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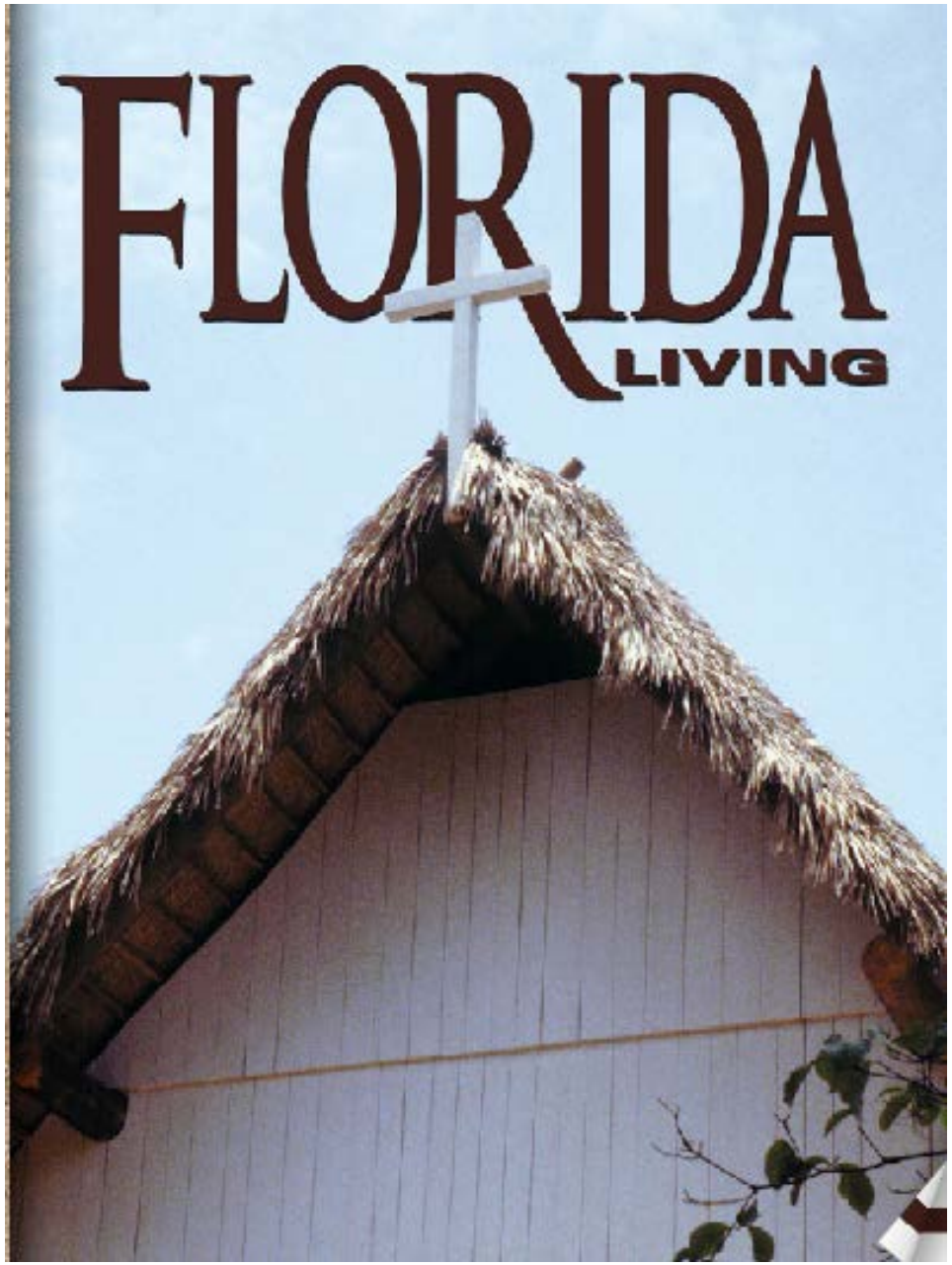

Mission San Luis de Apalachee in Tallahassee

Flames licked at the wood walls and burst into a brighter blaze as the thatched roof of the church caught fire. The columns of smoke would have been visible for many miles from the hilltop site of Mission San Luis de Apalachee. More than 1,000 men, women and children, who had lived in this provincial capital, fled with all their possessions. They never returned.

Stripped of its sacred objects – crucifixes, chalices, candlesticks, bells and carved images of the saints – the church, and also the nearby fort, the immense round council house of the Apalachee Indians, and the houses of the Spanish colonists and their Apalachee allies were all put to the torch in 1704. The colonists wanted to make sure nothing would fall into the hands of British raiders.

This far western outpost of the Spanish territory of La Florida had prospered since the middle of the 17th century, only to be suddenly abandoned as it faced imminent attack from British and Creek forces. Unlike St. Augustine with its protective fort, none of the more than 100 vulnerable Spanish missions in northern Florida survived.

But in recent years, new research by historians and archaeologists has illuminated this fascinating part of Florida's history. And it is at the site of Mission San Luis de Apalachee in Tallahassee that the spotlight shines most brilliantly. Based on meticulous studies by a network of scholars, the mission complex is re-created, including the burned church.

The house of worship is an impressive structure. The steeply pitched roof is covered with palm fronds anchored with great logs placed over the thatch, their ends crossed above the high ridge pole. A small wooden cross is placed over the main entrance, which has solid double doors with hand-forged iron fittings. The exterior walls are neatly

paneled with wide, vertical boards, painted white. The church faces the plaza, the center of community life, as decreed by royal order in all Spanish towns.

The Apalachee, a powerful and prosperous people, had invited the Spanish friars to visit their land as early as 1608, and by 1633, the Franciscans had established a mission in the area, which they named for San Luis. The priests converted thousands of the Apalachee to the Catholic religion, set up schools and introduced the Native Americans to European agricultural practices.

In 1656, the Spanish selected the present hilltop site with its excellent visibility and healthy climate for their provincial capital. The Apalachee chief and his people also moved to the new site, building their round council house across from the church.

Step back in time several centuries as you enter the mission church today Standing on the packed red clay floor, lift your eyes, once they are accustomed to the dimly lit interior, to the peak of the ceiling, 50 feet above, and admire the neat pattern of the thatch in the roof, woven by hand from more than 42,000 palm fronds. This technique was used to roof buildings in St. Augustine during the colonial period, and the Apalachee also were familiar with this type of roofing. Massive posts and beams support the pitched roof and brace the four sides of the building.

As the sunlight filters into the vast open space through the few openings in the solid walls, imagine the church filling with worshipers for Sunday mass – the deputy governor and his large family, soldiers off duty from the adjacent fort and their wives and children, and hundreds of Apalachee baptized in the Catholic faith.

The choir, standing in the loft in the rear, greets the worshipers with hymns sung in Latin, taught to them by the Franciscan friars. The scents of melting beeswax and incense mingle in the air. Add to these impressions the sound of bells and murmured prayers, the sight of the holy images and richly embroidered vestments, and the stir of the congregation as its members stand or kneel.

These conjectures are based on the few documents that refer to San Luis specifically and historical knowledge of Spanish mission life in the Americas in general. The location and the dimensions of the church, however, were determined precisely by archaeologists digging in the same red clay that forms the floor of the reconstructed building. It was 50 feet wide and 110 feet long, the same size as the church in St. Augustine.

Painstaking excavations revealed the placement of the altar and altar rail and the location of the baptismal font. Since nails fell to the ground in a neat pattern around the outside perimeter of the church as it burned, wood siding must have been applied only to the exterior walls.

Perhaps there is a document hidden in the Spanish archives or in Cuba that will reveal details of the paintings, carvings, textiles and statues that once embellished Florida's San Luis mission church, but it has not yet been discovered. A fragment of a bell was found on the site, but the precious church furnishings, most of them imported from the Old World, were taken away when the people of San Luis fled, some to St. Augustine, some to Pensacola, some to St. Marks on the coast where they sailed south to Cuba.

Now, we look back 300 years and discover, just a few miles from our present state capital, growing evidence of a vibrant pioneer society. It was a busy crossroad of trade and commerce, a prosperous agricultural economy, an important political center, and a dynamic religious complex.

The reconstructed Mission San Luis de Apalachee church reminds us of the central role that religion has played in Florida's history. The mission also shows the diversity of sacred spaces that have served our spiritual needs through the years.