

*Christmas with the Hathorne Family, December 1818*



The Hawthorne House, Raymond, Maine.

Photograph: courtesy of Abel Bates

Norma Jepson

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## **Introduction**

The photographs taken during the Christmas Party at the Hawthorne House in December 2024 presented, a tastefully decorated room with a beautiful, bedecked tree and people having an enjoyable time. It started me wondering how the Hathorne family, Nathaniel, his mother Betsey, his sisters Elizabeth, and Maria Louisa, (known as Louisa), and Jane, (Betsey's helper), would have celebrated Christmas in December 1818, in their own house in Raymond, Maine. I decided, via the following article, to turn the clock back those intervening two hundred and six years and present a visualisation of the family's celebrations.

I have focused on the family's preparations on Christmas Eve, and the celebrations on Christmas day. I have made use of any readily, available facts. Acceptance is required, however, where historical details, or speculative features regarding how they actually spent that Christmas Day are unknown, and therefore admit to the very probable necessity for the use of conjecture and creative imagination.

I have also added certain additional facts regarding information contained in the main narrative, which I hope will be of interest.

### **Christmas Eve with the Hathorne family, Thursday December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1818**

Christmas Eve was a busy day in the Hathorne household with last minute gift wrapping. Betsey had asked Captain Britton, a frequent visitor to the house, to play Santa when he was in Portland, and kindly bring gifts back for her family, from the list she gave him. Unknown to her, the Hathorne youngsters had also asked him to pick up a gift for their mother, the girls slipping a written note in his pocket containing the name of the gift, whilst Nathaniel listened for their mother's approach. Captain Britton had successfully located, and delivered the items and they were now being carefully wrapped in tissue paper of assorted colours.

Elizabeth and Louisa draped garlands of evergreen spruce boughs carefully across the fireplace. They gave a festive presentation with more spruce intertwined with sprigs of holly, in the windows, which offered a pleasing image for passers-by. Nathaniel visited Uncle Richard's store for last-minute shopping, spices, and berries for the delicious cranberry sauce and quite a few candy canes to decorate the tree.

Uncle Richard had arranged for an evergreen spruce to be cut down and delivered. The Hathorne girls had been making tree decorations to grace its presence. Star-shaped, baked gingerbread, attractive diamond and heart shapes cut from paper, and little glass beads threaded with ribbon of assorted colours they had discovered at the bottom of their sewing baskets; all were meticulously threaded between the tree's branches. Uncle Robert, who had travelled down from Salem, presented his nieces and nephew with a large star he had hewn from a piece of bark, and the girls had decorated it with sparkles. Nathaniel, balancing precariously on a chair had cautiously placed it on the top of the five feet tall tree where it now sat majestically, the sparkles effortlessly catching the brightness from the flickering flames of the fire. By evening, the tree was fully dressed, beautifully adorned with all

the ornamental gatherings, including the candy canes and had pride of place in the open-spaced corner of the kitchen.

The past few weeks had seen Nathaniel and his sisters roaming through the forest gathering fallen pinecones and storing them until Christmas. The girls had formed them into a circle, added some sprigs of Thyme for fragrance and a stout candle to be lit on Christmas Day; this provided an attractive centre piece, in readiness for the Christmas Day dinner table.

Before going to bed, 16-year-old Elizabeth, 14-year-old Nathaniel and 10-year-old Louisa, had hung their Christmas stockings above the hearth, with grand expectations of them being filled with goodies by morning. They also left two butter biscuits and a small glass of buttermilk by the door for Santa when he entered the house, whilst they slept peacefully upstairs.

### **Christmas Day with the Hathorne Family, Friday December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1818**

Christmas Day started early for the Hathorne family, even before the night sky had fully disappeared, and the moon had gone to bed. The turkey and the cooked ham that Robert had brought with him, had been prepared, the turkey now gently cooking and the ham sitting on the kitchen shelf, ready to carve. There was a hive of activity, peeling potatoes, preparing winter squash, and scraping corn, ready to boil. The cranberry sauce only needed the final additions, and the gravy boat was ready to be filled with the succulent meat juices and stock. Jane had prepared an apple pie the previous day, which had been baked and was ready to serve with cream for dessert.

Already awake, and hearing movement downstairs, Elizabeth, Nathaniel, and Louisa quickly washed and dressed, and hurried to the kitchen, where they found a lovely warm atmosphere. The fire gave a happy greeting, its burning pine logs providing a rustic fragrance throughout the kitchen and filtering its way around the rest of the house, a welcome barrier against the freezing temperatures outside. All three noticed the biscuits and milk left by the door, had disappeared, and the glass was empty. Did Santa really exist?

Snow had fallen over the past days leaving Raymond in its icy grasp and leaving a covering over the little garden and young trees in the orchard. The view from the front windows was of a wintery scene, snow drifts against the side of the road, blown there by a chilly Easterly wind. By Christmas morning the snow had stopped and a bright, clear, but extremely chilly day remained.

The three youngsters fetched their Christmas stockings and much to their glee found the expected goodies, an orange, an apple, some candy and a pair of woollen gloves in each one. Before opening the gifts under the tree, the family gathered round the table for a breakfast of oatmeal porridge and cornbread, with coffee, tea, and buttermilk.

The kitchen took on the appearance of a handsomely and tastefully decorated, festive scene of joyfulness and anyone arriving would be welcomed by a warm, homely atmosphere. The Christmas tree, looked resplendent, emblazoned with its creative and colourful assortment of decorations. It appeared to be guarding

the important gifts that had been placed round its base and around which the family now gathered in excitement, to see what Santa had brought. Betsey and Robert sitting in chairs next to the tree, ready to hand out the gifts and Elizabeth, Nathaniel and Louisa sitting on the floor in front of them with expressions of wonderment on their faces. It was time for the coloured tissue paper to reveal what lay beneath.

The youngsters had given their mother a phial of essence of peppermint, knowing it was her favourite fragrance. Her relations in Salem, had sent a cream-coloured woven shawl, exactly right for the frosty winter days.

Elizabeth opened her gifts to find, writing paper, a useful gift for Elizabeth who was constantly writing letters to friends and family; a pencil case, an attempt to help her keep a tidy desk, and a leghorn bonnet with purple and lavender streamers.

Louisa opened her gifts to find, a selection of different coloured embroidery silks, orange, yellow, shades of blue and green. Louisa knew she could now complete her half-finished picture of a little girl with pigtails. She also found a silver backed hairbrush and a bonnet, similar to her sisters, but festooned with pink ribbons of various shades.

It was now Nathaniel's turn. Whilst watching his sisters, his patience had been slowly ebbing, but he kept it in check. He was pleased to see his sisters were happy with their gifts. Nathaniel found a book entitled, 'Rob Roy,' the latest publication by Walter Scott and only recently available in America. He also found a pen, which he had been wanting for a while. Nathaniel felt he had never found a really good pen, but this one looked splendid and raised hopes of him improving his handwriting. A larger sized package contained a new pair of ice-skates, the silver blades gleaming so much that Nathaniel could see his reflection in them.

Their initial expressions of wonderment changed to expressions of thankfulness. Jane was not forgotten, her gifts consisted of two, pure white cotton handkerchiefs and a phial of lavender essence, her favourite fragrance.

Betsey's religious status had always been fairly orthodox. She was an observer of religious festivals, fasts and feasts, and of course the Sabbath when she would not let her children read any book other than those of a religious nature. Elder Leach would often call and talk with Mrs Hathorne about her idea of opening a 'Sabbath School' in Raymond.

Whilst living in Salem, Betsey Hathorne had frequented the First Church. There were no churches in the vicinity of the Raymond house and Elder Leach, the local Freewill Baptist Minister, joined the family for prayers and to sing psalms before dinner. They decided on two psalms from the book, 'Psalms of David,' Psalm 80, 'Great Shepherd of Thine' and Psalm 98, 'Joy to the World.'

Dinner was served at one o'clock when the family of six, Jane included, gathered eagerly round the table. The pinecone centre piece had been placed on the table and Elizabeth and Louisa had been busy creating flower petals out of the coloured tissue paper the gifts had been wrapped in.

The turkey, ham, potatoes, winter squash, corn and delicious home-made cranberry sauce and gravy lay in wait for their feasting. The apple pie and cream dessert was followed by coffee, tea, and buttermilk.

Uncle Richard suffered with limited mobility as a consequence of a bad fall when alighting from a carriage. The Hathorne family decided to visit them and walked briskly through the snow that covered the short distance to the Manning house. Aunt Susan had made mince pies, which Nathaniel, accepted with glee, the family already aware of his excellent appetite. Susan always had coffee and tea readily prepared for visitors. After exchanging Christmas greetings and topical news items had been discussed, the Hathorne family decided to return home. Although the two houses were in close proximity, they wanted to reach home well before the darkness began to move in, which at this point in the year was just before four o'clock.

Nathaniel wanted to try his new ice-skates on the frost covered Great Pond before darkness fell. Since the death of her husband during a sailing voyage when Nathaniel was only four, Betsey had been anxious when her son went anywhere near water. She wanted Robert to accompany him but Nathaniel, determined to go alone, assured her he would check the thickness of the ice and make sure it would offer a safe stage and, would not take any risks. Under duress, his mother relented. At the shoreline of the Great Pond, after satisfying himself the thickness of the ice was completely safe and would not yield under his weight, he put on his new skates and glided gently forward, maintaining a cautious reserve, and keeping close to the shoreline. Nathaniel had become very adept ice skater, but he knew this new pair would help him to improve further. When the moon started to offer its luminous shadow across the icy covering of the Pond, and the cold had almost penetrated his coat, Nathaniel realised it was time to return home.

Elizabeth and Louisa had remained indoors by the warmth of the fire and had busied themselves with their gifts; Elizabeth transferring her pens and pencils to the new pencil case, whilst Louisa sat happily sorting through her new silks and working on her embroidery. Their mother was sewing, some remedial work was required to Nathaniel's shirts; Robert sat quietly reading his book on horticulture that Betsey had given him.

When Nathaniel returned, he found his mother and Jane laying the table for supper. This meal offered apple dumplings, Nathaniel's favourite; bread, butter, and jam preserve; butter biscuits and Jane's famous lemon essence cake, with the usual, tea, coffee, and buttermilk. This was a celebratory evening, Robert's gift to the family had been a bottle of wine, of which all three young Hathornes were allowed a brief taste of.

After supper, the family sat round the warmth of the fireside, Betsey and Robert on either side, Elizabeth, Nathaniel, and Louisa laying on the home-made, woollen rug in front of the hearth. Suddenly, Nathaniel sat up and asked Betsey and Robert what part, if any, had his Puritan and Quaker ancestors played in the history of Christmas in America. Betsey knew of the stories Nathaniel's uncles and aunts had been eager to tell him of Puritans and Quakers in the Hathorne family, and their

involvement in some of the most prominent, but brutal events in America's past, but as far as she was aware, there had been no discussion about their feelings on Christmas.

### **Record of the Family's Discussion around the Fireside**

Uncle Robert began by saying the history of Christmas in America had always been a complex one. A variety of occurrences in America's dynamic history, and much further afield, have influenced the way we celebrate Christmas.

Over the centuries, in various nations, a high number of unofficial festivals were enacted throughout the year, which attracted unacceptable customs and blended with paganism. The Roman Church Christians had always felt that the birth of Jesus should be celebrated, however, the Gospels did not identify the actual date of Jesus's birth. Their concern over the festivals in Rome led them to take the decision that December 25<sup>th</sup> should be the date for their 'Nativity Feast.' Betsey said religious worship was a fundamental ingredient of Christmas and its true meaning.

Groups from different countries journeyed to America bringing with them customs from their homelands associated with their own religious observances. The Pilgrims had fled from England in 1620 aboard the Mayflower, searching for a new life with religious freedoms. From 1630, it was the Puritans that travelled west, looking for the liberty to worship God in their own way. Both groups were determined to be free from certain religious doctrines of Cromwell's English Parliament.

Puritans did not observe Christmas, they considered it a pagan festival, and on the decision for the given date of December 25<sup>th</sup>, for the Nativity Feast, they objected, calling it unbiblical. They were seen as religious extremists and wielded imposing power within the settlement colonies, more so in the New England Colonies, and even more so in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where the majority of them had established themselves.

Robert gave examples that offered insights as to how two Puritan leaders viewed Christmas. For December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1617, the following entry was made in the diary of Judge, Samuel Sewell, (a Puritan who was in Salem at the same time as John Hathorne, your great-great-grandfather). He wrote the word 'CHRISTMAS' in capital letters, followed by the words, "spent the day rambling around town." John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, made no mention of his first Christmas in America, in his diary in 1630.

In 1659, the Puritans enacted the 'Penalty for Keeping Christmas' law, the Puritan Reverend Increase Mather being a leading advocate. They administered retribution on anyone flouting the law, such as feasting, or absenteeism from work, which included a fine of five-shillings for each disrespectful occurrence. Harsher measures were taken on those who flagrantly disobeyed their obsessive religious beliefs, such as banishment from the colonies.

The Puritans in New England attempted to erase Christmas altogether. As a consequence, throughout the colonial era, settlers began to ask, "Shall we," and

“how do we have Christmas?” They felt any reference to Christmas had been forced into exile.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century more and more non-Puritans, Pilgrims and people of other religious denominations were arriving in the colonies and these new residents began to question the Puritan philosophy, including their system of beliefs on Christmas.

Their law of 1659 was repealed in 1681, following pressure from England and although older members of the Puritan community were bitterly disappointed, subsequently, their dominance only lasted into the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when an initial concept around Christmas began to be defined. There were endorsements to having a modest Christmas celebration, which also embodied broad Protestant values. By the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, America had developed strong, albeit regional traditions allowing more informal Christmas celebrations; a time for family gatherings.

The date of December 25<sup>th</sup> has been wrought into history, however exactly when that date was accepted as Christmas Day is unknown.

Robert explained that, as the Puritans would not contemplate Christmas, any mention of celebratory decorations would also be cast aside. With the new formation of celebrating Christmas, settlers introduced customs from their own lands. Decorating Christmas Trees introduced by German settlers and Santa Claus, his lineage traced back to Saint Nicholas, introduced by Dutch settlers. Robert said in a copy of the New York Advertiser he had seen from 1810, there was an image of Santa, which gave an early impression of his appearance, and which, conveniently, resembled Saint Nicholas himself. Noticeably, in the background, was a pair of “yarn stockings” hung over a fireplace, an age-old custom that the Dutch settlers had brought from Holland.

Robert talked of the gifts they had given each other and gave an example of the practice of giving gifts had started early, although not at Christmas. Records from the New Year of 1720 spoke of the same Samuel Sewell as had been mentioned before, giving a book to a Colonel Dyer, and Mrs Sewell receiving presents of “Oranges and a Shattuck,” (a grapefruit), which appeared a little out of a Puritan’s dominion.

Betsey remarked that Americans began to take these customs on board, assuring the youngsters that during their lifetimes, Christmas celebrations they are currently familiar with, will continue to evolve. Americans would improvise the old customs to meet their own requirements. Remember, Betsey added, changing culture takes a long time, but religious beliefs are a foundation of change.

To return to Nathaniel’s original question, Robert thought for a moment before he gave his opinion on the Puritan’s influence on the history of the American Christmas. He felt it could not be defined that their immovable beliefs, specifically created an immovable stimulus, towards Christmas. The understood reverence and sentiment that most people felt Christmas afforded, could not be denied forever, however it could be said that the propensities of the Puritans, including the Hathorne

ancestors, against Christmas and its celebrations, helped shape the family traditions we have today.

The discussion drew to a close, as did Christmas Day. Window shutters were closed, and curtains were drawn, dismissing the freezing air lurking outside. The candles had burned low and the oil lamps and the flickering flames from the fire's last embers sustained a gentle glow across the room towards the star on top of the Christmas Tree, which appeared to shine like the star that led the shepherds to the stable where Jesus lay.

### **Hathorne Family - Lasting thoughts**

It had been a lovely Christmas Day; and the Hathorne family and Jane went up to their chambers with the reassurance of knowing, they had celebrated it the way they wanted to. Three thoughts stayed with Nathaniel as he climbed into bed:

1. He would return to Great Pond with his new skates, but only after checking again, on the thickness of the ice.
2. He would sit in his great grandmother's chair in the corner of the kitchen and start reading 'Rob Roy' first thing in the morning.
3. He could not change the past, but the legacy his Puritan and Quaker ancestors had left, not only about Christmas, but from other stories he had been told, would stay with him for life.

### **Author's Notes**

#### **The Early History of the Manning Family**

Due to the Puritan Hathorne's involvement in prominent historical events, information about their lineage is more accessible. For the Manning dynasty, I have been unable to find any specifics on their religious philosophy. The stories Nathaniel heard from his Hathorne Aunts and Uncles were about their own lineage. I have found no records of comparable stories being told to him regarding the Manning family historical episodes.

To offer a little on the early Mannings. Records show the first Manning to sail from England to the New World was Nicholas, as early as 1662 and a member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, however we know the colony was made up of settlers with different religions. He then settled in Salem. It is thought, his father, Richard; never travelled to America and died in England. In 1679, Nicholas returned to his old homeland to fetch his widowed mother and his siblings to New England. In that same year Nicholas was brought before the Court for wearing periwigs, (an indulgence in fashionable attire, which the Puritan Colony did not look on with favour). Taking this episode alone may give an early indication that Nicholas did not share the Puritan's philosophy.

He served the Rank of Captain in King Philip's War, was a selectman in Salem and made a commander of recruits to reinforce the Massachusetts Bay Colony's regiment. He moved to New Dartmouth, in Maine and became a Justice of the Peace.



## Concluding thoughts

To offer an interesting information on Isaac Watts, the author of the book 'Psalms of David,' mentioned in the above narrative. Watts, brought up in a Puritan household in England, was a minister, theologian and liturgical reformer. Prior to the publication of 'Psalms of David,' in 1719, Watts sent a copy to Cotton Mather, asking for his comments. Cotton was also a minister and an author, and the son of Increase Mather, who is also mentioned in the above narrative. Unfortunately, to date, I have been unable to locate Cotton's response to Watt's request. This, however, was not the first time the paths of Isaac Watts and Cotton Mather had crossed. In Mather's diary of 1711, an entry says he had received, from Watts, a copy of his earlier work, 'Hymns and Spiritual Songs,' written in 1709. Cotton thought highly of this work and had it made into appendices to his sermon pamphlets, in effect Cotton Mather introduced Watts and his publications to Americans.

As mentioned in the piece about Nicholas Manning being brought before the court in 1679 for wearing a periwig. An entry in Sewell's diary from 1690, concerned a sermon given by Cotton Mather in the pulpit of a Boston Church where he made mention of the wearing of periwigs, zealous of innocent fashion taken up by the best of men.

We know when growing up in Salem, Nathaniel's relatives told him stories of his Puritan and Quaker ancestors, which did stay with him throughout his life and were an influence in his stories. However, there is no firm evidence that he was actually steered towards their doctrines when he was growing up by his mother, nor Samuel, Robert, or Richard.

## Nathaniel Hawthorne's Historical Insight

It is agreed that Nathaniel Hawthorne was not a history writer, however in his stories he engaged with historical features in his inimitable fictional style.

## Finally, here are some 'Did You Knows'

- Since 2008, Maine holds the Guinness Book of Records for the largest snowman; it was built in Bethal and stood, one hundred and twenty-two feet and one inch, tall; actually, it was a snow woman, and they called her 'Olympia.'
- Silent Night, Holy Night (Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht) sung in Austria is the first known Christmas Carol.
- In 1781, Massachusetts became the first State to give official recognition to July 4<sup>th</sup>

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## Disclaimer

The purpose of the article is to entertain and is a work of fiction; a portrait of the Hawthorne (Hawthorne) family on Christmas Day and preparations on Christmas Eve, December 1818. The article contains some historical facts, based on what was available at the time of writing. Places and Raymond residents named were real during the time the piece was set, however the content of occurrences and suggestion of dialogue, apart from known written and published articles, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. All effort has been executed to present accurate, dependable, and complete information wherever possible. The author declares any disparities in timelines, distances, and name changes as her own.