For Immediate Release:

FLORIDA JEWISH HISTORY MONTH TO KICK OFF JANUARY 6 WITH CONVERSATION ABOUT CONVERSOS IN FLORIDA IN 16TH CENTURY
Sunday, January 6, 2013 at 2:00 p.m.

The tenth annual celebration for Florida Jewish History Month (FJHM) will take place at the Museum on Sunday, January 6, 2013 at 2:00 p.m. To complement the statewide observance that marks the 500 years anniversary of the arrival of Juan Ponce de León in Florida, the FJHM theme is "Could Jews as Conversos/Crypto Jews/New Christians have lived in St. Augustine in the 16th century?"

Marcia Jo Zerivitz, the Museum’s Founding Executive Director, will lead the conversation that will include Dr. Abe Lavender on the history of Conversos in the U.S., members of the St. Augustine Jewish Historical Society, Rabbi Merrill Shapiro and Carl Lindenfeld, and Professor Tudor Parfitt, School of International and Public Affairs and President Navon Professor of Sephardi and Mizrahi Student, FIU. Dr. Lavender is editor of the Journal of Spanish, Portuguese and Italian Crypto Jews and Professor of Sociology and Sephardic Studies at Florida International University (FIU).
The Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon sailed from Puerto Rico to Florida, landing in April 1513. He named the area La Florida after Pascua Florida, or the "Festival of Flowers," in honor of the Easter season.

The observance concludes in 2015, with the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the founding of St. Augustine, Florida, the oldest permanent settlement in the United States, established in 1565 by Spanish Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Aviles. The first school, first church, hospital and town hall in the United States were established in St. Augustine. The city was also the first melting pot of different cultures.

Ferdinand and Isabella chose Catholicism to unite Spain and in 1478 asked permission of the pope to begin the Spanish Inquisition to purify the people of Spain. The Alhambra Decree, which ordered the expulsion of Jews, was issued in January 1492. Jews could not live anywhere in the world under Spanish rule. They had three choices: convert to Catholicism (becoming New Christians, Crypto Jews or Conversos), leave the country, or be killed. Since the discovery of Florida and the settlement of St. Augustine were during the Inquisition (1478-1834), were fleeing Jews part of these historic events? Someone needs to ask the question so this is not just a Catholic observance.

Just as these events predate the first permanent English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, if Jews sailed with Ponce de Leon in 1513 (just as we know Jews sailed with Columbus) or with Menendez de Aviles in 1565, these facts predate 1654 when Jews arrived in New Amsterdam.

Currently, the earliest documentation of Jews living in Florida is 1763. From 1513-1762, Spain owned Florida, so only Catholics could live here for those 250 years. Following the French-Indian War when the Treaty of Paris was signed in late 1762, Florida was ceded to Great Britain and people other than Catholics, including Jews, could settle. In early 1763, three Jews arrived in Pensacola, bought land and started businesses there.

More than 25 years ago when Marcia Jo Zerivitz began researching and collecting material evidence on Florida Jewish history, she met with Dr. Eugene Lyon, then the director of The St. Augustine Foundation, who shared with her 16th century records of soldiers and settlers in St. Augustine that reflect Spanish Jewish names. Since that time, Zerivitz has been seeking funding and scholars to research her hypothesis that Jews may have lived in Florida 89 years before the commonly accepted date of 1654 when Jews first arrived in North America and 189 years before the first records of Jewish life in Florida.

*If documented, this would rewrite American Jewish history.*
The only known persons working on this project currently are members of the St. Augustine Jewish Historical Society (SAJHS), led by Rabbi Merrill Shapiro. With the impending celebration of the 450th anniversary of the founding of St. Augustine, they rose to represent the Jewish component. Examining evidence that includes Menendez' taking on "undocumented" passengers after leaving the harbor at Cadiz, Spain; the dates of the sighting of the Florida coastline and the first landing; the archaeological revelations of human remains at Fountain of Youth Park; the founder's understanding of the native Timucuan as the supposed Ten Lost Tribes of Israel; the markers suggested by the Spanish Inquisition as to the characteristics of Conversos/New Christians and the anthroponomastic study of surnames, comparing them to known Sephardic names and names of those tried by the courts of the Inquisition, the SAJHS finds ample support for the hypothesis that Jews first came to what would become the United States along the northeast coast of Florida in 1565.

Rabbi Shapiro said, "To be sure, the presence of Jews in Florida from 1565, unlike the experience of the Jewish refugees from the Inquisition in Recife, Brazil who came to New Amsterdam in 1654, was neither continuous nor populated by anyone other than those whose religious and cultural identities were ruthlessly suppressed with brutality, threats of violence, torture and death. Nonetheless, the SAJHS is greatly concerned with the future of our past and vigorously labors on in the pursuit of the repatriation of the Jewish souls who came to these shores in the days of the Spanish Inquisition."

Since the Museum's partnership with Florida International University (FIU) and the arrival on the faculty of Dr. Tudor Parfitt, there is enthusiastic interest in pursuing the question of Conversos in St. Augustine in the 16th century.

Dr. Parfitt said, "It is not yet certain if the first groups of Spaniards to set foot in Florida in the 16th century contained any New Christians/Conversos or not. However the balance of probability is that they did." Tudor Parfitt, the new President Navon Professor of Sephardi Studies at FIU, assisted by Olivia Autolino, will attempt to ascertain if there were any Conversos among the early settlers in St. Augustine. Working along with the SAJHS, they plan to examine archives in the United States, Spain, Italy and Cuba in an attempt to discover when the first Jew settled in what is now the United States.

About Florida Jewish History Month (FJHM)
The concept for the month began at the Jewish Museum of Florida when Marcia Jo Zerivitz worked with legislators to translate the Museum's mission into a statewide observance. In April 2003, then Governor Jeb Bush signed a bill into law that officially designated the month of January annually as Florida Jewish History Month. State Senator Gwen Margolis and Rep. Gustavo Barreiro each sponsored companion bills that were passed unanimously and eventually led to this historic event. Florida is the first state in the nation to have a month dedicated to the tremendous contributions of Jews in its development.
Artist Romero Britto created the official logo for FJHM. Cities, congregations, schools and organizations participate in the observance. The Museum’s FJHM curriculum is approved by the board of the Miami Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) and distributed to schools in Florida’s 67 counties. MDCPS board will again issue a proclamation for FJHM and select six schools to receive free field trips to the Museum. The educational materials for FJHM and a speech for anyone to deliver to their group can be found on the Museum’s website: www.jewishmuseum.com.

As part of the free public celebration on January 6, Joe’s Stone Crab Restaurant is providing key lime pie, designated in 2006 as the official state pie. Jennie and Joe Weiss, the founders of Joe’s, were the first Jews to settle on Miami Beach in 1913 and the business is still run by the family. This program is co-sponsored by the Spain-Florida Foundation 500yrs.

Please bring family and friends to join in this historic conversation on January 6, 2013, at 2:00 pm. Make your reservation now to 786-972-3175 or info@jewishmuseum.

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