

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Massachusetts Holidays

This week's Byline is taking a break from discussing the bleak fiscal situation in our state to give you an inside look at the ways of the State House. The subject is Massachusetts state holidays, a topic of debate in the senate last week. The holidays are Evacuation Day and Bunker Hill Day and the question was whether to retain them as paid holidays.

Patriots Day was the first state holiday I encountered on moving to Massachusetts some years ago. Though the holiday was new to me, it was easy to understand why the tradition had developed. Every child in America learns about Paul Revere's ride on the 18th of April in '75, and most know of Longfellow's poem in which minutemen "fired the shot heard 'round the world" at Lexington. Now celebrated on the third Monday of April, the state appropriately marks the first battles of the American Revolution by closing state and municipal offices. If it happens to fall on April 15th, even the Internal Revenue Service gives us an extra day to file tax returns.

Evacuation Day and Bunker Hill Day are not so easy to explain. In fact, we could live in Western Massachusetts forever without knowing they exist unless we have to contract state business in Boston. State workers in Suffolk County (the city of Boston) have both days off from work, so that many office telephones are unanswered when we call from the 413 area code.

How did these holidays begin? Bunker Hill Day, June 17th, marks the Battle of Bunker Hill, a historic Revolutionary War event, and local pride and the battle monument in Charlestown must have led the state to set aside the holiday years ago.

Evacuation Day is a more recent benefit of state employment. The usual explanation is that Boston's Mayor Curley needed a reason to give workers St. Patrick's Day as a holiday, so his staff searched for a notable event taking place on its date. They found that George Washington's Continental Army forced the evacuation of Boston by the British on March 17, 1776, and Evacuation Day was born.

Now we come to the senate debate that I mentioned at the beginning of the Byline. A budget amendment proposed abolishing the holidays. The move would save money both by producing another day of work and reducing the need for overtime holiday pay. The vote was as close as possible, failing on a tie vote of 20-20. A second amendment then sought to level the status of all state workers by making both days statewide holidays. That amendment failed by a vote of 18-21.

The votes showed two things. First, money is not so short that special Boston benefits need to be cut. Second, Beacon Hill still operates on a system that provides one set of rules for Boston and another for the rest of the state.

Next week, surprise your friends by wishing them a Happy Bunker Hill Day.