

America's First Christmas

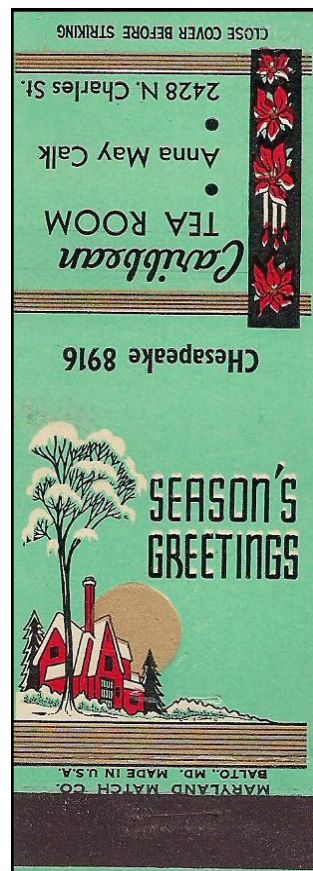
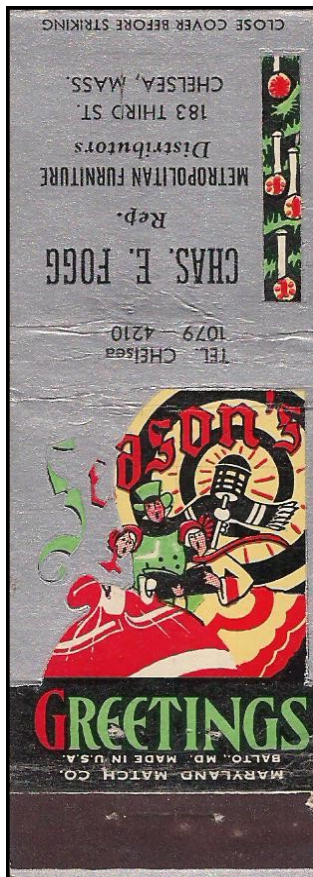
"Are we going back to America's founding fathers?" No...ice cold! "Ah, it had to have been the Pilgrims!" No...still cold! "Columbus?" Still wrong...but you're getting warm...

"The first Christmas celebrated on land that is now part of the United States took place near Tallahassee, Fla., in 1539, according to historians there. The region is known for its sunny weather, so it definitely was not a white Christmas. "It was not a very festive celebration either," Rachel Porter, special programs coordinator for the Florida Department of State, told Discovery News. "There were no Christmas trees or presents. Instead, it was a religious observance with a Christmas mass."

Spanish explorer and conquistador Hernando de Soto established his winter encampment site of 1539-40 near what is now the Historic Capitol in downtown Tallahassee. He, along with other members of his expedition, celebrated the first Christmas in America. Porter, who is also an archaeologist that helped to excavate the Florida site, said a written chronicle from the 16th century sheds light on what took place there.

De Soto landed nine ships with over 620 men and 220 horses at present-day Shaw's Point in Bradenton. De Soto named it Espiritu Santo, meaning Holy Spirit. The ships brought priests, craftsmen, engineers, farmers, and merchants; some were with their families. Some came from Cuba, but most were from Europe and Africa. Few had traveled before outside of Spain.

Women from that group probably would have cooked the food served on Christmas Day. "During the excavations we found pig bones," Porter said. "The Spanish were the first to bring pigs to Florida." Though pork was likely on the menu of the first Christmas celebrants in America, such meat was not



plentiful, Porter adds, so the meal likely would have included plenty of local vegetables, fruits and seafood. Turkey might have been on the menu too.

In addition to pig bones, Porter said archaeologists digging at the site found "artifacts such as chain mail, from armor worn by soldiers, cross bow darts, coins and pottery." Most probably would have been put aside on Christmas Day. Music, however, might have been enjoyed after the service.

The most vivid architectural legacy of the de Soto settlement is Mission San Luis in Tallahassee. The first permanent buildings associated with the mission were erected in 1633. As a commemorative sign at the mission shares, the buildings housed descendants of the Native Americans whose village Hernando de Soto and his men appropriated. Spanish colonists lived together at Mission San Luis. It preceded missions in California by more than 150 years.

While the first Christmas likely was celebrated outside, the mass would have been very similar to those held in the Franciscan chapel. In 2013, Florida celebrated this period during the state's 500th anniversary of Spain's arrival. As part of the "Viva Florida 500" commemorative events, on Jan. 5, Mission San Luis hosted the "First Christmas in La Florida." Visitors on that day celebrated Christmas the way explorer Hernando de Soto likely did. Activities included a reenactment of the winter encampment and Christmas mass, music, Spanish plays from the era and military arts, including black powder musket shooting, cannon firing and archery." [Jennifer Viegas, News Discovery.com, December 8, 2012, <http://news.discovery.com/human/americas-first-christmas-happened-in-florida-121208.htm>]

I doubt if we'll ever find any Christmas covers from 1539, but there were certainly lots to come later on. At a minimum, there are well over 7,000.

