

## Florida's Historic Places: St. Augustine

On the east coast of Florida is St. Augustine, the oldest permanent European settlement on the North American continent. When the Spanish explorer Menendez arrived off the coast of Florida, it was August 28, 1565, the feast day of Saint Augustine. Eleven days later, he and his 600 soldiers and settlers came ashore at the site of a Timucuan Indian village. He named the village St. Augustine.

Once the coast of Florida was firmly under Spanish control, Menendez set to work building the town. He established missions to the Indians for the church and explored the surrounding land. Thus, St. Augustine was founded long before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, fifty-five years later.

Over the next 200 years, the English and pirates attacked St. Augustine. In 1586, the Englishman Sir Francis Drake attacked and burned the town. Finally as assaults became more frequent, Spain authorized the building of a stone fort for protection. The Castillo de San Marcos took twenty-three years to build. Once it was in place, St. Augustine never fell again to enemy attack.



In 1763, Spain turned over Florida to England. St. Augustine was under British rule for twenty years. This was the time of the American Revolution. During the Revolution Florida remained loyal to England.

In 1783, Florida was returned to Spanish rule. This time, it remained under Spain for thirty-seven years. The Spanish left for the last time when Spain sold Florida to the United States of America.

In 1821 at a colorful ceremony, U.S. troops took possession of the territory of Florida, including St. Augustine, the capital of East Florida. That same year, a yellow fever epidemic brought death to many. Also, uprisings by the Seminole Indians developed into the Seminole War of 1831. This stopped the development of St. Augustine's economy.

In 1845, when Florida was admitted to the Union, the capital of East Florida was moved from St. Augustine to Tallahassee. This was a compromise between St. Augustine and Pensacola because both places were difficult to reach from most parts of the state.

The town had begun to prosper but then the Civil War started. Although Florida had seceded from the Union to join the Confederacy, St. Augustine was occupied by Union troops throughout most of the conflict. At the end of the war in 1865, St. Augustine was three hundred years old.

In the 1880s, the sleepy, old Spanish town began to thrive again with the arrival of Henry M. Flagler. He developed the town as a resort. The wealthy and fashionable flocked to St. Augustine. At the same time that Flagler started his hotels he purchased the surrounding railroads. This marked the beginning of the Florida East Coast Railroad. As Florida developed, tourists arrived to relax and explore.

Although fires have wiped out many historic buildings, the state has an ongoing preservation effort. Many of the historic structures have been restored to their original appearance. St. Augustine has now become a center of colonial Spanish culture and a popular destination for visitors.

Visitors can tour a Spanish Quarter Village. Here they can meet people portraying the residents and craftspeople of the middle 1700s. A popular destination is the Gonzalez-Alvarez House, known to generations of tourists as “The Oldest House.” It is one of the country’s most-studied and best-documented old houses.

The exhibits of the Spanish Military Hospital provide a look into early medical care and treatment. In the Government House Museum, the complete history of St. Augustine is shown through archeological artifacts excavated in the city and from shipwrecks off the coast of Florida. The Castillo de San Marcos fort is a particularly popular place for exploration.

St. Augustine has a longtime reputation as a charming and quaint city. It attracts travelers from all parts of the world. This historic seaside town welcomes visitors with a relaxed style that is part of the reputation of Florida.

