

CRISES OF AUTHENTICITY IN SAINT AUGUSTINE'S EARLY PRESERVATION  
HISTORY, 1840-1955

By

JOSEPH SHAUGHNESSY

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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To My Mother and Father

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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Chair: Roy Graham  
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Historic preservation is a tool that has been utilized to save certain features of the built environment that are culturally important. With time, places develop an accretion of history, which can be valuable. St. Augustine is an example of a place that has developed a level of historical value. This history has been manipulated and embellished by various entities. The underlying purpose of this work is to trace when and how tourism came to St. Augustine, then illuminate the various stakeholders that began to vie for control over the interpretation of various cultural sites. The role of the St. Augustine Historical Society during the early preservation movement is also analyzed.

This work attempts to illuminate the effects of criticism on the preservation movement, and how this can influence the preservation project. The difference between business interests and social groups are evaluated. During the beginning the two are closely related, but as ideas of authenticity change, so do the organizations. The goal of this study is to shed light on the causes, the dimensions, and the evolution of the early preservation movement in St. Augustine.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In 1565 Spanish sailors landed near an inlet in what is now north east Florida, eventually creating the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in North America. Throughout history, St. Augustine has faced trials and tribulations, from English raids to hurricanes, but the longest lasting threat to the city has been from internal sources. Since the emergence of tourism to the city, particularly during the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, the city has struggled over the interpretation of its cultural resources.

This study traces the change in the nature of visitation to St. Augustine, from health-related tourism of the mid to late nineteenth century to history-based tourism of the same period and beyond. Tourism became an important source of income for the town, and the flow of money had a steep impact on how sites were presented, created, and modified. There were several groups responsible for authenticating sites in St. Augustine, most notably the St. Augustine Historical Society (SAHS) which was founded in 1883.<sup>1</sup> This society and its members were accountable for much of the earliest preservation efforts of the city, during a period of time when the grand hotels of the town were being erected.

The reasons to visit St. Augustine correspond with changes in methods to attract tourists to St. Augustine. Businesses and the SAHS changed their presentation of their respective sites as the tourist economy increased. During the 1920s the SAHS was indistinguishable from business interests present in St. Augustine; both were economically motivated. This trend would not continue indefinitely, the Society evolved slowly to become one of the forces of authenticity in the city.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Graham, "St.,Augustine Historical Society, 1883-1983," *Florida Historical Quarterly* LXIV (July 1985): 1.

There were controversies during this early period of preservation, mostly coming from an outspoken critic named Charles Reynolds, a popular guidebook writer. The SAHS librarian, Emily Wilson and Reynolds engaged in an almost twenty-year long clash over the history of the city, particularly the sites under control of the Society. Both the Society and Reynolds had financial stakes related to tourism in St. Augustine, the Society ran the Oldest House and the Castillo; while Reynolds was a partner in the “Ask Mr. Foster” travel agency and a prominent guidebook publisher. The often contentious dialog between the two ultimately resulted in a more authentic presentation of the city's historical sites today.

In response to the challenge by Reynolds, the Society closed many of the gaps in their interpretation of history, but they continued to use traditional stories to fill the gaps for which they could not prove in the historical record. Over time, the Society changed from tradition-based history to a more evidentiary-based method of supporting the histories they produced. Instead of relying on tradition, the Society evolved to depend on archeology and more scholarly research.

The main difference between the SAHS owned properties and the privately owned properties was accountability. The society had a variety of different stakeholders, and had to answer to many different individual members. This was not the case for properties in private ownership. Although the Society was rather slow to change their presentation of the Oldest House, for example, they did eventually change the accounts of history of the building as new evidence presented itself. Individual property owners, such as Walter Fraser, were much less accepting of criticism if the attraction was painted in a less than romantic view. The focus of the SAHS shifted, particularly after the business side of the Society became less important, and the



history of their sites became more important. The shift was a product of archeological investigation and the need to accurately depict the history of the area.

The distinction between the private ownership of the sites and the Society is clarified in the 1950 *Walter Fraser vs Curtis Publishing* court case. The depositions taken for this case are enlightening because they bring usually privately held beliefs and backroom discussions into the forefront. The differences between the Society and Walter Fraser are evident. The Society had made significant gains in correcting the histories of their sites by expanding the research library and addressing traditional history. Walter Fraser had continued what the previous owners of his sites had done, which was to provide romantic attractions based on the notions of tradition. The court case also had a significant impact on the relationship between Fraser and the Society, as much of the information obtained in the article at the center of the case was gleaned from Society members. The case illustrates how the stakeholders of preservation had moved towards a new paradigm, a change in the knowledge base of the presentation of sites.

This study ends with the court case, after which St. Augustine entered into a new stage of preservation. Following the court case, in the middle of the 1950s, preservation began to change, with drastically improved knowledge of St. Augustine from archeological digs and Spanish literate historians.<sup>2</sup> Previously, the history of St. Augustine was constrained to mostly English sources which limited the amount of knowledge available. This history of the preservation movement will trace some of authenticity issues of the early movement as well as illustrate the foundation for the modern preservation movement which restored much of St. Augustine in the 1960s. Tourism has a great effect on how historical sites are presented in any historical town, St. Augustine is no different, this study traces the changes in tourism to the town, the authenticity

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<sup>2</sup> Frederik Gjessing et al, *The Evolution of the Oldest House*, (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1962).

issues that arose from the tourist economy, and how the SAHS responded and evolved to these changes.

## CHAPTER 2 THE SEED OF TRADITION: EARLY TOURISM IN FLORIDA

Florida and by extension, St. Augustine, remained a relative backwater until the “Gilded Age” and the arrival of Henry Flagler in the 1880s. However, the foundation for how heritage sites would be presented in St. Augustine was established in the years before the arrival of Flagler's extensive construction campaigns of the 1880s. St. Augustine was known as a destination for invalids and adventurous travelers before mass tourism arrived combined with the facilities of accommodation. During this period historical sites played a secondary attraction for tourism to St. Augustine. Most visitors were interested in the area's supposed rejuvenating climate or agricultural prospects.

Florida's tourism suffered in the early to mid-nineteenth century from costly wars. After Florida had become a United States territory in 1821, the borderlands remained a problem for Native-Anglo relationships. Settlers penetrating the hinterland caused border disputes, which led to the Second Seminole War (1835-1842).<sup>1</sup> While St. Augustine was relatively safe from invasion, the atmosphere of fear was not conducive for tourism. The nationwide financial Panic of 1837 was also a contributor to slowing tourism and development in Florida, and the five year depression stunted Florida's growth.<sup>2</sup>

Despite several roadblocks to growth, there were signs of development during the antebellum period. Even before the Civil War, publications within the United States mention the beneficial nature of Florida's climate for the curing of various diseases. In 1841, Samuel Forry M.D., wrote an article in the *American Journal of Medical Sciences* on the advantages of living

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<sup>1</sup> John Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War: 1835-1842*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gannon, *The New History of Florida*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 220.

in certain climates based on the number of illnesses reported.<sup>3</sup> According to Forry's statistical analysis, the soldiers in the Florida climate suffered from a diminished occurrence of pulmonary and rheumatic diseases, thus making the Florida climate a superior location for invalids searching for relief. St. Augustine and Key West were deemed the only towns that had enough of a trade network to supply the needs of the invalid.<sup>4</sup> According to Forry, the ideal situation for an invalid would be to live in Tampa in the winter and then travel back to St. Augustine for the summer months. However this remained improbable as long as the Indian threat remained unanswered. Forry accurately foresaw, "...the period, however, of the red man's departure shall have passed, the climate of this 'land of flowers' will, it may be safely predicted, acquire a celebrity as a winter residence not inferior to that of Italy, Madeira, or Southern France."<sup>5</sup> The next year in 1842, the Second Seminole War ended, opening the land of flowers to Northern invalids. St. Augustine was now available to function as an invalid tourist retreat.

Doctor Forry's quantitative support for St. Augustine as a possible journey for invalids was bolstered by the qualitative work of R.K. Sewall in *Sketches of St. Augustine*.<sup>6</sup> Sewall specifically wrote for the northern invalid.<sup>7</sup> The first chapter of the book provided the basic information that would be of interest to any visitor of Florida, incorporated in the manuscript were the relative locations of the Castillo, the St. Francis Barracks, and the harbor.<sup>8</sup> Included in the information about St. Augustine were overtones of the leyenda negra, particularly Sewall's

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Forry, "Statistical Researches relative to the Etiology of Pulmonary and Rheumatic Diseases, illustrating the application of the Laws of Climate to the Sciences of Medicine; based on the Records of the Medical Department and Adjutant General's Office" *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, ed. Isaac Hayes (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1841), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Forry 1841, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Forry 1841, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Rufus King Sewall, *Sketches of St. Augustine with a view of its history and advantages as a resort for invalids*, (New York: George P. Putnum, 1848).

<sup>7</sup> Sewall 1848.

<sup>8</sup> Sewall 1848, 8-16.

description of the inquisitorial dungeons in the fort.<sup>9</sup> The story of the Castillo hosting a dungeon was illustrated by William Cullen Bryant as early as 1843, "In one of them [rooms in the Castillo] a wooden machine was found, which some supposed might have been a rack, and in the other a quantity of human bones."<sup>10</sup> Sewell repeats this same story with some embellishments, "A human skeleton, with the fragments of a pair of boots and an empty mug for water, it is alleged were discovered within. As to the history of the place --- whether it was once an inquisitorial chamber, or the scene of vengeance..."<sup>11</sup> The guide that took William Bryant Cullen was quoted as stating, "'If the Inquisition,' said the gentlemen who accompanied us, 'was established in Florida, as it was in the other American colonies of Spain, these were its secret chambers.'"<sup>12</sup> Over time this story would repeated enough to be tempered into fact. It is quite possible that both Bryant and Sewell experienced the same guide. Both of their documents share the same story, and they come with some reservation "...either truth or fiction has succeeded in investing this place with mysterious and melancholy interest to an American citizen."<sup>13</sup> With repetition, the story became the truth.

The second chapter of Sewell's book is a collage of widely available histories of the area, and the third chapter is dedicated to describing the beneficial nature of the climate for the invalid. The third chapter is a collection of selected quotes from a variety of sources concerning the benefits of the St. Augustine climate, including those of the aforementioned Samuel Forry.<sup>14</sup> Sewell added the statistical information gleaned from Forry, and combined it with the current boarding houses and accommodations geared towards the invalid to create his book. This was

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<sup>9</sup> The leyenda negra or "black legend" is a historical phenomena which depicts the Spanish as cruel, ruthless conquerors.

<sup>10</sup> William Cullen Bryant, *Letters of a Traveler or Notes of Things Seen in Europe and America*. (Montana: Kissinger Publishing, 2005), 104.

<sup>11</sup> Sewall 1848, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Bryant 2005, 104.

<sup>13</sup> Sewall 1848, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Sewall 1848, 49.

one of the first guidebooks to report of the newly erected Magnolia House, an indicator of increased accommodations being built in the area.<sup>15</sup> Sewell utilized Forry's statistical analysis, added a few anecdotes and provided the information for an invalid to travel to St. Augustine to overcome whatever ailed the Northerner in the nineteenth century. Overall the message was powerful; St. Augustine, albeit a little out of the way, was a perfect spot for the rich northerner to live in an area that boasted the best of the sunny frontier, but without the risks involved with living too far from Anglo civilization. It created an outlet for the invalid traveler by providing an exotic location with foreign building styles, but at a location that was not too far from Savannah or Charleston. Tourism during the Early Statehood/Territorial period was geared toward the adventurous tourist or invalid. Travelling was mostly constrained by the lack of infrastructure. Only after the Civil War did the accommodations begin to approach the needs for mass tourism.

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<sup>15</sup> Sewall 1848, 61.

## CHAPTER 3 RECONSTRUCTION

During Reconstruction, tourism began to pick up as a wave of new arrivals began to make their way to St. Augustine. After the developmental hiatus caused by the Civil War, Florida began a steady route towards increased growth. Northerners and Southerners alike viewed Florida as a land of agricultural possibility. Settlements were mostly constrained to navigable rivers, most notably the St. Johns.<sup>1</sup> This chapter traces infrastructure, accommodations, and publicity changes that led to a change in tourism to St. Augustine. Infrastructure and hotel construction improvements expanded the tourist market and thus different kinds of tourists began to visit St. Augustine.

The guidebooks produced during Reconstruction utilized the same selling points contained within the antebellum contemporaries. In 1869, Daniel Brinton M.D. published, *A Guide-Book of Florida and the South: for tourists, invalids and emigrants*, which was structured similarly to Sewell's 1848 guidebook. Brinton's book is an indicator of the growth in Florida. In earlier guidebooks there are not as many listed sites. Brinton's publication was more comprehensive, the state was undergoing an increased settlement period.<sup>2</sup> The main impediment for tourism remained the lack of railroad transportation, "After  $3\frac{1}{2}$  hours of this torture [riding in a coach], the stage is checked by the Sebastian river, over which a miserable ferry boat conveys the exhausted tourist who at length finds himself in St. Augustine."<sup>3</sup>

Travel to St. Augustine would become easier, as detailed in 1872 by *The Guide to Florida, The Land of Flowers.* The bumpy stagecoach ride was bypassed by the St. Augustine to Toco

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<sup>1</sup> Gannon 1996, 259.

<sup>2</sup> Gannon 1996, 259.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Brinton, *A guide-book of Florida and the South*, (Jacksonville: Drew and Maclean, 1869), 62.

railroad line around 1870.<sup>4</sup> Tourists could take a steamer up the St. Johns to Tocoï and then take a fifteen mile railroad trip to enter the Ancient City.<sup>5</sup> Three years earlier, the telegraph lines that connected St. Augustine to Jacksonville were completed.<sup>6</sup> Just as transportation and communication were becoming easier, the hotel accommodations in St. Augustine were also improving, with expansions or construction of many of the great pre-Flagler hotels such as the Florida House, St. Augustine Hotel, and the Magnolia House.<sup>7</sup>

As the infrastructure and accommodations were creating a suitable environment for tourism, the publication of guidebooks and national press generated publicity for St. Augustine. In an 1870 edition of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, George Ward Nichols wrote a segment entitled, "Six Weeks in Florida." The article summarized his trip through Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and surrounding areas.<sup>8</sup> His portion on St. Augustine emphasized the impressive history of the city, and no doubt Nichols mentioned the dungeon in the fort, "Of course, attached to the old fort are many stories of thrilling interest; but one which has hair-raising power to every corner is that of the 'Dungeon.' Not in Chillon nor at Neuschloss, not upon the Rhine nor in all Europe, is there a more genuine dungeon than boasts San Marco."<sup>9</sup> Newspapers also picked up on publicizing St. Augustine, for example an 1873 *New York Times* correspondent wrote in an article entitled *St. Augustine-A Venerable City*, "The antiquated City of St. Augustine is rapidly becoming modernized."<sup>10</sup> The same article mentioned a number of prominent northerners who

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<sup>4</sup> Gregg Turner, *A Short History of Florida Railroads*, (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing), 70.

<sup>5</sup> George Olney, *A Guide to Florida: "The Land of Flowers," containing an historical sketch, geographical, agricultural and climatic statistics, routes of travel by land and sea, and general information invaluable to the invalid, tourist or emigrant*, (New York: Cushing, Bardua & Co., 1872), 104.

<sup>6</sup> Anon, "Th Telegraph," *St. Augustine Examiner*, December 28, 1867, 2; *New York Times*, December 28, 1867, 1.

<sup>7</sup> "The Ramber," pseud, *Guide to Florida*, (New York: The American News Co., 1873), 63.

<sup>8</sup> George Ward Nichols, "Six Weeks in Florida," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Volume XLI, June to November, 1870.

<sup>9</sup> Nichols 1870, 660.

<sup>10</sup> Anon, "St. Augustine-A Venerable City," *New York Times*, April 5, 1873, 4.



were making St. Augustine a destination for land speculation, and profitable orange groves.<sup>11</sup>

This article was supported by another of similar type in 1874, "At St. Augustine wealthy New-Yorkers are erecting Winter palaces, and at Jacksonville the Bostonians are building handsome mansions. Florida is the fashion."<sup>12</sup> St. Augustine was entering a period of growth during the 1870s, and a tourism industry was developing, only to bloom during the Flagler Era.

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<sup>11</sup> Anon, "St. Augustine-A Venerable City," *New York Times*, April 5, 1873, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Anon, "Pilgrims to Florida," *New York Times*, October 11, 1874, 6.

## CHAPTER 4 THE FLAGLER ERA

The arrival of Northern industrialists to St. Augustine changed the course of the town from a sleepy backwater to a thriving tourist attraction. St. Augustine benefited from over forty years of being advertised as a healthy climate for invalids, as well as being a historical oddity, that of being an "ancient" Spanish town in mostly British North America. Certainly the ingredients for a successful tourist attraction were present, most notably pleasant weather, an interesting locale, and ease of transportation. The relatively simple buildings of the previous periods were not exotic enough for the developers that escaped the chilly north, and many began intensive construction efforts, efforts that would have drastic effects on the built environment.

Henry Flagler first visited St. Augustine in the 1870s. He discovered the town on a side trip while staying in Jacksonville for a health retreat with his ailing wife.<sup>1</sup> Flagler's wife Mary would later pass away, but he remarried two years after her death.<sup>2</sup> On the advice of his doctor, the newly married couple honeymooned in St. Augustine, and Flagler was surprised to find a significant developmental change in both the built environment and the culture of the area.<sup>3</sup> Flagler saw exactly what the aforementioned newspapers were reporting, the nascent formations of a developing St. Augustine. Particularly influential in pushing Flagler towards building in St. Augustine were the San Marco Hotel constructed in 1884 by Isaac Crufts and the Franklin Smith's Villa Zorayda, built in 1883 based on the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain.<sup>4</sup> Developers in St. Augustine, including Henry Flagler and Franklin Smith, began a construction spree of several buildings established on imagined and extracted motifs of architecture of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Graham, *Flagler's St. Augustine hotels: the Ponce de Leon, the Alcazar, and the Casa Monica*, (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Graham 2004, 11-12

<sup>3</sup> Graham 2004, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Graham 2004, 12-13.

Spanish and Moorish styles. In 1885, Henry Flagler began construction on the Ponce de Leon Hotel, a superb model of Spanish Revival architecture. The building style of this type of architecture was continued throughout the 1880s with the additional construction of the Castle Warden, the Hotel Alcazar, and the Cordova Hotel. All of these projects were linked by the fact that they were all highly romanticized forms of an architecture that did not previously exist in St. Augustine. The new Moorish or Spanish renaissance styled buildings dwarfed the earlier buildings in St. Augustine, both in scale and ornamentation.

Charles Reynolds, a guidebook producer and historian, became an important critic on how sites were presented. He was a prolific writer of travel, history, and guide books, writing between the periods of the 1880s to the late 1930s. The Reynolds family moved from New York to St. Augustine when Charles was in college, and he lived in St. Augustine until 1879.<sup>5</sup> Charles Reynolds was employed by the magazine *Forest and Stream* and wrote two pamphlets on gaming laws.<sup>6</sup> A typical guide for St. Augustine is usually comprised of the following: around one hundred pages, multiple photographs of sites, a brief history of St. Augustine, and several advertisements. The guidebooks of the time typically lacked references or any way to trace the sources, and many of the guidebooks were based on the same traditional, passed down information that the site managers depended upon. One of these traditional guidebooks created under the pseudonym, “The Rambler,” in an 1876 edition of *Guide to Florida*, exemplifies the tales told about the fort, “...its dark passages, gloomy vaults, and more recently discovered

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<sup>5</sup> <http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pkyonge/reynolds.htm>

<sup>6</sup> For examples see: Charles B. Reynolds, *Game Laws: A compendium of the laws relating to game and game fish*, (New York, 1890). Charles B. Reynolds, *Game Laws in Brief: Laws of the United States and Canada relating to game and fish seasons*, (New York, 1911).

dungeons, bring you to ready credence of its many traditions of inquisitorial tortures, or decaying skeletons found in the latest-opened chambers...”<sup>7</sup>

Reynolds was listed as writing *The Standard Guide: St. Augustine* in 1886, however much of this information shows up in a previous publication, *The Standard Guide to St. Augustine and Fort Marion*, which was attributed to Roger Davis, in 1885.<sup>8</sup> Charles' father, Edward Henry Reynolds, owned the copyright. Charles Reynolds copied the Davis guidebook almost verbatim. However, the guidebook evolved as it was updated over the years. The guidebook changed during this period, as St. Augustine developed during the Gilded Age. Reynolds was hostile to many of these tradition based stories. When the St. Augustine Historical Society (SAHS) took over many of these sites, Reynolds and the society became involved in a lasting dispute over their different view of authenticity over the sites the society controlled or owned.

Much of the same critical information in *The Standard Guide* can also be found in expanded form in Reynolds' 1886 book, *Old Saint Augustine*, which traced the history of St. Augustine from the beginning of the Spanish occupation to the present time. The book contained much of what you would expect from a history of St. Augustine, but if the document is read critically; criticism of the tourist oriented sites can be found. The Castillo de San Marcos is only one of three sites that Reynolds mentions as being dubious in nature in book *Old Saint Augustine*. Reynolds states, “‘The oldest house in St. Augustine,’ like ‘the old slave-pen’ and ‘the old Huguenot burying-ground,’ is an invention of the sensational guide-book manufacturers.”<sup>9</sup> At this moment, Reynolds is not attacking the SAHS, because they did not control any of these

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<sup>7</sup> "The Ramber," 66.

<sup>8</sup> Both documents are very similar, see Roger Davis' publication, *The Standard Guide to St. Augustine and Fort Marion*, (St. Augustine: E. H. Reynolds, 1885).

<sup>9</sup> Charles B. Reynolds, *Old Saint Augustine*, (St. Augustine: E. H. Reynolds, 1886), 120.

sites, but he is questioning the current stories being told and written about them. The guidebook manufacturers are challenged again when Reynolds wrote about the Castillo:

Tradition has it that in these chambers certain remains were found, which were supposed, by the more imaginative, to be relics of cruel imprisonment and of the reign of the Spanish Inquisition. This tale of the bones in the dungeon was formerly received with the eager credence that the early explorers gave to the rumors of gold mines in Florida; but in later years, although the makers of sensational guide books cling tenaciously to the dungeon relics, skeptics have arisen, who deny the truth of the story.<sup>10</sup>

This passage is indicative of a common theme throughout Reynolds' publications. He concentrated on dispelling the tradition-based stories. In this case he sought to quell the story of the torture dungeon in the Castillo, but later he applied this treatment to other sites throughout St. Augustine, including the Oldest House. The Oldest House is not even mentioned in *The Standard Guide or Old Saint Augustine*, as being historically falsified because it was not then a popular attraction, and the SAHS did not yet own the site.

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<sup>10</sup>Reynolds 1886, 133.

## CHAPTER 5 THE SAINT AUGUSTINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The St. Augustine Historical Society was formed in 1883, at the same time as the exotic 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings in St. Augustine were being constructed.<sup>1</sup> The SAHS was one of the first organizations to begin some form of historic preservation in St. Augustine. It began purchasing buildings in order to save them from modernization or destruction, this echoing a broader national movement to save culturally important buildings.<sup>2</sup> The Society was instrumental in saving Fort Matanzas in 1911 which had fallen into disrepair.<sup>3</sup> The group was also responsible for curating the Castillo and the Oldest House in the late 1910s. An influential part of historic preservation and heritage tourism is the method in which sites are interpreted. The programming is as important as the sites themselves. Much of the authenticity of a site is perception, and perception is molded by programming. The presentation of sites in St. Augustine has been dubious at some periods of time, as evidenced by the guidebooks of the past. The guides and official histories of these sites varied greatly, depending on the site and time period. The character of the Society changed drastically from its initial inception of an organization based on historical and literary subjects which shifted towards a more business character in the early 1900s.

### **Business Interests**

The Society hired William J. Harris, a professional business manager, to run the guides at the fort. Harris was a keen promoter and salesman of souvenir items. History was secondary to his business interests.<sup>4</sup> The guides continued the traditional stories of the fort, as the historian Thomas Graham states in his history of the Society, “Visitors got a supposedly full and authentic

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<sup>1</sup> Graham 1985, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Graham 1985, 5; Charles Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Graham 1985, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Graham 1985, 5.

history of the fort and a trip to the 'secret dungeon.' Since little authentic information on the fort was available, the Society relied on tradition and imagination for much of its lectures.”<sup>5</sup>

Certainly much of the history of the fort was not documented then, but there was some information available, and as Reynolds elaborated in his book *Old Saint Augustine*, there was no proof for torture chambers except through traditional stories. However, like the exotic architecture springing up around St. Augustine, tales of unusual happenings in the past at the fort are major attractive devices for tourists.

The revenue generated from the fort led to the Society's next purchase, then known as the “Oldest House in America,” or the Geronimo Alvarez house.<sup>6</sup> The society did not become involved with the purchase without some investigation of the pedigree of the Oldest House. Two other houses in St. Augustine also held the same claim as being the “oldest house.” The Society put together the Old House Committee to discern which building was actually the oldest, and after major hearings and deliberation, “[it] cannot positively determine which is the oldest house in St. Augustine, but it is of the opinion, based upon the findings of this committee, that the house known as the Geronimo Alvarez house on St. Francis Street (the Oldest House) is such.”<sup>7</sup> With evidence based mainly on tradition, the SAHS bought the Geronimo Alvarez house in 1918 and began marketing it as the Oldest House. The combined tourist attractions, the fort and the Oldest House, gave the SAHS two of the most successful tourist draws of the time period. The other oldest houses were stripped of their titles, and rented out to various businesses. Harris, the director of the Society's economic success, benefited greatly from the success of these sites, as he

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<sup>5</sup>Graham 1985, 6.

<sup>6</sup>Graham 1985, 8.

<sup>7</sup>Graham 1985, 9-10 as quoted in Minutes Book, April 4, 17, 1917; Letter of George Reddington to Old House Investigating Committee, September 6, 1917, Oldest House file; Executive Committee Minutes, November 20, 1917. Also found quoted in William Harris, *Saint Augustine Under Three Flags: Tourist Guide and History*, (St. Augustine: W. J. Harris, 1918), 6.

received a twenty-five percent commission on admissions from the Oldest House and the Castillo for his promotional and business savvy.<sup>8</sup> As time passed the Oldest House became as important a fundraiser as the Castillo. The revenues from the Oldest House increased dramatically between the years 1926 to 1928, from \$1933.57 to \$4,637.98.<sup>9</sup> The revenue from the fort from the year 1928 was \$5,210.13.<sup>10</sup>

In 1918, Harris developed a brochure to promote various sites in *St. Augustine Under Three Flags: Tourist Guide and History*. The Oldest House and the Castillo received quite an amount of ink in the brochure, and as one would expect, the traditional stories are present. Harris dedicated almost one full page out of four in the “Description of Fort Marion [another name for Castillo de San Marco],” to the “Secret Dungeons.”<sup>11</sup> Stories of shocking tales of torment, including crucifixion, rack torture, and quicksand, all find a way into Harris' brochure.<sup>12</sup> Appropriately a corpse was also discovered, “in this dismal place, where not the faintest ray of daylight ever penetrates, and far from the sounds of the outside world, were found crumbled human bones.”<sup>13</sup> Harris' brochure also mentions the Oldest House, as the oldest house in the United States. Curiously the same segment also refers to the controversy over the claim of the Oldest House being the “oldest house,” Harris quotes the findings of the committee and states, that the house cannot be “positively determined.”<sup>14</sup> But Harris still labels the Alvarez House as the oldest, “[the Alvarez house] is the oldest house in the United States.”<sup>15</sup> How the “oldest

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<sup>8</sup>Graham 1985, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Minutes Book, St. Augustine Historical Society, January 2, 1927. [hereinafter cited as the Minutes Book, with appropriate dates]. Treasury Report, St. Augustine Historical Society, 1928.

<sup>10</sup> Treasury Report, St. Augustine Historical Society, 1928.

<sup>11</sup>Harris 1918, 3. In “Description of Fort Marion.”

<sup>12</sup>Harris 1918, 3-4. In “Description of Fort Marion.”

<sup>13</sup>Harris 1918, 4. In “Description of Fort Marion.”

<sup>14</sup>Harris 1918, 6. In “Guide to St. Augustine as it is Today.”

<sup>15</sup> Harris 1918, 6. In “Guide to St. Augustine as it is Today.”



house” can be determined when it cannot be positively identified is something of a mystery, nevertheless it does not prevent the site from becoming known as the Oldest House.

### **Opening Salvo with Response**

The SAHS and Charles B. Reynolds entered into a period of conflict in the 1920s and 1930s. Reynolds began printing another guidebook, this time to encompass information for the whole State of Florida. *The Standard Guide, Florida*, incorporated the material from *The Standard Guide: St Augustine*, but also added several other towns. The incorporation of other towns in Florida was prudent as Henry Flagler began pushing his railroad and hotels deeper into the south of Florida. St. Augustine was being bypassed as the elite vacation destination as Flagler extended his empire further south. The small section found in *The Standard Guide, Florida* dedicated to the traditional stories told at various St. Augustine sites exploded in the 1921 edition.

The 1921 guidebook was the opening salvo in a confrontation between Reynolds and the SAHS. Comparing the 1915 guidebook to the 1921 issue should illustrate the challenge put forth by Reynolds. In the 1915 guidebook, nothing is mentioned of the SAHS, primarily because the society gained control of the fort in 1914, and purchased the Oldest House in 1918.<sup>16</sup> Reynolds had not revisited the fort under SAHS control, when he published the 1915 guidebook.<sup>17</sup> The 1921 guide was explosive, as Reynolds threw down the gauntlet in this publication. The 1921 version was almost an exact copy of the 1915 book, with a notable addition. In the St. Augustine portion of *The Standard Guide, Florida*, Reynolds added a page lambasting the SAHS, particularly on the society's management of the Castillo and the Oldest House.

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<sup>16</sup> Graham 1985, 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Reynolds, *The Oldest House in the United States*, (New York: Foster and Reynolds Co., 1921), 4.

Reynolds began with the fort:

The fort is exploited by the St. Augustine Historical Society...One might assume that a “Historical Society” would be jealous of historical truth, and scrupulous to state only the strict truth and such an historical monument as Fort Marion; but on the contrary, the Society's guides recite weird tales of torture crosses, racks with bodies stretched on them by weights, skeletons chained to the walls...[these tales] are an affront to the intelligence of the hearer, a disgrace to a “historical” society, and a reproach to St. Augustine.<sup>18</sup>

Reynolds was appalled that the society would continue the traditional stories of torture.

Historical societies give authority to the narratives distributed at these sites, and information given by these societies is assumed to be authentic. The society should be critical of traditional stories, and narratives should be supported by history.

Reynolds is equally harsh of the Oldest House:

At its “oldest house” on St. Francis street the Society's representatives are as unblushingly mendacious in their statements representing the age of the house, asserting that it was built in 1565 (the year St. Augustine was founded); that it was used by the Franciscan monks...that the so-called “wishing well” in the yard was blessed by the monks, and they add other silly fabrications. The house contains exhibits of “historical antiques,” with labels which are accepted as being at least as authentic as the one on the wall, which sets forth that “this room was the Chapel used by the Franciscan Monks from: 1565 to 1590.” But the most extraordinary exhibition here is that of a “historical society” which practices such deception.<sup>19</sup>

The harshness of Reynolds' attack was taken seriously. These two sites were the most profitable sites of the SAHS, and were responsible for the financial success of a previously impoverished historical society.<sup>20</sup>

The society responded in the *St. Augustine Evening Record* of March 9, 1921 with the intent not to dignify Reynolds with a reply but did so anyway as the society stated it wished to:

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Reynolds, *The Standard Guide, Florida*, (New York: Foster and Reynolds Co., 1921), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, *The Standard Guide* 1921, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Graham 1985, 6-12.

“...assert to the world the belief of the St. Augustine Historical Society members that the dates and data it sets forth are right and correct, **cannot be disproved**, and are as near the facts as true lovers of history can establish from meagre historical records and **priceless traditions** handed down from father to son.” [emphasis added]<sup>21</sup>

The dependence on tradition and lack of ability to actually acquire historical records to secure the historical narrative given at the Oldest House, created a situation in which the false information could flourish. "Facts" that cannot be proven or disproven are not historical facts.

Reynolds responded to the society's article on April 12, 1921. He pushed for the foundation of a committee to investigate the Oldest House and other sites in St. Augustine.<sup>22</sup> The committee was to be comprised of three SAHS members with no financial ties to any of the sites, and two members chosen by Reynolds. Needless to say, the society did not participate in this cooperative investigation with Mr. Reynolds. After the society failed to agree to a cooperative “inquiry of the truth,” Reynolds began writing a booklet that would attack the society. The 1921 *The Standard Guide, Florida* and the flurry of correspondence in the St. Augustine Evening Record were the nascent stages of an assault on the SAHS that would not end until Reynolds' death in November 10, 1940.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Reynolds, *"The Oldest House"* 1921, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Reynolds, *"The Oldest House"* 1921, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Anon, "C. B. Reynolds, 84, Travel Bureau Agent" *New York Times*, November 11, 1940, 19.

## CHAPTER 6 THE CONFLICT INTENSIFIES

Reynolds began a booklet writing campaign that would specifically challenge the SAHS, starting in 1921 with, "*The Oldest House in the United States.*"<sup>1</sup> The booklet examines a number of claims that the society holds over the site. The most important SAHS claim addressed by Reynolds was that the coquina structure was built in 1565 by Franciscan Monks.

Attacking the idea that monks built the house in 1565 was not too difficult, after Reynolds researched the manifests and found no Franciscan Monks and found a quote from the town's founding father, Pedro Menendez, that he regretted not bringing the religious order in 1565.<sup>2</sup> His other rationale was inductive, as he illustrated that the living conditions are so tenuous that permanent structures are highly unlikely at this period of time. Furthermore coquina could not have been utilized because it had not been used as building material during this time.<sup>3</sup> Not only were living conditions horrible, but the location of the site of the original settlement was not actually built there, but in nearby area, what is now the Fountain of Youth Archeological Park.<sup>4</sup>

The claim that the site was owned by one family between the years 1590-1882, and that the society had documentation of ownership were both equally suspect. Reynolds surmised that the likelihood of these two events actually occurring was next to nil, for the following reasons: St. Augustine had been transferred among three nations during this period. Each transfer usually led to a high evacuation rate, and the town had been razed during several successful raids by the English and pirates.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Full title, "*The Oldest House in the United States*" *An examination of the St. Augustine Historical Society's claim that its house on St. Francis Street was built in the year 1565 by the Franciscan Monks.*

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, "*The Oldest House*" 1921, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds, "*The Oldest House*" 1921, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, "*The Oldest House*" 1921, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, "*The Oldest House*" 1921, 17-18.

The use of traditional stories as a substitute for historical evidence was the strongest argument in Reynolds' booklet. Using traditional stories can be interesting but also lead to inaccuracies, but they do generate funds. The Oldest House's ownership was also a question of dubious background. Stories cannot be passed down when whole populations were shifted out of the town during the various transfers of nationality.<sup>6</sup> The same hurdle faced early historians who tried to trace the ownership of the Oldest House. The reason that houses were highly unlikely to remain in the same family, is based on the same shifting of nationalities. Reynolds point is illustrated best, "...the question of the validity of the Society's claim of traditions attaching to its house is of no importance, because the owners of the house tell us that they have documents proving possession in the same family from 1590 to 1882."<sup>7</sup> If the society did have the documentation then why not make it public and shut down the negative Reynolds' press mill? The answer is simple, the funds that were being generated by the Oldest House were important and the Society did not have the means to produce evidence to counter Reynolds.

Reynolds did not stop with counterclaims to the society's Oldest House. He provided possible answers to the questions surrounding the house. According to documentation, Reynolds found that the house was not standing in 1778 because it was absent on the Peavett Grant, the land containing the house.<sup>8</sup> Archaeological evidence would later counter the Reynolds' Peavett Grant analysis and some other minor assertions, but for the most part, Reynolds was correct via a process of historical induction.<sup>9</sup> Reynolds is exceptionally harsh towards what he claimed were the purveyors of a fake St. Augustine: the SAHS, the St. Augustine Record, the Board of Trade, City Commission. According to Reynolds all of these groups either contributed to the fakes of

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<sup>6</sup> Reynolds, *"The Oldest House"* 1921, 19-20

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, *"The Oldest House"* 1921, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, *"The Oldest House"* 1921, 23-4.

<sup>9</sup> Compared to the information found in the *Evolution of the Oldest House*, Reynolds was correct about much of his inductions.

St. Augustine including the following: SAHS, City Commission, Board of Trade, or neglected to stop the fakes from being created like the St. Augustine Record.

For the most part, the Society did not respond to Reynolds after the publication of the 1921 booklet, but they did want to eliminate unsupported claims.<sup>10</sup> The Society did not have much historical material when they purchased the Oldest House. Much of the historical material at the time was still spread in various colonial record archives, most in Spain, Cuba, and England. It is important to note that the Society was comprised of English-speaking members, and very few were literate in Spanish. Therefore they could not read the maps even if they had them. This perhaps explains why they were looking for English maps to prove the Oldest House's age at a 1921 meeting, "...we should secure old English Maps, showing our present property to be the Oldest House, thus off-setting the doubt now prevalent in our community as to just what place should have this designation."<sup>11</sup> Of course the Society would have to find Spanish maps to prove the age of the Oldest House, since the Spanish arrived before the English.

At this point Society had not consolidated the available material. An inventory of St. Augustine material was taken by the American Historical Association in 1905, and there was very little information actually found at the Society or in the town for that matter.<sup>12</sup> An April 2, 1914 fire almost assuredly destroyed some material they had gathered from the founding of the Society to that point. Reynolds' booklet changed the Society's dearth of historical information, in part. To respond to the charges, the Society began to collect historical information on St. Augustine, particularly any information that could be found on the Oldest House. In Thomas

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<sup>10</sup> Graham 1985, 12. Also Minutes Book, March 1921.

<sup>11</sup> Minutes Book, February 8, 1921.

<sup>12</sup> *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1905*, (Washington: Government Printing Office), 339-352.

Graham's history of the organization, *The St. Augustine Historical Society, 1883-1983*, the fallout from Reynolds' pamphlet and the lack of historical documentation was made clear:

The Society attempted to remedy this situation by hiring Emily Wilson as research historian and librarian. Beginning in 1923 she searched for materials which would refute Reynolds's charges and authenticate the Oldest House. Over the years her efforts resulted in a major expansion of the documentary holdings of the Society and led to its acquiring one of the best small research libraries in the Southeast.<sup>13</sup>

The dialog between the Society and Reynolds had important unintended consequences. In order to defend the Oldest House, the society had to mine the colonial archives and expand their historical source material. The Society was becoming increasingly more dedicated to historical accuracy. The group needed to provide historical material on the Oldest House to protect a valuable asset, but many were also interested in clarifying genealogy of the building. As a result, the society began to cut some of its claims of the Oldest House, but at this time they still claimed to have the “Oldest House in North America.”<sup>14</sup>

Charles Reynolds was not just your average citizen, he was a partner in the “Ask Mr. Foster” travel agency empire.<sup>15</sup> Reynolds was a treasurer/secretary of the organization, and also the main generator of publications from the firm. *The Standard Guide, St. Augustine*, was just one of many guidebooks published by Reynolds. Places that also had their own “standard guide” published by the corporation include: Washington, Cuba, Florida, and New York. The attack on the Society was not toothless, since Reynolds had an audience, and he had an outlet to distribute pamphlets and booklets. In St. Augustine the “Ask Mr. Foster's” office was on the corner of

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<sup>13</sup> Graham 1985, 12-13; Charles Reynolds, *Fact versus Fiction for the new Historical St. Augustine*, (Mountain Lakes: Charles Reynolds, 1937), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Graham 1985, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Anon, "C. B. Reynolds, 84, Travel Bureau Agent" *New York Times*, November 11, 1940, 19.

King and Cordova Street, and the corporation had offices in almost all of the places in which they peddled their “Standard” guidebooks.<sup>16</sup>

Like many Society members, the official librarian and historian, Emily Wilson, was convinced that the St. Francis House was the Oldest House in the United States. Instead of an unbiased inquiry into the age of the building, Wilson began to gather information to authenticate the house to the First Spanish Colonial period and as the Oldest House in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Wilson began working on a counterargument to Reynolds, and midway through the 1920s the society had crafted a new story, based on Wilson's evidence, to validate the Oldest House. Central to the revamped lineage of the Oldest House was connecting the Oldest House to the Franciscan hermitage of La Soledad, the only building that survived the 1702 raid by the English.<sup>18</sup> Connecting the hermitage to the Oldest House was logical, since the Oldest House was found to be next to the Franciscan Convent. Additional evidence included the fact that Bernard Romans, an 18<sup>th</sup> century surveyor and author of the 1775 book, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida*, mentioned that a house from 1571 was still standing. Wilson asserted that this house must have been the Society's Oldest House.<sup>19</sup> The Oldest House became increasingly more important due to financial reasons. The Society lost control over one of its major money making operations, the Castillo in 1935 when it was transferred to the National Park Service.<sup>20</sup> In order to monopolize the market, the Society bought up the other “oldest houses” in town. In 1934 they bought up the rival “Old Curiosity Shop,” the Paredes House, and in 1939 the Society purchased the Don Toledo House.<sup>21</sup> At one time these houses were also claimed to be the oldest

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<sup>16</sup> Beth Rogero Bowen, *St. Augustine in the Gilded Age*, (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Graham 1985, 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Graham 1985, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Graham 1985, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Graham 1985, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Graham 1985, 17.



house, although they did not have a historical society backing up their traditions. There are always multiple ways to solve a problem, and if the SAHS could not substantiate their claims, they could eliminate the competition. Eliminating the other "Oldest Houses" was also a move to legitimize the Oldest House, and the existence of several Oldest Houses was a constant source of contention within the community and the Society as one member stated, "... in his opinion, there were too many Oldest Houses in Saint Augustine, which caused our people considerable embarrassment."<sup>22</sup>

The next flurry of discussion about the Oldest House and the SAHS occurred at a pivotal moment in the historic preservation movement in St. Augustine. In 1930, Harold Colee, President of the SAHS, was appointed a member of a historical marker program, the Fact Finding Commission. Many of the sites that were given official markers were not approved by the Society, particularly the marker in front of the Fountain of Youth Park.<sup>23</sup> The marker program agitated Reynolds, but it was not until 1937 until he wrote his next diatribe against the "fakes" of St. Augustine, including the SAHS. Internally the marker program caused problems for the SAHS, because many members were upset that President Colee would use his title to authenticate questionable sites around town.<sup>24</sup>

Reynolds responded to the newly found interest in St. Augustine with a booklet entitled, *Fact Versus Fiction for the New Historical St. Augustine*.<sup>25</sup> This publication was a response to the 1930 Fact Finding Commission, and a call to arms for authenticity regarding the Carnegie Institution-led St. Augustine Historical Program. Most of the booklet is not directed at the Oldest

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<sup>22</sup> Minutes Book, February 8, 1921.

<sup>23</sup> F. Hilton Crowe, *Charles Reynolds Material*, (Federal Writer's Project, 1938), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes Book, October 14, 1930.

<sup>25</sup> Full title, *Fact versus Fiction for the New Historical St. Augustine: A review in support of Dr. Verne E. Chatelain's declaration: "The program at St. Augustine must be absolutely sound historically without any flimflams or phoney stories."*

House, but there is a significant portion devoted to the building. Reynolds repeats the same arguments previously mentioned in his 1921 publication, but he is quick to point out changes that have occurred since his first booklet:

At some later time the year 1565 was abandoned for various other building dates and the guides were taught by the Librarian and Historian [Emily Wilson] to say when telling the story that “Tradition,” instead of “History,” says that the house was built for the Franciscans who came with Menendez.<sup>26</sup>

The Society had changed how they ran the Oldest House even dropping the claim of being the “Oldest House in the United States,” but the changes did not go far enough in Reynolds' opinion. The date of the structure was still in doubt. There was evidence that the structure existed during the First Colonial Spanish period, as noted in the 1764 Juan de la Puente map, but the remaining documentation was incomplete. The crux of Reynolds' argument, in *Fact versus Fiction*, is that tradition cannot be a part of a historical society's form of authentication, so the exact date of the house had to be “expressed in numerals.”<sup>27</sup>

St. Augustine entered into a new era of preservation in the 1930s with the arrival of the national organizations that experimented in preservation activities, particularly the Carnegie Institute. Ironically, the man involved with bringing the institution to St. Augustine was none other than Walter Fraser, the mayor of the town, and owner of the “authenticated” Fountain of Youth.<sup>28</sup> Some people hoped the arrival of the Carnegie Institute would bring a “Williamsburgese” restoration plan to St. Augustine. While the town was never restored completely like Colonial Williamsburg, the Carnegie Initiative produced drastic effects on St. Augustine.

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<sup>26</sup> Reynolds 1937, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Reynolds 1937, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Hosmer 1981, 313.

The display at the Oldest House during the beginning of the 1930s was a collection of a variety of items, a collection of odds and ends, reminiscent of a curiosity museum. In a *Washington Post* article in July 19, 1938 titled *The Post Impressionist: Captive Samovar*, described the museum as a “collection of unrelated bric-a-brac.”<sup>29</sup> The collection in the Oldest House consisted of a Hindu priest, a German Machine gun, beds slept in by a variety of dubious celebrity, a captured 1915 German machine gun, and last but not least a portrait of Chauncey Depew made with X's from a typewriter.<sup>30</sup> The constant critique of the Oldest House, by the author of the *Captive Samovar* and Charles Reynolds, led to the Society to seek help in improving their attraction.<sup>31</sup> In 1937 with the increased attention that the city received due to the Carnegie Institution, the Society sought the help of Verne Chatelain the representative of the Carnegie organization in St. Augustine, who recommended the society downplay the curiosity sections of the display, and restore the property to the early 1800s, a similar recommendation found in the *Captive Samovar*.<sup>32</sup>

A year after the publication, Emily Wilson wrote a long series of letters to F. Hilton Crowe, a local supervisor for the Federal Writer's Project, going through the Reynolds' booklet almost page by page.<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that Emily Wilson did not address the section on the Oldest House, she simply wrote, “Please examine my report at Judge Dunham's office [then the President of SAHS]...”<sup>34</sup> The crux of Wilson's report did not have any hard dates, and it was still dependent on tradition instead of history, partially because the historical documentation did not exist and because she wanted to believe that it was indeed the Oldest House, “we have proof of

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<sup>29</sup> T. R., "The Post Impressionist: Captive Samovar," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1938, X6; Graham 1985, 18.

<sup>30</sup> T. R. 1938, X6.

<sup>31</sup> Graham 1985,19.

<sup>32</sup> Graham 1985,19.

<sup>33</sup> Crowe 1938, 1-10.

<sup>34</sup> Crowe 1938, 7.

the Oldest House back to 1764 and we must take every step possible to get the abstract back to the beginning even if we lose our claim, but that I do not expect.”<sup>35</sup> Just as Wilson wrote a page by page analysis of Reynolds' latest material, Crowe did likewise. Crowe’s input to the project is heavily biased towards Wilson, and overly critical of Reynolds. He wrote a page and a half about Wilson and her unselfish years as the Society's librarian.<sup>36</sup> There is no doubt Reynolds made mistakes when he wrote his pamphlets, however the onus of evidence should be on the claimants of the Oldest House. An important piece of information can be gleaned from Crowe's work. He mentions that even business owners have been swayed to the traditional story, a fire insurance map had listed the building as “...over 300 years old...Thus has tradition.”<sup>37</sup> Crowe goes on to mention, “In fact it was not until Reynolds began his attacks that there was any question of the antiquity of the house.”<sup>38</sup>

The argument between Reynolds and the SAHS led to many changes in how the Oldest House was interpreted. Before Reynolds attacked the data on the Oldest House, the guides told visitors that it was the Oldest House in the United States and was built in 1565, that Franciscan Monks occupied the building, and that it housed a collection of curios that had little to do with one another. After Reynolds attacked the data, the story of the building had changed significantly, with a positive date to at least 1764. The “historical fact” of Monks living in the building had been changed to “tradition says” that the monks lived in the building. Reynold's and other’s criticism of the Oldest House being a collection of “sundry antiques” of dubious relevance pushed the Society to look to Verne Chatelain the Carnegie Institution's representative to St. Augustine. The most important outcome of the conflict between Reynolds and the SAHS

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<sup>35</sup> Graham 1985, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Crowe 1938, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Crowe 1938, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Crowe 1938, 40.

is the beginning of a shift of focus from being a purveyor of historical “flim flam” to the beginning of a different kind of house museum, based on historical fact.

Proving the age of the building was an impetus for Wilson and the SAHS to collect and organize information on the building. Even after the first conflict the crux of her argument depended on layers of historical evidence covering a traditional story base, however this in of itself, was a great shift from the total dependence on tradition. It would not be until the Society became involved with professional historians and archeologists that it deleted all traditional aspects of the Oldest House from the official story, particularly with the publication of the *Evolution of the Oldest House*, in 1962. The beginning of a movement towards a professional historical society began with the conflict between Reynolds, who pushed the Society from being led by its business interests to actually incorporating history into their properties. The outcome of the dispute; was that the Society took its first step from being like the other tourist traps to being a force of authenticity. The results of the Carnegie Institute's work in St. Augustine were Chatelain's book *Defenses of Spanish Florida*, the purchase of the Llambias House (and later transfer to the SAHS), and the groundwork for the 1950s restoration program.<sup>39</sup> The late 1930s preservation effort ground to a halt with the arrival of the Second World War. Charles Reynolds, the critic of St. Augustine's historical sites, passed away in November of 1940.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Graham 1985, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Anon, "C. B. Reynolds, 84, Travel Bureau Agent" *New York Times*, November 11, 1940, 19.

## CHAPTER 7 THE CURTIS PUBLISHING COURT CASE

During the war years, St. Augustine was more focused on the war than any petty squabbles that might have existed; but after the war was over, the various stakeholders once again came to blows over the town's sites. The catalyst for a major preservation crisis was an article printed in the March 5th, 1949 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post* in a series called "The Cities of America."<sup>1</sup> In the article concerning St. Augustine, the author Leigh White wrote a scathing review of some of St. Augustine's most well known sites, mostly targeted at Walter Fraser's properties, including the Fountain of Youth and the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse. The subtitle of the article was "Despite the efforts of promoters, our nation's oldest city retains much of its original charm. Its chief industry is the preservation-and fabrication-of historical landmarks."<sup>2</sup> The outcome of the article was a slew of libel court cases that were settled out of court for \$5,000.<sup>3</sup> Fraser had won \$75,000 in the first case in 1952, only 10% of what he originally sued for, \$750,000, but upon re-trial he settled for a mere \$5,000.<sup>4</sup>

In 1947, Leigh White began investigating St. Augustine on order to write an article about the town.<sup>5</sup> In St. Augustine he met with a wide range of townspeople, including many prominent members of the SAHS, businessmen, and politicians. White's article was damning to Fraser as it presented him as a manufacturer of history; "Fraser's talent is such that he can make anything, however new, look old."<sup>6</sup> White assaulted the the Fountain of Youth by attacking Louella Day

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<sup>1</sup> Leigh White, "Cities of America: St. Augustine," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 5 1949, 24.

<sup>2</sup> White 1949, 24.

<sup>3</sup> "Recent History," found in the Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 11.

<sup>4</sup> "Recent History," found in the Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 11; "Leigh White, Author of Article In Magazine Which Causes Libel Suit For \$750,000 is Called as Defense Witness" *The St. Augustine Record*, April 6, 1952, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Deposition of Edith Pope, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12.

<sup>6</sup> White 1949, 100.

McConnell, the previous owner of the site claiming that she had created the site before Fraser's ownership.<sup>7</sup> White similarly attacked the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, not necessarily for its age, but more on its presentation and method of paying surrey drivers a commission for bringing guests to the site.<sup>8</sup> The article was not only critical of Fraser, the SAHS received a share of White's critical eye, particularly the "wishing well" and the "money vine," and the irrelevant artifacts that were being displayed at the Oldest House.<sup>9</sup>

While many of the sites in St. Augustine and historical information were criticized by White, Walter Fraser was the only person to bring suit against the owners of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the Curtis Publishing Corporation. The suit is of interest to historians and preservationists because it identifies the main players in the preservation movement, and some of the questionable preservation practices come to light during sworn testimony.

An example of questionable practices came to light with the deposition of J. Carver Harris, who replaced his father, William J. Harris, as the business manager of the SAHS. The senior Harris had owned the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse before selling it to someone who then sold it to Walter Fraser.<sup>10</sup> In the hands of the Harris's the name of "Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse" was changed based on business interests to "The Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse in North America."<sup>11</sup> During the ownership of the Harris's a sign was placed that stated, "Recommended by the St. Augustine Historical Society."<sup>12</sup> According to J. Carver Harris, "My father and myself had no authorization from the Historical Society to place that sign up there.

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<sup>7</sup> White 1949, 100.

<sup>8</sup> White 1949, 102.

<sup>9</sup> White 1949, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Deposition of J. C. Harris, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 90.

<sup>11</sup> Deposition of J. C. Harris, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 88.

<sup>12</sup> Deposition of J. C. Harris, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 92.

We just did it."<sup>13</sup> Years later this action would cause a bit of embarrassment when the Harris's sold the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, and when the SAHS, of which the Harrises were members, wanted Fraser to remove the recommendation board.<sup>14</sup> Fraser wanted the Society to give him the same authorized "recommendation" that the Harris's had when they owned the structure, but by this time the organization had changed their criteria.<sup>15</sup> Fraser was probably a bit upset that the Harris's were able to enjoy the benefits of owning the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse when it was recommended by the Society, only to have the group change their minds when he owned the property. When interviewed Fraser stated that his basis of evidence for the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse was partially based on Harris's historical material.<sup>16</sup>

The deposition of Xavier Pellicer, vice president of the SAHS was illuminating because it clarified the relationship the Society had with W. J. Harris. According to Pellicer, Harris was a good manager but, "would stretch things, historically, in my opinion."<sup>17</sup> The Society had to reign in Harris at times because of his "want to make certain claims here and there that couldn't be substantiated."<sup>18</sup> Pellicer did not have any qualms with Fraser restoring the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, it was the historical claim that Fraser made on the building that upset him, that being the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse in North America. Particularly upsetting to Pellicer was the claim that the building was a seat of education, when there was little evidence.<sup>19</sup> Pellicer was

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<sup>13</sup> Deposition of J. C. Harris, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Deposition of J. C. Harris, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Deposition of J. C. Harris, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 95-96.

<sup>16</sup> Deposition of Walter Fraser, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 13, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Deposition of X. L. Pellicer, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 13, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Deposition of X. L. Pellicer, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 13, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Deposition of X. L. Pellicer, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 13, 109.



atypical of historical society members because he believed that Charles Reynolds' critiques had some validity, and he was perturbed that some people completely ignored Reynolds.<sup>20</sup>

The crux of the main issue with Fraser's sites; was that he was not the original purveyor of the Fountain of Youth or the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse. In fact, when he bought these properties he inherited much of the dubious data that was already incorporated into the sites. The Fountain of Youth property was associated with Louella Day McConnell's stories including the coquina cross and the silver casque, as well as the story of Ponce de Leon's landing site. When Fraser bought the Oldest Wooden Schoolhouse, he was buying the building based on its pedigree, particularly because much of the history of the building could be traced back to a prominent member of the SAHS, William Harris. This does not mean that Fraser did not embellish upon his sites. Fraser was guilty of "age washing" his buildings, as the article proclaims.<sup>21</sup>

One of the more interesting aspects of the case is the deposition of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, famed Florida author. According to her deposition she was given a proof to read of the article before publication in order to make comments on the material contained within the article.<sup>22</sup> The attorney went through the article almost line by line in the deposition to ask whether or not she had commented on the material, and for the majority of it, she stated she had not.<sup>23</sup> When asked which sites she thought were fabricated, as per the article, Rawlings stated that one of them was Fraser's Fountain of Youth.<sup>24</sup> Rawlings agreed with the writer of the article

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<sup>20</sup> Deposition of X. L. Pellicer, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 13, 111-112.

<sup>21</sup> White 1949, 100.

<sup>22</sup> Deposition of M. K. Rawlings, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Deposition of M. K. Rawlings, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 14-21.

<sup>24</sup> Deposition of M. K. Rawlings, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 24.

that the "...chief industry is still the preservation and fabrication of historical landmarks."<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that Rawlings was paid to review the galley proofs and comment on them, yet she emphasized that she was not a historian, even though she lived in St. Augustine and was familiar with much of the history of the area.<sup>26</sup>

The depositions with the greatest impacts came from Harris, Pellicer, and Rawlings, although many others were taken. The outcome from this case was alienation of Walter Fraser from the SAHS. Some of the newer members were not only political enemies of Walter Fraser, but they also had a much different idea of authenticity. Money generation over authenticity issues were also changing during this time as the Society began to transform. The Society's focus slowly changed from involving itself in questionable claims of the past to a new standard of authenticity. The Fraser sites were much less likely to revise their claims due to new research and history, because they were controlled by one person, not by a Society beholden to the individual members. As the SAHS incrementally became more authenticity oriented, the members of the Society became increasingly more critical of Harris and his focus on money generation, and of Fraser's sites which were in a state of authenticity stasis.

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<sup>25</sup> Deposition of M. K. Rawlings, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Deposition of M. K. Rawlings, found in Special Collections at the University of Florida in the Edward W. Lawson Collection, box 12, 17.

## CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

The historical evaluation of sites changed in St. Augustine after the Fraser court case. First and foremost, the SAHS undertook an extensive investigation of the Oldest House to pin down the official date of the building. The result of this study was the *Evolution of the Oldest House* which contains John W. Griffin's 1954 partial archeological dig of the Oldest House. Griffin found the evidence of a house built in 1650-1660 under the foundation of the Oldest House.<sup>1</sup> These new findings confirmed what Charles Reynolds had stated: the existing building cannot have been built before the inferno of the 1702 raid.<sup>2</sup>

Tracing St. Augustine's history from invalid retreat to popular tourist attraction is as exciting as the history the town is trying to preserve. Strong personalities were actively involved in the preservation and commoditization of the history of St. Augustine. What is particularly interesting is to notice how the presentation of sites run by the SAHS and Walter Fraser changed. The two started off presenting their respective sites in a similar fashion, which was more income than authenticity driven. Slowly the Society changed, due to an impetus created by the dialog between Charles Reynolds and Emily Wilson. Fraser did not change his presentation over time, yet the Society continually shifted towards a more authentic product, a result of increased professionalism.

An increased tourism industry led to a change in the way historical sites were presented in St. Augustine in the early preservation movement. The motive of the SAHS was more economically driven as a result of the increase in tourist admission, and only after public criticism with the combination of the Carnegie Institute did the Society evolve to a force of authenticity.

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<sup>1</sup> Gjessing 1962, 102.

<sup>2</sup> Gjessing 1962, 1.

Soon after the Fraser court case, St. Augustine began to coalesce around a new preservation movement. Although the SAHS would always remain a powerful authentication agent, the movement was led by a slightly different cast of characters, namely members of the Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board. This board would carry the torch of preservation in St. Augustine from 1959 to the late 1990s, and was responsible for shifting the preservation focus to the St. George Street area. This organization preserved and reconstructed most of the buildings in St. Augustine. The HSAPB was abolished and replaced by the City of St Augustine's Heritage Tourism division, which continues to look after the properties today.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joe Shaughnessy was born in South Carolina, in 1981. As the second child of Mimi and James Shaughnessy, he grew up in Tavernier, Florida and graduated from Christ School in 2000. Joe has a brother, James, who lives with his wife, Allison in New Jersey. Joe earned a B.A. in history from Flagler College in 2003. After the completion of his master's in Historic Preservation, Joe continues researching the preservation movement in St. Augustine, Florida.