

FLORIDA BUILDINGS I LOVE



The Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine. At center is the San Pablo bastion. HAROLD BUBIL/SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE

No. 75: Castillo de San Marcos, 1695, St. Augustine

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The Castillo de San Marcos became the first “Florida building I love” on Friday, Aug. 3, 1962.

That is when I visited it with my family on a short vacation to the Nation’s Oldest City in an un-air conditioned 1958 Dodge.

It was an old fort with massive walls topped with cannons. I was 9. That pretty much explains it.

It still looks the same after 56 years. The Castillo is the oldest masonry fort in America, and the only 17th-century North American fortress still in existence, according to the National Park Service, which administers the facility as a National Monument open to tourists.

Two decades after the Spaniards established St. Augustine in 1565, the settlement was attacked by Sir Francis Drake of England. In response, Spain built a series of wooden forts before starting construction on the Castillo in 1672.

The Castillo once housed the Spanish governor of St. Augustine, making its “castle” designation appropriate. Never captured in battle, it was passed among the Spanish, the English, the United States and the Confederacy. It was besieged twice, unsuccessfully, by the British, whose cannons could not do much damage to the thick coquina walls. The porous walls tended to absorb the small British cannonballs in 1702 and 1740.

It is one of two forts in the world that are made of shell-based coquina — the other is Fort Matanzas, 14 miles south of St. Augustine. The coquina for both structures was quarried on Anastasia Island at the mouth of St. Augustine’s harbor.

The fort’s design responds to the military technology of the day, using the bastion system of fortification. Bastions are star-shaped projecting structures that were designed in response to black-powder weapons. The shape was intended to withstand or avoid cannon fire. The square Castillo, surrounded by a dry moat that could be filled with about a foot of water, has a bastion at each corner.

The waterfront fortress was large enough to house the 1,500 residents of St. Augustine and its garrison while under siege. The Castillo also was used as a military prison on several occasions. Prisoners from the first Seminole War, including Chief Osceola, and captive Indians from the American West were held there; two dozen died in 1886-87. The heat can be quite oppressive, even with breezes off the Matanzas River and the Atlantic Ocean.

Before the stone fortress was built in the late 1600s, the Spanish had a wooden fort that also was called Castillo de San Marcos. After the Spanish gave it up by treaty, twice, it was called Fort St. Mark by the British, who gained control in 1763 following the Treaty of Paris. But in 1783, Florida was transferred back to Spain, which gave up the territory to the U.S. in 1821. In 1825, the United States Army renamed it Fort Marion.

In 1942, the National Park Service and Congress restored the name Castillo de San Marcos.

I am guessing the 9-year-olds still love it.

“Florida Buildings I Love” is Harold Bubil’s homage to the Sunshine State’s built environment. This article originally ran on May 19, 2018.



The Castillo de San Marcos National Monument in St. Augustine, is shown in this aerial photo on Oct. 8, 2016. CHRIS O’MEARA/AP



A view of Matanzas Bay can be seen from atop the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, a Spanish masonry fort begun in 1672 and completed by 1695 that protected St. Augustine from pirate raids and Spain’s rivals. ERICA BROUGH/OCALA LIFE



Tourists leave the sally port entrance to the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine. HAROLD BUBIL/HERALD-TRIBUNE



Tourists wander the grounds of the Castillo de San Marcos. CRAIG R. BAILEY/USA TODAY NETWORK