

# Committee on Resources

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Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands

Hearing on H.R. 2457 to authorize funds for an education center for the Castillo de San Marcos and for other purposes

Tuesday, July 22, 2003, 2:00 p.m.

My name is William R. Adams. I am appearing before the Subcommittee on behalf of the Colonial St. Augustine Preservation Foundation, Inc., a not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to engage in and encourage public and private participation in preserving, restoring, and reconstructing the historic colonial resources within the City of St. Augustine that embody that city's significant place in American history. I am also the director of the City of St. Augustine's Department of Heritage Tourism, which administers St. Augustine's visitor services program and manages a museum that interprets the city's colonial history.

The reason for my testimony today is to urge the Subcommittee to act favorably upon H.R. 2457, which authorizes funds to develop an educational center for the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, located in St. Augustine. Before addressing the specifics of the proposed educational and orientation center, I would like to provide some historical background that might explain the need for the facility.

The significance of St. Augustine to the history of the United States is manifest. Its historical resources incomparably testify to the contributions of Spain and Spanish-speaking people to the historical and cultural development of the United States. For over two centuries, St. Augustine served as the capital of the Spanish empire in this part of the continent and for most of that time constituted virtually the only population center in the vast southern region stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River. The enormity of St. Augustine's contributions to the architectural and cultural heritage of America can hardly be weighed.

Throughout the last century and a half of St. Augustine's 256-years long colonial era, the Castillo de San Marcos was the northern-most military outpost within Spain's enormous New World empire. It is the oldest masonry fort and the best preserved example of Spanish colonial fortification in the continental United States. Begun in 1672 and substantially completed by 1695, the Castillo subsequently enabled the Spanish to withstand two attempts by the English to drive them from St. Augustine and Florida.

The War Department assumed control of the Castillo in 1821 when the United States took possession of Spain's Florida colonies. The venerable fortress was transferred to the National Park Service in 1936. Since that time, it has been the central historical attraction within St. Augustine, with an average annual visitation of more than a half million.

The Foundation that I represent here today has picked up the reins of a seven-decade long program to restore the northern section of the colonial presidio of St. Augustine, adjacent to the Castillo. That Restoration program, initiated in 1936 upon the recommendation of a national committee of citizens, public officials and scholars, was originally directed by a former chief historian and acting director of the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings for the National Park Service, Dr. Verne Chatelain.

From 1959 to 1997, the State of Florida administered the Restoration program. Upon the state's withdrawal, the City of St. Augustine, numbering only some 12,000 inhabitants, took responsibility for carrying on a project that is of inestimable importance to the interpretation of American colonial history. The Colonial St. Augustine Preservation Foundation was formed to mobilize the support of private citizens to assist the City in preserving and interpreting for its visitors St. Augustine's colonial legacy. In concert with the City of St. Augustine, the Foundation has identified the development of the proposed educational and orientation center for the Castillo as a first priority.

The visitor to the Castillo de San Marcos enters the site coldly unprepared, leaving all but the very well educated unable either to understand its place in history or fully enjoy the experience. The lessons about the past that this historic site, like any other great piece of history, ought to impart are, I strongly suspect, lost upon most. Few historic sites managed by the National Park Service or, for that matter, any state and local agencies that administer them, labor under such a disadvantage. No illustrations, no film, no lectures of any kind prepare the visitor.

Especially disadvantaged by the lack of an orientation center are school children, some 75,000 of whom arrive annually on sponsored visits; and the disabled, who cannot gain access to the terreplain or upper level of the Castillo because its features prohibit construction of access-ways for them.

The Castillo itself and the grounds surrounding it contain no space upon which to erect a center for orienting visitors. For that purpose, the City and the Foundation selected two obvious, well situated and privately owned parcels adjacent to both the Castillo and the interpretive museum that is administered by the City. The City has already purchased one of those sites. The Foundation has secured from the owner of another an agreement for sale. The City has also undertaken to secure the cooperation of the State of Florida, the owner of the surrounding lots, in this project.

This effort to develop a visitor's center for the Castillo is accordingly a partnership in every sense, for it will involve federal, state and municipal governments along with the private sector, represented by the Foundation and the people who contribute to it. All will share in the cost of the center's development. The State of Florida and the City of St. Augustine will contribute land to the project; the Foundation and the Federal Government will contribute the monies for its construction. The City will bear the cost of managing the facility in future years, a not inconsiderable sum given the many millions of people who will enter in that time. The National Park Service will contribute staffing to conduct visitor orientation.

The siting and construction of the center will also contribute to the continuing Restoration program through the removal of intrusive buildings and their replacement by buildings that in scale and appearance harmonize with the adjacent presidio museum. Our foundation is committed to this project and we respectfully urge your support.