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On This Day in History



Historically Speaking: April Fools

by John Manbeck (edit@brooklyneagle.net), published online 04-01-2010

By John B. Manbeck
a Brooklyn historian
Special to The Brooklyn Eagle

April's Fool Day remains an annual event that has been celebrated in Brooklyn over the years, but may have roots in ancient Persia, aka today's Iran. Other genealogies indicate Hindu ancestry from the Feast of Hull, with French and Scottish customs added. We all may suffer that foolish streak or, as the Brooklyn Eagle of 1866 noted, "The first of April sometimes is called All Fools' Day. Considering the number of fools who have always existed, one day a year is not an unreasonable allowance."

Basically, the day gives license to playing practical jokes and telling lies for the fun of it. Or, as Mark Twain remarked, "The first of April is the day we remember what we are the other 364 days of the year." There are fools and "d....d fools."

Practical jokes that emerged in the past included sending people on "fool's errands," supposedly referring to journey that Jesus took from Pilate to



John B. Manbeck



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Herod and back again. In 1902, the Eagle reported that the superintendent of Brooklyn Borough Hall sent his secretary on an errand to deliver a package of bricks. Other messengers (fools) have been sent looking for pigeon's milk, hen's teeth, a left-handed monkey wrench and sky hooks, or have been told to sprinkle salt on the tails of swallows.

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Brooklyn newspapers were filled with stories of pranks, such as putting a hat or a box over a rock, then teasing someone to kick it. Or placing a wallet on the sidewalk, and then yanking it away by a string when a stranger bends to pick it up. In France and Canada, children attach a paper fish on an unsuspecting friend's back for poisson d'avril; in America, a "Kick Me" sign is substituted, a joke "perpetrated by that nuisance of humanity—the small boy," the Eagle wrote in 1870.

France is rumored to be the point of origin for April fools when King Charles IX converted the Julian calendar to Gregorian, thereby changing the new year from April 1 to January 1. Henceforth, those who failed to note the change were dubbed "April fools."

But the 1867 Eagle also questioned: "Why the first of April should be chosen is a mystery until the Long Island Historical Society [Brooklyn Historical Society, today] shall clear it up." By 1873, the Eagle declared that the "Long Island Historical Society intends to erect a statue to Adam, a strange man but then he got Eve'n, he wasn't so odd."

Another account reported that a man stopped and stared up at a pole outside the Brooklyn City Railroad Building, still on the corner of Old Fulton and Furman streets, but near the entrance of the Fulton Ferry in 1867. Soon a crowd gathered staring up at the top of the pole—until someone realized what day it was: the day of fools.

The newspaper ran a limerick about a young man from Gowanus who was April fooled and concluded: "We ought to be thankful that there is such a day. It's the only time in the year that a man who always tells the truth has a chance to lie and get away with it. He has just to say he was fooling. If he had to live a year without telling a lie, think how he would suffer. The thought is terrible."

While the Eagle suggested that the custom was dying out in 1879 and that "fools will be as numerous on any day of the year as on April 1," the tradition has been carried into the present day through our varied media such as the ad for workers needed to help harvest the spaghetti trees of Italy; the sponsorship naming of Philadelphia's Taco Liberty Bell and Washington's Lincoln Mercury Memorial; and the birthday celebration for Alfred E. Neuman.

If you're willing to take a chance, the 25th annual April fool's Day Parade will march down Fifth Avenue today from 59th Street to Washington Square where the king and queen will be crowned. This year's theme is "Up, Up and Away in My Beautiful Balloon" played by the Where's-the-Money-Marching Band. Go ahead. Don't be a fool.

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manbeck@brooklyneagle.net

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