The Surratt Courier

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President's Message

With the arrival of autumn and cooler weather, we begin to think of pumpkins, hayrides, bonfires, and Halloween. Like many of our holidays, Halloween is a compromise between pagan and Christian rituals.

To mark the end summer and the harvest, the ancient Celts celebrated the festival of Samhain on October 31st. The next day, November 1st, was the start of the new year and of the dark, cold days of winter.

It was during those dark hours before the new year that the Celts believed that the boundary between the worlds of the living and the Otherworld blurred. This allowed ghosts of the dead and Otherworldly spirits to enter this world. To ward off any mischievous spirits, the Celts would light sacred bonfires. However, the Celtic priests used the presence of those same spirits to help make predictions for the future, which would give the people hope during the long winter months. They would also offer sacrifices to placate the Celtic gods so that the people and their livestock would survive the winter. During these celebrations, the Celts wore costumes consisting of animal heads and skins. Perhaps the precursor of today's Halloween costumes.

Believing it would help protect them during the coming winter months, at the end of the celebrations, each household would take home a flame from the sacred bonfire to relight their hearth fires, which they had extinguished earlier that evening. Perhaps it was a symbol of a new beginning.

As the pagan and Christian worlds began to mesh, so too did many of their celebrations. In the eighth century, it was Pope Gregory III who declared November 1st as All Hallows' Day or All Saints Day. In 1000 A.D., November 2nd was declared All Souls Day. Many believe it was the Christian Church's way to replace the Celtic festival of the dead on October 31st.

So how did Halloween get its name? Since early Christian times, the day before a major feast day is its vigil. In the case of All Saint's Day or All Hallows Day, the night before became known as All Hallows' Eve or Halloween as we call it today.

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Request for Articles

From the comments I've received, I know that many have enjoyed reading, or rereading as the case may be, articles from the past 40+ years of the Surratt Society's newsletters. However, new information is

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This newsletter is a bimonthly publication of the Surratt Society, a non-profit affiliate of the Surratt House Museum, a historic property of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The Surratt Society's website is surrattmuseum.org Contact us at surratt.society@gmail.com or by mail at: Surratt Society, 9201 Edgeworth Drive #3853, Capitol Heights, MD 20791-3853. The Surratt House Museum's phone number is (301) 868-1121.