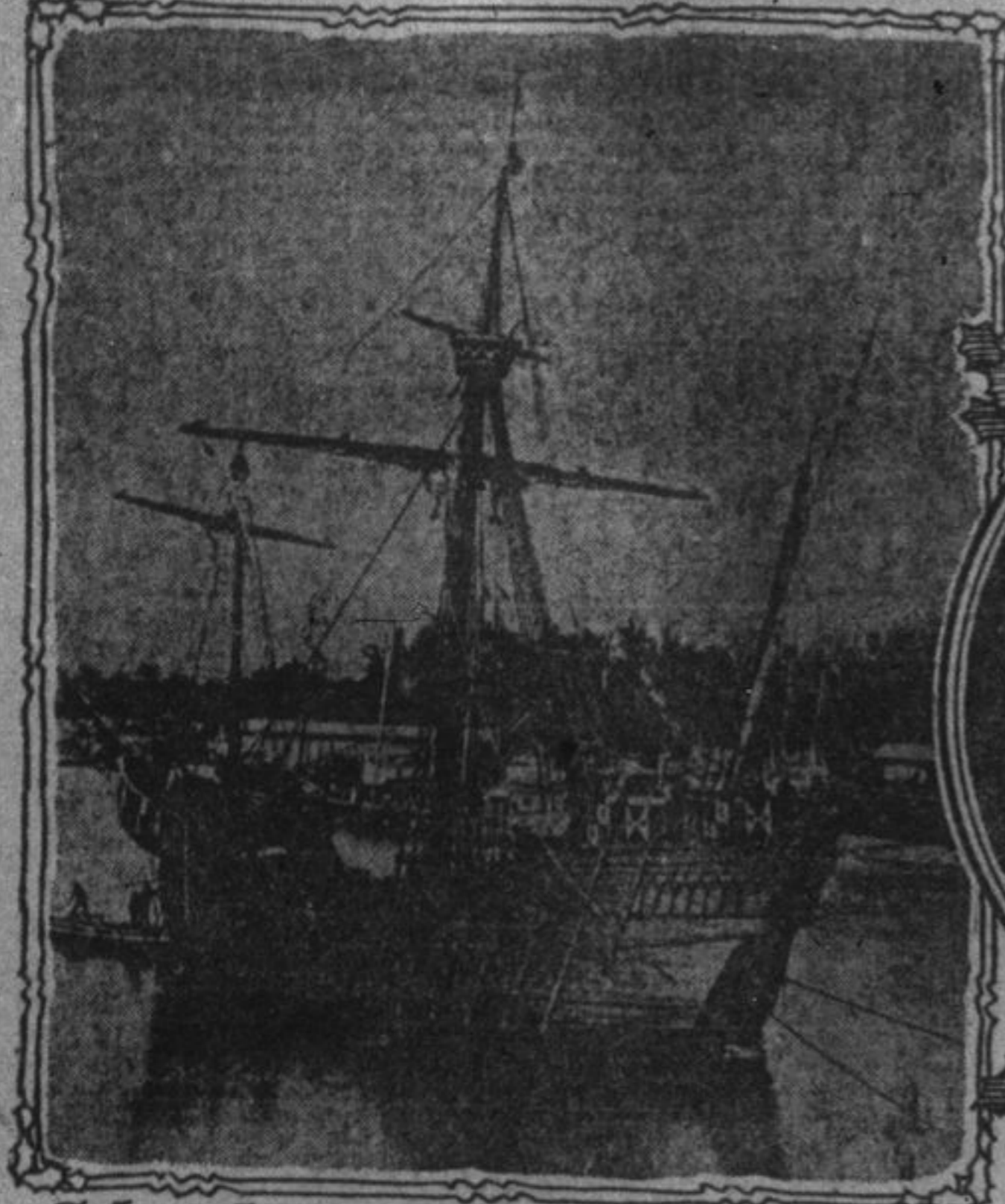


FIRST CHRISTMASSES IN AMERICA



Columbus Flagship Santa Maria, from Deposition on Bail for Chicago Fair



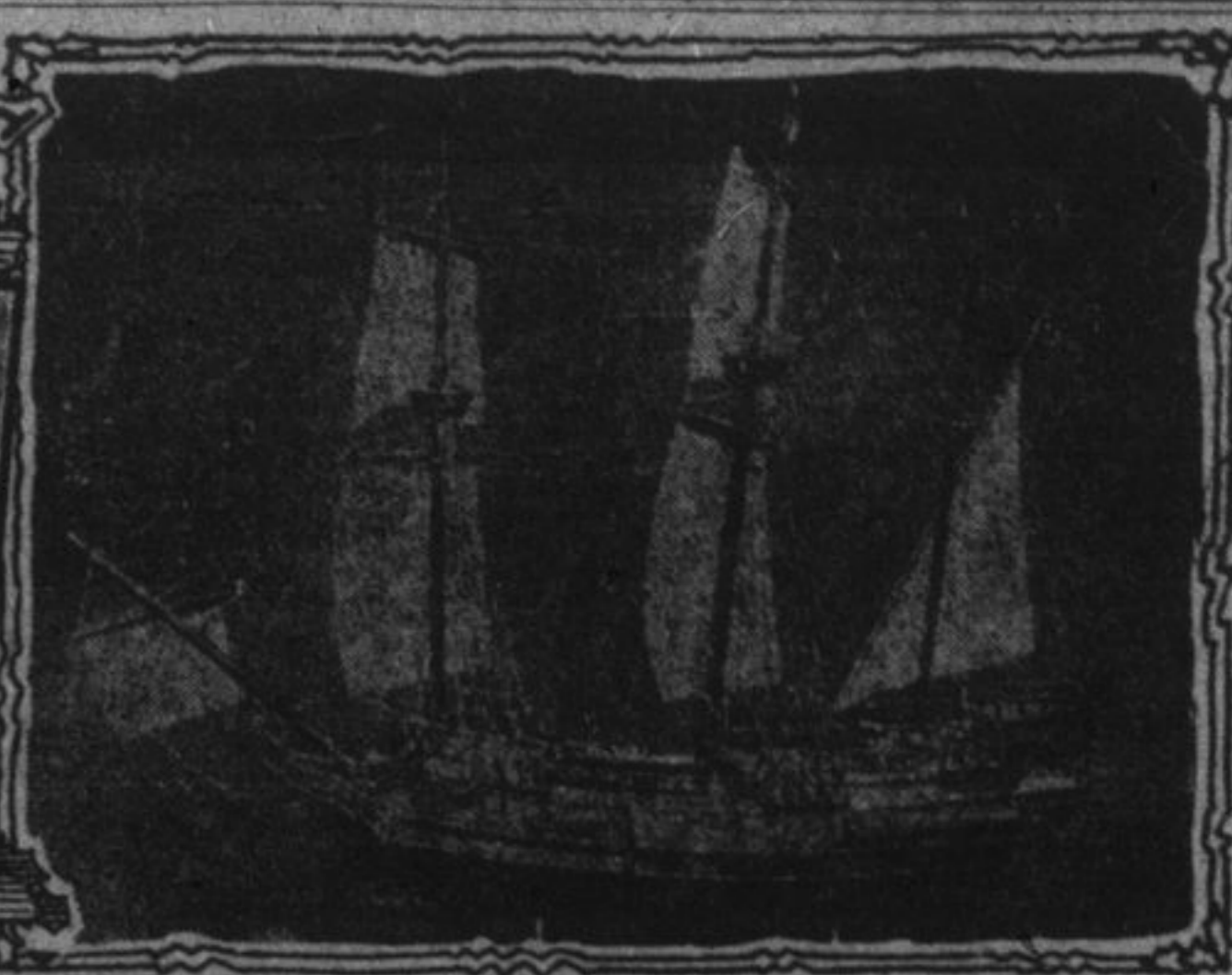
Christopher Columbus



Pilgrims on Way to Christmas Celebration



The Main Dish at Columbus Christmas Dinner - An Iguana



The Mayflower - From a Model in the U.S. National Museum

Christmas Dinner With Christopher Columbus On the Island of Haiti—The First Christmas of the Mayflower Pilgrims—A Jolly Festival.

THE first Christmas celebrated in America was on the island of Haiti, and the principal guest at the banquet on that historic occasion was Christopher Columbus. His host was a native chieftain.

Columbus had arrived in October, 1492, at Watkins Island, in the Bahamas, where he made his first landing in the New World. The island is recognizable today from the description he gave of it, most of its interior being occupied by a large lagoon. Thence he sailed to the north coast of Cuba, which he supposed to be part of the mainland of Asia, and, after exploring the bays and river-mouths, he sent an expedition inland to treat with the Great Khan of Tartary.

From Cuba he crossed to Haiti, with his flagship, the Santa Maria, and one of his caravels, the Nina, leaving the other caravel, the Pinta, behind. Off Cape Haitien his expedition met with its first great misfortune, the Santa Maria running in the night upon a reef, where she stuck. Though the weather was calm, it soon became ap-

parent that she would be a total loss. Fortunately the natives were friendly. They thought that the strangers had come from beyond the sky. Guacanari, the local chieftain, actually shed tears when he learned of the shipwreck, and sent 100 canoes to help unload the Santa Maria. Even the spars were unshipped and carried ashore, no attempt being made to steal anything. Columbus wrote in his logbook: "In no part of Castile could things be left about in such safety, without the loss of so much as a leather strap."

Banquet On Christmas Day

The shipwreck occurred on Christmas Eve. Next day—possibly with the idea of distracting their minds from the misfortune—Guacanari gave for Columbus and his men an enormous feast, which that navigator described in writing as the most elaborate he ever attended. It was served by comely Indian damsels, and included many wholly novel dishes. There was a kind of bread made from an unfamiliar grain called

"maize," samples of which the distinguished guest took back with him to Spain as a curiosity. Also a bread of cassava, a stew of parrots cooked in an earthen pot, and a mysterious dish (known today in the West Indies as "pepperpot"), which Columbus liked so much that he asked for the recipe.

The Spaniards, however, could not be persuaded to partake of the meat of an "ugly serpent," which was broiled whole over a quick fire on a hardwood gridiron. This was the iguana, which their descendants learned to relish as a great delicacy. Its flesh resembling chicken.

When the native notables present at this Christmas dinner had eaten their fill, they did something altogether extraordinary. Producing small-rolls of dried leaves, they lighted one end, drawing the smoke into their mouths and blowing it out. Others burned leaves of the same kind in a sort of pipe with two stems, the latter being inserted in the nostrils. Thus was given to the white man his first opportunity to see tobacco used; but the Spaniards would have none of it.

Clothes Unfashionable in Haiti

Guacanari wore at the banquet a costume consisting of a shirt and a pair of gloves, which Columbus had given him. All the rest of the natives

were unclothed, barring a few golden and other ornaments. What struck the guest of honor most was their nakedness, both sexes being nude and unashamed. The climate, indeed, made clothing a superfluity. "If they wore clothes," he wrote, "they would be almost as white as the people of Spain." He allowed for the fact that they were sunbanned.

The Haitian chieftain bestowed rich gifts upon Columbus, one of them being a ceremonial belt, to which was attached a wooden mask with "two large ears and tongue and nose of beaten gold." In short, he left nothing undone that could testify to his hospitable feelings and friendliness.

But the navigator was no sentimentalist. He had come across the Atlantic to seek gold, land, or whatever else might represent wealth. The kindly natives, from his viewpoint, were "easy marks," inviting enslavement. To Queen Isabella he wrote: "They have no arms and are naked; 1,000 of them could not face three Christians; and so they are suitable to be governed and made to work and sow and build villages."

Later on, the Spaniards showed their gratitude to Guacanari by murdering him, after robbing him of all he possessed—such being the Christian method of dealing with the heathen in those days.

Christmas With The Pilgrims

It was in December, 1620, a few days before Christmas, that the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth on board the Mayflower. They were 100 in number, and for some weeks they had sailed along a desolate and savage coast in search of a suitable place for the establishment of a colony. An exploring party having reported favorably upon Plymouth, the vessel dropped her anchor in the harbor there.

"Monday, the 25th day, being Christmas Day," writes one of the Pilgrims, William Bradford, "we began to erect the first house for common use. We went on shore to fell timber, some to saw and some to carry; so no man rested all that day. But toward night some, as they were at work, heard a noise of Indians, which caused us all to go to our muskets; but we heard no farther, so we came aboard again, and left some twenty to keep guard."

There seems to have been a mild suggestion of appropriate festivity, however; for it is further recorded by

the same historian that "at night the master caused us to have some beere." Naughty, naughty! What should we Puritans of today think of that?

In the next year the struggling colony was strengthened by the arrival of another vessel, the Fortune, which brought thirty-five sturdy young Englishmen.

These young chaps seem to have had too much red blood in their veins to find social conditions at Plymouth altogether to their liking. William Bradford writes: "We had a cold Christmas. Ye Governor called them out to work, but most of ye new company excused themselves and said it went against their conscience to work on that day. When ye others came home at even from their work, he found them on ye street at play, pitching bar and throwing ball. So he tolde them that it was against his conscience that they sholde play while others worked. If they made it a matter to keep Christmas, they must keep to their houses."

Frowned Upon Christmas

No sympathy was felt by the stern and ascetic Puritans for "ye ungodlie pleasures" of the English church and its festivals. In 1659 the General Court of Massachusetts enacted that "anybody found observing, by absence from labor, feasting, or any other way, any such day as Christmas Day shall pay for every such offense 5 shillings." Christmas, in fact, was outlawed; and in Connecticut on that day the law strictly forbade the making of mince pies or playing upon any musical instrument except the drum, the fow-harp and the trumpet.

How different with the jovial Dutch colonists who, four years after the arrival of the Mayflower, brought their plump wives and cheerful families to settle in the New Nether-

lands! Kerstnydt (Christmas) was first and foremost of all their festivals. Indeed, it was twice a festival with them, because it was also Landing Day—the date on which, in 1624, the first large party of them arrived.

The first Christmas celebration as Manhattan Island (which the Dutch had meanwhile bought from the Indians) was in 1625. But among those people the preparations customarily began at least eight weeks in advance. For one thing, there were huge fruit cakes and puddings to be made ready.

On Christmas Eve the master of the house went, candle in hand, through each barn and outbuilding, to whisper to every living creature, from cat-fle and horses to pigeons and piglets, the joyful news that the Christ child was coming. And on the great day there was a love feast in the church, when the women, in caps and aprons freshly laundered and starched, carried around inviting trays of pretzels and shining mugs of scalding coffee.

Christmas Dinner

And, oh! the dinner. A sumptuous meal. Turkeys, chickens, and geese—enough six times over for everybody who sat down. But an important and most attractive item, there was also a huge "cheese" compounded of pork and molasses after a Dutch recipe possibly of pre-historic origin.

Sugar "cakes," made in enormous quantities, were sent from house to house. And, following a custom of the old country, young men in gay and picturesque disguise tramped from farm to farm, bearing gifts—each such bringer of good things being accompanied by another, attired to represent the wicked Belshazzel, an imp clad in skins and armed with a huge whip to frighten children who had been naughty.

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