

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Celebrating Evacuation Day

The man on the other end of the phone line sounded puzzled. He called my Boston office on Monday, but nobody answered the phone. He then called me in Longmeadow to find out if the number had changed. The number had not changed, I explained, and he had called the right number, but the office was closed on Monday, March 17, in celebration of ...Evacuation Day.

You may have thought Monday was St. Patrick's Day, a day to wear a green shirt or tie to the office, but it's more than that for Bostonians. It is the commemoration of the day in 1776 when the British forces, faced with the army of General George Washington, evacuated the city of Boston. And it is a holiday for all city and state workers in the city.

Or is that just an excuse to have a day off for parties??

The way the history was told to me, Mayor Curley was responsible for this Boston holiday. He is said to have ordered his staff to find an event in history that fell on St. Patrick's Day so the event could be remembered in the future with a holiday.

Evacuation Day was the result.

I was surprised to learn that the original event has real significance in American history. In 1776 the Revolutionary War had just begun. The British occupied the city of Boston. General Washington then approached Boston and positioned cannons on top of Dorchester Heights, in sight of the British ships docked in the harbor. After bombardment from the heights and before an invasion, the British evacuated the city, sailing away to Nova Scotia. The early victory was an important landmark for American patriots in their struggle against the powerful British.

The historical significance was reinforced to me when I read David McCullough's biography of John Adams. McCullough covers the event as seen by Abigail Adams. After telling of window-rattling bombardments, she marvels that "the largest fleet ever seen in America," was lifting canvas in a fair breeze and turning to the open sea. "You may count upwards of one hundred and seventy-sail... They look like a forest."

McCullough then reports the British reaction by quoting the Duke of Manchester speaking in the House of Lords. "The fact remains, that the army which was sent to reduce the province of Massachusetts Bay has been driven from the capital, and the standard of the provincial army now waves in triumph over the walls of Boston."

In old Boston, Evacuation Day marked a memorable milestone in the American Revolution. In today's city it is a holiday for schoolchildren and public employees. I don't mind the holiday so much now that I have learned the history behind it. I just hope the children of Boston learn the Revolutionary era history of their St. Patrick's Day day off.

NOTE: In the budget crisis of 1991, Governor Weld proposed eliminating the holiday as a way to save money. But it is said that politics is the art of the possible, and the governor soon learned that is not possible to get state workers into their Boston offices on March 17th.