



Developing a Museum Exhibit: The Spanish Missions of Florida

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Abstract

The sidewalks thousands of our feet walk across and the many different classroom buildings connected by them are now built upon land that used to tell a very different story. Where students now come to learn, was once a vast land full of Native American tribes that stretched throughout the country where the Spanish came to learn about the “New World”. With obvious special interest towards Florida, research on the Spanish missions was initiated with the purpose of answering this question: what story can be formed about the Spanish missions? In the Anthropology Department here on campus, there are mini exhibits depicting various topics in the field of anthropology. My duties were to gather research on the Spanish missions in Florida in order to create an exhibit that encompasses what is known about this part of history. Through tactics such as reviewing papers, looking at Florida State’s collection of archives, and visiting Tallahassee’s local museums I was able to paint a picture of the Spanish interactions with the Natives. What I found includes both the blending of cultures—and the strong rejection of the European ways of life on the deeply embedded roots of the Natives living here.

Methods

To conduct this research, a few different approaches were taken. In order to get a general overview of the Spanish missions in Florida, existing literature was reviewed. Books and journal articles were read in order to gain a sense of perspective on what is currently known about the subject. Furthermore, once I became knowledgeable about the subject, I sought out ways I could most experience what the Spanish missions were like. To do this, I visited the Mission San Luis museum here in Tallahassee, in order to see artifacts and get photographs to put what I read into what I could see. Also, here on campus Florida State University has a collection of artifacts from the Spanish missions, so I also viewed the collections FSU currently has in order to further my understanding of the history.

Figure 2. Examples of some other Native items discovered at mission San Luis



Conclusions

In conclusion, much of the culture regarding the Spanish missions of Florida is oftentimes overlooked and forgotten in the history textbooks we read in schools. The culture and characteristics of the Spanish missions of Florida were incredibly diverse and, in some ways, was the first true “melting pot” of the Americas. The already diverse group of Spanish, African, German, and more that further combined with the distinct culture of the Native Americans came together to create multiple strong and heavily populated settlements across Florida. Although all the missions were eventually abandoned, the lasting impacts of them are important to what we’ve come to know as the Americas today. The importance of developing a museum exhibit such as this one, is so we can still experience what once was. To know what came before us, is one of the ways we can truly understand where we are today.

Results

When many people think of the beginning of colonialism in the America’s, the prominent examples that come to the minds of most are of the British, such as Jamestown for example. But during my research I found that this is in fact a common misconception, as the Spanish missions started developing settlements in what they called “La Florida” approximately a century before the infamous Plymouth Rock was landed upon. Even that “first Thanksgiving” that comes to our minds between the British pilgrims and the Natives was out-beat by the one that took place between the Spanish and the Natives when the Spanish landed on and founded the city of St. Augustine in 1565. The relationship between the Natives and the Spanish was a complicated one that differed among settlements. In St. Augustine for example, the Natives were welcoming to the Spanish at first, but quickly went south when the Natives felt the Spanish had overstayed their welcome and began attacking the Spaniards, eventually driving the Spanish away. In comparison, at the missions of San Luis, the relationship between the Spanish and the Natives was tamer, as Natives served alongside Spanish soldiers in their military, oftentimes long hours without pay, however. Nonetheless, there are some key characteristics that are common throughout the different settlements of Spanish Florida. One of the major goals of the Spanish was to convert the Natives to Catholicism, as they believed that it was their duty to spread the Gospel. When it came to the integration of Spanish and Native culture, both parties adopted some of each other’s practices, but for the most part each stuck to what they knew. For example, the Natives built round houses made from straw, while the Spanish had rectangular houses made of clay. Furthermore, in some ways their cultures even blended. Pottery from the time is often referred to as “middle style” due to its both Native and Spanish influences. The most fascinating information I discovered although, was the use of the Spanish missions as a sort of sanctuary for runaway slaves from the British settlements. Both the Spanish and British had African slaves, but unlike in the British colonies, those in Spanish Florida had some rights and were viewed as human beings. So oftentimes, slaves would go south to make a somewhat better life for themselves. I found this to be quite interesting considering the fact that once the United States was born, the situation was reversed, and slaves would go north to seek freedom.

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Figure 1. Examples of pottery discovered at mission San Luis

Figure 2. Recreation of the council house at mission San Luis



Introduction

Why did the Spanish set out on the waters of the Atlantic Ocean to explore a very unfamiliar land far away from what is known to them exactly? A few different main reasons can be stated. First, this exploration was at a time when every major country wanted to be the biggest and most powerful one in the world—the alpha of world powers in a sense. Spain wanted to find land to colonize and add to their territory, and America was a good place to do so. Second of all, the Spanish wanted to spread their faith. They wanted to outreach the word of God and the teachings of Christianity, and there were plenty of Natives in America with which to do so.