

Fort Matanzas

National Monument
Florida

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide

Matanzas Inlet was the scene of crucial events in Spanish colonial history. The massacre of French soldiers here in 1565 was Spain's opening move in establishing a colony in Florida. The construction of Fort Matanzas in 1740–42 was Spain's last effort to ward off British encroachments on St. Augustine.

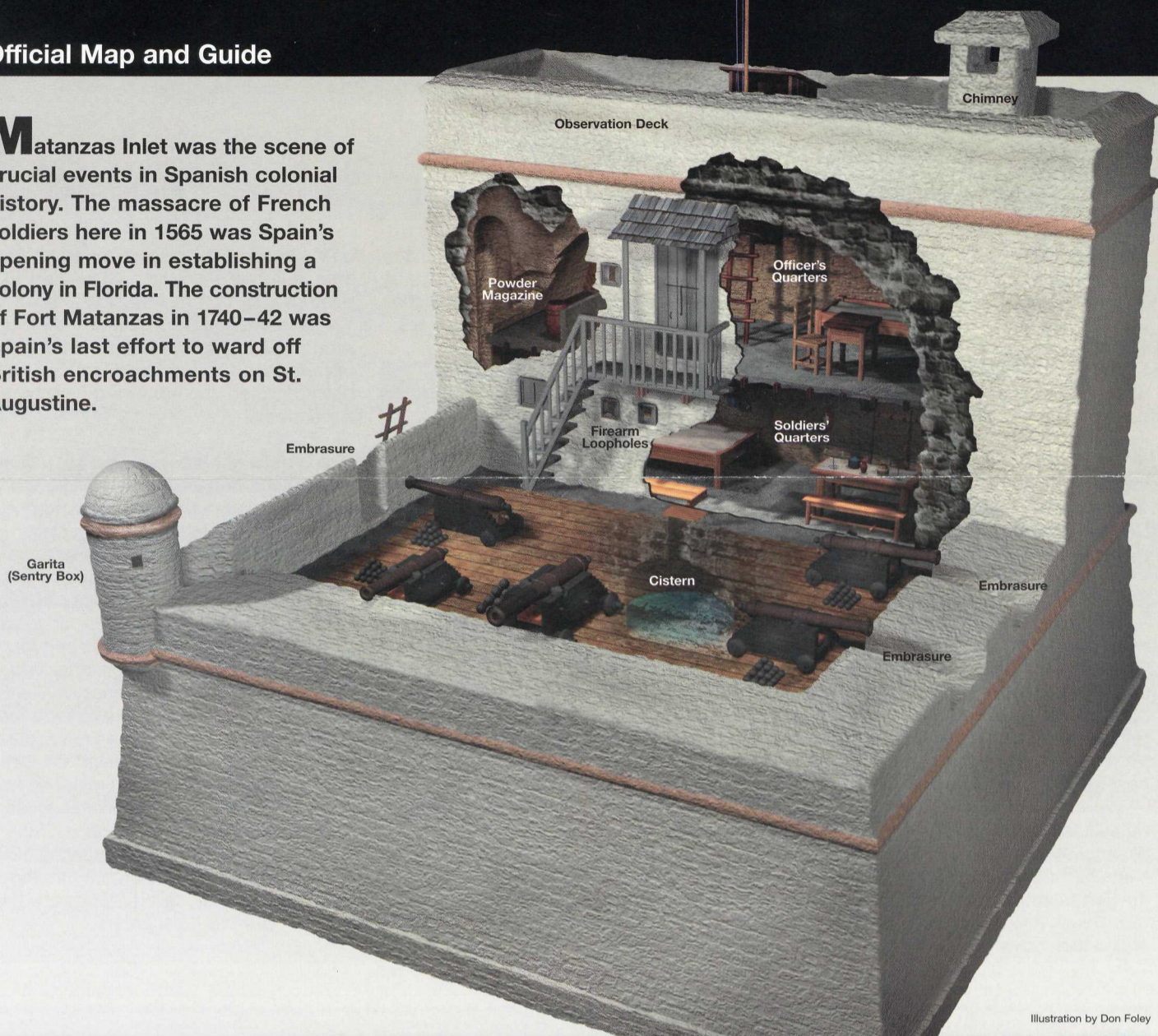
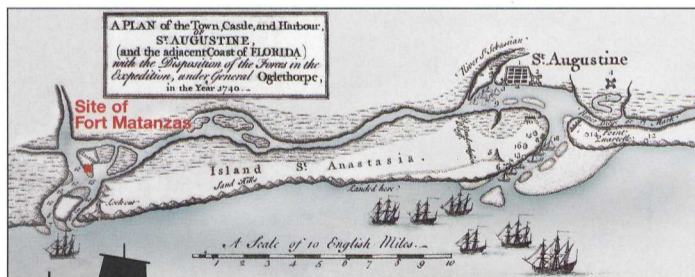


Illustration by Don Foley

Outpost of Empire

Since its founding in 1565, the military outpost town of St. Augustine had been the heart of Spain's coastal defenses in Florida. After the completion of the Castillo de San Marcos in 1695, the town had only one weakness: Fourteen miles to the south Matanzas Inlet allowed access to the Matanzas River, by which enemy vessels could attack the town from the rear—out of range of the Castillo's cannons. Spain had good reason to fear attack. Beginning with Francis Drake's raid on St. Augustine in 1586, England had repeatedly harassed the Spanish colony. In 1740 troops from the British colony of Georgia, lead by Gov. James Oglethorpe, blockaded St. Augustine inlet and began a 39-day siege of the town. On a few occasions during the siege Spanish vessels managed to evade the British blockade and resupply the town. With the siege broken and with the onset of the hurricane season, Oglethorpe gave up the attack and returned to Georgia.

The Spanish learned their lesson: If the British had controlled the inlet, then they could have starved the town into surrender. Construction of a masonry fort began soon afterwards, with carpenters and masons from St. Augustine and labor supplied by convicts, slaves, and American Indians. In 1742, with the fort near completion, Oglethorpe arrived off the inlet with twelve ships. The fort's cannon fire drove off his scouting boats and the warships left; it had passed its first test. As part of the Treaty of Paris following the French and Indian Wars, Florida was transferred to Britain in 1763. At the conclusion of the American Revolution, a second Treaty of Paris returned Florida to Spain in 1784. Spain spent little maintaining Fort Matanzas, even as erosion and rainwater took their toll. By the time Spain transferred Florida to the United States in 1819, the fort was so badly deteriorated that its soldiers could no longer live inside. The United States took possession in 1821 but never occupied the fort.



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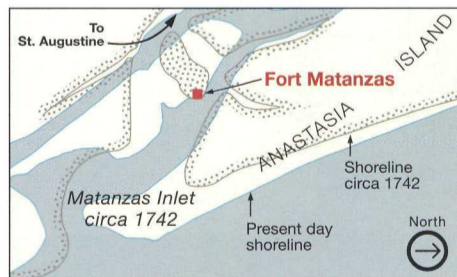
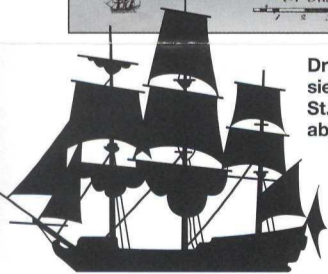


Illustration by Richard Schlecht



Drawn after the 1740 siege, this map shows St. Augustine's vulnerability. Vessels entering Matanzas Inlet (at left) could sail up the river and attack St. Augus-

tine from the rear. After 1742 Fort Matanzas defended the inlet from entry by enemy vessels and kept open St. Augustine's communications line with Havana.

Erosion and shifting tidal deposits have so altered the inlet since the 18th century that the fort is now about a half-mile farther from the open sea. In 1742 the inlet was close

enough that any ships trying to enter came within range of the fort's guns. The Lieutenant at right carries out his most basic mission: scanning the inlet for enemy sails.

The Tower at Matanzas

Fort Matanzas—50 feet on each side with a 30-foot tower—was built of coquina, a local shellstone. Lime for the mortar was made by burning oyster shells. A foundation of close-set pine pilings driven deep into the marshy ground gave the fort stability. Soldiers were rotated from St. Augustine for one-month duty tours at Matanzas, the normal complement being the *cabo* (officer-in-charge), four infantrymen, and two gunners. More could be assigned to this remote outpost when international tensions increased, up to the planned maximum of 50 during a crisis. The soldiers lived and ate together in a sparsely-furnished room off the gundeck; the officer lived in the vaulted room above.

The fort could bring five guns to bear on the inlet: four six-pounders and one 18-pounder. All of the guns could reach the inlet, which in 1742 was less than a half-mile away. Loopholes in the south wall of the tower allowed the infantrymen to fire their muskets from inside the fort. Besides warning St. Augustine of enemy vessels and driving them off if necessary, the fort also served as a rest stop, coast guard station, and a place where vessels heading for St. Augustine could get advice on navigating the river. Its primary mission, though, was maintaining control of Matanzas Inlet. After thwarting British attempts to gain the inlet in 1742, the fort never again fired its guns in battle.

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1564 In the midst of the Protestant Reformation, King Philip II of Spain learned that the Frenchman René de Laudonnière had established Fort Caroline **1** in Florida. This concerned Philip, for the French colony sat on land claimed by Spain. Fort Caroline provided a perfect base for French attacks on Spanish treasure fleets sailing along the Florida coast on their return to Europe. Worst of all to the devoutly Catholic Philip, the settlers were Huguenots—French Protestants. Despite Philip's protests, Jean Ribault sailed from France in May 1565 with more than 600 soldiers and settlers to resupply Fort Caroline. Adm. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, charged with establishing a settlement in Florida and with removing the French, sailed from Spain with some 800 people, arriving at the mouth of the St. Johns River **2** in August, shortly after Ribault. After a brief sea chase the Spanish retired south to the newly founded post **3** they had named St. Augustine.

Ribault sailed on September 10 to attack St. Augustine, but a hurricane carried his ships far to the south, wrecking them on the Florida coast between present day Daytona Beach and Cape Canaveral. **4** Menéndez took advantage of the opportunity

and attacked Fort Caroline, killing most of its inhabitants. Upon his return to St. Augustine, Menéndez learned from Timucuan Indians that a group of white men were

on the beach a few miles to the south. He then marched south with 70 soldiers to a deep inlet **5** that had blocked the way of 127 shipwrecked Frenchmen trying to return to Fort Caroline. After learning from Menéndez that Fort Caroline had been captured, the exhausted Frenchmen surrendered.

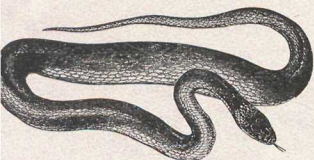
Fatal Encounters



Hiding most of his soldiers behind a dune, Menéndez ferried the French ten at a time across the inlet. Hands bound, they began marching toward St. Augustine, but when they reached a line Menéndez had drawn in the sand, the Spanish soldiers fell on them with sword and pike. Only 16 were spared, mostly Catholics, along with some impressed Breton sailors and four artisans needed at St. Augustine. Two weeks later the grim sequence of events was repeated when Timucuans reported more men to the south. The French survivors this time included Ribault. On October 12 Ribault and his men met their fate at the inlet in the same manner as those who preceded them. The Spanish soldiers killed 134 Frenchmen, sparing 12 musicians and four Catholics. From that time, the inlet was called *Matanzas*—the Spanish word for “slaughters.”

Barrier Island Refuge

In preserving the site of historic events on Anastasia Island, the



National Park Service also set aside a slice of an intact barrier island ecosystem. Distinct habitats harbor a number of species, several of which are listed as endangered or threatened. From May to August, the beach is the nesting site for sea turtles, including the loggerhead (threatened) and the green and leatherback (both endan-

gered). The beach is also home to the ghost crab and the threatened least tern.

On the ocean side of the island, sea oats, seaside legumes, and other salt-tolerant plants growing on the dunes help stabilize them and provide cover for several species. The endangered Anastasia Island beach mouse lives among the sparse vegetation. In

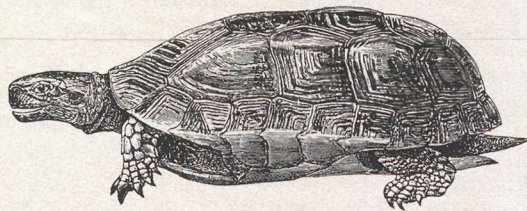


the scrub areas of the dunes, characterized by prickly pear cactus, bayberry, and green-brier vines, the gopher tortoise (right) digs branching burrows up to 30 feet into the dunes. Other species such as the gopher frog and the endangered eastern indigo snake (top left) exploit the tortoise's labor for their own shelter.

The oldest and highest part of the island is covered with a hammock—a stabilized dune on which larger species have taken root in the thin layer of decayed remains from pioneer species. Palmetto, magnolia, and live oak provide a can-

opy under which diverse species can thrive: funnel spiders, snakes, the great horned owl (bottom left), the Carolina wren, raccoons, and opossum.

Rising tides create tidal creeks that twice daily flood low-lying areas behind the dunes. Great blue herons, snowy egrets, and green-backed herons feed on the fish and crustaceans living in the tidal salt marshes. Raccoons, owls, and night herons hunt here at night. At low tide the mud flats are alive with fiddler crabs.

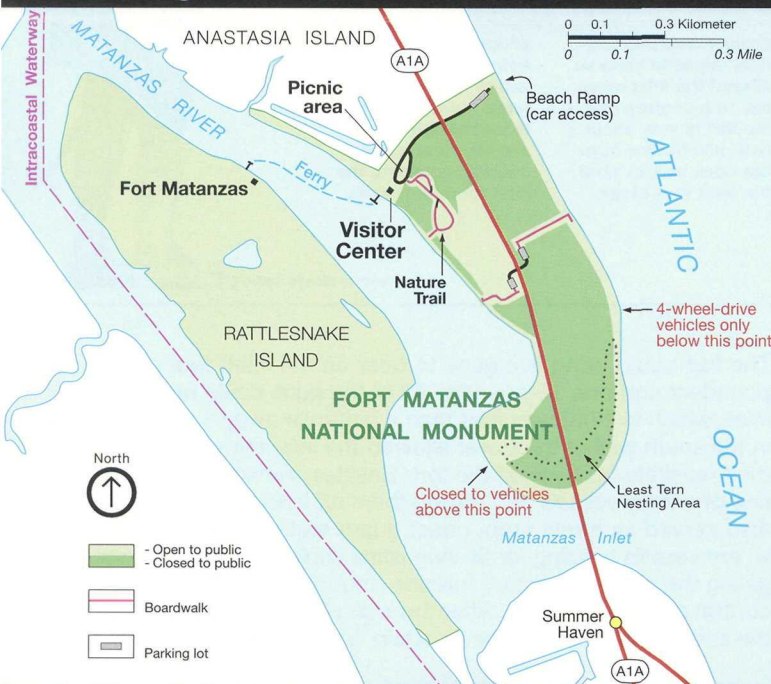


The park is a nesting area for endangered and threatened animal species. Please observe any area closure signs. The ocean beaches, used by marine turtles for nesting and hatching, are closed to vehicles at night during the summer. To help preserve the fragile environment, do not walk or drive on the dunes and do not pick sea oats. Individuals who cut, break, or in any way destroy sea oats or other plants are subject to fines and imprisonment.

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Visiting the Park



Fort Matanzas National Monument is 14 miles south of Saint Augustine and is reached via Fla. A1A on Anastasia Island. The park is open 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily except on December 25. There is no admission fee. The park consists of almost 300 acres on Rattlesnake and Anastasia Islands. The visitor center is open, when staffing allows, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. An 8-minute film about the fort and the area's history is shown. Restrooms are located at the visitor center parking lot. A free passenger ferry carries visitors to the fort, weather permitting, from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Availability is first-come, first-served. The ferry

and the fort are not wheelchair accessible; a dock where the fort can be viewed from across the river is wheelchair accessible, as are the visitor center, the restrooms, and a 0.6-mile boardwalk nature trail. For information contact: Superintendent, Fort Matanzas National Monument, 1 East Castillo Drive, St. Augustine, FL 32084; on the Internet: www.nps.gov/foma.

Swimming A St. Johns County beach pass can be purchased to drive or park on the beach during the summer season. There are also free parking lots. **Warning:** Many vehicles driving on the beach get stuck in the sand and are caught by the

rising tide. Ask a ranger about conditions.

For Your Safety • Do not swim in the treacherous waters of the inlet. • Do not climb on the fort walls. • Avoid the sharp oyster shells along the river bank.

Regulations • Alcohol and firearms are prohibited. • No glass containers may be used on the beach. • Pets must be on a leash. Clean up after your pet. • Speed limit on the beach is 10 mph. • The fort may be visited only by ranger-led groups. • Help protect the fragile coquina structure by not climbing or sitting on fort walls. • Docking of private vessels at the fort or letting off passengers is prohibited.