



CHRISTMAS AT THE HERMITAGE

Thematic Unit

Introduction

In 1845, Andrew Jackson's Hermitage was home to nearly 160 people. The people who lived here fell into two major categories: slave and free. Each of these groups of people developed their own **culture**, or their own way of celebrating holidays and festive occasions. For the Jacksons and their family and friends, Christmas was a time of elaborate meals, the exchange of small gifts, and games and musical entertainment. For the enslaved people who lived here, Christmas marked the end of the cotton harvest, an opportunity to visit with family and friends, celebrate occasions like marriage, and receive tools, clothing, and other supplies for the coming year. Christmas in 1845 looked similar and different than Christmas today, no matter whether someone was slave or free. Christmas at The Hermitage utilizes historic structures and objects, inquiry method discussion, and crafts and games to compare and contrast the Christmas celebrations, foods, and entertainments of the Jacksons and the enslaved community.

Why do we want them to know it? Americans celebrate holidays that provide them with a common experience of tradition and an expression of the values which are most important to society. But different groups of people celebrate the same holiday differently, and this reflects larger differences in American society: class, race, economics, and labor. For Americans of Andrew Jackson's day, Christmas games, crafts, foods, and decorations looked vastly different between the white slaveholding class and enslaved African-Americans. Andrew Jackson's plantation, The Hermitage, serves as a microcosm of early American culture and values.

TN Standards Met:

K.3	1.2	1.38	2.3	3.14	4.53
K.26	1.3	1.39		3.46	4.61
K.30	1.4	1.41			
	1.5	1.42			

Format:

This class addresses K-4 curriculum related to celebrations of holidays, cultural events, and personal relationships. It utilizes three guided activities in various locations at The Hermitage. The program is also structured so that the activities may be conducted in any order, allowing for as many as three groups to begin simultaneously. The time should not exceed one hour, including time for movement between activities.

Activity A: Christmas at the Mansion and Alfred's Cabin

Teachers and parents, your involvement is critical to keep everything moving smoothly and not disrupt our other guests in the Mansion.

Procedure: After arriving, students will be escorted to the Education Center, where the program begins. (The program begins outdoors, and children will need to keep their winter clothes on.) Through discussion, students will reflect on the differences and similarities of Christmas in the nineteenth century and today. They will be introduced to the family at the Mansion and the enslaved community. We will proceed to the Mansion, where children will be escorted into the Family Parlor. Taking a few seconds with each child, the educator will help the children identify decorations, foods, and games and gifts the Jacksons enjoyed at Christmas. The group will then proceed to Alfred's Cabin to do the same exercise related to the enslaved community.

Total time: 15 minutes, including 2-3 minutes for moving from Education and back.

Activity B: Classroom Discussion

Materials Used: PowerPoint with historical images of celebrations. Similar objects to those used in the mansion and Alfred's Cabin related to foods, games, toys, etc.

Procedure: Have the children share some of their observations from the Mansion and AC. Using the PowerPoint, discuss with the students why there are differences in how the two communities celebrate. Using the sample materials on hand, have the students analyze and categorize different types of foods, tools, clothing, games, etc. Once the students have mastered these distinctions, use period images of sheet music and décor to introduce the game and craft and discuss how each one is unique to the community it represents.

Items in Alfred's Cabin include: cornbread, lemons, fish, garden vegetables, plated dinner with greens, pork, beans; pies and wrapped mason jars on table; fabric scraps/quilt piecing on chair. *Items in Family Parlor include:* cakes, fruit, nuts; musical instruments, jewelry, books, décor made of greenery and citrus fruits.

Time: 15 minutes.

Activity C: “An Old-Fashioned Frolic”

The students will divide into two smaller groups and then rotate activities as directed. Cakewalk represents the enslaved community, and their celebrations through entertainments and activities.

Materials Used: Clothing pieces. Sound recordings of cakewalk.

Procedure: Have the children quickly don some period clothing items. The students partner with each other and develop their own dance moves. Remove students in pairs from the dance until the final couple remains and is the winner. Repeat as time allows. The “Liberty Bell March” is an orchestra version of a popular song in the Jacksons’ day that enslaved people danced cakewalk to.

Time: Fifteen minutes, max.

Tin-Punch Ornament represent the Jacksons and their practice of decorating the house for Christmas holidays.

Materials Used: Tin squares, paper patterns, push pins, cardboard or Styrofoam squares, Ziploc bags, sharpies.

Procedure: Have the children select a prepped tin square with paper patterns. Placing the tin square on top of the cardboard or Styrofoam, have them press the push pin through each dot on the pattern until finished. Have children write initials on the back and place in Ziploc bag, to be given to the teacher upon conclusion.

Time: Fifteen minutes, max.

Pre- and Post-Visit Activities and Additional Resources:

- While at The Hermitage, have students inventory the types of materials used in Christmas decorations, the types of foods served, and the types of amusements enjoyed. Compare and contrast these materials with a child’s own celebration of Christmas or other types of holidays.
- Crafting sites like Pinterest have several historically-based patterns and directions for making ornaments, foods, or games very similar to those played by the children of The Hermitage. Have the students collect materials from their yards or neighborhoods and bring to school to make crafts with. Some really excellent materials include pine, magnolia, boxwood, or holly.
- Create a holiday mapping activity, beginning with early Americans like the Jacksons, and ending in the current day. Have students study traditions, foods, and entertainments of a specific community or group and mark them along a timeline.

Create holiday maps for various cultures and groups of people and discuss where these holiday maps intersect and divide across cultural lines.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

1. Image, "Winter Holydays in the Southern States, Plantation Frolic of Christmas Eve." Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1857. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a49759/>
2. Image, "Blind-Man's Bluff." After David Wilkie. Paul Jarrard & Sons. London, 1825.
3. Image, "Sketch of American Christmas." 1812 or 1819.
4. Letter, Phila Ann Donelson to Elizabeth Martin Randolph Donelson, January 11, 1847,
5. Letter, Sarah Jackson to Rachel Jackson Lawrence, December 18, 1848.
6. Letter, Rachel Jackson Lawrence to Andrew Jackson III, December 15, 1849
7. Letter, Samuel Jackson to Rachel Jackson Lawrence, February 1, 1850.
8. Objects, The Hermitage Mansion and Family Parlor furnishings.
9. Objects, Alfred's Cabin and furnishings.
10. Song, "Liberty Bell March". Paragon Ragtime Orchestra.

Secondary Sources:

1. Kalman, Bobbie. *Early Christmas*. New York: Crabtree Publishing. 1991.
2. McKissack, Patricia C. and Frederick L. McKissack. *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters*. New York: Scholastic, 1994.
3. Nissenbaum, Stephen. *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.