

Fort Matanzas

NATIONAL MONUMENT



FLORIDA

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Here Spain in 1565 eliminated France's attempt to control Florida and in 1742 built the fortified Matanzas Tower to guard the south entrance of St. Augustine.

THE DECIDING SCENES of the Spanish-French struggle for Florida occurred within and near the present Fort Matanzas National Monument, where in 1565 about 300 French Huguenots were put to death. Here Spain achieved potential control of the entire continent of North America and actual domination of the southeast for nearly 200 years. During most of that period Matanzas was a typical Florida military outpost, strategically important as a defense for the south entrance to St. Augustine, the capital of Spanish colonial Florida.

Matanzas is named

In 1562 Adm. Gaspard de Coligny, leader of the Huguenots in France, sent Jean Ribaut to the New World. Ribaut's colony was a failure, and a second expedition set out in 1564 under René de Laudonnière, who built Fort Caroline on the St. Johns River in Florida. This was a threat Spain could not tolerate. Her treasure galleons from the Caribbean sailed the Gulf Stream on a great circle route to Spain, and by the wayside of this lifeline was Florida. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés was charged by the Crown of Spain to drive out the French.

Ribaut arrived at Fort Caroline with reinforcements on August 28, 1565. Hardly a week later Menéndez found Ribaut's fleet, and after a preliminary skirmish he sailed to a harbor a few miles south of the St. Johns to establish the settlement of St. Augustine as a base of operations. Ribaut, with superior forces, decided to attack. It was a fateful maneuver, for a northeaster wrecked his vessels far down the coast. Menéndez, suspecting Fort Caroline to be weakly defended after Ribaut's departure, marched through the storm and captured the enemy supply base.

But Ribaut's forces, though shipwrecked, were not destroyed. In two groups the French began a return march up the coast, only to be halted by the swift-flowing waters

of the inlet south of Anastasia Island, about 14 miles from St. Augustine. Menéndez, with 40 men, made his way down the island to the shore opposite the French. There, at dawn, he placed his soldiers so that it looked to the Huguenots as if he had many men. The Huguenots, famished and weary, decided to surrender. Ten at a time they were ferried across the inlet. They were fed and led behind the dunes, where their hands were bound behind their backs with the matchcords from their harquebuses. The date was September 29, 1565.

At a distance of a crossbow shot toward St. Augustine, Menéndez drew a line in the sand. The prisoners were herded together for the march, and at the mark in the sand they were put to the knife. Only 8 of 208 were spared.

About a week later, Menéndez got word of the second band of 350 Frenchmen, likewise halted at the inlet. Again there was a parley—this time with Ribaut himself—who saw the gruesome evidence of the first incident. That night 200 of the French marched back south, but the next morning, October 12, 1565, Ribaut and the remaining 150 French soldiers surrendered.

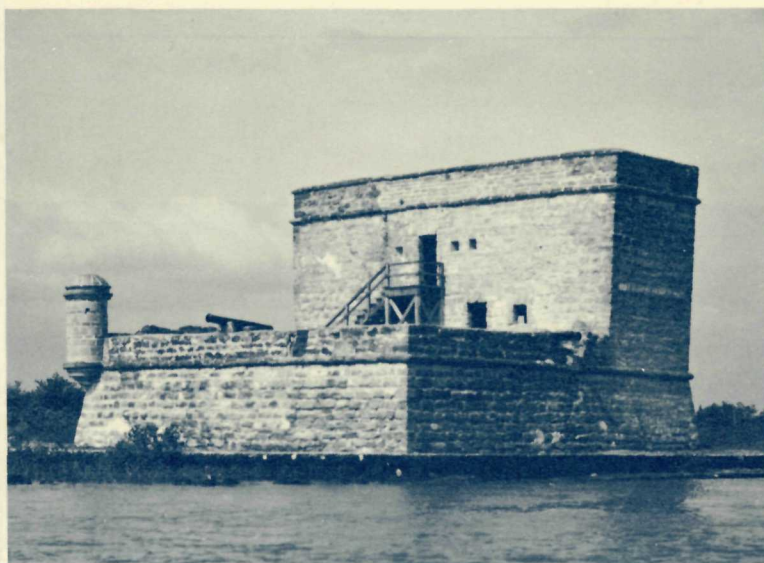
As before, the Huguenots were brought across the water. And a second time the white sands were darkened with blood. Jean Ribaut was not among the 16 who escaped the knife and marched as prisoners to St. Augustine. As for the ones who had not surrendered, Menéndez later sought them out; most returned with him to St. Augustine.

Matanzas, which in English means "slaughters," had received its name.

The pirates

Matanzas had an important part in the defense of this vast new land. By 1569 a blockhouse for 50 soldiers was

The tower has stood beside the Matanzas River for more than two centuries.



built. Later, however, Matanzas was but one of several "sentinel houses" along this coast. A wooden watchtower and palmetto thatched hut for six soldiers was a typical establishment. Supplies came from St. Augustine in a large sailing canoe, and to Jonathan Dickinson, the Quaker who with his party was shipwrecked near here in 1696, the corn meal, fish, and Spanish wine at Matanzas seemed food fit for a king.

When a ship was sighted at Matanzas, a runner set out on the island trail to carry the news to St. Augustine. Many were the ships seen, but not all of them were peaceable merchantmen. Corsairs were a constant menace to the lonely outpost.

In the blackness before dawn, March 29, 1683, stealthy enemies rowed silently over the shallow bar, landed on the shore back of the tower, and hid in the brush. Dashing from cover at daybreak, they seized the five sentries. Matanzas was taken. Over 200 strong, the motley crew took the Anastasia trail toward St. Augustine and the unfinished Castillo de San Marcos, whose defenders these high-spirited pirates far outnumbered. Old Pedro de Texeda, one of the captured sentries, guided two boatloads of the adventurers up the Matanzas River. Pedro led them into a blind creek, then slipped away to warn the people at the Castillo. A half league from St. Augustine, the pirates walked into an ambush. Bloody and chagrined, they boarded their ships and sailed away.

Three years later, in another corsair attack, Corp. José Begambre did valiant battle with the notorious Agramont. This time there was no march on St. Augustine.

Matanzas and the lifeline to Cuba

James Oglethorpe founded the English buffer colony of Georgia in 1733 on land claimed by Spain. Hostilities were inevitable, and the War of Jenkins' Ear (a Spanish-English struggle over commercial rights) seemingly gave Oglethorpe a chance to remove the Spanish threat to Georgia. Oglethorpe's fleet blockaded both St. Augustine and Matanzas, and on June 24, 1740, his land forces began a bombardment of the Castillo at St. Augustine. Spanish supplies diminished rapidly. The 2,000 townspeople had only enough food to last a month. Even the garrison was put on half rations, and before long the Spaniards in St. Augustine "for want of Provisions were forced to kill and eat Catts."

Since his communication by sea with Havana was cut by the British, Governor Montiano dispatched messengers southward by canoe, behind the coastal islands. Somehow the word got across to Havana. On July 7 Montiano learned that five supply vessels were south of Matanzas at undefended Mosquito Inlet. Antonio Nieto went with



Guardroom at Fort Matanzas.

four small vessels to bring in some of the food. Trading shot for shot, Nieto ran the British blockade and came in over Matanzas Bar and up the river, laden with precious flour. The Spanish kept successfully at this desperate game of blockade running until Oglethorpe, discouraged, raised the siege on July 20.

The stone tower

Had the English held Matanzas, St. Augustine might have been starved into surrender. With the value of Matanzas so clearly shown, however, Montiano took the advice given him in 1736 by engineer Arredondo. Soon after the siege ended, Matanzas Tower was begun. Indian raids drove away the workmen for a while. Oglethorpe tried to destroy it while the work was still going on, but the ocean swell was too heavy to land his men, and he departed to await a better opportunity. Before the end of 1742 the tower was built, though in disregard of orders from the King that no fortifications should be constructed without royal permission. Arredondo waited until the work was done to explain.

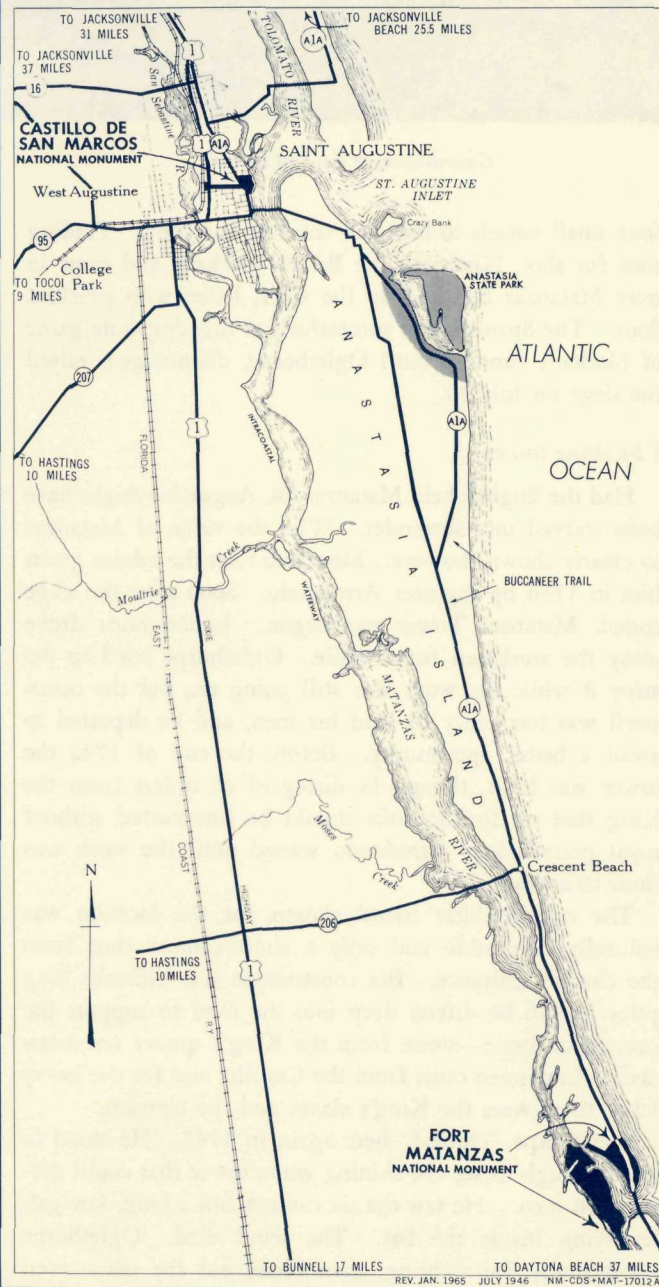
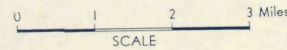
The marshy little island chosen for the location was naturally defensible and only a short cannon shot from the channel entrance. But construction was difficult; long piles had to be driven deep into the mud to support the courses of stone—stone from the King's quarry on Anastasia. Craftsmen came from the Castillo, and for the heavy labor there were the King's slaves and the convicts.

Oglethorpe "cruized" here again in 1743. He stood in close enough to see the shining white tower that could garrison 50 men. He saw the six cannon and a long, low galley lying inside the bar. The wind died. Oglethorpe cleared ship for fighting, then broke out the oars—even

COVER: *The small fort's lone sentry box sheltered the watchman.*

FORT MATANZAS AND CASTILLO DE SAN MARCOS

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handling one himself—to row inshore. As darkness fell, Oglethorpe saw nothing but the sinister outlines of the waiting galley and a sea that “ran Mountains high on Shore,” so again he took himself away, never to return.

Times change

The English finally gained Matanzas Tower, along with the rest of Florida, by treaty in 1763. After their previous experiences, they too regarded Matanzas as the key to St. Augustine, and in addition to the 30 soldiers and pair of iron 18-pounders at Matanzas, they stationed two galleys in the harbor. No attacks came during the 20 years the English occupied Matanzas, but during the American Revolution, Spain carefully planned to capture Matanzas and advance upriver to the most vulnerable side of Castillo de San Marcos. These plans never came to pass, and at the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the English turned Matanzas and the remainder of Florida back to Spain.

After their return to the province in 1783, Spanish soldiers again gazed toward Cuba from the height of the tower, but by now Spain could no longer afford to maintain her many remote outposts. Matanzas soon began to fall into disrepair, and when Spanish soldiers sailed away from Florida for the last time, the interior of Matanzas was already in ruins.

Florida was ceded to the United States in 1821, and Matanzas now became the property of the U.S. Army. But the fort had little military value to the United States and was soon forgotten. During the War Between the States, blockade runners operated in the vicinity, and after that conflict Matanzas Inlet became a port of entry, with a customhouse on Anastasia Island nearly opposite the tower. This custom activity lasted hardly a decade, however, and then the old tower and its vicinity were abandoned. A long and colorful history was over.

The fort ruin, designated a National Monument by Presidential proclamation on October 15, 1924, was transferred from the War Department to the National Park Service in 1933.

The tower commands the inlet.



About your visit

You can reach the monument via Fla. 1A1 on Anastasia Island. The entrance is 14 miles south of St. Augustine. The monument is open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free.

The National Monument consists of 308 acres on Rattlesnake Island, where the fort is located, and Anastasia Island, where the visitor center is located. Both fort and visitor center are equipped with landing docks for small craft. The fort is accessible only by boat. Ferries cross to Rattlesnake Island daily in summer and on weekends the rest of the year. The National Monument also includes a fine bathing beach, and the surrounding waters offer a wide variety of water activities.

Administration

Fort Matanzas National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which this monument is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the natural, historic, and recreational heritage of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.

A superintendent, whose address is 1 Castillo Drive, St. Augustine, Fla., 32084, is in immediate charge of the monument.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

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