



History of Christianity in the USA

Recently there has been a great deal of public talk (much of it political) about the Christian history of the United States. This topic is often titled, "Our Christian Heritage." The implication is that the USA is, and always has been, a nation of Christians, and that Christianity is woven into the American nation in a fundamental way. Moreover, many commentators insist that the most "American" expression of Christianity is Protestant rather than Catholic, Orthodox or any other group. Are these statements, assertions and implications historically correct?

Note: Three issues of ALOE will explore this question: August '09 covers the first Christian settlers in the New World, September '09 covers colonial Christianity, and October '10 looks at the last 2 centuries of Christianity in the USA. We won't cover Native American religions in these issues although we know that religious thought and practice in what is now the USA began with the various Native religious beliefs. We are focusing specifically on the history of Christianity in the USA.

Early Roman Catholic soldiers, settlers and missionaries from Spain; Dutch Reformed Church in New Amsterdam

The earliest known Christians in the New World were Spanish Roman Catholic settlers in Puerto Rico (now a US territory). Christopher Columbus and his men were the first Europeans to come to Puerto Rico when they landed there in 1493 during Columbus' second voyage.

The earliest known Protestant church was founded by the Dutch in their colony of New Netherland (now New York) in 1514; they established the Dutch Reformed Church as the colony's official religion.



SALINAS PUEBLO MISSIONS GRAN QUEVIRA
NEW MEXICO

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Ruins of the 1589 Spanish mission at The Pueblos, New Mexico

In 1537, Pope Paul III ordered that "the Indians of the New World be brought to Christ by the preaching of the divine word, and with the example of the good life." Spanish Catholic monks began traveling to the New World (what is now North, Central and South America) to establish missions among the Native Americans.

The Roman Catholic Franciscan monk Marcos Di Nizo established a mission in 1539 known as The Pueblos, in what is now New Mexico. Di Nizo had set out from Mexico after hearing tales of fabulous cities to the north; he found instead Native American pueblos (settlements), where he built his Christian mission.

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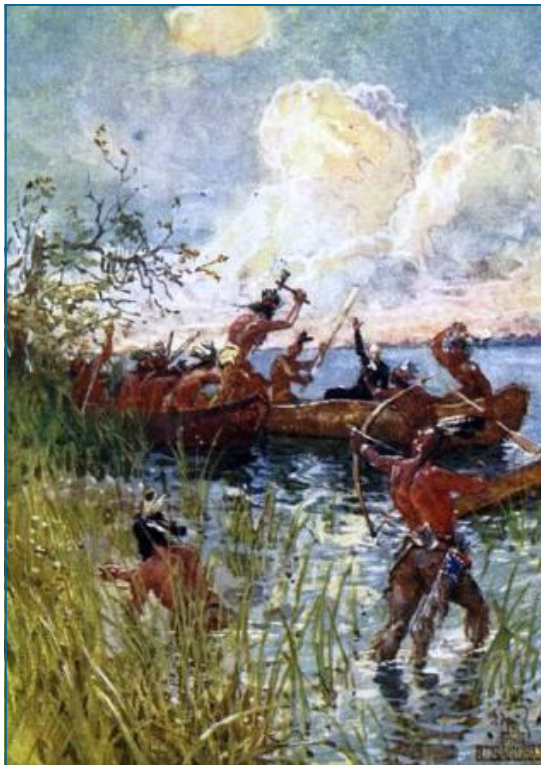
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Settlers, soldiers and missionaries from France and Spain

The first Christian worship service held in the United States, in 1559, was a Roman Catholic Mass celebrated in Pensacola, Florida. Protestant French Huguenots settled Fort Caroline in what is now Jacksonville, Florida on June 22, 1564, as a refuge from the religious persecution they faced in Europe. Their tiny wilderness settlement was later destroyed (and never rebuilt) by Spanish soldiers under the command of Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles. The King of Spain had appointed Menendez to be the governor of the colony of Florida. Menendez, along with 600 soldiers and settlers, came ashore in Florida at the site of the Timucuan Indian village of Seloy in 1565; he hastily fortified the fledgling village and founded the oldest city in the USA, St. Augustine, named in honor of the Christian saint's name day.

In 1566, the first Jesuit Catholic priest to enter what is now the United States, Pedro Martinez, was clubbed to death by fearful Indians in Florida. By 1573, large-scale evangelization of the Florida Indian nations and tribes began with the arrival of Spanish Franciscan friars (www.snu.edu).

Anglican settlers and French missionaries

In 1585, after a small scouting expedition had returned from North America with two Native Americans and many astonishing stories, Sir Walter Raleigh tried to establish a colony called Roanoke in the land which the British named "Virginia," in honor of Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, who was also the head of the Anglican Church. Roanoke vanished, but a successful British Anglican settlement, Jamestown, was founded in 1607.

French Roman Catholics missionaries were active in the St. Lawrence River valley, in what is now Canada and the northern USA. In 1615, French missionaries in Canada opened schools in Trois-Rivieres and Tadoussac to teach Native American children with the hopes of converting them. And in 1642, Catholic missionaries Isaac Jogues and Rene Goupil were captured by Mohawk Indians as they returned to Huron country from Quebec. Goupil was tomahawked to death while Jogues was held for a period of time as a slave. He used his slavery as an opportunity for missionary work among the Native Americans.