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Florida Trend

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The Mission San Luis de Apalachee in Tallahassee was one of an early string of 100 Franciscan missions in Florida.

Layers of People

Evidence of prehistoric building abounds at Florida's parks and museums, like Crystal River State Park, with an intriguing complex of mounds and collection of artifacts. Later native American sites include the Fort Walden mound

abandoned in the 1500s and Seminole sites at Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki at the Big Cypress Indian Reservation.

The arrival of Spaniards and other Europeans can be studied as it comes to life through costumed interpreters at the DeSoto National Monument in Bradenton or the

remarkable reconstruction of Mission San Luis de Apalachee in Tallahassee.

Twenty years of archaeological digging, sifting and studying enabled historians to rebuild both the stockade and mission of the first Spaniards and the meeting house of the Apalachees they

sought as allies and converts.

Whenever the park staff at San Luis breaks ground for gardening or plumbing, an archaeologist goes out to watch — and so do tourists. The annual open house of the labs and digs was so popular, the park now invites the public "backstage" once a month.



◀ The gold pendant is part of the Montague Tallant Collection at Bradenton's South Florida Museum.

Florida's Old Digs

Finding ancient history in modern Florida is easy. Just watch your step. And look carefully.

Wherever you tread is old Florida, very old Florida — gleaming crystals, fossils of mastodons and sabre-toothed cats, and the residue of people ranging from prehistoric mound-builders to conquistadors, slaves and Civil War soldiers.

In the center of Fort Walton Beach, for example, is a museum built around a temple mound constructed by coastal Indian tribes 700 years ago. For its part, Miami found a 200-year-old ancient ceremonial

circle of perforated bedrock limestone smack in the middle of downtown in 1998. The Miami River Circle will open as a public park this fall — the fragile ruin covered with grass but with stone seats sure to attract solstice worshippers.

Increasingly, amateurs and the curious of all ages spend weekends and vacations digging Florida's earthy history in state and national parks, museums or by taking to the field.

"An amazing history and prehistory," says Sherry Svekis of the Time Sifters archaeology club in Sarasota. Some 2,500 years ago there were established villages, with low circular mounds where important individuals were buried. By 1000