Mission San Luis de Apalachee

A Visitor’s Guide
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Mission San Luis de Apalachee

Mission San Luis was one of more than 100 mission settlements established in Spanish Florida between the 1560s and 1690s. Between 1656 and 1704, more than 1400 Apalachee Indians and Spaniards lived at the mission. San Luis was a principal village of the Apalachee Indians and home of one of their most powerful leaders. San Luis was also the Spaniards’ westernmost military, religious, and administrative headquarters.

Admiral Antonio de Landeche conducted a survey of Apalachee Province in 1705, one year after the missions were abandoned. This map, drawn during Landeche’s visit, is the only cartographic evidence of San Luis and the surrounding area.
The agricultural wealth of Apalachee Province made the native inhabitants one of the most powerful and prosperous tribes in Florida. The fertile soils and dense population were also what attracted Spaniards to the region and led to the economic success of the mission community.

Apalachee men and women did different kinds of work. Men cleared the fields, hunted and fished, constructed buildings, and made tools and other objects. Women tended kitchen gardens and field crops, collected wild foods, and did many other tasks such as rearing children, cooking, making pottery, grinding corn, and preparing skins.

The most important foods in the Apalachee diet were corn, beans, and squash supplemented by maypop, sunflower, acorn, wild grapes, hickory nuts, blackberries, fish, and wild game.
New Faces, New Ways

Apalachee rulers requested Spanish friars as early as 1607 when epidemics and the threat of foreign attacks brought about a loss of faith in their traditional customs and leadership. From 1633 to 1635 at least 5,000 Apalachee were baptized by two friars, Pedro Muñoz and Francisco Martínez.

Both Spaniards and the Apalachee were forced to alter some of their customs in order to coexist. Some traditions were more easily changed than others.

This quartz crystal cross was found in the church at San Luis. Photomicrography from the back of the cross reveals how the cross was made and suggests that it could be the work of a native artisan. This may be evidence of the Apalachee’s religious conversion and their adoption of Christian symbols.
In 1656, the Spaniards chose this hilltop because of its clear view of the countryside. A powerful Apalachee chief offered to build a blockhouse for the Spanish military garrison and moved his village to San Luis. The blockhouse added a formal military component to the mission and preceded Spanish civilian settlement of the province.
Trade Bolsters San Luis’ Economy

Relatively easy access to the St. Marks River port of call enhanced San Luis’ trading industry. Supplies could be unloaded at St. Marks River and, using small boats, could be brought to within 1.5 miles of the mission. Similarly, surplus goods produced at the mission were transported by boat or over land to St. Marks for export. Imported goods found at San Luis originated from Europe, Mexico, South America, and the Orient.

Artifacts found at San Luis provide clues to the daily lives and activities of the mission residents. Large amphora-shaped containers stored olive oil and other Mediterranean foods such as wine and olives. Other frequently found artifacts include European-tradition utensils, pottery, and various iron tools and hardware.

Diego de Florencia

Diego de Florencia was one of the wealthiest merchants to trade with San Luis. He owned several ships which transported hides, beef, corn, tallow, lard, hams and chickens to Havana in exchange for goods coming in from the Orient, Europe, and other parts of the New World.
Christianity and the Apalachee

The introduction of Catholicism to the Apalachee at San Luis brought fundamental changes. From marriage to funeral practices, holidays to education, the church influenced nearly every aspect of daily life.

Throughout the day, the church bells tolled to mark many activities. Spaniards and Apalachee alike attended Saturday evening prayers, 11 a.m. Mass on Sundays, services on religious holidays, choir practices, baptisms, marriages, and funeral rites in the church.

Baptisms began at the door of the church with the priest addressing questions to the child who was held by a godparent. The group then moved inside the church to the front where the priest completed the ceremony.

The base of the limestone baptismal font was found inside the church at San Luis. It is the only baptismal font ever located at a mission in Spanish Florida.
The Friars’ Daily Life

The friars lived in the convento (friary) where they used their time away from the church to read and improve their knowledge of the Apalachee language through native interpreters. They also traveled to outlying villages that had no friars in residence.

In keeping with their vows of poverty, friars lived spartan lives, sleeping on mattresses in sparsely furnished rooms.

The friary compound probably included storage areas for foods, a detached kitchen, gardens, and corralled animals. It is likely that Apalachee women did most of the cooking and laundry for the friars.

Fray Marzelo de San Joseph
Pastor at San Luis in the 1680s, Fray Marzelo de San Joseph translated a letter written by the chiefs from Apalachee to Spanish. It was sent to King Charles II, the King of Spain. The letter declared the chiefs’ loyalty to the king and the governor of Florida and acknowledged that the new governor righted the wrongs of his predecessors.
The Cemetery at San Luis

The cemetery at San Luis is located beneath the floor of the church. Since all the residents of San Luis were Christians, a great number of them were buried in the church cemetery. As in other aspects of life, rank had its privileges. Important or wealthy people were buried closest to the altar.

The Church at Mission San Luis

A Main Altar
B Sacristy
C Side Altar
D Nave & Cemetery
E Baptistry
F Choir Loft
G Main Entrance

At 50 by 110 feet, the church at San Luis was equal in size to the church in St. Augustine. Its design followed a proportional system known as the Golden Rectangle which can be traced back as early as 300 B.C.

The baptistry at San Luis was located immediately inside the entrance on the left or gospel side of the church near the entrance.

Residents at San Luis recited the rosary nightly.

Family and friends usually attended religious services prior to the burial of the deceased in the church.
The plaza was the central hub of commerce and activities for the mission. Traditionally, both Spaniards and Apalachee built large, central plazas in their communities.

At 410 feet in diameter, the circular plaza was about the size of a modern football field. An open and expansive area, the treeless, packed-clay plaza was the site of many community activities.

On any given day, the plaza might have been filled with people and activities: soldiers marching, merchants trading, and children playing.

Juan de Paiva, pastor at San Luis, wrote a description of the ball game and his perception of its evils as part of his campaign to stop the game. Two native interpreters provided many of the details about the origins and religious practices associated with the ball game.
A Daring and Dangerous Game

The Apalachee ball game was an integral part of native life. The game was dedicated to the native gods of rain and thunder and was played to ensure rain for crops.

The game involved 50 or more players and was quite violent, sometimes resulting in death. Superior ball players became pampered celebrities in their villages, much like athletic stars today.

This historical drawing shows the goal post used in the ball game. It was crowned by an eagle’s nest inside of which were shells and a stuffed eagle. Five sassafras pegs were attached to each side of the triangular framework.

The Apalachee ball game held much religious and social significance. The ball, about the size of a golf ball, was made of hardened clay covered with buckskin.
Living on the hilltop where the plaza and public buildings were located was an honor most likely reserved for the village’s leaders. They attended daily meetings in a council house where community affairs were discussed and planned.

By contrast, most Apalachee lived and worked in outlying areas near their fields and only came to the mission center for Saturday evening prayers, Sunday mass, evening dances, ball games and other special events. Apalachee living at San Luis ate a variety of foods introduced by the Spaniards including peaches, sugar, and beef. They also adopted European agricultural practices and enjoyed limited access to imported goods such as firearms, cloth, and jewelry.

At 120 feet in diameter, the council house could accommodate up to 3000 people. Second in size were leaders’ houses, generally about one-half the size (65 feet in diameter) of the council house. A typical Apalachee home was only 18-24 feet in diameter.

Most Indian households at San Luis were clustered in small hamlets that extended for several miles around the mission center.
Traditions in Transition

Prior to European contact, the Apalachee used bone, stone, shell, clay, plant fibers, and wood for most of their needs. The Spanish traded manufactured goods to the Indians. Iron tools, popular among the Indians for their durability, replaced bone, stone, and shell.

Glass beads and cloth were also in high demand. Though Apalachee women continued making their traditional pottery, they imitated European pottery in a style archaeologists call “colonoware.”

By 1703, San Luis was primarily a Spanish town. Disputes between the Indians and Spaniards caused the Apalachee to build new villages away from the mission. Most descriptions of Apalachee villages point to a dispersed arrangement of houses near their agricultural fields, rather than compact settlements. San Luis’ friars served four such communities within several miles of the mission.
Although the Apalachee were skilled carpenters, their own dwellings were relatively simple. Most activities were conducted outside, with homes reserved for sleeping and storage.

An Apalachee house was described in 1675 as small, round, and made of thatch with a low, narrow doorway and no windows. The only interior features mentioned were a central hearth and sleeping benches covered with pelts. Smudge pits beneath these benches provided smoke to repel insects. There may have been a small opening in the thatched roof for ventilation.

Nearby forests provided the materials for construction. The shelters were built by lashing together a frame of wooden poles and covering this frame with layers of palmetto fronds. Houses were easy to repair and new houses quickly built. This allowed the Apalachee to relocate settlements away from the mission.

An Apalachee house was partially excavated between the friary and the Messer House. It was 21 feet in diameter and had a row of smaller posts for sleeping benches as well as support posts near the center.
The Apalachee were a matrilineal society. Inheritance and authority were passed down through the mother’s family. Related groups were also combined into clans with each member belonging to the mother’s clan. After marriage, the husband relocated to the village of his wife.

Gender roles were well-established. Men cleared fields for planting, hunted and fished, constructed buildings, and made various tools to help with these activities. Women tended the fields, gathered wild plant foods, ground corn, cooked food, and made pottery. Child rearing was the responsibility of the mother and her family.
The council house at San Luis was one of the largest historic Indian structures in the southeastern United States. Council houses were the focus of Apalachee religious and ceremonial activities, including dances, rituals, and preparations for war. They were also city halls where Apalachee rulers met every day to discuss community business.

Bird’s eye view of the Apalachee council house.

- A Palm thatch
- B Purlins (thatch support)
- C Roof rafters
- D Benches
- E Bench support posts
- F Major support post & beam
- G Central hearth
- H Roof opening

On the night before the ball game, specific rituals had to be performed in the council house. An elevated bench was reserved for the chief behind the players. New fires were started between the chief’s and players’ benches that were to be used only for lighting the chief’s tobacco. In order to be ritually purified, the chief fasted from food and spent the night smoking tobacco and drinking cassina to the point of nausea.
The leaves of *Ilex vomitoria*, or yaupon holly, were used to make cassina. They were first roasted, then ground before being used to brew the black drink.

Cassina, commonly called black drink, was a dark brew loaded with caffeine. It was popular with Spaniards and Apalachee alike. Black drink could only be served in the council house unless the chief granted special permission to serve it elsewhere.

One friar was allegedly experiencing cassina-nerves or caffeine withdrawal when he stormed into the council house and broke some pottery jugs because he was not given his black drink on time.

As *inija*, or town manager, Bip Bentura was responsible for overseeing the preparation of the black drink. He was also in charge of native sentries and supervised the planting of the San Luis fields.
Daily life for Spaniards at San Luis was not unlike that in other Hispanic communities. Shoemakers and tailors plied their trades. Off-duty soldiers drank wine, played at cards or dice, and strummed guitars or similar stringed instruments known as vihuelas.

The village was alive with sounds and smells: roosters crowing, dogs barking, and stews cooking. Spaniards successfully introduced European plants and animals such as cattle, pigs, chickens, peaches, wheat, and peas. They also imported wine, olives, olive oil, and other basic Mediterranean foods that could not be locally produced.

Spaniards set their tables with dishes from Mexico and the Orient and adorned themselves with fine European clothing and jewelry.
Married Life in Spanish Florida

By outward appearances, life in the Spanish village was European in nature. However, since Spanish soldiers commonly married Apalachee women, native wives continued some Indian traditions in their homes. Apalachee women perceived marriage to Spaniards as a form of upward mobility for them and their children.

In the Spanish village, Apalachee wives tended gardens, prepared foods, washed their families’ clothes, and reared their children.

Large amounts of imported jewelry made of glass, precious metals, and stone were found in the Spanish village at San Luis.

Juana Caterina

Only a few Spanish women lived at San Luis, most of whom probably had Apalachee servants. Juana Caterina was married to the deputy governor and they had ten children. She was a bad-tempered woman who once slapped a leader in the face for not bringing her fish. Her actions were typical of the attitude of many Spaniards toward the Apalachee.
The Spanish Fort at San Luis

From the 1650s when San Luis was first established, its military garrison had some type of casa fuerte or blockhouse. However, a full-scale fort was not constructed until the 1690s when the threat of English attack became imminent.

The number of Spanish soldiers stationed at San Luis ranged from 12 to 45. There were also an unknown number of reformados or civilians who remained on call in the event of a military strike.

A variety of military and architectural artifacts, found beneath layers of red clay, provide critical clues to the daily life in and around the military complex.

A Trigger Guard  E Nails  H 17th-Century Spanish Flintlock Musket
B Window Latch  F Musketball
C Flintlock Mechanism  G Gunflint
D Knife Blade

A team of oxen and handlers approach the entrance to the fort with their heavy but important burden – a new six-pound cannon.
Apalachee militias provided the bulk of the province’s military power. Apalachee received training in the use of firearms from Spaniards. They served as sentries, some held military titles, and they always outnumbered Spanish soldiers on raids.

The Apalachee formed at least one native religious brotherhood, or confraternity, at San Luis, Our Lady of the Rosary. They carried their banner (with Our Lady of the Rosary on one side and a crucifix on the other) with them into war.

After completion of a new, two-story blockhouse in the 1690s, a palisade with four diamond-shaped bastions was built. It was surrounded by a dry moat filled with cactus.
Beginning in 1702, English Carolina Governor James Moore began a full-scale attack on Spanish Florida aimed at St. Augustine and the missions along the Atlantic coast. Early in 1704, Moore mounted a campaign against Apalachee. The strongly fortified San Luis was not a target of the initial raids of 1704. On July 31, just two days before the final strike force reached San Luis, the Spaniards and Apalachee burned and evacuated the mission.

Women and children were the first to be evacuated from San Luis. Men stayed behind to burn the mission in order to prevent English forces from occupying it.
Most of the Apalachee who were not killed outright or enslaved moved north into English territory. Others migrated west to Pensacola and Mobile. A small number moved eastward eventually settling around St. Augustine. Once dispersed in 1704, the Apalachee never repopulated their traditional homeland.

The residents of San Luis probably took their most valuable possessions with them when they abandoned the mission. But heavy objects, such as the church bells, were buried with the intent of reclaiming them someday. Since only one bell fragment has been found at San Luis so far, many more may still be buried.

The map depicts the various evacuation routes used by the Apalachee and Spaniards.
## Mission Period San Luis Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1608</td>
<td>Friars make the first friendly visit to Apalachee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1633</td>
<td>Spanish friars arrive in Apalachee, where they establish the mission of San Luis de Jinayca.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1645</td>
<td>The First deputy governor of Apalachee is appointed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1647</td>
<td>Non-Christian Indians stage an uprising in which seven of the eight existing churches are destroyed and the deputy governor, his family, and three friars are killed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1656</td>
<td>San Luis de Jinayca and a large native population move to the present location of Mission San Luis. By this time, San Luis is recognized as the provincial capital.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1670</td>
<td>The English establish Charles Town and become an active threat to Spanish Florida. The Spanish respond by building the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1675</td>
<td>With a population of more than 1500 people, San Luis is the largest community in the province. A new name, San Luis de Talimali, first appears in Spanish documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1702</td>
<td>The outbreak of war in Europe gives England a plausible reason for open hostilities against Spaniards in Florida.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1704</td>
<td>Facing imminent raids from English and Creek Indian forces, Mission San Luis is burned and abandoned by its residents.</td>
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</tbody>
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MISSION SAN LUIS
Florida’s Apalachee Spanish Living History Museum

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