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St. Augustine, Florida founded

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Slave Market Plaza

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*On this date in 1565, St. Augustine, Florida was founded with the first arrival of Black African slaves to North America. On that date Spaniard Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles came ashore and named a stretch of land near the inlet in honor of Augustine, a saint of the Roman Catholic Church.

When the Spanish conquistador Menendez arrived, not only were there Black slaves and members of his crew, but he noted that his arrival had been preceded by free Africans in the French settlement at Fort Caroline, just a few miles north. During the 16th and 17th centuries, St. Augustine was the center of the slave trade in Spanish colonial Florida, a distinction that continued through the early 1800s. *"The Spanish Crown was one of the largest slaveholders, workers on the defense works,"* said St. Augustine historian Susan R. Parker. And, though many of the



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documents from the Catholic Church reveal slavery's deep roots in North Florida's
ding of Jamestown, Va., the first documented slave birth was recorded in St.
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in the Catholic faith. He was the son of Agustin and Francisca, both Black and listed
as slaves in church baptismal records.

Church documents from what is called the First Spanish Period, 1565 to 1763, were taken from St. Augustine to Cuba in 1763 when the British occupied Florida. Some records were lost. But St. Augustine's Cathedral Basilica has records dating to 1594. Parker said church documents show how the royal government worked through slave owners to record slaves' marriages and births. "*The Church was so prominent in this role,*" Parker said. The plantation society did exist around St. Augustine in the 18th century, the first slaves, primarily from Africa, worked in Spanish households in town. "*In a lot of the homes, they did the hard tasks. "You would have a female domestic slave, a male slave for hard work."* From 1763 to 1783, when the British ruled Florida, more of an Antebellum South (<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-antebellum-south-a-brief-story/>) plantation society-style developed in St. Augustine.

Historian Daniel Schafer said St. Augustine maintained its dominant position in the slave trade under British rule but it did so with more of an economic and less of a domestic slant. Schafer is a professor of history at the University of North Florida and has studied the roots of slavery in Florida from its African origins. In the 20-year occupation of St. Augustine by the British, slave ships regularly arrived either after stopping in the American colonies, or coming directly in from Africa. As the British settled in East Florida, agricultural plantations were built apart from the center of town. British residents coming to Florida from the Carolinas and Georgia brought slaves with them to work in the fields.

Florida's British Gov. James Grant had African slaves but Lt. Gov. John Moultrie, Schafer said, had third-, fourth- and fifth-generation slaves born in America. Principal slave suppliers to eastern Florida were South Carolinian Henry Laurens, who provided mostly African born slaves, as well as John Graham of Savannah, Ga., and Richard Oswald of Scotland. Oswald, said Schafer, had a slave "factory" on Bance Island in what is now part of Sierra Leone, Africa. Oswald brought hundreds of slaves for his plantation near St. Augustine and to sell to others. Ships coming into the Port of St. Augustine would carry about 100 Africans at a time, Schafer said. The slave population of this period also included West Indies natives.

A key example of St. Augustine's importance in the slave trade, Schafer said, can be found in a bureaucratic request by John Fraser, a British planter, also a slave trader. He regularly brought in slaves from Africa for himself and others. Because some were destined for St. Augustine, he had to secure permission from the government to exclude his own from a customs clearance. He got permission to take slaves for his St. Mary's, Ga., plantation directly to St. Mary's but the other 16 for British Florida buyers had to be cleared through customs before being released. Spanish rule returned in 1784 and St. Augustine's slave center image remained. In fact, more than a quarter of the recorded population were slaves.

According to a 1784 report by the Spanish governor back to Spain, St. Augustine recorded 574 black residents and 1,418 white residents, without distinction of free or slave. In 1797, the census recorded 1,007 white residents, 483 slaves and 102 free black residents. By 1802, St. Augustine had been back under Spanish rule for almost 20 years.



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changing worldwide as European countries and the American colonies started
n slaves. Spain did not "You have Liverpool, a center for the slave trade and all
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suddenly, there is a ban," Schafer said. "So they pack up and head for (ports in)
Fernandina and St. Augustine," he said. The second Spanish occupation continued until 1821 when Spain
transferred Florida to the United States.

The slave culture in St. Augustine expanded because it not only included the slaves who returned with Spanish
owners in 1784 but it still had some from the British period, African born and American born. In this second Spanish
period, she said, the slaves were also holding "jobs" when they were not working for their owners as an attempt to
buy their freedom. They worked as butchers, seamstresses, and rowers for boats. They held parties to sell products.
*"Whatever they did, it took a long time," she said. "Most would have been paid only 1 1/2 to 2 pesos a day and the
minimum to buy their freedom would have been about 400 pesos."* Parker was historian for the former Historic St.
Augustine Preservation Board. In that role, she acted as a tour guide for the Nation's Oldest City. Regarding the
Plaza de la Constitucion "people would ask, 'Is that where the slaves were sold' and I would explain that it was a
public market and probably some slaves may have been sold there. Parker said slave sales likely were held on the
steps of Government House at the opposite end of the plaza. But private sales were not uncommon elsewhere.
*"They were private sales between owners and they may have been at the market to do other business when they did
this."*

Reference:

Daniel Schafer & Susan R. Parker, Historians
for the former Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board.

St. Augustine History (https://www.visitstaugustine.com/history/black_history/introduction/index.php)

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