St. Augustine

IS GATOR COUNTRY

How the University of Florida is partnering with America's Oldest City to help it claim its rightful spot in history

BY LAURA BERNHEIM

AMERICA'S OLDest city lies just more than 70 miles to the east.
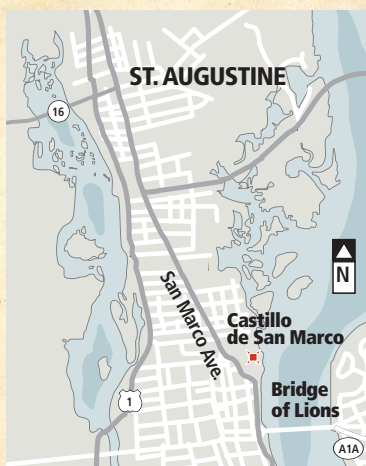
You'd be forgiven if you didn't know that. Most children don't, either — schools don't teach that version of American history.

That's why a host of University of Florida archaeologists, historians, architects and preservationists are out to rewrite the textbooks. Faculty, staff and students from all over campus have teamed up with the City of St. Augustine, Flagler College, the National Park Service, lawyers, a state representative and a banker to make St. Augustine more than a day-trip destination as it sneaks up on its 450th anniversary next year.

With buildings so old they often have more than one story to tell, St. Augustine weaves a rich history that so few get to hear. But with the rare partnership UF has forged by taking on the management and maintenance of 38 historic buildings on 23 state-owned parcels, the city hopes to be able to share its history with visitors from all over the world.

UF's direct support organization, a separate nonprofit corporation called UF Historic St. Augustine, is hoping to accomplish this through

Pedro Menendez d'Aviles founded St. Augustine in 1565.

building and archeological preservation, informative exhibits, a living history museum and even a four-part documentary.

St. Augustine, the country's first successful colonial settlement, was established in 1565 — 42 years before the British established their first permanent colony in Jamestown, Virginia. St. Augustine and Florida, occupied primarily by the Spanish for some 200 years, didn't become part of the United States until 1821.

The state's late arrival to the Union, coupled with its Hispanic heritage, keeps St. Augustine out of

ST. AUGUSTINE

16

San Marco Ave.

Castillo de San Marco

Bridge of Lions

A1A

N

A view looking south down historic St. George Street.

Jacksonville

10

75 St. Augustine

16

24

Gainesville

GULF OF MEXICO

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Spanish St.

CASTILLO DE SAN MARCOS

S Castillo Dr.

St. George St.

Avenida Menedez

Cordova St.

Matanzas River

1B

1A

King St.

N

■ HISTORIC PROPERTIES MANAGED BY UF

GRAPHICS BY ROB MACK

HISTORIC PROPERTIES

The University of Florida manages 23 state-owned historic parcels with 38 separate historic buildings in the city of St. Augustine.

ERICA BROUGH

the American history textbooks and classrooms, according to Roy Hunt, a historic preservation expert, UF Distinguished Service Professor of Law Emeritus and vice chair of UF Historic St. Augustine.

"Unfortunately, our history books are very English-centric and focused on the first settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia, but of course that's not true at all," he says. "It all began here."

UF experts and city officials want to show tourists and schoolchildren alike that American history began here in Florida.

"It's going to be a little controversial, because we're going to bring up some of that," says Hunt, the former president of the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation. "History is not always perfect or pleasing."

The thorough research and meticulous planning is all part of giving visitors an authentic experience of St. Augustine's unique story, according to Linda Dixon, who manages the day-to-day affairs as the partnership's

Dixon

director of operations and administration.

"We want to keep improving these properties and creating potentially new destinations and new things for people to experience in St. Augustine, but always with that authentic, factual, university-backed research," she says.

One of the centerpieces of the effort is the restoration and reconstruction

of the historic homes, many on St. George Street, that UF now oversees, including those in the recently renovated and relaunched Colonial Quarter. Once called the Spanish Quarter, the two-acre site now highlights research on three centuries of St. Augustine life by UF scholars. It's managed in public-private partnership with UFHSA and entrepreneur Pat Croce, former owner of the Philadelphia 76ers.

In addition to the Florida Museum of Natural History and the Smathers Libraries, campus involvement comes from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, College of Design, Construction & Planning, College of Engineering, College of Fine Arts, College of Health and Human Performance, College of Journalism and Communications, College of Law, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and UF Performing Arts.

Following historic preservation efforts in the mid-1930s, residents reorganized to form the Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board in 1959 to buy, restore and in some cases reconstruct buildings leading up to the city's 400th anniversary in 1965.

The board maintained and rehabilitated the properties until 1997, when the state legislature abolished

Roy Hunt, a historic preservation expert, UF Distinguished Service Professor of Law Emeritus and vice chair of UF Historic St. Augustine.
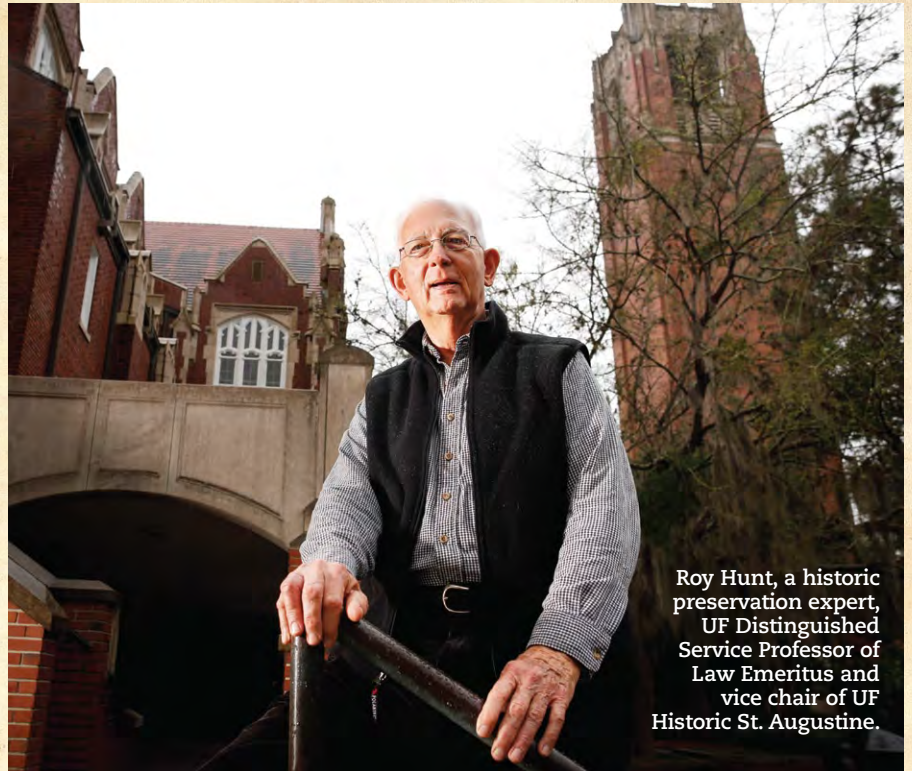
DOUG FINGER

all preservation boards. The City of St. Augustine assumed control of the properties, but with very little monetary support from the state.

As deferred maintenance piled up and roofs sprung leaks, the city and state sought another solution — perhaps a copy of one that existed 400 miles to the west.

Pensacola, in the same dire straits as St. Augustine, entered into an agreement with the University of West Florida in 2001 to archive, research, preserve and showcase 28 historic locations on the National Register.

Bill Proctor, chancellor of Flagler College and the area's state representative, asked Hunt, a former Florida Secretary of State, to draft legislation in 2006 that would open the door for a similar partnership between

A historic interior in a Colonial Quarter house on St. George Street.

ERICA BROUGH

Visiting from Belgium, the Van Quickenborne family exits the Government House at 48 King Street, where the Florida Museum of Natural History's "First Colony" exhibit is on display through 2015.

St. Augustine and the University of Florida. Hunt, who drafted the Pensacola legislation, previously served on St. Augustine's disbanded preservation board.

The legislation passed a year later in 2007, and UF formed a steering committee to build a strategic plan that addressed not only the development, management, maintenance and operations of the state-owned properties, but the social, cultural and economic impacts, as well.

Ed Poppell, UF's director for economic development, led the committee at the behest of President Bernie Machen.

"You've got to engage your communities, your city and your county government to assist you, and at the same time, it's still their city," Poppel says. "We knew this was something the University of Florida was interested in, but it was such a tremendous

WHAT'S IT MADE OF?

Where we might use concrete today, early St. Augustine residents used **tabby**. One of the key components of concrete is gravel, but there was no gravel available. Instead, the colonists used oyster shells in their masonry construction.

Other buildings were constructed of mined natural shell **coquina**. The tiny coquina clam has thrived in the shallow waters of coastal Florida for thousands of years. The shells accumulated on the bottom in deposits several feet thick.

When sea levels eventually dropped, the shell layers were exposed to air and rainwater. Dissolved calcium in the shells produced calcium carbonate, gluing the shell fragments together into a porous type of limestone called coquina, Spanish for "tiny shell." Settlers mined the coquina deposits to build the defensive walls of the Castillo de San Marcos and Fort Matanzas, walls that have stood for centuries. — *Diane Chun*

undertaking that we had to make sure we could handle it."

UF faculty, staff and students were already frequent visitors to St. Augustine. For decades, researchers such as archaeologist Kathy Deagan and historian Michael Gannon, who spent part of his upbringing in St. Augustine, immersed themselves in all the stories St. Augustine had to tell.

"We suddenly realized that, for lack of a better term, St. Augustine is Gator Country," says Chris Silver, dean of

UF's College of Design, Construction & Planning and member of the committee. "Then, when you look at all the things we were already doing academically and professionally over there, it really made sense."

With the strategic plan finished in 2009, the state awarded recurring operations and maintenance money in 2010, and UF took responsibility of 23 historic state-owned properties with 38 historic buildings.

"It wasn't all the money we asked for,

Billy Triay's ancestors were part of a group of Minorcans who left the New Smyrna settlement and walked 70 miles to St. Augustine in 1777. Triay stands in front of the building that bears the family name.

ERICA BROUGH

but it was enough to get us started," says Poppell, who estimated that the partnership has so far received between $4 million and $6 million of the $40 million needed to meet its goals.

The university formed the direct support organization to back UF's mission to ensure the long-term preservation and interpretation of the historic properties. And while the UF contingent has a long way to go, Hunt remains confident the funding will eventually come.

"We would not have signed the agreement if the state did not agree with the principles of preserving this tremendous area," he says.

Four years later, UF Historic St. Augustine has caught up to the buildings' deterioration, Dixon says. Leaky roofs have been sealed, exteriors have been stabilized and painted, sagging balconies have been leveled and rotten wood replaced.

"As of this year, we've really caught

up and touched every single one of the buildings with what we talk about as the standard paint, patch and repair projects," says Dixon, also the director of planning in UF's Planning, Design & Construction Division. "There's a lot of bringing back the original historic fabric of the buildings."

A lot of that is thanks to another asset UF gained in the 2010 transfer — property manager Billy Triay, who has worked to restore, preserve and promote St. Augustine's buildings since 2001.

"Before, we were trying to put a Band-Aid on major arteries," he says of what the city could maintain on such a small budget. "Now, we're actually maintaining these structures well and bringing them up to a standard that should be the norm."

Before managing the state-owned properties for the city, Triay worked at the city's visitors information center.

"I've spent most of my adult life

promoting this city in one way or another, carrying it forward," he says.

One would be hard-pressed to find someone as entwined in his hometown's history and culture as Triay. His ancestors were among the Minorcans taken to New Smyrna as indentured servants, promised land and freedom. But treatment and conditions were harsh. After nearly two-thirds of the original 1,400 had perished, the survivors fled, walking 70 miles north to St. Augustine in 1777. The Minorcans were given properties in St. Augustine's current restoration area. In fact, one building still bears the Triay name.

"I tend to baby these buildings a little," he says. "I've even gotten to the point where if I see someone putting their dirty shoes on the side of the wall, I almost cringe."

Triay helped calm local residents' initial fear and concern about letting the university into their sacred town.

St. Augustine's City Gates.

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

College of Design, Construction and Planning

Chris Silver, dean of UF's College of Design, Construction & Planning.

Although the steering committee held many public forums, several community members held concerns and misconceptions about what exactly UF was going to do. Some thought all the historic properties were going to be converted to classrooms. Others disagreed with how some buildings were restored.

Triay's favorite building, the De Mesa Sanchez House at 49 St. George St., has evolved and expanded during each period of Spanish, British and American occupation. It's also bright pink — a color Triay says would have been a common color used at the time. Naturally, when UF Historic St. Augustine restored the building, it needed a fresh coat of paint.

"The locals at that time were so upset and thought, 'Why in the world would you put that godawful pink on that building?'" Triay says. Some people painted over the pink and vandalized the building.

The building was repainted, but it was a prime example of a change that was a little hard-hitting, he says. Triay says tensions were gone less than two months into the collaboration, once residents learned more about the program and saw more progress.

"With UF and its credibility, how can you possibly be worried? UF is really bringing the buildings back to their true glory," he says.

In fact, residents are now beginning to take matters into their own hands.

"We would paint one our buildings, and the next thing we know, our neighbor would paint theirs," Triay says. "It raised the bar."

Silver, dean of UF's College of Design, Construction & Planning, can quickly list a multitude of studio projects that use St. Augustine as a backdrop for new and improved

ST. AUGUSTINE
Continued from Page 47

waterfront transportation, tourism information centers, traffic patterns and more. But it's the preservation and digitization of the city's records that he ranks as one of UF's most important initiatives. And it's happening in one of the city's most important historic buildings.

Since 1598, a government building has stood on the impressive site at the west end of Town Plaza. From governors' residences, a courthouse, post office and customs house, Government House is now the centerpiece to the UF Historic St. Augustine collaboration.

Grants have allowed the Smathers Libraries to establish a library digitization lab on the second floor of Government House to process a massive collection of photographs and historic documents, which now can be searched and downloaded from the library's website.

Silver remembers an image a student pulled out of the archive that showed St. George Street before it was converted to the pedestrian corridor so many enjoy today.

"It's a fascinating remembrance that St. Augustine wasn't always this walkable place," he says.

Looking at that street today, Silver says they might have preserved the area differently, and instead chose to preserve the mid-century modern version of the area, since the era currently is so popular in the architectural and design worlds.

"We look at those spaces much differently now," he says. "St. Augustine is not just a colonial city, but it was also a Victorian neighborhood. The Ponce de Leon Hotel has nothing to do with the historic area and everything to do with the climate of Florida. And with Flagler College, it's a college town as well."

Flagler College remains heavily involved in historic St. Augustine, as well — through UF's DSO as well as through the Historic St. Augustine Research Institute, a collaborative project of Flagler College and UF, and through renewed focus on upgrading their campus, especially the spectacular Ponce de Leon Hall, formerly an exclusive hotel built by Standard Oil co-founder Henry M. Flagler and finished in 1888. Silver's most recent doctoral graduate, Leslee Keyes, now director of Flagler College's historic preservation program, leads the charge.

Keyes and Silver work together to foster an informal exchange program of sorts, allowing UF students to stay at Flagler College to study architecture and urban design while encouraging Flagler students to continue their studies in Gainesville.

Triay jokes that the UF partnership has already boosted tourism revenue in the area with all the visiting faculty and students eating and shopping at local businesses. Beyond the economic impact, though, Triay says the educational element is tops.

"It's not just what we can provide to the students, but what the students can provide to us," Triay says. "Their research helps us a great deal."

After being so immersed in the history and heritage of America's oldest continuously occupied European settlement, Triay has to adjust his perspective from time to time.

"We look at an 1888 building and go, 'Oh, that's fairly new.' I have to remind myself that historical sites from the 1920s are old, too," he says.

Triay estimates that 85 percent of the local residents originally came on vacation and fell in love. "We carry that old saying of once you get the sand in your shoes, you never get it out." 🍃

A statue of Saturiwa, the chief of the native Timucua tribe encountered by the early Spanish settlers, can be seen at Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park.

FLORIDA MUSEUM
Continued from Page 53

in itself: Some of the items excavated from the site in the 1950s —all of which had been properly mapped, labeled and catalogued—had been stored in matchboxes with 1950s-era pinup girls on the covers.

"In about six months of digging, they excavated at least half or more of the area that we've done in 30 years," Deagan says. "So it was quite a revelation."

Using the recovered artifacts and field notes from the Goggin dig, for the first time ever, Deagan and Waters were able to determine just how big the Spanish-American settlement was.

"When we finally figured out where they had worked and put it together with our maps, we realized the site goes much farther in one direction than we had imagined," she says. Some of the findings by the Goggin team looked to be part of a defensive construction.

"If it turns out to be a fort, it would be a huge discovery," she says. "I think it's a huge discovery to finally get a handle on the settlement."

And once again, although Deagan is now retired, the team has its work cut out for it.

"I don't know how many times I've said, 'This is the last year. We've worked here enough, we've opened too much of this site, we're not coming back,'" says Deagan, who began excavating anew at Fountain of Youth Park in March.

"That's the great thing about archaeology," Waters adds. "We go each year with a number of questions, and for every one question we answer, three new ones pop up." 🍃

IF YOU GO
Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park
What: Believed to be the site of Juan Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth, the park is where Pedro Menendez De Aviles settled in 1565.
When: Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily
Where: 11 Magnolia Avenue, St. Augustine, (904) 829 3168
Cost: $12 adults, $8 ages 6-12, 5 and under free
For information: fountainofyouthflorida.com