuries of European settlement, most New Englanders did not celebrate Christmas. Not until the mid-1800s did it become an official public holiday.

The Puritans, who allegedly invented Thanksgiving, systematically suppressed Christmas throughout the colonial period. In 1621, one year after they landed at Plymouth Rock, Governor William Bradford discovered some of his Pilgrims trying to take Christmas Day off, and he ordered them right back to work. In the Bay Psalm Book, the hymnal used in New England churches well into the nineteenth century, not a single Christmas hymn was found. From 1659 to 1681, it was actually a criminal offense to celebrate the holiday in Massachusetts.

That's right: Christmas was banned in Boston!

Puritans argued there was no biblical or historical authority placing the birth of Jesus on December 25. In this, of course, they were quite right.

The gospels give no indication of the date or even the season of the nativity. It took the Christian church over three hundred years to settle on December 25, and then only because it corresponded roughly to the winter solstice, neatly joining Christmas to a pagan holiday it stood no chance of displacing otherwise. It's from the pre-Christian solstice celebration that Christmas borrows the Yule log, candles, holly, mistletoe, even the Christmas tree, none of which has anything to do with the birth of Jesus.

But the more important reason the Puritans frowned on Christmas was the cherished tradition of celebrating the season with gluttony, drunkenness, mockery of authority, aggressive begging, and even invading the homes of the affluent. This tradition survives today in familiar holiday songs in a few quaint references to "wassailing," but it was serious and sometimes violent business in its day.

Christmas was the season of "misrule," in which ordinary social constraints could be violated with impunity, and suppressed resentments and appetites alike found expression. Revelers disguised themselves with masks and outlandish costume, in which both gender-bending and sexual adventure were commonplace. Rowdy bands of servants, apprentices, sailors, and the unemployed barged into wealthy homes demanding food and drink. A wassail song from those days conveys the menace behind the mirth: "We've come here to claim our right . . . And if you don't open up your door, We will lay you flat upon the floor."

At Christmastide in Boston, roughnecks calling themselves "the Anticks" roamed the streets. According to one offended householder, they "disguised [themselves] in filthy clothes and oftentimes with masked faces" and "went from house to house in large companies . . . obtruding themselves everywhere, particularly into the rooms that were occupied by parties of ladies and gentlemen." There they "would demean themselves with great insolence."

Of course, all this drove the Puritans crazy. Despite their best efforts to shame and legislate the populace into piety, sobriety, and chastity, Christmas remained a hotbed of illicit activity. In 1712, the Reverend Cotton Mather bemoaned the debauching of Christmas: “[T]he feast of Christ’s Nativity is spent in Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, and in all Licentious Liberty . . . by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, by rude Reveling . . . .”

He may not have been exaggerating. Demographic records from eighteenth-century New England show not only a marked rise in premarital pregnancy, but also an annual baby boom in September and October—nine months after Christmas.

By the latter half of the century, progressive religious leaders in New England had decided that if Christmas could not be defeated outright, perhaps it could be tamed and domesticated.

Universalist and later Unitarian churches led the movement to take back the holiday from the streets by scheduling worship on Christmas Day.

Universalists, believing in the ultimate salvation of all souls, not just a predestined elite, had never subscribed to Puritan severity. From their earliest existence in New England, Universalists had celebrated Christmas Day in glorious defiance of orthodoxy. The Universalist community in Boston held a Christmas Day service in 1789, even before their congregation was officially established. By the early nineteenth century, Universalists were the foremost advocates of religious observance of Christmas, and many Unitarians joined them.

Although the Protestant trend toward worship on Christmas Day peaked by 1820, by then an even more powerful movement had taken hold, with Unitarians in the vanguard. This was the cult of domesticity, which celebrated the sanctity of home and hearth as a sanctuary from the unease of industrial development, economic fluctuation, and rapid social change. Christmas quickly emerged as the highest and holiest day of domesticity. Unitarian writers like Catherine Sedgwick, Louisa May Alcott, and even Margaret Fuller served as propagandists for a Christmas characterized by childhood innocence, parental wisdom, and selfless generosity.

Catherine Sedgwick left us a telling history of Christmas in Massachusetts not only through her own popular stories but also through extensive family correspondence. Raised in affluence in Stockbridge, Sedgwick and her siblings rejected their Calvinist catechism and became staunch Unitarians.

Her father Theodore, a United States Representative and later Senator, never even mentioned Christmas in his frequent letters from Washington until the first decade of the nineteenth century. Until then, the only apparent observance of the holiday by the Sedgwicks was Theodore’s bouts of drinking with his buddies. But by the second decade, “Merry Christmases” and “Happy New Years” begin popping up frequently in family letters, and the third decade ushered in descriptions of increasingly extravagant gift-giving.

By 1828, Catherine’s sister-in-law Elizabeth was reporting the following presents lavished upon their children, ages 3 and 4: “They received a great many beautiful presents, among which Lizzy had a Mahogany bedstead and bureau, and a wax doll, whose eyes would open and shut. The Bureau, which is a gift from her father, is really a curiosity. It is more than half a yard square, and has three drawers which are sufficiently

deep to hold all her dolls clothes now. And to be useful as she says for her ornaments and Curiosities [‘]when she is a big lady.’”

The following year, Catherine’s favorite niece Kate, age 9, wrote to complain that Santa “only gave me four” presents.

By this time, of course, children’s tears of joyful surprise at receiving a gift at Christmas had long since given way to the glazed eyes of avaricious entitlement. Having banished the drunken revelers from their living rooms, New Englanders now had to confront the intoxication of their own children by greed and materialism. This discovery was especially uncomfortable for Unitarians, who believed in the essential goodness of human beings. Some believed further in the innate perfection of children. The sight of these junior paragons behaving badly at Christmas challenged Unitarian ideals.

Unitarian writers rose to the challenge by penning moral tales of fictitious children outdoing their flesh-and-blood counterparts in acts of generosity and compassion at Christmastime.

In an 1835 story, Catherine Sedgwick describes a wealthy New York family besieged by pretentious holiday callers. Alone at last, the family exchanges presents around the Christmas tree. It soon becomes apparent that teenage Lizzie, rather than relying upon store-bought gifts she could easily afford, has made by her own hand gifts for each member of the family. Her young siblings respond with rapturous gratitude: “O, sister Lizzy! I did not know when I spilt all your beads that you was knitting this bag for me!” and “Sister, sister, did you paint these [toy] soldiers? . . . kiss me, you are the best sister that ever lived.” (I doubt this dialogue sounded any more realistic then than now.)

A decade later, Unitarian, Transcendentalist, and feminist Margaret Fuller was in New York City writing for the *New York Tribune*, published by Universalist reformer Horace Greeley. On Christmas Day 1844, the *Tribune* printed an editorial by Fuller in which she describes Christmas as “peculiarly sacred to children . . . . The evergreen tree is often reared for the children on Christmas evening, and its branches cluster with little tokens that may, at least, give them a sense that the world is rich, and that there are some in it who care to bless them. It is a charming sight to see their glittering eyes, and well worth much trouble in preparing the Christmas tree.”

Then Fuller tells a German legend about a young prince who gives away his own possessions whenever he encounters a suffering child. One day, after giving away his coat, the prince falls asleep outdoors and dreams that the child Jesus is wearing his coat. Waking, the coatless prince falls ill from the cold, dies, and joins Jesus and the angels in heaven. Fuller comments that children at Christmas should be likewise be taught “that what they have they must bestow. . . . Were all this right in the private sphere, the [public] sphere would soon right itself also.”

Another Unitarian writer who seemed to heed Fuller’s admonition was Louisa May Alcott. Daughter of Bronson Alcott, the Unitarian educator whose progressive ideas about children’s inherent virtue and intelligence repeatedly landed him in hot water, Louisa May enjoyed spectacular literary success that seemed to vindicate her father’s theories. In her 1868 classic *Little Women*, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy awaken Christmas morning to gifts not of dolls and dressers, but of little illustrated copies of the New Testament, inscribed with words from their mother and tucked under each of their pillows. Thus morally instructed, they set out on Christmas Day to bring gifts to a poor family in the neighborhood.

As Mandy told us this morning, yet another Unitarian, the German-born minister and abolitionist Charles Follen, after whom the Follen Church in Lexington is named, played a crucial role in introducing the Christmas tree to American culture.

It is, of course, ironic that Unitarians and Universalists, the heretics of Christianity, have long been champions of Christmas. Many of us still are.

Today we honor all faiths. Yet no one sings Christmas carols with greater gusto or tells the Christmas story with more delight. A cynic would say we substitute form for substance. I would argue the opposite: that in lifting up the timeless ideals of love, compassion, generosity, and hope, we embrace the essence of this holy day.

Beyond myth, beyond dogma, we look into the eyes of our loved ones, we look to the needs of those who are suffering, we look to the stars in the winter sky, and find there the meaning of Christmas.

Amen and Blessed Be.

**Benediction:**

In this season of darkness,  
In this season of light,  
May we make an act of faith toward all humankind,  
An act of joy toward all sad hearts,  
An act of love toward friend and foe,  
An act of trust toward all of life.  
Amen and Blessed Be.