



Gardner's Beacon

CAPE ANN AND SALEM PLANTER



Thomas Gardner Society

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-- Winter, 2011

Tudor Christmas

Thomas and Margaret, in their Dorset life, most likely, experienced the Christmas of the Tudor era; Christmas was a festive occasion until the time of the Puritans. Advent's fasting regime was followed up through December 24th. Then a long series of feast days started on Christmas Day.

During the Tudor times, the Christmas season was the greatest festival of the year. And, there were the requisite religious services. Too, all but essential work was stopped so that people could celebrate. People watched plays, participated in sports, and ate and drank merrily. The meats included a variety of wild game and fowl, plus domestic offerings.



Decorations were done with festive greenery and were used to brighten the home. However, the Tudors did not do the decorating until Christmas Eve. Rather than having the decorated Christmas tree which came later into England, the old tradition of burning the decorated yule log was familiar to the Gardners. In English folklore, we see Father Christmas depicted as carrying a yule log.

Those who could afford it had sumptuous feasts; one such feast had 24 courses served to the guests. In this type of circumstance, having food left over from such a meal was a sign of status; these leftovers fed the poor.

There were some instances of gift-giving, but it was not a common practice.

In short, a civilized town would have been quite taken with the activities of the Christmas season.

New England Christmas

When Thomas and Margaret spent their first Christmas at Cape Ann, no doubt they thought about

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the traditions of their families. A question would be: how much were they able to celebrate beyond some rudimentary level? In 1624, they may not have been under the Puritan cloak, as of yet.

As we know, the Puritan viewpoint squelched exuberant celebrations. This mindset was prominent a few years later in New England.

So, how many Christmas seasons were Thomas and Margaret able to celebrate in their new homeland?

At the Plymouth Plantation, in 1620, the settlers spent their first Christmas starting to construct their first building. At that time, they were still stuck on the Mayflower and would be there for the winter.

Observing the holiday was explicitly outlawed in Plymouth; we saw this restriction extended to Massachusetts in 1659.

Even if the Cape Ann group were allowed to celebrate, with what could they have celebrated the season? The little group did come into a new land with provisions to take on necessary tasks. They had fields to plow; harvests to nurture; fish to catch. We also know that they built a remarkable house (Vol. I., No. 3) from material that they had brought over.

History tells us that the Pilgrims had to learn a lot during the initial years. What of the Cape Ann venture? We know that production farming turned out to be problematic; were their efforts able to meet the sustenance requirement?

We know that Thomas' and Margaret's children made it through this time and the winters. For that first Christmas, there would have been game, fish, and native plants to add to their larder.

Given the northern climes, one can appreciate that having a winter festival could help bolster the spirits. It could create some distraction for the kids, perhaps. That first Christmas, John was an infant with older brothers who were still rug rats.



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Perils of Winter

Just how difficult was it to endure the winter in this new place? We are reminded every year, to wit the Valentine Day blizzard of 2011. Before 1624, there had been several known groups that had spent the winter in New England.

The Popham expedition of 1607, the same year of the Jamestown venture, settled into Maine with 125 people and over-wintered in what might be considered the "coldest spot south of Greenland." There was only one soul lost over the winter. In fact, the group was able to build a vessel that was sailed back to England.

We know that difficult times faced by the Pilgrims during their first winter of 1620. The Pilgrims had arrived late in the season and did not have proper time to prepare, for many reasons. The Pilgrim loss over that first winter was almost fifty percent.

In 1624, the little group that arrived in Cape Ann had the wherewithal to survive and to be self-sustaining in the difficult environment, since, due to the nature of the endeavor, there was better provisioning. Also, with an earlier arrival in the year, they had more time to prepare.

The move to the Salem area in 1626 must have brought on more hardship as they pulled up their roots and ventured to another unknown situation.

A little later, Winthrop's arrival in 1630 brought about 1000 colonists; some 200 of these settlers died the first winter. The spring of 1631 saw the return to England of about as many who did not wish to face such a winter again. That would be a forty percent loss of manpower for the colony.



The Popham venture, near the Kennebec River, demonstrated that people could populate the upper regions leading to annual fishing excursions; it was one of several events that led to the 1624 effort.

Mary Gardner, Granddaughter

Mary was the daughter of Thomas' and Margaret's son, John, who served several terms as Magistrate of Nantucket. She was born in Salem a few years before Thomas' death. Her family moved to do business with her uncle, Richard, on Nantucket in 1672.

In 1686, Mary married Jethro Coffin. Their marriage is said to have helped settle bad feelings between the Gardner and the Coffin families; their house, a wedding gift, still stands as the oldest house on Nantucket.

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The Nantucket Historical Association (nha.org) has many images that are related to the Gardner family, including several paintings of the house. This image, which was done by the Pollard Limner, is a portrait of Mary from 1717.

Some granddaughters

Mary (Grafton) Hardy
Mary (Balch) Stone
Susanna (Hill) Dow
Priscilla (Gardner) Arthur
Rachel (Gardner) Brown
Sarah (Gardner) Folger
Hannah (Gardner) Biddulph
Ruth (Gardner) Coffin
Miriam (Gardner) Worth
Deborah (Gardner) Pease

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Sarah Shattuck (ca 1632 - 1724, Nantucket) Born in England, Sarah was the daughter of Samuel Shattuck and Demaris. Her mother married Thomas Gardner of Salem as his 2nd wife. Sarah married Thomas Gardner's son, Richard. Sarah and Richard lived, and were quite prominent, on Nantucket.

This issue is the fifth of a long series, we hope. We are inviting contributions of articles in regard to the Thomas Gardner families. Contact: algswtlk@thomasgardnersociety.org