

## A REVIEW OF THE ST. AUGUSTINE HISTORICAL PROGRAM

It has occurred to some people that Florida, having a four-hundred-year-old history that ties in closely with early Spanish colonial effort, offers unexcelled opportunities to inform the United States public about Hispanic-American background—a background which we prejudiced historians think is rather important in present-day problems. Extant examples of the Spanish heritage in Old Florida (which for practical purposes may be called the southeastern part of the continent) are retained almost exclusively at St. Augustine.

In view of this situation, it was not surprising that Dr. John C. Merriam, then president of Carnegie Institution of Washington, should recognize the potentialities of Florida's historical resources, and in coöperation with the citizens of St. Augustine and Florida, initiate the St. Augustine Historical Program.

The Program was started in 1936 under the immediate leadership of Verne E. Chatelain, who realized fully that the rather extensive rôle of Spain as an influence in our national growth justified extensive study. "It appeared desirable," wrote Director Chatelain, "to undertake a systematic study, as well as the preservation, of historical sites, buildings, and other remains, so that these resources might be made available in the future as a means of historical education, and as a nucleus of a center for examining the origin and development of certain aspects of American culture in relation to Spanish activities in Florida."<sup>1</sup>

This was indeed an ambitious project. That it was also a worthy one was soon made manifest by the enthusiasm with which it was accepted by the responsible organizations and individuals who were called upon, or who volunteered, to coöperate.

The opportunities at St. Augustine were in many respects unique. The region had been in use by the aborigines for centuries before the Columbian era. There was a substantial amount of historic architecture of the pre-Columbian era gratifyingly well preserved. Many colonial houses, in fact, are still inhabited. Moreover, as at Jamestown, the earth hides dozens of structural foundations and countless numbers of artifacts. Problems of research and discovery were made the more interesting and complicated not only by the fact of con-

<sup>1</sup> *The Defenses of Spanish Florida* (Washington, 1941), iii.

tinuous occupation over a period of several centuries, but by the superimposition or juxtaposition of several distinctly separate cultures—aboriginal, Latin, English, and early American—during this relatively short period of time. In other words, here was a highly concentrated research problem.

Historical source materials for study of the subject were almost unbelievably voluminous, but they were scattered from Vatican City to California and from Mexico to Ottawa. Some of the more important materials were at the time unavailable. However, the locating, collecting, and duplicating of foreign archival materials relating to Florida had been under way for a number of years. The perspicacious bibliographical projects of the Carnegie Institution once again proved the tremendous value of long-range historical planning. The Carnegie guides were essential in the task of evolving a comprehensive outline of sources potentially useful in the Program, and fortunately the guides had already been used with telling effect during the two decades prior to inauguration of the Program, for a large number of foreign records had been duplicated for deposit in United States repositories.

Yet even the United States collections were widely scattered. The pioneer transcripts of the nineteenth-century historians, Buckingham Smith and Woodbury Lowery, were in the library of the New York Historical Society and the Library of Congress respectively. The vastly more important modern collections, such as those of the Library of Congress, the North Carolina Historical Commission, the Florida State Historical Society, the State Archives of Georgia, the St. Augustine Historical Society and the William L. Clements Library were to be found in as many different cities, while a surprising number of important (and in some cases unique) Florida sources can be discovered in other libraries scattered over the country.

The project initially resolved into two preliminary activities: (1) the compiling of rudimentary historical facts, and (2) the development of a tentative master-plan for the activities of the Program, based upon the findings of the fact-compilers. The tentative plan was completed and submitted for endorsement to an advisory committee composed of nationally recognized scholars and headed by Dr. Merriam. Next it was approved in referendum by the citizens of St. Augustine, whose interests, of course, were directly affected by the zoning and preservation measures proposed by the plan.

Even before research progressed very far, it was possible to set up legal provisos designating zoned areas to assure preservation of existing historic sites and buildings, and to regulate new construction

within historical areas. An executive organization (the St. Augustine Historical Preservation and Restoration Association) was set up to handle these matters, and the foundation for this part of the Program was soon completed. The State of Florida appropriated funds to aid the project, and there were also contributions from Carnegie Institution and from local sources as well.

Meanwhile, Mr. Chatelain and his staff continued research. It was necessary now to work out details of the master-plan. Investigatory procedure was similar in many respects to the work of the National Park Service at Yorktown, Jamestown, and other archaeological-historical sites, though necessarily modified by the presence of twentieth-century civilization in the form of a thriving town of some twelve thousand inhabitants. Procedure might be called "pan-scientific" in nature. Historian, archaeologist, engineer, architect, town planner, ecologist, and other specialists worked together in close coöperation, with continual aid and advice from other individuals and organizations, such as the Florida Historical Society, the St. Augustine Historical Society, the St. Johns County Bar Association, the National Archives, National Park Service, Federal Writers' Project, and Historical Records Survey.

Results were gratifying. In addition to legislation that implemented the work of preservation, several historic structures formerly in private hands were transferred to organizations which felt deeply the responsibilities of preservation, development, and interpretation. Ideas about presentation of the results of the Program crystallized. Archaeological investigations produced unbelievably rich finds in both architectural sites and artifactual materials. No less productive was the more purely historical field.

St. Augustine during its entire colonial existence had been a military post, and it was only natural that the Program should first turn its attention to the defenses of the town. To a remarkable degree they were the defenses of Florida—Spain's bulwark to halt for a time the advance of the English toward the Indies and the routes of the treasure fleets. Mr. Chatelain's work on this subject, *The Defenses of Spanish Florida*, was published by Carnegie Institution of Washington in 1941.

This book stands as a period to the first part of the project, for unfortunately current economic conditions have brought about a hiatus in the work of the St. Augustine Historical Program. Its historical and archaeological collection has been placed in the custody of the St. Augustine Historical Society for safekeeping until work can be resumed, and is available in the library of that organization

for study. Work on the collection was progressing until a few months ago, when loss of personnel to the war effort called a halt.

Of exceptional value in the collection are the thousands of historic objects from several local sites. Once in the late 1500's, hungry St. Augustinians complained that their unfed fowls foraged amongst the molluscs, and chicken flesh thereby acquired such a fishy taste that chicken became undistinguishable from a fish dinner. The pot in which the memorable test was conducted is quite likely still under ground. Nevertheless, from the gopher shell found in the Timucua cooking pot to the British vase caricaturing Napoleon at St. Helena, the excavated artifacts tell a remarkable story. They have not yet received the study due them.

It should not be concluded that the Program is finished. To the contrary, numerous institutions and individuals not officially connected with the project are yet contributing in one way or another to the work of the Program. The National Park Service studies of the historic sites identified with the Southeastern National Monuments, the work of the Florida Historical Society, the continuing researches of the staff members of the St. Augustine Historical Society, as well as those of numerous individual scholars in southeastern history must all be regarded as contributory to the objectives of the Program.

Especially important in this regard are the bibliographical and source-collecting activities of organizations whose aims are in part parallel with those of the Program. Though wartime conditions have modified normal coöperative programs for locating and collecting historical source materials, yet considerable progress has been made recently in spite of limiting factors. The Union Catalog of Floridiana at Rollins College is an excellent example of the type of continuing work which will be of inestimable value when the St. Augustine Historical Program is resumed. The publication of the James A. Robertson memorial bibliography of Spanish records, as well as a bibliography on Florida archeology, both of which are now in preparation under the aegis of the Florida Historical Society, will supplement excellently the card catalogue of foreign and domestic records prepared by the historians of the Program. In most cases, the collecting of source records does not necessarily involve the discovery of "new" materials, but rather the gathering or duplicating of essential materials for deposit at the sites of the respective studies. To cite an example: the National Park Service has microphotographed several extensive Spanish, English, United States, and state archival sections relating to the history of the south Atlantic coastal area. Thus a

mass of essential Florida study sources from important but mutually distant repositories has been centralized at the library of the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine. As a public-service gesture, the National Park Service makes these films available for duplication. Some have already been duplicated. Conceivably the day is not far distant when the student of Florida history will find all the historical sources he needs available in Florida.

Though St. Augustine prides itself upon the title of "Ancient City," yet its citizens are forward-looking. Pushed aside for the moment are the memories of Spanish soldiery who gave life to the town centuries ago, for present concern involves a military in less colorful dress. But if St. Augustine has any lesson to teach, it is that peace must come eventually. Florida has undergone many wars, many sacrifices, many privations. And St. Augustine, the logical focal point for telling the dramatic story of Spanish colonial effort as related to the beginnings of our own nation, will not be denied the opportunity to present that narrative of inspiring tenacity. Time is nothing in the story of the Ancient City. Its people can wait. When peace does come, the citizens of St. Augustine intend to see that the historical value of their town for producing sympathetic understanding of the Spanish part in the pageant of the New World is fully realized—and developed as thoroughly and accurately as it can be. To that end, plans are even now being revised and modified to anticipate post-war possibilities. For of what use is history if history remains untold?

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