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The First Parish of an Emerging Nation

Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine
38 Cathedral Place
St. Augustine, Florida 32084

*Did you know that the state of Florida
is named after the Feast of Easter?*

As every schoolchild used to know, “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” The Italian-born explorer, sailing under the banner of Their Catholic Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, got his first glimpse of the New World in the islands of the Caribbean. His last stop on that maiden voyage was Hispaniola (today, Haiti and the Dominican Republic), where his flagship, the *Santa Maria*, ran aground.

Some six hundred miles northwest of Hispaniola was an enormous peninsula jutting out from the American mainland. Spanish explorers may have touched land in Florida as early as 1502. The first official expedition to the future state was directed by Juan Ponce de León, to whom the Crown had granted a charter to explore and settle a purported island to the north of the Bahamas. He arrived at the Atlantic coast of North America during Easter Week, known as the Feast of Flowers. This new land—which turned out not to be an island after all—was thus called Pascua Florida (Easter Flower), or simply Florida.

Forming a Catholic Parish

Fifty years after Ponce de León's explorations, the Spanish decided to colonize east Florida in an attempt to keep French aspirations in the region at bay. The first European colonists in Florida had been a sect of French Calvinists, called Huguenots, whose faith was persecuted in their home country and who thus sought a new beginning and religious freedom in the New World. When King Philip II of Spain learned of the colony, he was determined for reasons of both state and church to drive the French Calvinists out of Florida.

Pedro Menéndez de Avilés led the initial expedition in 1565, which expelled the Huguenots from their fort on the St. John's River and planted the settlement named after St. Augustine, on whose feast day (August 28) the fleet had sighted the Florida coast. The Spanish implemented their usual model for settlement, with religious missionaries accompanied by civil authorities. Diocesan priests immediately founded a mission, Nombre de Dios, the first Catholic parish within the bounds of what would eventually become the United States. The Church community was formally founded on September 8, the Feast of the Nativity of Mary. Fr. Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales erected a cross, and all of the Spanish, led by General Menéndez, venerated it, after which the priest offered Mass dedicating the new colony to God.

Jesuits staffed the earliest missions in Florida and built St. Augustine's first church building, but they soon abandoned the field in the face of intense opposition from the native inhabitants. Franciscans, arriving in 1578, faced the same obstacles as had the Jesuits. Initial efforts to extend the missions across Florida and north into Georgia and the Carolinas ended in violence and retreat but gained for the American Church some of its earliest martyrs.

In typical Spanish fashion, the heart of St. Augustine was its central plaza, anchored by a church and government buildings. The first church, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, was built of wood planks, though its interior was "furnished richly enough with an ornate, painted retablo, costly altar hangings, a gilded cross and candlesticks, and bright-colored banners." Unfortunately, this humble yet dignified edifice was short-lived, burned down in a raid by Sir Francis Drake, the

most famous privateer in English history. His raid was but one episode in a centuries-long battle between England and Spain for control of the Caribbean and its surroundings.¹

In 1597, Fr. Ricardo Artur (or Richard Arthur) arrived to take up the pastorate of St. Augustine, becoming the first of many Ireland-born priests to minister to the Church in America. Exactly how Artur came into the service of Spain is unclear; possibly he had been part of the Irish “Wild Geese” brigade that fought in the Spanish-Dutch wars of the sixteenth century.

A second church at St. Augustine also burned to the ground in 1599, although the 1594 records of the first baptism and marriage survived, making them the oldest extant written documents in the Americas north of Mexico. Parishioners decided to build the third church with an eye to durability. It lasted ninety-five years as the hub of the colony’s activity. The number of baptisms recorded in the parish rose steadily from seven in 1596 to more than one hundred in 1761. Franciscans and other missionaries started to succeed among the local inhabitants as well. By the late seventeenth century there were more than twenty-five thousand Native American Christians attached to more than thirty missions in Florida. Earlier in the century, in yet another first, the nearby chapel of Nuestra Señora de La Leche y Buen Parto (Our Lady of the Milk and Happy Delivery) was built, making it the first Marian shrine within what would become the United States.

“Nearly every aspect of life in colonial St. Augustine,” the historian Kathleen Deagan writes, “like that in all New World Spanish colonies, was influenced by the Catholic Church.” The Church provided a source of unity in what gradually became a “melting pot of ethnic groups” that were “loosely bound together by a common Catholic faith, Castilian tongue, and the political dominion of the Spanish Crown.” There were *peninsulares* (Spanish from various provinces of the Iberian Peninsula), *criollos* (those of Spanish/Indian mixed ancestry), full-blooded Native Americans, and *morenos* (Africans from the Antilles or escaped from the Carolinas). Beginning in the 1680s, there were also English, who were permitted to settle in the region. A 1696 journal reported

an encounter with an Englishman married to a Spanish woman; they were parents of seven children.

Colonial St. Augustine was never profitable for Spain. It was neither rich in precious metals nor agriculturally promising (though the Spanish did introduce thriving orange and fig trees). Instead, according to Deagan, military concerns and the presence of the Franciscan missions “remained the primary reason for St. Augustine’s existence.” The year 1675 marked the apogee of Spanish Florida, with St. Augustine anchoring a mission chain that stretched across the peninsula into what is today the Florida panhandle. But Catholicism in St. Augustine faced grim days ahead.

An English Interlude at St. Augustine

The English again proved to be the bane of St. Augustine’s Catholics. By 1700, the flourishing British colonies just to the north set their sights on the Spanish stronghold of Florida. James Moore led a sortie from South Carolina with the object of capturing St. Augustine. The expedition failed, but in the melee the town’s church was once again reduced to ashes.

Fr. Agustín Ponce de León—namesake of both the parish and the heralded explorer—was serving a mission near St. Augustine when it was raided by the English and their Creek allies in 1705. Learning of the capture of two of his native altar boys, the Franciscan friar pursued the captors and offered himself in place of the young Christians. The raiders killed the boys and the priest, adding three more names to the long list of Florida’s martyrs.²

In 1740, James Oglethorpe, a member of the British Parliament and the founder of the Georgia colony (see chapter 26), led another assault, this time from Georgia. His force laid siege to St. Augustine for a month but withdrew in mid-July after the British navy failed to sustain its blockade.

Spain managed to keep hold of Florida through the first half of the eighteenth century by protecting its colony from behind the bulwarks of the Castillo San Marcos, the fort that guards the Atlantic approach to St. Augustine. The fortification was constructed in the late

seventeenth century and, as one description put it, “has dominated the town ever since.” Log and earth walls extended from the fort to encompass the city. But the Spanish Empire was waning, and funds could not be spared for rebuilding the church. Mass was said in makeshift locations until 1763, when control of St. Augustine finally passed into British hands. Within a year, all the priests had abandoned Florida for Cuba and there were few Catholics left in the already historic parish of St. Augustine.

There is one peculiar Catholic twist to this British interlude. After the English took control of Florida, a Scottish aristocrat was given a land grant south of St. Augustine and initiated a colonial venture to raise cotton and olives. To populate his colony, Andrew Turnbull recruited a hundred Italian men, who gathered at the Mediterranean island of Minorca to prepare for their transatlantic expedition. In the meantime, many found wives among the Minorcans, and so, to work his Florida farms, Turnbull ended up with dozens of budding Catholic families, who had brought along with them a Minorcan priest. In 1777, Turnbull’s little colony failed, and the band of Catholics, led by their pastor, settled in St. Augustine, bringing Catholicism back to the First Parish. The American poet William Cullen Bryant, visiting St. Augustine in 1843, found this group’s ethnic customs still in evidence, including an Easter procession in honor of the Virgin Mary, accompanied by a hymn sung in a Minorcan dialect.

A New Church, A New Country

By the time the Minorcan immigrants arrived, St. Augustine had become a refuge of another sort. Loyalists from the British colonies to the north, finding life intolerable among their patriot neighbors as the strife of the American Revolution intensified, fled south to the English outpost. Most of them didn’t stay long. As part of the settlement of the Treaty of Paris ending the American Revolution in 1783, Florida was returned to Spanish control. The Tory refugees then migrated again.

It was during this second and final Spanish period that plans were made for the construction of a monumental edifice to serve the Catholics of Florida. The façade of the new church was reminiscent of

the mission style that dominates the American Southwest, but it also incorporated neoclassical elements such as its pediment resting on Doric columns. The walls were made of coquina—a local masonry standby composed of a sedimentary rock formed from seashells. The building was completed in 1797.

At about this time, a young boy arrived in Florida from Cuba, accompanying his father, a Spanish military officer. Félix Varela spent eight years in St. Augustine before returning to Cuba to continue his education. He went on to an illustrious career as a priest, professor, and advocate for Cuban independence. Driven out of Cuba, he labored as a parish priest and diocesan official in New York (where he spent time at Old St. Peter's; see chapter 6) before retiring to St. Augustine, where he assisted at the First Parish until his death in 1853.

As Spain's empire continued to recede during the nineteenth century, the maintenance of the Florida outpost became untenable. American "filibusters"—freelance fighters trying to expand US control in Spanish America—invaded Florida in 1812, sparking the "Patriot War." In St. Augustine, a diverse force of Hispanic, Black, and mixed-race defenders refused to surrender. But Florida's destiny was to be American, not Spanish. The Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 ceded the colony to the US and also created a class of free Blacks in the Deep South by guaranteeing all former Spanish subjects the full rights of American citizenship.

The transfer of Spanish territory to the United States ushered in yet another difficult period for St. Augustine Catholicism. Insisting that the property had been the possession of the Spanish Crown rather than the Church, American officials confiscated Catholic holdings in Florida, including the churches of St. Augustine and Mission Nombre de Dios. Worse yet, the vulnerable Catholics of the region were bereft of episcopal leadership, as it was not immediately clear which bishop should now have authority over what had been part of the Archdiocese of Havana.

Bishop John England of Charleston took Florida Catholics under his wing while the situation was sorted out. The articulate and well-respected Bishop England fired off a missive to President James Monroe

asserting the property rights of St. Augustine's Catholics under American law. The administration ruled in favor of the Church, Congress confirmed the decision, and St. Augustine's Catholics were once again in possession of their own church.³

Secession and Beyond

In 1845, Florida became the twenty-seventh state in the Union. The days of Catholic dominance under Spanish rule were long past. By 1850 Protestant churches in the state outnumbered Catholic ones by a ratio of more than thirty to one. St. Augustine, the former capital of an imperial district, had been superseded by other Florida cities. It was now a backwater, described by an 1858 observer as "dilapidated in appearance, with the stillness of desolation hanging over it." Then, just sixteen years after statehood, Florida withdrew from the Union and joined the Confederate States of America.

The opinions of southern Catholics, including priests and bishops, on matters such as slavery and secession generally mirrored those of the non-Catholic majority. One prelude to secession was an eloquent sermon delivered in the Church of St. Augustine on January 4, 1861. The preacher was Augustin Verot, vicar apostolic of Florida. Bishop Verot began by citing the Church Father St. Augustine to make the point that a nation's prosperity and success depend on its virtue and that an unjust nation is sure to founder. Verot identified slavery as the cause of the strife threatening to destroy the Union, but his aim was not to condemn slavery. Finding support in scripture, natural law, and even Church teaching for the institution of slavery, Verot instead chastised abolitionists, calling them "fanatical preachers whose only object is to inflame the wicked passions of their hearers." Northern abolitionists were further tainted, Verot observed, by their association with Know-Nothingism (of the type that cast the pope's stone into the Potomac; see chapter 13).

Yet Verot was no crass apologist for slavery. He went on to enumerate the "wrongs which the South ought to acknowledge and confess." If slavery in theory enjoyed the sanction of natural law (in the bishop's view), slavery in practice was often a violation of human dignity. Citing

Pope Gregory XVI, Verot condemned the slave trade and similarly decried the violation of the rights of free Blacks (often former slaves) as well as slaveholders' abuse of slave women, failure to respect the integrity of slave families, and indifference to the religious welfare of enslaved persons.

As historian Frank Marotti points out, Verot faced a difficult dilemma. Recent papal teaching and the fact that many of the area's slaves were Catholic favored a strong stand against slavery. But a thundering denunciation of slavery risked raising the ire of the dominant white, Protestant population. The Minorcans still made up a sizable portion of St. Augustine's parishioners, and identifying the Church too closely with slave rights would make "this already suspect Hispanic population less 'Southern' and less 'white.'"

Yet Verot's attempt to split the difference between North and South was destined to fail. While he was preaching in St. Augustine, delegates from around the state were deliberating in Tallahassee; six days later they voted to secede from the United States.

In March 1862, Union gunboats appeared off the coast of north Florida. The news arrived at the Church of St. Augustine during Mass as a handwritten note—"The Yankees are landing"—and circulated rapidly. Heedless of the priest's protests, the worshippers rushed out of church to grab their belongings and flee the city. Federal troops landed at St. Augustine the next day, and the city remained under Northern control for the duration of the war. The city's early discomfiture may have saved its historic church: several other Florida Catholic churches were sacked and burned by Union troops on their rampage through the South as the war drew to a close.

Shortly after the state was accepted back into the Union following the Civil War, St. Augustine became the official seat of Florida Catholicism. Verot, who had in the meantime been appointed bishop of Savannah, Georgia, was selected as the inaugural bishop of the Diocese of St. Augustine in March of 1870. The Church of St. Augustine was now a cathedral.

Fire, that perennial terror, struck again in 1887, but the coquina skeleton survived, and the church was restored and expanded. The

Standard Oil magnate Henry Flagler, who was responsible for developing Florida's east coast, provided major funding. James Renwick, the architect of the new St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, was enlisted to oversee the renovation, which added the six-story bell tower as well as the transept that gives the church its cruciform shape.⁴

The Gilded Age boom reflected in Flagler's largesse was but the first in a succession of waves of economic prosperity and massive immigration from Europe, Latin America, and northern states. The Catholic Church expanded commensurately. The Diocese of St. Augustine was gradually partitioned, and today Florida is home to seven dioceses.

St. Augustine, with its cathedral, its fortress, and its sparkling beach, became a tourist attraction. Even in its dark days in the nineteenth century, "Moss-grown and shattered," historian George Fairbanks wrote, it appealed to "our instinctive feelings of reverence for antiquity." More than 150 years later, that sense of antiquity has only intensified. Millions of visitors each year connect with the rich history of La Florida by ambling along the cobblestone streets of "America's Ancient City."

In the midst of it all, through many highs and lows, the First Parish has endured. In 1976, in recognition of its historic significance, the cathedral was granted minor basilica status by Pope St. Paul VI. This church and its predecessors have witnessed the passage of a succession of characters: brown-robed Franciscan friars, mail-shirted Spanish soldiers, blue-coated Union troopers, short-panted American vacationers. Heaven only knows what's in store for the future of Florida Catholicism, but it's a safe bet that the Basilica of St. Augustine will be at its heart.

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