

A La Florida Christmas

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First Christmas in La Florida

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Video of Mass:



On Saturday Mission San Luis hosted an open house to help launch Viva Florida 500. / Glenn Beil/Democrat

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Kimberly Smith and her 2-year-old daughter, Izzy, love going to Mass. But more specifically, they love Christmas Mass.

That's why Saturday's Mass at Mission San Luis commemorating the First Christmas in La Florida was a special treat.

The event was a part of Viva Florida, the state's quinentennial anniversary celebrating the arrival of Juan Ponce de Leon on Florida's east coast.

"I think it's a wonderful way to bring families together to remember that history," Smith said.

Throughout the year, cities all over the state will host various events to celebrate Florida's 500-year history.

David Ramsay, chairman of the board for Friends of Mission San Luis, said the Mass at the mission was a celebration of the first Christmas in what is now the United States, when Don Hernando de Soto, his soldiers and Catholic priests held Mass for Christmas in 1540 at his winter encampment which was located not far from the mission. Back then, Christmas was celebrated at the beginning of January because they used the Julian calendar. Today the Georgian calendar is used.

During the commemorative Mass, the Bishop Gregory L. Parkes of the Tallahassee-Pensacola Diocese gave a sermon and held communion.

"It was a unique experience for me," said Theresa Chase, who attended. "It was a great way to begin the (Viva Florida) celebration."

Jonathan Shea, who also attended Mass, described it as a "remarkable celebration of a tremendous event."

"Particularly since it happened right here in Tallahassee," he added. "You wouldn't really think that something like that would happen right here."

At least 400 people attended Mass, with more than 1,200 people visiting the mission throughout the day for the other festivities.

Other activities at the mission celebrating Florida's history included: a Las Posadas, traditionally done with families during the Christmas holiday reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for shelter in Bethlehem; historical interpretations by Florida Living History Inc.; crafts activities for children; a display of original artifacts from the de Soto expedition; and 18th century weapons demonstrations. Spanish war dogs and Paso Fino horses were special guests of the event.