

GISette

City of Marlborough
Massachusetts



A quarterly newsletter to broaden people's understanding of mapping, geography and the City's Geographic Information System

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Marlborough's Public Information Mapping Application (PIMA):

<http://gis.marlborough-ma.gov>

Greetings once again from the *GISette*! Fall is fully upon us now and once again we can drink in the beauty of those sights found only in New England. You hate to say goodbye to summer but the stunning beauty of our little corner of the world never gets old. As always, it's my great pleasure to present you with our latest newsletter. I thought I would give this one a bit of a seasonal theme. It's really fun to write these short newsletters and I hope you enjoy reading them.



The Headless Horseman. We all know the tale of Ichabod Crane and his untimely demise, but did you know the same legend exists in half a dozen other countries?

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Trick or treat?

The geography of Halloween

I keep telling myself that one of the days I am going to write about a very technical topic in GIS. Something along the lines of the derivation of contours from a digital elevation model or possibly even the methods for determining a watershed after first creating a flow direction raster. But enough of that crazy talk, let's learn about Halloween instead!

What you have to always remember is that geography is the study of peoples, cultures *and* places. This river is here and that valley is there is all well and good but, there are people living by this river and there is a very different way of life in that valley. Why? Because the landscape shapes people just as people can shape the landscape. Try to look at it like this: One large group of people migrates and splits into two groups. One group settles on the west side of the mountains and the other group settles in a valley on the east side of the same mountain range. Over time, these two groups will develop different languages, different religions and different diets. The landscape has forced change. Interaction with other groups and cultures will affect language and religion. The mountains in the middle create different weather patterns that effect farming and hunting practices and thus diets. The land has helped to change the people. Keep that t in mind as we talk about Halloween.

So, where, you ask, did this super fun holiday with its traditions of carving pumpkins, putting on scary costumes and asking complete strangers for candy come from?

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Trick or Treat cont.

Halloween came from a lot of places, actually, which is precisely the point. Most of the recognizable customs come from northwestern Europe. Like most modern holiday traditions, they only vaguely resemble their true roots. The very name Halloween is a contraction derived from “All Hallows’ Evening”. This is the start of a yearly Christian festival honoring all of the saints called Allhallowtide. When the church began to convert the various pagan groups in northwest Europe, they replaced existing holidays and festivals with Christianized versions of the same holiday. In this case, Allhallowtide replaced the pagan “Samhain”. This translates to “summer’s end”. Do you follow me so far? *Samhain* was the festival that celebrated the end of the harvest season and beginning of the “darker half” of the year. Because these peoples lived in northern climates, animals and crops could not graze or grow during the winter months. The festival was a time to celebrate the season’s bounty and take stock for the coming winter. Because the sun shines less in the northern hemisphere during the winter months, it was also as I mentioned, the “darker half” of the year. The people of northwestern Europe believed this time of the year to be when spirits and fairies could more easily enter their world. Aha! People thus took great care not to offend these spirits and would also ward off those that would cause mischief or harm. How did they do this? Well, they would ward them off, or attempt to appease them, by wearing scary costumes and masks. They also believed that some spirits could be bought off, if you will, by offering rewards of various types in exchange for good fortune the following year. People would also dance around large bonfires in the evening. The fires may have been symbolic of the sun and helped to hold winter at bay for just a little bit longer. They would carve the likenesses of spirits into turnips and other vegetables to represent these spirits or goblins. It goes on and on, but let’s stop here and make the geography connection.

We can clearly see the makings of modern Halloween here. We have a pagan tradition that celebrated the end of the harvest. They were giving thanks for the crops harvested during the northern hemisphere’s growing season. Because of the tilt of the earth, the shorter days and peoples’ innate fear of things that go bump in the night; we probably have the origins of costumes, jack-o-lanterns and trick or treating.

But, it doesn’t end there. How did the traditions of pagan farmers and Christian saints make it to Main Street USA? Migration. Because of difficult economic times and overcrowding of different regions, people migrated to more fertile lands. In this case, it was primarily the Irish to America in the 19th century. Age old customs and stories assimilated themselves into a modern holiday with some uniquely American twists to it.

Remember, my primary goal is to make you think about geography in a broader sense. Geography is the study of the land AND its people. So, believe it or not, my modest history of Halloween is actually a human and cultural geography lesson. And, hopefully, makes you think about where things came from just a little bit more.

THERE’S AN APP FOR THAT!!
MARLBOROUGH WORKS



“Marlborough Works” is our new mobile app designed for residents. You can report potholes, graffiti, street light outages and more all from your smartphone or through the city website. To do this, simply log on to this City’s webpage and click on the “Marlborough Works” icon and follow the easy instructions. Help us make Marlborough an even better community!



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