

First Christmas in La Florida at Mission San Luis part of Florida's 500th anniversary celebration

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Worshippers at a special mass leave the thatch-roof church which was rebuilt on top of the mission's cemetery. / Democrat files

Written by [Blythe Newsome](#) Democrat staff writer

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First Christmas in La Florida

If You Go: Mission San Luis, 2100 W. Tennessee Street

Jan. 4, 7 P.M

- A lecture on De Soto's 16th-century expedition and winter encampment by Dr. J. Michael Francis, holder of the Hough Family Endowed Chair in Florida Studies at the University of South Florida.

Jan. 5, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

- A contemporary Catholic Mass by the Bishop of the Tallahassee-Pensacola Diocese, the Most Rev. Gregory L. Parkes (Noon)
- Historical re-enactment of portions of the first Christmas Mass celebrated in what would become the continental U.S.
- Children's Las Posadas re-enactment of Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of shelter. (1:30 p.m.)
- Display of original de Soto-expedition artifacts recovered in Florida
- Historical interpreters in period dress, representing de Soto's winter encampment in Grand

Anhaica

- Apalachee life of the period with archery for children and adults
- Military arts of the de Soto entrada
- Spanish Golden Age drama by Theater with a Mission
- Period foodways demonstrations
- Colonial Spanish music
- Period map-making
- Crafts and other children's activities
- Artisans
- Food vendors

For more information visit, www.missionsanluis.org or call 850-245-6406.

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The first Christmas in Florida is believed to have been a simple celebration with a Mass that took place outside and a large meal of pork, seafood and local fruits and vegetables.

Visitors to Mission San Luis can experience an old-world Christmas — the way explorer Hernando de Soto likely did — when the living history museum hosts a special re-enactment Jan. 5 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m as part of Viva Florida 500, the state's year-long commemoration of Florida's 500th anniversary and the arrival of Juan Ponce de Leon to Florida's east coast.

“The premier Viva Florida 500 event will be held at Mission San Luis' Apalachee-Spanish living history village to commemorate the 1539 First Christmas Mass celebrated in present-day Tallahassee by the Hernado de Soto expedition,” said Rob Blount, Executive Director of Mission San Luis.

At noon, a contemporary Catholic Mass will be led by the Most Rev. Gregory L. Parkes, Bishop of the Tallahassee-Pensacola Diocese, and portions of the first Christmas Mass will be re-enacted. The service will be held in the reconstructed Franciscan Church on the museum grounds.

According to historians, the first Christmas celebrated in the United States took place in Tallahassee in January 1540. At that time, Christmas was celebrated based on the Julian calendar, which would have put the holiday on or near January 7.

In May 1539, Spanish explorer and conquistador Hernando de Soto sailed into what is known today as Shaw's Point in Bradenton. De Soto named the spot *Espíritu Santo*, meaning Holy Spirit. He arrived with nine ships which were carrying over 620 men, 220 horses, 12 Catholic priests, some craftsmen, engineers, farmers, merchants and their families.

They traveled almost 300 miles before reaching the Native American village of Anhaica Apalachee, which was one of the principal villages of the Apalachee Nation. De Soto and his group arrived in October and set up a winter encampment site where they would remain until March 1540. The site is near what is now the Historic Capitol in downtown Tallahassee.

It was during their stay in Tallahassee, in January 1540, that De Soto and his group of explorers celebrated the first Christmas.

The first Christmas was a far cry from the festive celebration it has become today. The Native Americans, who were living in the area in 1539 and had been forced from their homes by de Soto and his army, were angry and constantly trying to ambush these strangers who had taken over their land. It left the Spaniards very little time to let their guard down and celebrate.

“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. It is unfortunate that so much of what we were taught as school kids focused on the pilgrims and British colonization efforts, but the truth is that the Spanish were here long before the British.” said Gifford Waters, Collections Manager for Historical Archaeology, Florida Museum of Natural History. “Through the archaeological and historical research carried on at Mission San Luis and events such as this the true story of our colonial origins can be told.”

First Christmas in La Florida at Mission San Luis, which is known as Florida’s Apalachee-Spanish Living History Museum, is free to the public. In addition to the special Mass that will be held at noon, other activities include a display of some of the original de Soto-expedition artifacts recovered in Florida, a representation of de Soto’s winter encampment in Grand Anhaica, military arts of the de Soto entrada and a children’s re-enactment of Mary and Joseph’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of shelter.