



The Jersey Blue Laws

1675



1798

The Sunday Laws—Blue Laws!—in the Immorality Act passed by the State Legislature in 1798, have never been repealed. They covered practically everything: “Traveling, worldly employment or business, ordinary or servile labor or work, either upon land or water, shooting, hook and line fishing, sporting, hunting, gunning, racing, or frequenting of tipling houses, interludes or plays, dancing, singing, fiddling, or other music for the sake of merriment, playing at football, fives, ninepins, bowls, long bullets, quoits or any other kind of playing sport,” were prohibited on the Christian Sabbath.

Offenders had to pay two dollars for each offense, or have their goods sold, or stand in the stocks for four hours. Seven Day Baptists or others observing the Seventh Day, were permitted to work on their premises but could not engage in trade on Sunday. Moreover, driving a stage (mail coaches excepted) wagon or cart on Sunday was a flagrant offense, punishable by a fine of eight dollars. If you had two dollars to spare, you might risk being overtaken in a dray. For willful disturbance of religious worship on any day, the penalty was two dollars and usually the offender was “set publicly in the stocks”.

“The Sacrifice of Fooles”

The first Sunday law passed by the East Jersey Assembly (1675) declared that it was unlawful to do “any kind of servile work” on the Lord’s Day. The law of 1682-3 was so drastic it was not approved by the Governor and Council. It forbade engaging in any other than “sober and religious exercise”. The Governor commented that “this law enforces people by paynes and penalties to worship whether their worship be true or false; if false, better none than any. Better to be silent than to offer the sacrifice of fooles.” . . . “Every day is holy to the Lord—he has no profane dayes.”

The Quaker Law

The Quaker Assembly of West Jersey approved keeping one day a week holy as “good in practice and law”, and imposed a fine of six shilling upon persons found doing “unnecessary servile labor, traveling except for worship, or found tipling, sporting or gaming” on the Lord’s Day. The master or mistress of the house harboring such tiplers paid a fine of six shillings, if found guilty, or was imprisoned until the fine was paid.

—Proceedings, N. J. Historical Society; C. S. Boyer, 1931.