

Beacon Hill Byline by Rep. Mary Rogeness

January 8, 2003

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How did you spend New Year's Day? Watching football games? Recovering from New Year's Eve revelry? Visiting with friends? These traditional holiday activities might have occupied your day just as they often keep me busy on New Year's. But not this year. The Massachusetts constitution mandated that I spend the day in Boston. Here is the reason why.

Our state constitution is even older than the US Constitution. It establishes dates for certain functions of government to take place. One of those dates dictates the time for newly elected legislators to take office. The time so designated is noon of the first Wednesday of January in each odd-numbered year. This year that date happened to fall on January 1.

Our Puritan forbears did not approve of many celebrations, and the constitution predates the celebration of New Year's Day as a holiday. As a result of the 18th century requirement, the State House on January 1, 2003, was definitely not a building closed for the holiday. Offices were open for business as usual and the House chamber was filled beyond capacity as the noon hour approached.

The first day of a legislative term is steeped in tradition that has been building for hundreds of years. The house clerk called to order the 183rd session of the legislature. Because the house had no officers – its members had yet to be sworn in – he then turned the gavel over to the Dean, the longest serving member. He would preside until a Speaker was elected.

Following a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance, a special committee was appointed to call on the governor. Then Governor Swift's arrival in the chamber was announced with fanfare by the Sergeant at Arms. After the order, "Admit Her Excellency the Governor," he escorted her to the podium where she proceeded with one of her last acts of office, swearing in the new legislature.

We were in business. After a three-way race, Tom Finneran was reelected Speaker. I voted for Brad Jones, the new Republican leader, as did all other Republicans, and dissident Democrats voted for Boston's Byron Rushing, but the outcome was never in doubt. The session soon ended, and the building then assumed the holiday signs of the rest of Boston. New Representatives and their families celebrated the beginning of a new term at a festive luncheon, enjoying one worry-free day before taking on the fiscal difficulties that will define our next two years in office.

As the Assistant Minority Leader, it will be my responsibility to help deal with our state's problems in the bipartisan manner that was heralded in opening day speeches. When bipartisanship is not enough, I will offer and support alternative programs and solutions.

Governor Romney took office on January 2nd, and he has been quick to assemble his administrative staff. I expect to work with him as well as my legislative colleagues.

The teams are now in place, so it is time to put forth the extraordinary effort and teamwork needed to pull the state through this period when budget demand is unmet by budget resources. Please let me know of your ideas for helping Massachusetts back to fiscal stability.

NOTE: On undergoing surgery in November, I said I would be back to a full schedule in January, and that is indeed the case. My thanks to Dave Buckley, who has been an excellent manager of the State House office during my convalescence. And my thanks to all of you for your prayers and good wishes for my recovery.