

January 1960

Site of the nation's first Christmas

Hampton Dunn

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Recommended Citation

Dunn, Hampton, "Site of the nation's first Christmas" (1960). *Hampton Dunn Phototouring Florida Collection*. 325.

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



SITE OF THE NATION'S FIRST CHRISTMAS

By HAMPTON DUNN

TALLAHASSEE --- The place where Christmas was celebrated in the present United States was in what is now the capital city of Florida.

That first celebration was not marked by gaily decorated trees, heaps of gifts or festing. Only a straggling band of weary Spanish soldiers, watched by curious Indians, knelt on the damp ground at a campsite on Lake Jackson that Dec. 25, 1539, to hear priests intone a historic Christmas Mass.

The party of explorers was headed by Hernando de Soto and had landed in the Spring of the year near Bradenton and marched northward to this area. When Winter came, de Soto decided to take camp at an important Indian village, Anhayea, until more favorable Spring weather. Their camp was near a group of huge temple mounds in the heart of the Apalachee Indian country, now a state Park complex.

Since 12 priests accompanied the Spaniards, it has been established that the first Christmas service in the New World was celebrated here. This observance was 26 years before the founding of St. Augustine, 38 years before Jamestown, Virginia, was founded and 81 years before the Mayflower arrived on our shores with its cargo of "first families."

Tallahassee, those four centuries ago, was the center of the Indian province of Apalachee. Near the 250-hut village the Spaniard found great fields of corn, beans, squash and other vegetables growing.

De Soto's force had numbered 600 when it landed at Tampa Bay, but was greatly diminished by the time it reached Anhayea. An Florida State University archaeologist has said the mounds here date from 1,000 A.D. and were part of an Indian village that must have been the cultural and religious center of a huge surrounding area.

