

Our Opinion: Historic celebration

Anniversary puts spotlight on Mission San Luis

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Today, one of Tallahassee's most valuable treasures will be on display as Florida steps back in time to kick off part of this year's celebration of Florida's 500th anniversary with Viva Florida 500.

Almost daily, thousands of cars travel past Mission San Luis, 2100 W. Tennessee St., but today is a good opportunity for residents and tourists alike to stop and take in the sheer beauty of the mission's grounds and what it has to offer this community and the state of Florida.

Events are planned from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. as organizers offer a re-enactment of what Hernando de Soto experienced in celebrating Florida's first Christmas.

The events not only allow for a chance to recognize San Luis Mission, but also a chance to understand a slice of this state's history. At noon, the Most Rev. Gregory L. Parkes, who serves as bishop of the Tallahassee-Pensacola Diocese, will lead a Catholic Mass in the Franciscan Church on the property. The Mass is a celebration of the first Christmas Mass at what was the Hernando de Soto property, off what is now East Lafayette Street.

Plenty of events are scheduled throughout the day, providing families with a personal glimpse of the state's history.

In addition to the Mass, other attractions include a Children's Las Posadas re-enactment of the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, original de Soto artifacts, interpreters in historic dress, colonial Spanish music and crafts and other ongoing activities for children.

What's significant about this event and having it hosted at Mission San Luis is the fact that historians say the first Christmas celebrated in the United States was held in Tallahassee in January 1540.

"This is a wonderful event for the public to learn about the early history of Florida and Spanish exploration of what is now the United States," Gifford Waters, collections manager for historical archeology at the Florida Museum of History, told the *Democrat*. "Through the archeological and historical research carried on at Mission San Luis and events such as this, the true story of our colonial origins can be told."

It also gives the public a chance to understand what having a treasure such as Mission San Luis in the capital city means to all of us.