

# Christmas in America

## Rockefeller Center and Plaza

Rockefeller Center is one of New York City's most famous landmarks, and the Plaza is one of the city's most iconic public spaces. The skyscraper at 30 Rockefeller Plaza is familiar to Americans as the home of NBC. Across the street, Radio City Music Hall houses the famous Rockettes, a precision dance company that has performed the Radio City Christmas Spectacular each year since the theater opened in 1932. Since 1933, a giant Christmas tree has adorned the Plaza during the holiday season. The Plaza's ice-skating rink, which opened on Christmas Day in 1936, remains a tradition today.

### Explore New York City at Christmas

*Radio City Music Hall \* See the Rockettes perform their famous Radio City Christmas Spectacular.*

*The Rink at Rockefeller Center \* Ice skate beneath the giant Christmas tree in Rockefeller Plaza.*

## Jamestown Colonists' Christmas at Sea

Just before Christmas of 1606, an expedition of the Virginia Company set off from London to establish a colony in the New World. They were a crew of 105 men divided among three ships – the *Susan Constant*, the *Discovery*, and the *Godspeed* – on a mission to establish a permanent English presence in North America. The fleet spent the first six weeks of its journey trapped in the English Channel by storms that left them seasick and frustrated with their lack of progress. Yet they refused to return to shore. The men dined aboard the ships on Christmas Day. For many, it would be the final Christmas of their lives. More than half died of disease and starvation within the first few months after founding the Jamestown settlement in Virginia.

### Explore Jamestown

*Jamestown National Historic Site \* See where the Jamestown colonists established their first settlement in 1607.*

## Christmas in Williamsburg

The city of Williamsburg, Virginia, was founded in 1632, and soon became one of the centers of colonial life in Virginia. The College of William and Mary was founded in the town in 1693, and six years later, Williamsburg became the capital of the Virginia Colony. The House of Burgesses met there for nearly one hundred years. Its members included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry. At Christmas, Virginians participated in feasts, parties, and dancing balls. The holiday was a time of joy and celebration marking the birth of Jesus Christ.

### Explore Colonial Williamsburg

*Colonial Williamsburg \* Visit the historic capital city of the Virginia Colony re-created as it would have been in the eighteenth century.*

## Washington Crosses the Delaware on Christmas

As Christmas of 1776 approached, the Continental Army fighting the American Revolution was on the verge of collapse. General George Washington was struggling to clothe, feed, and pay his men. Knowing that their terms of service would expire at the end of the year, he resolved to make one final, desperate attempt at a victory. Amid a heavy snow storm on Christmas night, he led his army – many men lacking boots on their feet – across the Delaware River on a nine-mile march to Trenton. There, the Patriots caught the Hessian mercenaries by surprise and achieved an improbable victory that reenergized Washington's troops and marked the turning point of the war.

### Explore Washington's Crossing

*Washington Crossing Historic Park \* See where Washington mustered his troops for the historic crossing. Reenactors conduct a river crossing in replica boats every year on Christmas Day, conditions permitting.*

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## Christmas at Mount Vernon

George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, settled on the Potomac River south of Alexandria, Virginia, was home to many of his Christmas celebrations from the time he began leasing the property in 1754 until his death in 1799. George and his wife, Martha, were frequent hosts. In fact, they had visitors – many uninvited and unknown travelers – virtually every night in Washington's later years (including 677 guests in 1798). Naturally, at Christmas Washington sought to provide some special entertainment. In 1787, his records indicate that he paid an Alexandria man to bring a camel to the estate for his guests to view-not out of character for the curious Washington, who showed a lifelong interest in animals.

### Explore Mount Vernon

*George Washington's Mount Vernon \* Visit Mount Vernon, Washington's estate, beautifully maintained by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. Each year, Aladdin the Camel is on exhibit throughout the Christmas season.*

## Lewis and Clarks' Christmas at Fort Mandan

The explorers of the Lewis and Clark Expedition – or the Corps of Discovery, as they were known – spent the winter of 1804 at Fort Mandan (named for the nearby villages of the Mandan tribe) in present-day North Dakota. Clark wrote in his journal that the men awoke to snowfall on a chilly Christmas morning and celebrated by firing three cannon shots. Another member of the expedition wrote that the Corps then "had the best to eat that could be had, and continued firing, dancing, and frolicking during the whole day. We enjoyed a Merry Christmas during the day and evening until nine o'clock-all in peace and quietness."

### Explore Fort Mandan

*The North Dakota Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center \* Visit the reconstruction of Lewis and Clark's Fort Mandan in Washburn, North Dakota, where the Corps of Discovery spent Christmas of 1804.*

## Christmas with Andrew Jackson

Christmas was quite a production in President Andrew Jackson's White House. In 1834, Jackson threw a "frolic" for the children of the house, complete with games, music, food, and holiday treats. The highlight was an indoor "snowball" fight, waged with cotton snowballs prepared for the occasion that burst apart upon striking their target. Earlier in the day, President Jackson reportedly took the children on a trip around the nation's capital to deliver presents to local dignitaries and to visit an orphanage. The president's own parents had both died when he was young.

### Explore Andrew Jackson's Life

*The Hermitage \* Learn more about the life of President Andrew Jackson at his home, the Hermitage.*

## Christmas During the Civil War

The Civil War raged from 1861 to 1865, splitting the country between the Union in the North and the seceding Confederate States of America in the South. The Southern states asserted a right to maintain the institution of human slavery without federal interference, and declared independence from the U.S. government at the outset of the war. The Union considered this secession an act of rebellion, and a long, bloody conflict followed. Christmas during the Civil War was a somber occasion. With the country torn in two, there was little joy on either side of the conflict. Anecdotes indicate that some soldiers erected small Christmas trees in front of their tents, with one soldier writing of decorating his tree with "hard tack and pork." Other reports indicate soldiers were given extra rations to mark the occasion.

### Explore the Civil War

*National Civil War Museum \* Visit the only museum devoted to teaching the complete history of the Civil War-located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.*

*Gettysburg National Military Park \* See the site where one of the Civil War's most famous and important battles took place.*

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## Christmas on the Frontier

Beginning in the early 1800s and accelerating dramatically from the 1840s through the end of the century, millions of Americans moved west to settle the vast frontier beyond the Mississippi River. The Homestead Act of 1862 increased migration in the west even further by providing settlers with free land if they established a homestead there. Life on the frontier was difficult and not particularly exciting, so when Christmas arrived, the holiday was a welcome break. Contemporary reports from settlers describe communities coming together enthusiastically to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

### Explore Life on the Frontier

*Museum of the Great Plains* \* Learn about frontier life at this museum in Lawton, Oklahoma.

*Scotts Bluff National Monument* \* Visit the annual Christmas on the Prairie event at this national monument in Nebraska to learn what the holiday was like for settlers on the frontier.

## Teddy Roosevelt's Christmas Carnival

To celebrate Christmas at the White House in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt and his wife, Edith, hosted a spectacular Christmas "carnival." The event, attended by more than five hundred children, featured ice cream shaped like Santa Claus, among a variety of other delicacies. The party was reportedly "kids only" and was certainly among the largest holiday gatherings at the White House up to that point in American history.

### Explore the Life of Theodore Roosevelt

*Sagamore Hill* \* See Teddy Roosevelt's impressive home, Sagamore Hill, in Oyster Bay, New York.

*Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace* \* Tour the New York City townhome where President Roosevelt was born and raised.

## Christmas with the 168th Infantry/World War I

When the United States entered World War I in the spring of 1917, the men of the 168th Infantry were sent to a small village in northern France. Even though the soldiers did not speak the same language as the local people, they managed to become friendly. By Christmas of that year, the men decided to surprise the children of the village with a party. They obtained a Christmas tree and whatever presents they could find, and gathered the local children in the church on Christmas Eve, where Santa Claus was waiting for them. The American soldiers made Christmas a little happier for the young French villagers who had endured three Christmases of war already.

### Explore World War I

*National World War I Museum* \* Learn about World War I at Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri.

## First National Christmas Tree

Although Christmas trees were often displayed inside the White House during previous holiday seasons, our nation's capital had no official national Christmas tree until 1923. On Christmas Eve of that year, President Coolidge, joined by his wife, Grace, pressed a button to light up a forty-eight-foot Balsam Fir on the ellipse in front of the White House. The tree had been brought for the occasion from Vermont, Coolidge's home state. The U.S. Marine Corps Band played at the ceremony – an event that continues each year to this day, not far from where President Coolidge lit the first national Christmas tree nearly a century ago.

### Explore the First National Christmas Tree

*President's Park* \* Tour the White House grounds and gardens to see where President Coolidge lit the first national Christmas tree.

*President Calvin Coolidge Homestead* \* See where President Coolidge was born and raised in the small village of Plymouth Notch, Vermont.

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## Norman Rockwell

Norman Rockwell was one of the most iconic and popular artists in American history. His paintings and illustrations of American life helped define the nation's self image in the twentieth century, most famously on covers of the Saturday Evening Post. Over a period of nearly fifty years, Rockwell painted more than three hundred cover images, including depictions of life during the Great Depression, World War II, and of course, Christmas. Rockwell produced a series of heartwarming Christmas paintings over the years, including the image of an angelic Santa Claus reading his mail in 1935.

### Explore the Art of Norman Rockwell

*Norman Rockwell Museum* \* See Norman Rockwell's studio and a museum of his life's work in small-town Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

## The Battle of the Bulge / World War II

The Battle of the Bulge was one of the most significant and costly battles of World War II. It began in December of 1944, when the German Army attacked Allied forces in the Ardennes Forest near the borders of Belgium, Luxembourg, France, and Germany. As the fighting continued on Christmas Day, a small group of American soldiers, lost in the thick forest and one of them wounded, approached a cabin in the woods and knocked at the door. A woman answered and invited the soldiers inside for shelter and a meal with her and her son. According to the son's account, the Americans' rest was soon disturbed by another knock on the door. This time, it was a group of German troops—an extremely dangerous situation for the lost Americans. But the woman came to the Americans' defense. She told the German soldiers they were welcome in her home, but that she would have no violence on Christmas, and insisted they leave their weapons outside. The German soldiers obliged, and joined the woman, her son, and the Americans for a tense but peaceful Christmas dinner before all retired to a night's sleep in the warmth of the cabin. The story was confirmed when the son was reunited with one of the American soldiers decades after the war.

### Explore the Battle of the Bulge

*Battle of the Bulge Memorial* \* Visit the memorial at Arlington National Cemetery honoring the nearly twenty thousand Americans killed and fifty thousand wounded in the Battle of the Bulge.

*Ardennes American Cemetery* \* See the American military cemetery at Liege, Belgium—the final resting place for thousands of American soldiers who died in the Ardennes offensive.

## Christmas in Space on Apollo 8

Less than a month after NASA launched the first American into space in May 1961, President John F. Kennedy set a goal for the U.S. to land men on the moon by the end of the decade. Thousands of small steps toward that goal followed over the next eight years, and one of the most important achievements was Apollo 8, the first manned mission to orbit the moon. Astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders entered lunar orbit on December 24, 1968, and became the first people ever to see the moon's surface up close. From orbit, the crew transmitted a Christmas Eve television broadcast, with each astronaut taking turns reading from the Book of Genesis, the biblical story of creation. At the end, Borman signed off, "From the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you—all of you on the good Earth."

### Explore the Apollo Program

*National Air and Space Museum* \* Visit this remarkable museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (and its extraordinary second facility in Chantilly, Virginia), showcasing America's achievements in air and space.

*Johnson Space Center* \* Tour NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, and see the control room for the Apollo missions.