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Members of The Saint Augustine Garrison shake hands after firing their muskets at the start of the grand opening for the 24,000-square-foot visitor center at Mission San Luis in December.

Mission San Luis grows up

Visitor center gives a boost to local historic landmark

These days, everything is new and improved.

Even history. Or at least history's footprint at Tallahassee's only national historic landmark: Mission San Luis.

In December, Mission San Luis opened its new visitor center. The opening of the \$8 million, 24,000-square-foot building signaled a new era for Mission San Luis.



Gerald Ensley

The View From Here

The old San Luis was a work in progress: An archaeological site that slowly added recreations of the original 17th century village. A Catholic church, an Apalachee council house, a Spanish soldier's home, the military fort. It was a place you could stroll around for free and imagine the echoes of the past.

But with the new visitor center and the addition of full-time costumed interpreters, Mission San Luis becomes the full-fledged, living history mecca — a Spanish-accented Williamsburg, if you will — that was envisioned when the state purchased the site in 1983.

"I think now that we have the new visitor's center, we have much more of a presence," said Bonnie McEwan, longtime executive director. "We are now poised to take off because we have the facilities we really need and the way people requested."

Mission San Luis is where Spanish missionaries and soldiers lived with the Apalachee Indians from 1656 to 1704. It was the western capital of Spanish Florida and had more than 1,400 occupants at its height.

For years, Mission San Luis has drawn about 35,000 visitors a year. But that number seems certain to soar now.

New state history education standards went into effect this year that

MISSION SAN LUIS: Mission San Luis, 2100 W. Tennessee St., is open 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday (closed Mondays). Admission is \$5 adults, \$2 children. Individual, family, student, senior and educator annual memberships are available from \$20 to \$40.

require Florida's mission era to be taught in schools. It is not as strong a requirement as in California, where all schoolchildren must visit one of California's numerous Spanish missions. But it's a good start for Florida, whose only mission sites are in St. Augustine and Tallahassee.

Already, almost every Leon County elementary school child takes a field trip to Mission San Luis (usually in fourth grade). Home-schooled students and, increasingly, those from elementary schools in nearby counties also visit — and are spreading word of its appeal.

"History is best encountered live," said Karen Stanford, Mission San Luis program supervisor. "In Wakulla County, one teacher who brought a class here said it was the first contact most of her students ever had with (visiting) a museum."

The visitor center is key to attracting more visitors.

For years, Mission San Luis was hidden away on Mission Road, its location almost a secret. Now, the mission announces itself with large Spanish gates on Tennessee Street, just west of Ocala Road, and a view of the visitor center on the hill. Out-of-towners can find the mission more easily now — and visitors no longer have to climb a steep hill from a parking lot on Mission Road.

"We called it the widow-maker," Stanford joked. "That huge hill was not accessible to some."

The visitor center's facilities will attract even more people. The pre-

vious visitor's center was a compact affair in a former house on the mission grounds. The new visitor's center offers a 125-seat theater — where a short film introduces visitors to what they are about to see — plus artifact displays, classrooms, a gift shop and a banquet hall that can hold 250 people.

The mission is already hosting weddings, receptions, birthday parties and other group events. Leon High had its prom there this spring.

"People who never came here before have come for the first time to attend a (reception)," Stanford said. "All this brings awareness."

For more than 20 years, there was no admission fee to visit Mission San Luis. Now, it costs \$5 for adults and \$2 for children — a not unreasonable fee, McEwan said, in a world where even state parks require admission fees.

"We're charged with being stewards of this property, and there's a cost that comes with that," McEwan said. "I think most visitors understand we have to generate a certain amount of revenue to keep the facility viable."

And what a treat one receives for that price. There is a spiritualness on that hill, anchored by the recreated Catholic church and Apalachee Indian council house. It may be hard to imagine the mission as a busy town of 1,400 people — but it's always easy to imagine a simpler world.

"For a short time, people of different races lived together on this hill in harmony," Stanford said. "As imperfect as it was and for as short as it was, it's still an important thing to know and think how that impacts life today."

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