As Christmas approaches, we are cheered by our favorite songs of the season. Among these are many religious songs. Such profusion of music makes it hard to accept that in the early years of Puritan New England, religious music as we know it today was uncommon. Indeed celebration of Christmas itself was forbidden in the early years of the Plymouth community. Governor William Bradford, writing of life in the early plantation, reported his chastising of a group of young men for playing games on Christmas day when they should be working. Not considered consistent with Scripture, celebration of the “holiday” was prohibited. Furthermore, the only “music” allowed in the Puritans’ worship, at any time of year, was the metrical recitation of the psalms. This practice grew out of the reformer John Calvin’s views on the inappropriateness of church music.

Falmouth, founded as an offshoot of Plymouth colony, and dominated by Congregationalism in its early decades, joined in the December silence that characterized much of Massachusetts.

It should be noted, however, that there was a long tradition of church music prior to the development of Puritanism. The Church of England, including its New England congregations, continued to use music while the Puritans shunned it. Martin Luther was himself a hymn writer and welcomed church music. Over the years, the Puritan attitude changed, and this shift in
favor of music (and, eventually, of the observation of Christmas as well) can be traced through several items found at Museums on the Green.

Our archives hold three copies of *The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. to which are added, Selected Hymns from other authors, and directions for musical express by Samuell Worcester*, with publication dates of 1823, 1835, and 1858. The earliest “singing” in the Puritan meeting house had consisted of the metrical recitation of Psalms, usually led, or “lined out,” by the designated predecessor—a practice that few today would recognize as hymn singing. The texts recited sought to be literal translations of the original Hebrew scripture, with little attention given to the poetic nature of the verses.

Unhappy with this practice, Isaac Watts, an Independent (Congregational) pastor in England, wrote new versions of the psalms to make them more suitable for singing and revised the language to give it a New Testament flavor. Urged by his father, Watts wrote a new musical psalm every Sunday for two years, reshaping the nature of the psalter. He later added hymns—songs that conveyed the beliefs and feelings of Christians, but were not purely translations of biblical texts. Ultimately, Watts wrote about six hundred hymns, more than any other single hymn writer.

One of Watts’s most widely sung hymns, appearing in all three editions of the Museums’ hymnbook, is “Joy to the World,” first published in 1719. Based on Psalm 98, this hymn continues the use of psalms, albeit in an evolved form, as the proper vehicle for church music. Watts did not regard “Joy to the World” as a Christmas hymn; rather, he intended it to describe the Second Coming. If you read all its lyrics carefully, you will not find a reference to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Producing texts that were more poetic, and thus easier to sing, was but part of the task of moving from metrical psalters to the hymnals we know today. The second ele-
ment was the creation of tunes to which the words could be sung. Another item found in the archives is an 1829 edition of *The Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection of Church Music*. In the interest of providing quality music for hymns, this text provided instructions in reading music and then offered a number of hymns set to tunes of famous composers. This collection was created by Lowell Mason, a native of Massachusetts, though living in Georgia at the time. When he had trouble finding a publisher, he submitted the collection to the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, which published it anonymously, at Mason’s request. Within its pages, we find hymns for use throughout the year, as well as Christmas songs, such as “When shepherds watched their flocks by night.” Lowell Mason would later compose a tune called “Antioch,” based on musical quotations from Handel’s *Messiah*. “Antioch” blended so successfully with Watts’s poem that it became the only tune we now associate with “Joy to the World.”

The celebration of Christmas was finally restored to Congregational worship during the nineteenth century, some say as a way to help bring a divided country back together following the Civil War. According to Rev. Showalter, the Falmouth church began to observe Christmas in the early 1880s. Probably parishioners drew some inspiration for their festivities from the other denominations flourishing in town, including Methodists, Episcopalians, and Catholics. The Christmas we know today is made up of strands borrowed from many religious groups, from secular lore such as the stories of Dickens, and from immigrant traditions, most notably the German Christmas tree. Though the Puritans and their spiritual heirs in the Congregational Church came late to the Christmas party, through Watts and Mason they contributed one of its most beloved carols.

*Left:* Rev. Henry K. Craig presided over the first Congregational Christmas in Falmouth in 1882.

*Below:* In 1895, Congregationalists enjoyed a “merry” program that included Santa Claus and Jingle Bells along with religious music.

_Terry White & Meg Costello_