



Winter Solstice celebration brings Native American heritage home

HISTORY TOUCHES PEOPLE

Inside the council house at Mission San Luis, a visitor is dwarfed by the massive interior. DEMOCRAT FILES

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts | Special to Tallahassee Democrat

For one fleeting moment on a windy, gray day in November, Rebecca Woofter lived inside the 17th century. At just 9 years old, her family vacation to Boston and Plymouth Plantation — a living history museum — paved the way for her future as programs assistant for Mission San Luis. The re-creation of that English colonial village gave Woofter a true sense of the hardships that the original inhabitants must have faced, as well as a window into their community life.

“The villagers were tending to their gardens and it felt like they actually lived there and needed these buildings for their survival,” recalls Woofter. “It made the experience so immersive and realistic and you couldn’t get that from reading a textbook. That was when I knew I loved history, especially living history.”

As Woofter prepares to transport visitors through time for Mission San Luis’ sixth Winter Solstice Celebration on Dec. 16 and 17, she’s reminded of the magnetic pull these sites and museums had

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Rebecca Woofter is programs assistant for Mission San Luis. MISSION SAN LUIS

If you go

What: Winter Solstice Celebration: Native American Festival

When: 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 16, and 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday, Dec. 17

Where: Mission San Luis, 2100 W. Tennessee St.

Cost: \$5 adults, \$3 seniors (65 and over), \$2 children (6-17), free for Friends Members, Active Duty Military (with ID), and children under 6

Contact: For more information, call 850-245-6406 or visit <https://www.facebook.com/events/144771056054291/>.



Warriors of AniKituhwa, the cultural ambassadors of the Eastern Band of Cherokee who preserve Cherokee heritage. MISSION SAN LUIS

History

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on her during her early years. With her father in the military, Woofter's family lived in several cities across the U.S. As a result, she experienced American history firsthand in places like Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Williamsburg.

Social Studies quickly became her favorite school subject, and it was no surprise to her family that she decided to embark on a degree in American history during her time at Florida State University. Though her bachelor's focused on Native American and Florida history, Woofter's minor in anthropology and museum studies gave her a solid foundation to pursue and present cultural history, and eventually she completed graduate studies in historic administration and public history.

"I am fortunate to have volunteered and worked for great museums around Tallahassee," says Woofter, who has worked behind the scenes at the Museum of Florida History, the Florida Historic Capitol Museum, and the Taylor County Historical Society. "History really touches people, and knowing where your community has been is inspiring. If you don't know your past, you don't know your present."

Woofter created educational plans, learned about the roles of docent or tour guides, and witnessed how the collections department cared for and exhibited their artifacts with key mentors at the Museum of Florida History showing her the ropes. Meanwhile, the Florida Historic Capitol Museum immersed her in Florida's political history as she worked to draft texts and select artifacts for the museum's exhibits.

However, working at Mission San Luis has actualized Woofter's childhood dream. Her position as programs assistant comes with a variety of responsibilities. In addition to coordinating the museum's lecture series, which brings in regionally and nationally known historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, Woofter organizes outreach programs to promote the museum to external audiences.

She also works with the living history manager on workshops where visitors can try their hand at blacksmithing, pine needle basket making, historic cooking, cannon and musket firing, and rope making. As Woofter walks amidst the Spanish mission and other structures on the museum's grounds, she marvels at how they juxtapose the Apalachee council house.

"It's visually stunning to visitors when they see both components in the same place, and that tells a story in itself," remarks Woofter. "I'm lucky that I get to be in a beautiful, culturally enriching place. Every time

I go into our gallery, I continuously learn and get to be a part of something big."

Coincidentally, one of Woofter's first times on Mission San Luis' grounds was for the Winter Solstice Celebration in 2015 when she attended as a visitor. Now on the other side as a planner, Woofter wants to create even more engaging programming for the event, as well as add a few new twists. A team effort with museum staff and community partners, Woofter says the group has worked diligently to highlight the history and heritage of native southeastern Americans.

The winter solstice — the shortest day and longest night of the year—has been a significant time for many cultures throughout the ages explains Woofter, as it assisted communities in marking their year and planning crop plantings. As observing the skies was an important part of this time of year, the Tallahassee Astronomical Society will be providing solarscopes and telescopes to Mission San Luis' Winter Solstice Celebration: Native American Festival.

The event will take place from 10 a.m.-8 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 16, and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 17, and feature music and dance performances, including Painted Raven, The Warriors of AniKituhwa, Deer Clan Singers, and Mississippi Choctaw Social Dancers.

The Apalachee Nation will have a place of honor at the chief's bench at the council house, and craft vendors from around the region will be selling flutes, gourd art, jewelry, native plant herbal remedies, and patchwork clothing and fabrics.



Harjo

Woofter is most looking forward to headliner Joy Harjo, an award-winning musician, poet, and storyteller who blends native rock, reggae, and jazz with poetry to connect audiences to her ancestry and southeastern roots. Woofter sees the solstice as a great opportunity to highlight Mission San Luis' role as "an important southeastern native American heritage site," and hopes to reach the local community, as well as attract attendees from all over the southeast.

"I really love that public history is about making history accessible to everyone," says Woofter. "People can hear a story but you can actually pick herbs from a garden, hear the friary bell ring in the church, see where the chief and his council sat, touch the thatch of the council house as you walk inside, and feel that sense of space and place, and then have someone there who can put it in context. Every story we tell has the potential to touch some group or make the past and the present more understandable."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).