Overview of St. Augustine Historic Preservation efforts

Nineteenth Century Beginnings
Concern about the survival of St. Augustine's historic structures and buildings developed more than a century ago. One travel writer in 1875 indignantly reported talk of demolishing the Castillo de San Marcos (then called Ft. Marion) to make way for a railroad station. "Such vandalism would be a disgrace to us," he said.

Although the magnificent fortress escaped outright destruction, it suffered continually at the hands of visitors who chipped away at its sentry boxes and portals for souvenirs. A worried observer said that if some kind of protection was not established, the whole massive structure would soon disappear.

To travelers and visitors, even then, the economic potential of St. Augustine's historic sites was apparent. "With a little enterprise on the part of the whole community," one writer observed in 1871, "St. Augustine can be made the most attractive of American cities." Sentiment of that kind, with an eye toward the economic value of the city’s history, has motivated preservation concerns ever since.

Beginning with its organization in 1883, the St. Augustine Historical Society for many decades took the most active role in efforts to persuade residents and local officials to preserve historic buildings. The Society's purchase of the Gonzales-Alvarez House in 1918 was the first of several acquisitions of significant properties that the organization made in order to preserve them.

At times the Society purchased historic properties and then resold them with restrictive covenants that assured their preservation, an early example of the use of a "revolving fund" technique to preserve historic buildings.

The 1930s Origin of the "Restoration" Program
Transfer in 1936 of the Castillo de San Marcos from the War Department to the National Park Service placed the city's most prominent historic structure under the auspices of an agency dedicated to that site's preservation and interpretation.

At about the same time, local officials and residents undertook an ambitious preservation effort of their own.

In 1935 St. Augustine City Mayor Walter B. Fraser encouraged the organization of a national committee to formulate plans to save what remained of the Ancient City's physical history and to further develop St. Augustine's historic and natural resources.

Economic trends favored this approach. The growing use of the automobile, helped by an interstate road system, promoted middle class tourism. More and more Americans, freed from the work place by Depression Era work rules that gave them vacation time, took to the road looking for tourist spots. U.S. 1, the only major highway along the East Coast, carried them by the thousands into St. Augustine.

The Carnegie Institution, a rich and powerful national foundation, gave financial support for preliminary research studies, but it did not offer a Rockefeller-like subsidy of the restoration concept. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) a Depression Era relief program, sponsored national and state searches for records pertaining to the city's history.

The National Park Service undertook the first professional archaeological survey in the city's history. Many local people, including Mayor Fraser, invested in historic buildings that they hoped would form a part of a restored colonial town.

Perhaps the most significant result of the mid-1930s effort was the State of Florida's endorsement of the restoration concept. In 1937 the Florida Legislature approved a special act granting St. Johns County and its cities and subdivisions the power of eminent domain to protect historic landmarks and sites. A bill authorizing creation of a "St. Augustine Historical Preservation and Restoration Commission" was introduced and an appropriation of $50,000 to fund the acquisition and preservation of historic sites was approved.

Although the Commission authorization was not passed at that time, the money remained available and some fifteen years later it was used to purchase the historic Llambias House, now a municipal property.

Formation of the Original State Commission and Its Early Work:
World War Two interrupted further progress in the movement that St. Augustine residents had begun to call "the Restoration."

The fast physical changes that ensued in the post-war era quickly offered renewed threats to St. Augustine's historic appearance. The Historical Society did what it could, purchasing three historic buildings in the 1950s to prevent their destruction. But, with the 400th anniversary celebration of the city's founding looming, municipal residents and leaders urged renewed life for an organized "Restoration" effort.

Governor LeRoy Collins signed into law June 19, 1959 the original 1937 legislation creating a St. Augustine Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission. The statute creating the seven-member state commission, later renamed the Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board, authorized it "to acquire, restore, preserve, maintain, reconstruct, reproduce, and operate for the use, benefit, education, recreation, enjoyment, and general welfare" St. Augustine's "historical and antiquarian sites."
Employing concepts formulated in the 1930s by the Carnegie-sponsored study, the state commission, meeting for the first time in 1960, proposed to conduct a program of restoration or reconstruction of colonial structures throughout the "Walled City." The planned 1965 Quadricentennial Celebration gave its plans particular urgency.

In late 1960 the Commission undertook its first physical venture, restoration of the Arrivas House. The State legislature voted the Commission trust fund an appropriation of $150,000. While the Commission was authorized to use the monies for acquisition of property and restoration or reconstruction of historic buildings, it had also to fund its staff activities from that allocation. Little or nothing remained for the actual task of restoration.

While trustees of the Commission thereafter pleaded annually for fixed capital support to undertake the job of restoring St. Augustine, they were told the state could do nothing more. The legislative practice of merely funding staff salaries while ignoring capital expense needs has remained in place.

In 1961, as the Legislative session got underway, the trustees recognized the time was running out and patience running thin among people looking toward the 1965 celebration. The Commission rejected an initial suggestion for private funding assistance, hoping that the state would accept responsibility.

From the beginning of the program in the 1930s, St. Augustine's leaders often talked about "restoring the Walled City." This concept was never truly defined. The term "Walled City" has presumably meant the colonial city, contained within the defensive perimeter that once surrounded it, some twenty-two blocks in all. The colonial walled city extended west from the waterway, bounded on the north by the Cubo Line (along Orange Street) and on the west by the Rosario Line (which ran north-south along what is now Cordova Street), and ended on the south at approximately South Street.

"Restoration" presumably meant reconstructing the colonial appearance of this area; that is, building replicas of the colonial buildings that once occupied the Walled City.

The illogic of replacing post-colonial buildings (those built after 1821) should, however, have been apparent. The question of where magnificent architectural and historical structures such as Trinity Church (1824), the Cordova Hotel (1892), the Exchange Bank (1927) or the Bronson Cottage (1876), to name but a few, fit into the "restoration" scheme was never answered, for there was no original plan of action for the Restoration program.

Not until 1974 did the Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board produce a plan for a restored colonial village. By then the area proposed for restoration had shrunk to some six blocks, running south of the City Gate along St. George Street. In 1983 the plan was revised and the proposed interpretive village reduced to four blocks. But even that was unattainable, given the Board's lack of state funding support for acquisition of properties and the high valuations which properties in that sector had reached, in part as a result of the work that had been accomplished.

The life began to seep out of the Restoration program at the end of the 1965 celebration. While close to twenty buildings had been restored or reconstructed, they did not permit the operation of a colonial village, for they were scattered amid modern buildings, resulting from the absence of an original plan of development for the restoration scheme.

Nevertheless, in the mid-1960s the Commission initiated an interpretive program, placing costumed guides in widely separated buildings in an attempt to portray colonial life in Spanish St. Augustine. This confused situation persisted for some fifteen years before the Preservation Board was able to make appropriate property arrangements that permitted the operation of a consolidated interpretive program. The lack of visibility has, however, consistently discouraged visitor acceptance.

**New Directions**

In 1974 the City Commission created the Historic Architectural Review Board (HARB) and advocates of historic preservation in St. Augustine began to look beyond just the colonial era, focusing attention on, for example, the magnificent architecture of the Flagler Era, which includes such buildings as the Zorayda Castle, Hotel Ponce de Leon, and the Alcazar. The City authorized the HARB to review requests for demolition of all fifty-year old buildings, including those outside the defined historic districts.

The Preservation Board completed a historic building survey that for the first time provided a description of the city's entire collection of old and potentially historic buildings, chronologically reaching from the Colonial Era to 1930.

A number of historic districts were listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The last of them, Lincolnville, listed at the request of the City in 1988, embraced the community's historic black neighborhood. While listing has little legal consequences, it does reflect awareness of the city's varied cultural heritage.

The City in 1987 adopted a Historic Preservation Element as a part of its Comprehensive Plan. This document provided an outline of goals and objectives for preserving cultural resources and suggested policies for achieving them. Pursuant to adoption of the element, the City in 1988 approved an ordinance designed to protect archaeological resources. Property owners undertaking development at a defined below-ground level were required to make an assessment of the property's archaeological resources. The City employed a professional archaeologist to perform the investigations. Municipalities throughout the state began to look toward St. Augustine as a model for protecting below-ground historic resources.
In 1993 a group of civic leaders from many segments of the community participated in creating a "Vision Plan" for the next century. The preservation of the city's cultural resources constituted one of the "visions" to which a committee was assigned. The committee included representatives of public and private historical or historic preservation organizations and interested local residents. It drafted a statement setting specific and general goals for the city to attain in the twenty-first century.

The Present Management of Historic Preservation in St. Augustine

Responsibility for encouraging or ordering the preservation of historic buildings, monuments, and archeological resources in St. Augustine does not rest exclusively with any single level of government or private organization. The municipality, the federal government, the State of Florida, private organizations and institutions, and property owners are all involved in one way or another in preservation.

Presently no one of the federal, state or local agencies or private organizations coordinates preservation activities, although they often cooperate on specific projects. None offers advice and assistance to private property owners seeking information. Both are roles that the City logically should perform.

2016 – A St. Augustine Historic Preservation Master Plan

A public forum for the St. Augustine Historic Preservation Master Plan Thursday, May 19, 5:30-7:30 in the Alcazar Room at City Hall will introduce Preservation Design Partnership, LLC, the City's consultant to develop a master plan.