

Fast Forward to Patriots' Day

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English men and women settled New England for religious reasons, and religion remained a vital part of New England culture into the 1800s. Since the 1600s New England's governors usually (but not always) proclaimed days of "public fasting, humiliation, and prayer," on the first Thursday in April. Like proclamations for its calendar bookend Thanksgiving in the autumn (usually on the last Thursday in November), annual spring Fast Day proclamations were published in newspapers and read from pulpits on the proceeding Sunday. These Fast Days were not commemorative of any particular event, nor were they part of a liturgical calendar. Rather, the civil authority decreed New England's Fast Days. In the 17th, 18th, and into the early 19th centuries many people indeed abstained from food, reflected prayerfully on their lives, and attended morning and afternoon worship services as they did on Sundays.

By the 1830s, however, much of the quiet and prayerful nature had passed from Fast Day, at least for most people, as the society grew more secular. Even those who did spend the day at prayer had only a morning sermon to attend, and "fasting" often only meant no meat dish at an otherwise full dinner. In families that *did* fast, children often squirreled away extra food ahead of time. While earlier New Englanders felt the need to impose fines on those who worked on Fast Day, their 19th century descendants were often only too happy to take an extra day of (unpaid) rest during the week. Some still attended worship in the morning and quietly prayed the rest of the day, but ironically people increasingly treated Fast Day as a holiday in the modern sense of the word, with festive foods, social visiting, and play. Some individual congregations were not content with these ever more secularized state Fast Days, however, and reacted by declaring their own genuine days of fasting and prayer, as Sturbridge Baptists did in both 1838 and 1840. As Puritanism faded, by the late 1800s some New England governors chose to proclaim Fast Day on Good Friday instead of the first Thursday of April in an effort to restore some religious solemnity to the holiday.

What happened to Fast Day? In 1894 Massachusetts transformed it into a state holiday to celebrate the anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, and called it Patriots' Day. Since 1969 it is now always on the third Monday in April, regardless of date. This year it falls on April 20. In most years it is marked by the

running of the Boston Marathon, and is known informally as Marathon Monday in that city. In 1907 Maine (until 1820 a province of Massachusetts) also transformed Fast Day into Patriot's Day; note the singular spelling used there, however. April Fast Day actually persisted in New Hampshire until the late 20th century, when in 1991 it became Civil Rights Day there. Fast Day just faded away in Vermont, Connecticut and Rhode Island, but although it is not a holiday, Wisconsin requires schools there to teach about the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19 each year. Although it may be a bit different this year, happy Patriots' Day everyone!

