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Transcript

Ben Brotemarkle

Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, is made possible in part by the Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, and the State of Florida. It's also made possible by the Jessie Ball du Pont Fund, and by the historic Rossiter House Museum and Gardens in Eau Gallie, celebrating pioneer history, the natural environment, and women's history, available for weddings and events at rossitterhousemuseum.org.

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society, on the web at myfloridahistory.org. I'm Ben Brotemarkle and coming up on the program, we'll visit Fort Christmas in East Orange County.

Vicki Pruitt

So, the war started in 1835. It lasted for seven years and ended in 1842. And Fort Christmas, of course, was built in 1837.

Ben Brotemarkle

We'll discuss literary depictions of Christmas and Florida.

Connie Lester

A look at the most beloved Florida literature and diaries and letters of earlier periods in Florida history show us a much different holiday season.

Ben Brotemarkle

And talk about a steamboat called Noah's Ark. All that ahead on Florida Frontiers.

Thousands of people from throughout Central Florida converge on the small town of Christmas every year to have the town's postmark appear on their Christmas cards. Although East Orlando keeps moving closer and closer, Christmas is still a rural community located in East Orange County about halfway between Orlando and Titusville. Fort Christmas Historic Park features a collection of historic cracker houses from the late 1800s and early 1900s, cow camps, and a schoolhouse, but at the heart of the park is a replica of Fort Christmas, which was originally built during the Second Seminole Indian War. Vicki Pruitt is a recreation specialist at Fort Christmas Historic Park.

Vicki Pruitt

The war was mainly being fought because people of moving into the state and settling, and they were encroaching upon the land that Seminoles were using. So, they, there would be skirmishes. There was also the slavery issue, because the slaves would leave Georgia and hide out among the Seminole Indians. And so, they were always having troops coming down, or people coming down trying to recapture slaves. And so, it was basically a slave issue, a land issue. Of course, they couldn't agree on how to use the land. So, the war started in 1835. It lasted for seven years and ended in 1842. And Fort Christmas, of course, was built in 1837.

Ben Brotemarkle

Many Florida towns grew up around forts that were constructed during the Second Seminole Indian War. For example, Orlando grew up around Fort Gatlin, Sanford around Fort Melon, and Fort Pierce is still called that from the Seminole War for it, named after Lieutenant Colonel Kendrick Pierce. The idea was to build the forts about a day's walk apart so the soldiers could walk from one fort to another during the day and have protection at night. Fort Christmas was constructed in what is now East Orange County, Vicki Pruitt.

Vicki Pruitt

They were in a winter campaign in December of 1837. They left Fort Melon, which is over on like, what we call Lake Monroe now, and they were trying to establish a chain of supply forts to keep the Army that was finding the Indians supplied with the materials they need. So, they were falling in the St. John's as close as they could without being up to their waist in water. And establishing the fort, they arrived at a place about a mile north of here on December 25 and started building their fort. So, they named their fort, Fort Christmas because they started it on Christmas Day.

Ben Brotemarkle

Fort Christmas was a typical Seminole Indian War fort made of tall pine pickets, before it is 80 linear square feet with two block houses that are 20 square feet each with a storehouse and a powder magazine within the walls of the fort. Joseph Adams is a recreation specialist at Fort Christmas Historic Park and describes what's on display in the fourth Christmas replica.

Joseph Adams

Blockhouse One has exhibits on the second Seminole War, the soldiers, and the Seminoles. Blockhouse Two has some of our more prized possessions from the Christmas community and exhibits community life, and the storehouse has exhibits on some of the tools they would have used, and then some of the tools the pioneers used, and we even have a model of one of the steamboats that went up and down the St. Johns River.

Ben Brotemarkle

In addition to the replica of Fort Christmas, the historic park features cow camps, the Union Christmas school, and a variety of historic Cracker houses from different eras. As Vicki Pruitt explains, each house is staged with artifacts and exhibits.

Vicki Pruitt

We tried to make the homes look like someone was living there and had just stepped out for the day. Each home usually has at least one bedroom, but instead of repeating bedrooms, we put special exhibits to tell how the pioneers used to live. We've got a textile exhibit, we've got a post office exhibit, and hunting/fishing/trapping exhibit. But each home that has a kitchen has the kitchen represented, the main living room represented, and a bedroom. They were moved from their original location, most of them were donated, and then we have fitted them to represent different time periods. Some of them we took back to the very beginning, others of them we left at a later period. But all of them had to have a certain amount of work done for them to get to the periods that we represent here.

Ben Brotemarkle

The Cracker houses on display at Fort Christmas Historic Park feature familiar names from Florida's pioneer days such as Simmons, Wheeler, Bass, and Yates.

Vicki Pruitt

Most of the families that settled in the Fort Christmas area, they came in through North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and into northern Florida, and on down into the central Florida, and then they even proceeded on down south. So, you see these names repeated in especially rural communities, all throughout the state of Florida. The Yates family, I know they're widespread. The Simmons family, we don't have houses for all of our pioneer families, of course, but the Tuckers are throughout the state, the Osteens are throughout the state. There's even a little community called Osteen, Florida, the Browns. So, these pioneers, when they arrived here in the early times, and when they arrived in Central Florida, like in about 1858 and then spread out from there, they were very large families. And so, as these kids got a little older than they continued to spread out throughout the different communities in the state and build land. Everybody wants land. That's the main issue, finding a home.

Ben Brotemarkle

As Joseph Adams explains, two or three groups of students come to Fort Christmas Historic Park every week.

Joseph Adams

Well, we have about eight different educational programs we can do with the students. Today's program is just going to be a general tour. They'll make and taste butter. We have a program, which is my favorite, children's chores, where they make and taste butter, but they also wash clothes, snap beans, feed the chickens, they pump water. And the students, a lot of the students have chores, but the idea of the kind of chores and daily activities that the children had to do in the past is quite fascinating. To me, it's very different.

Vicki Pruitt

By the early 1860s, we had families arriving out here, and throughout the 60s by the end of the 60s, early 70s, we're talking 1800s, we had probably 20 families living out here. And these are our families that are still in the area today. A lot of them, their descendants, are here. They built farms, they had ranches, they lived off the land. When you came out here into the wilderness, you brought your wagon and your family, and you brought your farm tools. Basically, you didn't work for anybody else. You work for yourself. You had to raise your own garden. You had to plant some corn. They had bills of sugarcane. You had to go hunting for extra food, of course you had your livestock. And one thing they found when they got into this area is there were wild cows. There were cattle roaming all over the state.

Ben Brotemarkle

In addition to frequent tours for students, Fort Christmas Historic Park hosts a couple of major events during the year. Not surprisingly one of them recognizes Christmas.

Joseph Adams

Well, the first weekend full weekend in December is always Cracker Christmas for us. And essentially it is our largest special event of the year we have about 150-175 crafters people who make handmade crafts to sell. Then we have demonstrations of pioneer skills, the syrup making, which is a big thing people come back for every year, soapmaking, wood carving, weaving, spinning, making this year, just out there about, blacksmithing there's about 100 yeah, we do about 50 to 60 different demonstrations. Of course, we have a Confederate camp. And then the historic site sells barbecue which is always really good.

Vicki Pruitt

And all of our community groups are nonprofit local groups, the 4H, the FFA, they come, and they earn money for their group by selling hot dogs, or gator bites, or beef on a stick, that type of thing

Joseph Adams

We also have another, larger event, our Bluegrass Festival, which is normally the third weekend in March. We brought in about four local bluegrass groups which are really good groups. And again, we have some crafters but it's not as big a craft show is, say Cracker Christmas, but it's two days under the oaks of pure bluegrass music.

Ben Brotemarkle

Visitors to Fort Christmas Historic Park enjoy the historic homes and the fort replica. But there's also a playground and picnic pavilions that attract many people.

Vicki Pruitt

We get a lot of local people coming here to picnic. I mean, our park is maxed out as far as the pavilions go every weekend with picnickers. But then we also get senior groups that come for parties and functions, like during the week sometimes. We have a lot of people dropping in who are from overseas, you know, there they see our sign on the road or they've Googled Central Florida and something comes up and they stop in here. And some of them repeatedly come back with whoever they bring on their next holiday to see us.

Ben Brotemarkle

Vicki Pruitt and Joseph Adams are recreation specialists at Fort Christmas Historic Park in East Orange County.

This is Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society I'm Ben Brotemarkle. The holiday break is a great time to binge watch our Florida Frontiers public television series at myfloridahistory.org. The new episode is on the shrimping industry in Florida. That's myfloridahistory.org.

Joining us now is Connie Lester, Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES digital archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly. Connie, it's Christmas time. Merry Christmas.

Connie Lester

Merry Christmas. Even though the town of Christmas is located in Florida, the state hardly fills the Currier and Ives vision of the December holiday. Media stories do nothing to help. Newscasts feature

airport scenes showing the arrival of family and friends escaping the cold for a few days with Mickey and Minnie, complete with surfing Santas, twinkle-lit palm trees, and backyard Christmas dinners. Weather reporters delight in comparing Florida's balmy temperatures with the snowstorms elsewhere. For all of that, Florida manages to be more like the rest of the nation than different from it when it comes to celebrating the holiday. Christmas in Florida may be warmer, but the weeks and days leading up to Santa's visit are packed with shopping, cooking, event planning, and much more of the same. By the time the jolly old man makes it down the chimney or through the door everyone is exhausted and overwrought.

Ben Brotemarkle

Christmas time in Florida was much different in the past though, right?

Connie Lester

Yes, it was a look at the most beloved Florida literature and diaries and letters of earlier periods in Florida history show us a much different holiday season. The most obvious difference is the lack of preparation. There were no frantic shopping trips to purchase just the right gift. Gifts were limited to members of the household. No colleagues, or customers, or even distant cousins, were on the shopping list. Most gifts were handmade, not bought. Toys for children, including ragdoll, slingshots, and carved animals. Adults on the gift list received knives, quilts, pipes, tobacco, and food such as pies, cakes, preserves, or cookies. No one spent weeks decorating, no houses displaying lights visible from the space station, no blow up Santas and snowman. Christmas trees were cut and decorated on Christmas Eve or even Christmas Day. There were no blinking lights or expensive baubles, trees were decorated with what was readily at hand: ribbons, berries, pinecones, perhaps colored paper ornaments grace the tree. I once heard an oral history in which an elderly woman recalls that in her youth, the children saved the foil wrapping from the occasional chocolate Hershey bar to add into the Christmas tree as decoration. Likely no expensive ornament ever looked as beautiful as that glittering foil. Likewise for busy farm families, Christmas dinner was not an elaborate affair, but made up of what was at hand. Men and boys hunted on Christmas Eve, and even Christmas Day, and what they killed was what they ate. If they were lucky, everyone had turkey. The meat was supplemented with sweet potatoes, beans, cornbread, and pies. Those living close to the coast may also have enjoyed fish or shellfish.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie, Patrick Smith's *A Land Remembered* is probably the most beloved novel based on Florida history, and he describes a pioneer Christmas in that work.

Connie Lester

Yes, in chapter 22 of *A Land Remembered*, Patrick Smith writes a Christmas story that focuses on a community's Christmas dance, or frolic, an annual event for young people. The chapter begins three days before Christmas with Zach on his way to Fort Drum. Christmas, in Zach's experience was, quote, "a festive time he had never really known", although his mother, quote, "always tried to fix something special for Christmas dinner," baking sweet potato pies covered with Wild Honey, a turkey if his father could kill one, or whatever else was available to mark this one day from all the others. There had been no gaily decorated tree, no exchange of colorfully wrapped gifts, no frolic or church services in his experience. Smith describes the scene: cold December winds stung his face as Zach rode alone across

the prairie. There had been no change of seasons here. No brilliant colors to signal the coming of fall. No bare trees surrounded by decaying leaves to herald winter. No ice-covered bushes or frozen ponds. Zach has money in his pocket to purchase Christmas gifts for his parents, a knife for his father and lilac water for his mother. He reaches the trading post just at dark and persuades Mr. Turner to keep the store open long enough for him to buy his gifts. Once he has completed his purchases, he heads over to the frolic at the meeting hall with some trepidation. It is his first frolic, and he doesn't know what to expect. Still, he is excited about the frolic and as he enters the meeting hall, he sees Glenda, red hair standing out like a flag, wearing a blue dress decorated with white lace, and a blue ribbon in her hair. Although he had anticipated the moment, he is embarrassed for his own appearance, his faded jeans, dusty boots, and denim jacket. Had he known about Christmas frolics, he would have purchased suitable clothing, but no one told him. Zach tries dancing but quickly decides dancing isn't his strong suit and thinks he better stick to horses. Glenda sees a different man and tries to persuade him that she is interested. When he finally leaves the dance, he is excited but conflicted. Later he recounts the event and his feelings to Emma, his mother. Although Zach sees himself as awkward and out of place at the dance, his mother sees what Glenda saw. She explains what was essential to life on the Florida prairie. Girls want a man, not a fancy dancer who couldn't skin a rabbit if his family was starving. You've got strength like your father. Glenda has more sense than you give her credit for. She knows what she is doing. And it turns out she did.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie, T. Thomas Fortune's work is included in an anthology of African American Christmas stories and he's from Florida.

Connie Lester

Yes, T. Thomas Fortune, a black 19th century Florida author and editor of the New Age newspaper, also used Christmas Eve to tell a story of conflict and romance titled Mārama's Christmas Test. It is set in the fictional town of Jason in the land of sunshine and flowers, of mockingbirds and alligators. Fortune creates a scene between Mārama Young, a black school teacher and her future husband Alexander Simpson, the principal of the school where she teaches. The two are quarreling, as they apparently do rather frequently and always about the same thing. Simpson, who learned carpentry from his father before attending college, wants to leave education and become a lawyer. Miss Young wants him to return to carpentry and go into partnership with her father who operates a successful construction business. She believes that the more practical option offers the greater chance for success. Simpson views the prestige of law as the better choice, deeming manual labor beneath the dignity of his college degree. The disagreement that Fortune creates in this story is one that also roiled the black community in the period, practical education and pursuits versus higher education and professional life. Mārama seems to have the upper hand in the argument when she declares that she will call off the engagement if Simpson continues in his plans to pursue a career in law. Suddenly, Simpson sees a way to obtain what he really wants marriage to the charming Mārama. If I do what you want, will you fix the date for the wedding? He asks. Certainly, she says I will fix the day anytime you say after you write your resignation to the school board. That is your Christmas test. Alexander took the fountain pen and securing a sheet of paper wrote his resignation to the school board to take effect at the end of the holidays and handed it to Mārama. She reads through it carefully and said we'll fix the date of the wedding tomorrow at three

o'clock said Alexandra. Oh, that is the Christmas test, exclaimed Mārama. Yes. It's Mārama's Christmas test, said Alexander Simmons.

Ben Brotemarkle

Thanks, Connie.

Connie Lester

You're welcome.

Ben Brotemarkle

Connie Lester is Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida, director of the RICHES digital archiving project, and editor of the Florida Historical Quarterly.

This is Florida frontiers. Holly Baker takes us aboard a steamboat called Noah's Ark.

Holly Baker

The Florida Trust for Historic Preservation's annual 11 to Save list brings attention to the most threatened historic properties and resources across Florida, Noah's Ark, a steamboat from Palatka, has been added to the 11 to Save list. Ennis Davis is an urban planning consultant and a trustee for the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation. He told me more about Noah's Ark.

Ennis Davis

Noah's Ark is one of our most interesting 11 to Save sites because it is actually a steamboat as opposed to a building or natural landscape. The story of Noah's Ark is it was a steamboat in Palatka, and during the late 19th and early 20th century, Palatka was considered to be the gem city of St. John's River. Palatka was very interesting place. The St. John's River was basically our first major highway in the state of Florida. During the antebellum period, and really through late 19th century and early 20th century, steamboats were a way to move passengers, goods, and products from other countries and in eastern coast markets to the inland of Florida, which is starting to rapidly grow following the Civil War. So, Palatka emerge is one of Florida's major port cities at that particular point in time, and it was primarily a tourist destination and a location where larger, deeper drop vessels had to stop and allow cargo and passengers for shallower draught vessels to go further inland into the state of Florida. In 1929, the shingle manufacturer and carpenter by the name of Noah Tillman constructed this steamboat. It was a 50 foot, three deck wooden boat, and it was actually built at the Palatka Boathouse and Marina. He completed in 1929 and made his maiden voyage on September the 26th, 1930.

Holly Baker

Captain Noah Tillman constructed Noah's Ark out of savaged native Florida wood, including heart of pine, cypress, and mahogany. For several decades, the steamboat was a common sight along the St. John's River.

Ennis Davis

For 20 years, it basically served as a steamboat on the Saint Johns River. It was equipped with staterooms, a formal dining room, a saloon for relaxation. It also ferried several notable people during

the era as a part of various fishing expeditions, including Jimmy Stewart, Babe Ruth, Gary Cooper, and Senator Sam Urban Junior, who is the chair of the Watergate investigation committee. In the later half of the 20th century, the boat was renamed Larina and was owned by a resort in Howey in the Hills. In 2003, an incident on the Ocklawaha River led to its sinking. A year later, it was salvaged and towed back to Palatka. And then in 2016, it became property of the Putnam County Historical Society.

Holly Baker

Noah's Ark, one of the few surviving steamboats from the early 20th century, is back home in Palatka and ready for a new life as a restored piece of floating history. Ennis Davis.

Ennis Davis

One of the reasons that we nominated this particular site and selected this particular site as the 11th Save location is it was a unique opportunity to help restore a long-lasting relationship between Palatka and Putnam County on the St. John's River. And the nominators themselves, they want to raise awareness, and they seek to have this vessel added to the National Register of Historic Places. And so, some great news to close us off is last month, the Putnam County Historical Society was awarded \$5000 as one of the first recipients of the Florida Trust's 11th to Save grant program. These funds will be used to purchase the ship's logs and other historical documentation and artifacts that will be used for educational or research purposes as well as contribute to information for the application of the placement of this vessel on the National Register of Historic Places. For more information regarding Noah's Ark in its history, and in efforts that are underway, you can visit www.noahsarkpalatka.org.

Holly Baker

To learn more about the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation and their annual 11th to Save list, go to floridatrust.org. For Florida Frontiers, I'm Holly Baker, public history coordinator for the Florida Historical Society and archivist at the Library of Florida History in Cocoa.

Ben Brotemarkle

You've been listening to Florida Frontiers, the weekly radio magazine of the Florida Historical Society. Please join us right here again next week. Until then find us anytime online at myfloridahistory.org and on Facebook. Production assistance for Florida Frontiers comes from Connie Lester and Holly Baker. The program is edited by Jon White. Happy Holidays and Merry Christmas, I'm Ben Brotemarkle.

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