

500 Years of Maritime History



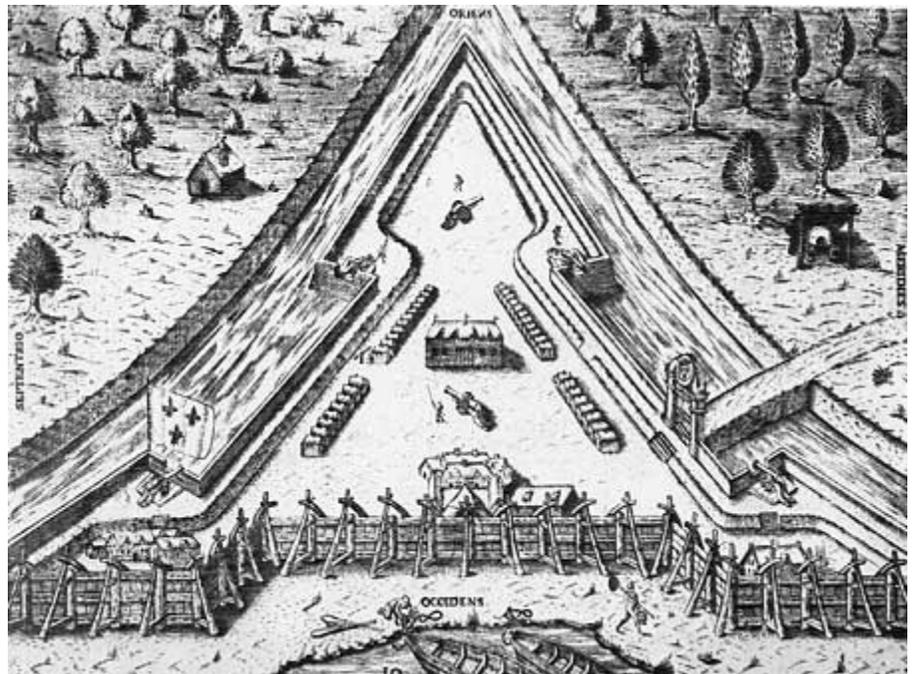
Above: Traditional Spanish New World shipping routes.

By the mid-sixteenth century King Philip of Spain felt an acute need to establish a coastal stronghold in the territory he claimed as “La Florida,” a vast expanse including not only present-day Florida but most of the continent. The Atlantic coast of present-day Florida was strategically important for its proximity to Spanish shipping routes which followed the Gulf Stream and annually funneled the treasures of Philip's New World empire back to Spain. The two biggest threats to this transfer of wealth

were pirate attacks and shipwrecks. A military outpost on the Florida coast could suppress piracy while at the same time serve as a base for staging rescue and salvage operations for the increasing number of ships cast away on Florida's dangerous shoals.

With these maritime goals in mind, the King charged Don Pedro Menéndez de Avilés with the task of establishing a foothold on Florida's Atlantic coast. Before leaving Spain, word reached the Spanish court that a group of French protestants had set up a fledgling colony in the region, and Menéndez' mission was altered to include the utter destruction of the French enterprise, which represented not only heresy but a direct threat to Spain's North American hegemony.

The French Huguenots, led by René de Laudonnière, had by 1563 established Fort Caroline at the bank of the River of May (present-day St. Johns River at Jacksonville, north of St. Augustine). Early in 1565, France's King Charles sent Jean Ribault to re-supply and assume command of the Fort. Ribault lead a powerful fleet consisting of his 32-gun flagship, *Trinité*, the 29-gun royal galleon *Emérillon*, and four other war, supply, and



The French Ft. Caroline was established on the banks of the River of May, present-day St. Johns River in Jacksonville.

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dispatch ships. One thousand French colonists and troops came with him to bolster the fledgling French colony. Unbeknownst to Ribault, the Spanish expedition lead by Menéndez arrived in Florida at virtually the exact same time. Ships from the two fleets met off the mouth of the St. Johns River, and the stage was set for a bloody conflict. In a preemptive strike aimed at thwarting Menéndez' plans to found St. Augustine, Ribault sailed his fleet southwards, only to be struck by a hurricane which scattered and wrecked his ships between Matanzas Inlet and Cape Canaveral. With the loss of these ships, Fort Caroline was taken, Ribault and his men put to the sword, and Spain established a firm grip over the Florida frontier and an Atlantic port that would operate continuously to this day.



Menendez founded St. Augustine in 1565, on the site of the Timucuan Indian village Seloy. (Courtesy of National Geographic Society)

Menéndez had chosen what he would name St. Augustine because of its defensible harbor and its proximity not only to the Atlantic but to an extensive network of inland waterways. From the very beginning, the port of St. Augustine saw ships coming and going on an annual basis. Early trading partners included Cuba and then Apalachee, a region controlled by Spain in the Florida panhandle which includes present-day Tallahassee. A luxury trade carried out in smaller sloops and *pataches* supplied St. Augustine's upper class with sumptuary goods from

Mexico and the Caribbean. Spain's influence spread from its Atlantic foothold into the hinterlands, and a series of outposts and missions extended westward past Tallahassee and northward as far as the Chesapeake. St. Augustine became the principal port in the supply chain linking these settlements, and numerous vessels engaged in this trade came to grief on the ever-shifting sandbars plaguing the harbor inlet. A testament to the early importance of the port was the construction of what appears to be the nation's first lighthouse, a wooden watchtower on Anastasia Island noted on a 1586 map and described as a "beacon" by contemporary English observers.

While Menéndez was brutally successful in eradicating an early French colonization attempt in Florida, the English quickly replaced the French as Spain's chief New World rival. Armed conflict, usually in the form of raids on ships or coastal towns, but

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eventually involving the entire conquest of island colonies, began to break out regularly throughout Florida and the Caribbean. The earliest English attack on St. Augustine occurred in 1586 when Sir Francis Drake, sighting the Spanish watchtower from sea, burned the tower, the town, and probably any shipping or craft found in the harbor. In May 1668, Robert Searle, an English privateer from Jamaica sacked St. Augustine in retaliation for a Spanish raid in the Bahamas. His burning of the town, and any small craft he could find, caused the Spanish in 1672 to begin the construction of the Castillo de San Marcos in order to better protect the harbor, the port, and its maritime infrastructure.

The founding of Charleston, South Carolina in 1670 marked a new period in St. Augustine's history. The English were now firmly settled in what had been St. Augustine's northern sphere of influence. English territory encroached ever closer to St. Augustine, and as wars broke out in Europe a series of raids were staged from these neighboring colonies. The first serious incursion took place in October 1702, at the hands of Governor James Moore of Carolina who arrived with a small fleet and laid a two-month siege to the fort before being bottled up in the harbor by two Spanish men-of-war who had arrived from Cuba. In order to prevent its capture, he burned his small fleet of eight ships, ranging in size from seventy to less than fifty tons, and made his retreat overland. In 1740 James Oglethorpe, founder of Georgia, made another effort to take St. Augustine. His siege was also broken by the arrival of reinforcements from Havana. The archaeological evidence of these events, including Moore's lost invasion fleet, lie undiscovered and silent beneath sand and wave, preserved in the archaeological record.

Ironically, during this period the English colonies were also St. Augustine's biggest trading partners. St. Augustine relied on an annual *situado* (government subsidy of money, goods, and food shipped from Mexico), but this fluctuated from year to year and did not always meet the needs of the frontier settlement. The townspeople had to rely on illicit trade with outsiders, and a brisk exchange of oranges, naval stores, and other local products for English manufactured goods flourished. In the years before the outbreak of the War of Jenkins Ear (which brought on Oglethorpe's raid) it was not uncommon to see Spanish ships from St. Augustine at the port of Charleston. During the interspaced periods of warfare, St. Augustinians fulfilled their craving for English goods through privateering and, most likely, through continued smuggling.



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In 1742 Fort Matanzas was constructed to guard the inlet about 14 miles south of St. Augustine.

At the same time, Spain constantly expanded St. Augustine's maritime infrastructure and coastal defenses. In 1737 the wooden watchtower and navigational aid on Anastasia Island was replaced with a coquina lighthouse complex. This structure would serve as St. Augustine's lighthouse until its replacement by the current tower in 1874. Fort Mose, America's first free African-American settlement, was established amid the wetlands and waterways north of St. Augustine to guard the northern approaches to the town and prevent a waterborne invasion from the Tolomato River. In 1742, in response to Oglethorpe's raid two years prior, Fort Matanzas was constructed at the inlet fourteen miles south of town to guard the "backdoor" entrance to St. Augustine.

While St. Augustine had proved impossible to capture by force, the port and the rest of Florida were ceded to England on the negotiation table at the close of the Seven Years' War in 1763. British troops and colonists soon arrived in St. Augustine, and British ships arrived in her harbor in greater numbers than ever before. One of the first English supply ships, the sloop *Industry*, ran aground on the St. Augustine bar in 1764. Its wreck is the earliest yet discovered in St.

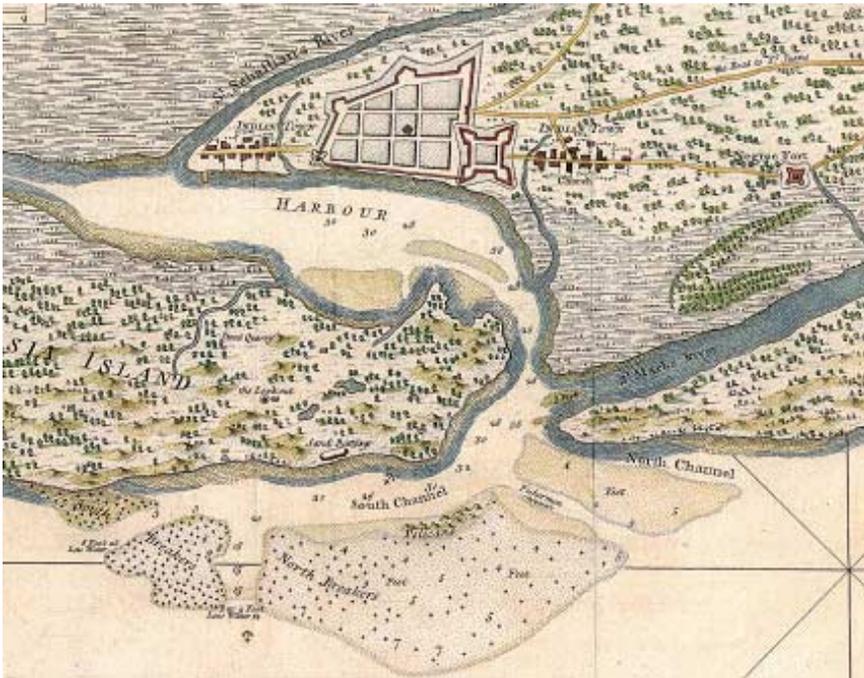
Augustine waters, and was [excavated by archaeologists](#) between 1997 and 2000. The excavation yielded well-preserved examples of the artillery, munitions, tools, and harbor infrastructure (mooring anchors) that were being shipped to the fledgling British colony. The St. Augustine Lighthouse and Museum, which now displays these recovered artifacts, was involved with this work almost from the beginning, and the Lighthouse Archaeological



The *Industry*, a sloop sent from New York with supplies for the new British colony, wrecked off St. Augustine in 1764.

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Maritime Program or LAMP was founded in 1999 and continues to conduct maritime archaeological research on this and other sites.

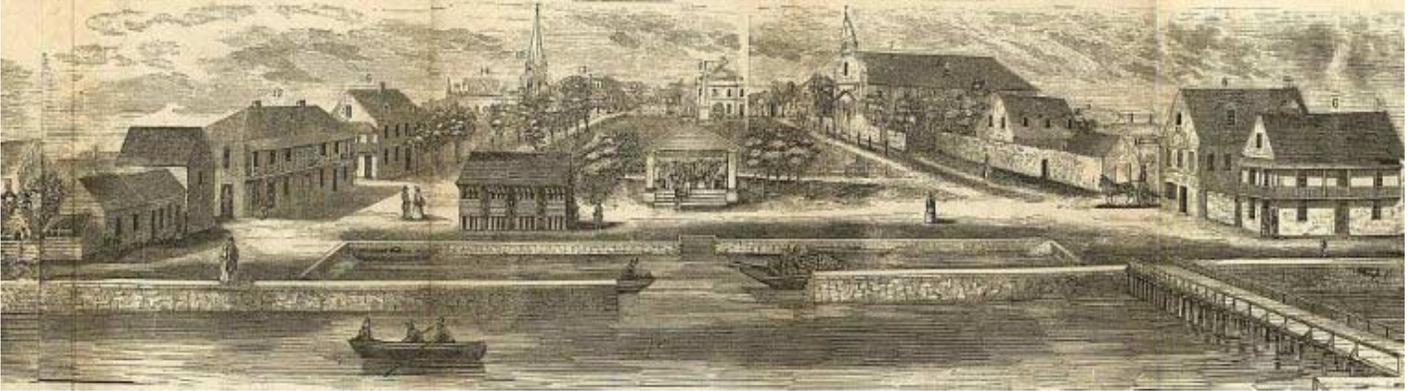


Detail of an 18th century map of St. Augustine, showing the walled city, the fort guarding the harbor entrance, and the sand bars just outside the inlet.

The trade that had been illegal under Spanish rule was now legitimate, and St. Augustine and its surrounding region underwent an economic boom. This began with a detailed hydrographic survey of the inlet, approach channels, and sandbars, which resulted in marked improvements in navigation. Orange, rice, and indigo plantations sprung up along the complex inland network of navigable waterways, which facilitated transport of export produce to waiting ships in the harbor. This economic growth

lead to the influx of a significant population of indentured servants from Menorca and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, who brought new boatbuilding and fishing traditions to the region. The maritime aspect of the plantation system is archaeologically preserved in the form of waterfront sites along St. Augustine's inland waterways, which include the remains of docks, wharves, and locally-built watercraft.

Even the outbreak of the Revolution didn't slow this soaring maritime commerce, though St. Augustine was to switch hands again at the end of the war. The Second Spanish Period, 1784 to 1821, was a time of complex trading relations and mixing cultures as Spanish, English, American, Menorcan, African-American, and Seminole settlers all coexisted and took part in trade to mostly American but also Spanish ports. In 1806, for example, 42 registered ships called at the port, 37 from the U.S. and 5 from Havana. Increasing numbers of American settlers eroded Spanish influence to such a degree that in 1821 the U.S. was able to negotiate the purchase of Florida as a U.S. territory.



View of St. Augustine waterfront and downtown area from the harbor. ca 1885 Courtesy U.S. Library of Congress.

Shipping to and from port of St. Augustine, predominately with coastal schooners, and inland shipping up and down the St. Johns River via sail and steam, continued to increase up to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Shortly afterwards the Union blockade brought this trade to a standstill, and the harbor that had been described as “one of the finest in the world” fell silent. The commander of the Confederate forces occupying Fort Marion (the former Castillo) responded by ordering the St. Augustine Lighthouse extinguished to confuse the Union blockading fleet. One of the most dramatic episodes of the war in St. Augustine was the loss of the Confederate privateer *Jeff Davis* in August 1861. The *Jeff Davis*, formerly the slaver *Echo*, was the single most successful privateer of the Civil War, before ending its first and only cruise on the infamous St. Augustine bar. After the war, with the regional economy collapsed, transportation infrastructure and the related tourism industry became the key to St. Augustine's redevelopment. Steamboat landings on the St. Johns River became increasingly important for transporting goods and people to the port. One such visitor, wealthy industrialist Henry Flagler, became determined after an 1884 visit to transform the sleepy town into a winter refuge resort, a “Riviera of the South.” He extended his railroads south into Florida and dramatically changed the city skyline by building a series of glamorous hotels, including the Ponce which survives today as Flagler College. At least one offshore



Wealthy industrialist Henry Flagler built the Hotel Ponce de Leon and other architectural wonders in downtown St. Augustine in the 1880s. These were constructed from blocks of poured cement, initially brought in by barrels on board ships like the wrecked Centerboard Schooner offshore.

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shipwreck, known simply as the "Centerboard Schooner Wreck," appears to be related to Flagler's building boom. The identity of this sailing ship remains unknown but it carried a sizable cargo of cement in barrels, which would have been needed in great quantities for casting the massive blocks used for Flagler's hotel construction. Another unidentified shipwreck from this period, the "Steamship Wreck," features a wooden hull, a single cylinder inverted engine, a large boiler, and a shaft and four-bladed propeller. This steam-powered vessel reflects the economic and technological progression of St. Augustine's shipping at the dawn of modernity. Ironically, technological advances would eventually lead to a decline in shipping from the port, as the newly established railroads allowed fishermen and farmers a cheaper and more efficient means to get their products to northern markets.



The shrimping industry flourished during the 20th century in St. Augustine. This 1947 photograph depicts the shrimp boat 'Silent Night' in front of the Castillo during the second annual Blessing of the Fleet. Photography courtesy of the Florida State Photographic Collection."

But with the downturn in shipping came a rise in fishing activities. The American shrimping industry was born just to the north at Fernandina, and with the relocation of several prominent shrimping families of Mediterranean descent to St. Augustine the industry's focal point shifted to the ancient city. By the 1940s over 100 shrimp boats were home ported in St. Augustine, making it one of the largest fisheries in the country. Ancillary industries such as wooden shipbuilding, ship chandlery, ice production, and boat

maintenance also flourished. The notorious sand movement within the channel threatened the industry, and between 1889 and 1893 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a series of groins to keep the channels clear. Despite these engineering projects, a more severe act was called for, and an artificial channel 200' wide was cut in 1940, which has had a dynamic impact on the surrounding landscape (the previous channel is now a tidal lagoon, and former breakers are now Conch Island). Ironically, once these improvements were made the shrimping industry shifted locales again, following the abundant harvests accessible off the Dry Tortugas. While some shrimping persists to this day, the most common maritime activity in St. Augustine is now recreational boating.

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The port of St. Augustine is significant to the greater history of our nation for many reasons. It is not just that it is America's oldest port, though that is indisputably the case. It is not only that the physical remains of a series of shipwrecks and archaeological sites still exist, providing direct examples of the evolving process of maritime trade, warfare, and engineering that are so intertwined with the story of the oldest port. Like America itself, St. Augustine is a maritime melting pot. Shipping, boatbuilding, fishing, and other marine activities have always shaped the lives of the diverse groups who have lived and traveled here. The prehistoric Native American economy was dependant on fishing and long-distance trade via dugout canoes. Timucuan watermanship was put to new use as they worked as ferrymen for the Spanish, and their dugout canoes influenced colonial boatbuilders for centuries. French, Spanish, and English colonists brought new maritime traditions to Florida, and their governments used ships, coastal forts, and sea power to expand trade and maintain their competitive transatlantic empires. Enslaved Africans were forced to the New World in European ships, but they brought with them memories of a rich maritime past on West African river deltas, and many used the waterways of their new homes as avenues of freedom and prosperity. Eighteenth-century Menorcan, Italian, and Greek settlers brought Mediterranean seafaring traditions to St. Augustine, and members of their descendant community served as lighthouse keepers, shipbuilders, blockade runners, fishermen, and tour boat operators throughout the ensuing centuries. It is the stories of all of these Americans that comprise the birth and development of our nation's maritime history. America's first port has a dramatic and unique history and is worthy of preservation efforts to protect it for future generations.