



Unearthing the fountain of truth

Many of the artifacts – and historical facts – in the Florida Museum of Natural History’s “First Colony” exhibit were unearthed by museum archaeologist Kathleen Deagan, who has been excavating in St. Augustine for more than 40 years.

ERICA BROUGH

The Florida Museum of Natural History is poised to help rewrite St. Augustine’s—and the nation’s—history, thanks to a gift of more than 97,000 artifacts, a surprise discovery of a massive trove of objects, and an exhibit about the “first colony” in the United States

BY DIANA TONNESSEN

AT FIRST GLANCE, ST. AUGUSTINE’S Fountain of Youth Park looks like just another one of Florida’s numerous roadside attractions. A massive archway along the highway leads visitors through a residential neighborhood to the park’s main entrance.

Once inside, you can feed the peacocks strutting around on the grounds, visit the Spring House, where Spectoramas depict the arrival of Spanish explorer Ponce de León in Florida, witness daily 16th century cannon firings, observe re-enactors dressed in period costume as they demonstrate aspects of daily life in colonial Florida, learn about stellar navigation in the park’s Navigator’s Planetarium, or check

out the park’s reconstructed Timucuan huts and a wood reconstruction of the nation’s first Franciscan mission church. In the gift shop, you can even buy souvenir bottles of water from the fabled Fountain of Youth.

But stroll along the walkway overlooking Matanzas Bay and you’ll discover an entirely different side of the park. This place really *is* steeped in history, although it’s not the history the park has built its reputation on. Rather, interpretive panels explain how artifacts unearthed at the park by Florida Museum of Natural History archaeologists over the past 65 years revealed the site of the original Spanish settlement established in 1565 — America’s first successful colony.

“Recognizing this settlement startled even me,” says Kathleen Deagan, Distinguished Research Curator Emerita and Lockwood Professor of Florida and Caribbean



Excavations at Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park.

FILE PHOTO



Inearthed at the site, a tigueta (an amulet meant to ward off evil spirits)

Archaeology at the museum. Deagan and her archaeological field crews have been excavating in the St. Augustine area since 1965, and at Fountain of Youth Park since 1976.

Now, many of those artifacts are a part of a “myth-busting” exhibit by the Florida Museum of Natural History on display at St. Augustine’s Government House — just in time for the city’s 450th birthday next year. “First Colony: Our Spanish Origins,” supported by \$1.7 million in funding from the State Bureau of Historic Preservation, tells the story of the nation’s first successful European colony through archaeology, history and interactive exhibits that incorporate film, touch tables, tablets, QR codes and other technology.

The museum’s extensive excavation work in and around St. Augustine, its “First Colony” exhibit and its vast research collection of Spanish-American artifacts are part of a partnership forged between the University of Florida, the city of St. Augustine, Flagler College and the state of Florida — UF Historic St. Augustine — intended to set the historic record straight about the importance of St. Augustine in American history. Through museum exhibits, building preservation efforts, living history re-enactors and more, the partnership’s goal is to put St. Augustine



MacMahon

on the map as an important historic landmark—as prominent as Jamestown and Plymouth Rock—and every bit as interesting to visit.

A few recent developments, including the gift of more than 97,000 artifacts valued at nearly \$3.5 million from the owners of Fountain of Youth Park last month, along with the museum’s recovery last summer of a trove of long-lost artifacts excavated from St. Augustine more than 60 years ago, hold the promise of even more history-changing discoveries.

REWRITING HISTORY

According to Darcie MacMahon, exhibit director at the Florida Museum of Natural History, the “First Colony” exhibit was designed to challenge the longstanding belief that the British were the first to colonize America with their Jamestown, Virginia settlement. MacMahon says “First Colony: Our Spanish Origins” establishes St. Augustine—founded 42 years before Jamestown—as the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in what is now the United States. The exhibit also describes how, contrary to popular belief, the first Thanksgiving took place in St. Augustine on September 8, 1565, some 55 years before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.



DOUG FINGER

Gifford Waters, collection manager of historical archeology at the Museum of Natural History, looks over pottery recovered from a 1565 Spanish settlement in St. Augustine.

The exhibit tries to cover all of the firsts...the first settlement, the first Thanksgiving... We wanted to focus on the personal stories about the real people who lived there, as well as the archaeological evidence," MacMahon says.

Visitors can test their strength by lifting a cannonball, uncover artifacts at a virtual excavation site, and learn about how the Spanish and Native American cultures almost immediately began to blend into America's melting pot. They can even use an interactive world map to mark their family's origins.

"We thought there was a real connection between the experiences of people living in the first colony and our lives," McMahon says of the cultural blending happening in today's increasingly globalized world. In the Spanish colonies, there was much more blending of cultural traditions than there was in the British colonies, she says.

The exhibit will be on display in St. Augustine's Government House through the year 2015 in observance of the city's 450th anniversary celebration. It will then come to the Florida

Museum of Natural History in 2016 before traveling to other sites around the country.

"Maybe America is finally ready to hear this story," she says.

BURIED TREASURE

Last month, the owners of Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park donated to the museum some 97,000 artifacts excavated from their property over the past 65 years—many of them recovered by Deagan and her team. The artifacts, valued at nearly \$3.5 million, helped to vault the museum's collection of Spanish-American artifacts to the largest in the world.

"If we kept the artifacts at the park, they would become ornaments stored away in a drawer," John Fraser, the park's manager and grandson of owner Walter Fraser, said in a news release. According to Florida law, anything excavated on private property belongs to the property owner. So although most of the artifacts unearthed from the park had been brought to the museum for safekeeping and study, until last month, they belonged to the Frasers.

Fountain of Youth Park has been in the Fraser family since 1927. But the park has been a popular Florida tourist attraction as far back as 1868,



FILE PHOTOS

Artifacts found at Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park.

according to Kit Keating, the park's assistant manager and communications director, who notes that the park is one of Florida's oldest tourist attractions.

In 1898, Luella Day "Diamond Lil" McConnell purchased the property—allegedly with a fistful of diamonds—and spun fanciful tales about the fabled Fountain of Youth that Ponce de Leon was supposed to have been seeking when he landed somewhere along Florida's east coast in early April, 1513. Diamond Lil put the park on the map, and visitors came in droves to see the mythical Fountain of Youth.

In 1927, Diamond Lil sold the park to the Fraser family, who continued its tradition as a tourist attraction. Then, in 1934, while planting some orange trees, the gardener dug up human remains. The Frasers called in archaeologists from the Smithsonian Museum, who identified the remains as those of Native American Timucuan Indians. Further excavations identified the park as the site of a large Timucuan village.

"We knew it was a Native American



The "First Colony" exhibit now on display in St. Augustine's Government House.

ERICA BROUGH

town," Deagan says of her decision to dig at the park in 1976. But after a few years of fieldwork, Deagan says she realized this was not a typical Native American town.

"There were barrel wells, which were not ever used in traditional Tumucuan society. There were square buildings made with square timbers, and nails and artifacts you wouldn't expect in a native town."

They began to suspect that perhaps the park was the site of an early Spanish settlement. But it would take many more years of field work before Deagan felt certain this was the site of Menendez' first settlement.

"We weren't willing to come out and say that because there was no smoking gun," Deagan says. "There was no description [of the settlement], no maps, nothing..."

One archaeological find that helped seal the deal: An olive jar found in a barrel well on the site. The ceramic jar had a distinctive opening that dated it to the mid-1560s.

LOST AND FOUND

Last summer, Deagan and her team received a phone call that led to

another remarkable discovery related to the site. She had known that UF archaeologist John M. Goggin had excavated areas of the park in the early 1950s.

"But there were no artifacts here, none in St. Augustine, no notes, no maps, no photos," Deagan says. "We had no idea where they dug or what they had found." One day last summer, Deagan got a phone call from a woman in Martinez, California, who said she had found in her father's garage several boxes containing artifacts, field notes, maps and photographs from an excavation in St. Augustine.

Apparently, her father had been one of Goggin's graduate students. After Goggin's team had finished excavating, the grad student had packed up all of the materials and taken them with him to Connecticut, where he planned to write his dissertation while earning a Ph.D. Instead, he dropped out of college, moved to Chicago, married, and spent the next 25 years raising a family and working as a public school teacher. After retirement, he and his wife moved to

IF YOU GO

"First Colony: Our Spanish Origins"

What: Discover the first colony through archaeology, history and the stories of people who lived there in this hands-on, interactive exhibition.

When: Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily

Where: Government House Museum, 48 King St., St. Augustine, (904) 823-2212

Cost: \$7.99 adults, \$5.99 ages 5-12

For information: www.flmnh.ufl.edu/firstcolony/

New Mexico. When his wife passed away, he moved to California to be near his daughter. After his passing last summer, his daughter and granddaughter found the cache of missing materials.

Deagan arranged to have the materials shipped back to the museum in Florida.

Gifford Waters, collections manager of Spanish-American artifacts at the museum, says the collection of some 12,000 artifacts is an artifact

Continued on Page 124 ➤➤



ERICA BROUGH

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

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

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.” 🍀