

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONSERVANCY TURNS 20 • FINDINGS AT MISSION SAN LUIS

WINTER 1999-2000

# american archaeology

a quarterly publication of The Archaeological Conservancy

Vol. 3 No. 4



## SELLING OUR HISTORY

ARCHAEOLOGISTS STRUGGLE TO STOP THE LUCRATIVE ARTIFACT TRADE

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# american archaeology

a quarterly publication of The Archaeological Conservancy  
winter 1999-2000

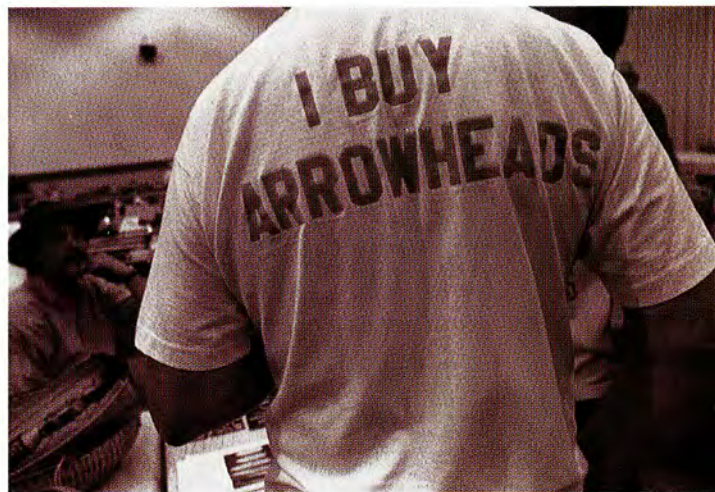
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*As archaeologists work to stop the artifact trade, looters fear for their profits, responsible collectors for their avocation.*



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*A few people joined forces two decades ago with the goal of preserving archaeological sites. They, and others, have accomplished much in that time.*

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**COVER:** The artifact trade is putting a price tag on our history. (Photograph by Patrick Jennings)





*The church is one of several buildings that has been reconstructed at Mission San Luis.*



# The Short **DRAMATIC** Life of Mission San Luis



The long-term excavation at one of the Southeast's most important missions is yielding remarkable results about Spanish and Apalachee contact.

BY ANDI REYNOLDS

MISSIONS ARE WELL KNOWN IN AMERICA'S SOUTHWEST DUE TO THE REMAINS OF BUILDINGS AND LIVING DESCENDANTS OF MISSIONIZED INDIANS. BUT BY 1704, ALL OF THE SPANISH APALACHEE MISSIONS IN THE SOUTHEAST WERE DESTROYED BY THE BRITISH AND THEIR CREEK ALLIES, OR HAD COLLAPSED BECAUSE OF DEPOPULATION AND DISCONTENT. THERE ARE NO STANDING REMAINS AT ANY SOUTHEASTERN MISSION. UNTIL A FEW YEARS AGO, THERE WERE NO KNOWN DESCENDANTS OF THE ONCE NUMEROUS FLORIDA INDIANS. ►

RAY STANVARD



"Mission San Luis existed just 48 years, from 1656 to 1704, but in its time it was second only to St. Augustine in importance to Spanish colonization efforts in Florida," says Jerald T. Milanich, curator of archaeology at the Florida Museum of Natural History.

Today, Mission San Luis, located in Tallahassee, is open to the public. Visitors can explore the site and witness excavations. San Luis's religious complex, native buildings, Spanish village, and fort are being reconstructed by the state of Florida based on almost two decades of meticulous archaeological and historical research.

This legacy of long-term commitment to one site is uncommon. "Most archaeologists follow their own interests and move around accordingly," says James J. Miller, the state archaeologist of Florida. "San Luis has been fortunate to always have had several highly qualified, skilled professionals devote their entire careers to its excavation, interpretation, and restoration." The result is a site unusually comprehensive in its nature. Simultaneously, teams are excavating new areas, cataloging and interpreting artifacts, and planning, building, and interpreting the completed restorations.

In the course of learning about Spanish colonization strategies and documenting the final chapter of the Apalachee Indians in Florida, Bonnie McEwan, director of archaeology at San Luis, six full-time staff archaeologists, and a number of dedicated volunteers routinely uncover information about this state-owned site. McEwan says, "What I love about San Luis, what makes this project so fantastic, is that I learn something new every day.... And to be able to share this with the public makes it very special."

Most Southeastern missions consisted of a church and housing for friars, which were surrounded by Indian villages. San Luis was the western capital of a chain of missions and it had a central plaza like those in European towns. The Spanish built a large mission church, and encouraged the area's principal Apalachee chief to build the tribe's council house and his own residence on the plaza.

A number of Southeastern tribes were missionized, but religious conversion was most successful among the Apalachee. The Spanish strategy was to convert local native populations by first converting their leader or chief. Friars would then direct the natives to build a church. That done, the Spanish would then move on to the next village and start over.

The site of San Luis was selected by the Spanish military authorities in 1656 on one of the region's highest hilltops for defensive purposes. The chief of San Luis moved his village to the new location to be near the Spaniards. San Luis was recognized as the religious, military, and administrative capital of western Florida. A mission census indicates its popula-



European and Indian artifacts found at the site.

tion was more than 1,500, making it the only large European community in Spanish Florida other than St. Augustine.

Mission San Luis was different from other missions, says Miller. "Although the Spanish burned the mission, the sheer size and importance of San Luis kept its memory alive. It was not lost. People knew the site of San Luis by maps, by local lore, and by ownership."

#### NEW TECHNOLOGY REVEALS HISTORY

Despite local legend about San Luis, it took modern technology and years of fieldwork to understand the town plan. Topographic mapping at two-meter intervals across the entire site revealed a number of features previously unnoticed. For example, a subtle earthen embankment was thought to be the edge of the town's central plaza, and a large circular platform

ORIGINAL OIL PAINTING BY EDWARD JONAS. REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE FLORIDA DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES



San Luis was recognized as the religious, military, and administrative capital of western Florida.



suggested the location of the native council house, the most important civic building for the Apalachee.

Subsurface tests were conducted with a mechanical soil auger, the results of which formed a working hypothesis of the layout of the community. Areas with high concentrations of hardware and imported pottery suggested European (Spanish) structures and activities; locations with native pottery and lithics suggested Apalachee residents. The hypotheses have been tested and in large part verified by extensive field investigations.

Some of the most fascinating archaeological revelations at San Luis involve the church complex and the council house, two enormous structures located directly across the central plaza from each other. The church was the most visible symbol of Christianity in Apalachee Province. Excavations revealed that the original structure was a 50-by-110-foot plank and thatch building designed following the European proportional system called "the golden rectangle." McEwan, in a notable discovery, found the

*An artist's conception of a pre-game ceremony in the council house at San Luis.*



*This quartz crystal cross was recovered from the church's floor.*



base of the baptismal font and elevated altar intact.

As many as 900 Apalachee parishioners were buried in the San Luis cemetery beneath the floor of the church. Although there has been debate over the sincerity of native conversions, that sincerity is supported by historical records which show that after migrating to Mobile, Alabama, the Apalachee repeatedly demanded that the French supply them with priests.

While archaeological investigations have suggested there was a high degree of religious conversion among the natives, the Apalachee also retained many pre-Spanish beliefs and practices. Nowhere is this more apparent than in some of their activities that took place in the council house, which served as the community center for the native population. It was the scene of evening dances, ritual purifications, ballgame ceremonies, and war preparations.

Historical documents indicate that Apalachee structures were round and thatched. Accounts also mention that 2,000 to 3,000 people could fit inside the council house. Although many researchers felt that this must have been a gross exaggeration, archaeological investigations have confirmed that the council house was over 120 feet in diameter, making it the largest period Indian building found in the Southeast. The central hearth, which was found just five inches below modern ground surface, was 14 feet in diameter.

The recently excavated chief's house, adjacent to the council house, was equally impressive. At 70 feet in diameter, it is approximately three times larger than typical Apalachee dwellings. The framing of these buildings gives them the appearance of large teepees.

"The enormous scale of both structures reflects the large size of the community and the importance of the San Luis chief," McEwan says. These large buildings on the mission's central plaza are evidence that the social and political structure of the Apalachee remained largely intact through the mission period.

"Having two completely separate construction methods side by side—Spanish wattle and daub and plank buildings alongside Apalachee pole and thatch—is a rich, rich find," says Milanich. "It allows experts to examine the acculturation of the Indians and Spanish in each other's presence over a known period of years."

Though the Apalachee became skilled at Spanish design and



Bonnie McEwan, the chief archaeologist at Mission San Luis.

construction, there is no evidence of these techniques in native structures.

Other materials recovered from San Luis are also being examined. Plant and animal remains reveal the successful introduction of several European domesticates to the Apalachee Province. Ethnobiologists who have studied food remains from San Luis concluded that beef, pork, wheat, and chickens—which the Spanish preferred to many native foods—were more abundant at San Luis than in other areas of Spanish Florida. Cloth, jewelry, weaponry, ceramics, and hardware were imported and are frequently found in and around Spanish dwellings. But native pottery is the most common material recovered in both Spanish and native areas at the site. "The concentration of Apalachee pottery in the Hispanic villages

provides evidence of the important role of native women as cultural brokers in Spanish homes as servants and wives," notes McEwan.

#### RUMORS OF EXTINCTION GREATLY EXAGGERATED

Until recently, there were no known Apalachee survivors. When San Luis was burned and abandoned in 1704, some Apalachee migrated east to St. Augustine while others went north into Creek territory. Those that fared the best appear to have been the Apalachee who migrated west to Pensacola, Florida, Mobile, Texas, and Mexico. A small group of these émigrés eventually settled in Louisiana and are the only descendants known to have survived. Church records support their tribal claims, as do oral histories.

"Finding out that Mission San Luis not only survived, but is being restored, is like coming home," says Gilmer Bennett, the Apalachee's leader.

A highlight for McEwan and her staff was the day in March 1996, when they were contacted by Bennett and informed that he and his family were a living link to their site. A fading black-and-white photograph of Bennett's family hangs prominently from a wall of her cluttered but organized office. "Meeting Gilmer and his family," McEwan says, "really put a face on what we do every day and made our research that much more meaningful."

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ANDI REYNOLDS is a freelance writer based in Tallahassee, Florida.



**"Although the Spanish burned the mission, the sheer size and importance of San Luis kept its memory alive." — James J. Miller**

*A Zulu worker prepares palm fronds for thatching the roof of the reconstructed chief's house. Zulus are recruited from Africa because of their thatching skills.*

