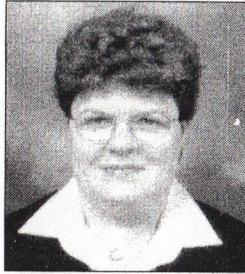


Town's earliest Fourth of July celebrations

The designation of July 4 as a national holiday did not occur until 1870 when federal employees were given the day off without pay. Congress or the President can designate a holiday for federal employees but the recognition of a holiday can only take place at the state or local level.

In 1781 Massachusetts was the first state to officially recognize the Fourth of July for celebrating Independence Day. It was on that day in 1776 that



PICTURES OF THE PAST

Jane Bouley

Every year at midnight the bell at Trinity Church would toll to proclaim the holiday. Everyone in town knew who the perpetrator was but the local constables could never catch him.

the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. During that period the joyous celebration consisted of the firing of canon, fireworks, dinner at the tavern, parades, bonfires and a gathering of the militia and its citizens. Orations were given by the local politicians.

The 50th anniversary of the nation in

1826 – known as the Jubilee of Freedom – was celebrated throughout the nation. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died on July 4 of that year. In 1876 Centennial celebrations were held throughout the United States and abroad.

Branford has a July 4 story that was told by Bill Ahern in the *Branford Review* in 1949.

Every year at midnight the bell at Trinity Church



Photo courtesy of the Branford Historical Society

Celebrating July 4 in the early 1900s, Branford Battery A parades down Main Street to the Green to shoot off their cannon.

would toll to proclaim the holiday. Everyone in town knew who the perpetrator was but the local constables could never catch him – Dr. William Thompson – red handed. Dr. Thompson, who was known as “Deke,” was a Branford dentist for over 60 years – he was still seeing patients when he was 90 years old. In his youth he rang the bell for Trinity services and so he had a key to the belfry. He thought it was his patriotic duty to sound in the Fourth but constables Billy McKee and Joseph Schenk thought otherwise.

Deke never rang the bell if a person in town was gravely ill. He devised many ways to deceive the constables and still ring the bell at midnight.

Another year the local lads decided that the horse barns on the green – where the Cenotaph is today – would make suitable bonfire material. A pile of

wood was fueled by gasoline from John Barnes’ garage and the town enjoyed the bonfire that night. The old horse sheds were no more.

In the early 1900s the Branford Battery A paraded to the Green and shot off their cannon as a liberty salute. In 1901, over 3,000 people gathered at the Driving Park for fireworks, races and other entertainment.

Connecticut banned the sale of fireworks to the public in 1949 and the town began its show – sponsored by the American Legion – from Branford Point in the 1950s.

Today, the July 4th fireworks display from Branford Point is one of the finest on the shoreline.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Jane Peterson Bouley is the historian for the Town of Branford.