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# Exploring Black history and culture in St. Augustine, Florida

*Michael J. Solender*

10-12 minutes

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St. Johns County Ocean Pier. Near here is where the fabled 1964 integrated Beach Swim civil rights demonstration was held.

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FloridasHistoricCoast.com

History in America has always been shaped by the tellers, and no place are the omissions more consequential for Black Americans than in St. Augustine, Fla., our nation's oldest city. Here 457 years of Black American history, long stories untold, are today being brought to light by contemporary institutions and historians eager to uncover a fuller recounting of history than previously chronicled.

Today's visitor to the Ancient City finds richly textured examples of African Americans' economic, cultural, and historic impact on St. Augustine's development — from their role supporting early Spanish explorers and the unusual north-to-south passage to freedom along the fabled Underground Railroad, to their establishment of Lincolnville, a thriving St. Augustine Black neighborhood that played a significant role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

St. Augustine resident and historian David Nolan notes not only were there Black crewmen who accompanied Spanish conquistador Pedro Menendez on his 1565 expedition to St. Augustine when he claimed La Florida for Spain's King Phillip II, his arrival was preceded by free Africans in the French settlement at nearby Ft. Caroline.

Packaged alongside some of Florida's most pristine beaches, stunning architecture and ocean-fresh seafood, St. Augustine's historic Black touchstones make for holiday get-aways that deliver family fun and cultural enrichment. Here's what not to miss:

### **Castillo de San Marcos**

Spain's interest in St. Augustine lay in protecting the Gulf Stream shipping routes and solidifying their hold on La Florida — a vast area encompassing Florida and several of today's surrounding southeastern U.S. Not long after its founding, St. Augustine was threatened by the British colonists advancing from the north. After building a series of nine wooden forts, the Spaniards constructed the stone fort, preserved today as part of a national monument and one of the most visited sites in the Ancient City. Built between 1672 and 1695, this iconic Castillo is constructed of coquina — a sedimentary rock dredged from the ocean floor. Visitors learn about the fort's storied 457-year history through self-guided exhibits exploring design, various occupiers, and people, including Europeans, Native Americans and Africans, who've passed through St. Augustine through the centuries.

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St. Augustine's storied Castillo de San Marcos was built by the Spanish between 1672 and 1695. This iconic fort is constructed of

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## **Ft. Mose Historic State Park**

St. Augustine makes legitimate claim to being the earliest “sanctuary city” in the Americas as Spain famously offered freedom to runaway Africans enslaved by British colonizers in Georgia and the Carolinas in exchange for service in the Spanish militia and adoption of the Catholic religion. By 1738, nearly 100 former enslaved people founded the first free Black settlement here at Ft. Mose. They were led by Francisco Menendez, an African enslaved person who escaped from a plantation in South Carolina. Menendez fought alongside the Spanish and became captain of the militia here. An engaging Visitors Center is a good first stop upon entering the park for an overview of the site’s history, examination of artifacts uncovered during successive archaeological digs, and interpretation of the hardscrabble life here. Surrounded by marsh and acres of parkland, the park is heaven for birders, hikers, kayakers, naturalists and photo safaris of all kinds. Pack a lunch and enjoy the shade, view and picnic tables on the grounds.

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Ft. Mose reenactor portraying Francisco Menendez, an African slave escaped from a plantation in South Carolina. Menendez fought alongside the Spanish and became captain of the militia here. FloridasHistoricCoast.com

## **Ximenez-Fatio House & Museum**

Built in 1798 by Spanish merchant Andre Ximenez, the property in

the historic district operated as a grocery, tavern, and billiards room for the Spanish military in early St. Augustine. His descendants sold the house to the first of three successive women entrepreneurs (including Louisa Fatio) who ran the enterprise as a fashionable boarding house. Purchased and restored by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the state of Florida in 1939, the house and museum opened to the public in 1946. “Our mission is historic preservation, patriotic service, and education and historic activities,” said Payson Tilden, museum director. Tilden acknowledged the importance of recently added programming to document and highlight the history and stories of the enslaved people that served in this urban plantation as staff. Through research of wills, church records, legal documents, censuses, and manuscripts, the team has uncovered intimate details of slave life and created a series of programs entitled “I lived here as well.”

## **Lincolville Museum and Cultural Center**

“St. Augustine has the oldest African American history in the country,” said R. Gayle Phillips, executive director of the Lincolville Museum and Cultural Center. “It starts with the Spanish influence, though most of [our] history doesn’t get told because American history is written from the English standpoint. We’ve worked hard here at the Lincolville Museum and Cultural Center to get people to listen — and help us share — these untold stories.” Housed in the former and historic Excelsior School, the first public high school for African Americans in St. Augustine, the museum is the epicenter of Black history and cultural experiences for the Ancient City. With artifacts and ephemera going back more

than 450 years, the museum excels with contemporary artifacts and exhibitions including a police fingerprint card documenting Dr. Martin Luther King's arrest for protesting here on June 11, 1964. Frequent educational programs, cultural exhibits, and music (Jazz anyone?) are held at this treasured institution.

Drive along the nearby **Accord (Anniversary to Commemorate the Civil Rights Demonstrations) Freedom Trail** a self-guided tour with more than two-dozen historic sites in the Lincolnville neighborhood including the stretch of MLK Boulevard where Dr. King marched, **Bethel Baptist Church**, home to countless SCLC civil rights meetings, and **Dr. Hayling's Dental Office**, home of the first non-segregated waiting room in St. Augustine and office of Dr. Robert B. Hayling, a prominent local civil rights leader.

Additional must visits when in St. Augustine include touring **Flagler College**, the one-time Hotel Ponce De Leon, a legendary Spanish Renaissance architectural gem built by Gilded-age industrialist, Henry Flagler. **The Lightner Museum**, directly across the street from the college, and one-time Alcazar Hotel, is now home to an American collection of fine art, furniture, cut glass, and collectibles where visitors experience early 20th century architecture, art, and design. Hit the beach at the **St. Johns County Ocean Pier** where nearby the 1964 Beach Swim (a civil rights swim-in) was held.

**Casa De Suenos**, a cozy and hospitable B&B, is a great place to headquarter when visiting St. Augustine. Here, sumptuous breakfasts, happy hour, and evening treats daily, a walk-to-most-everything downtown location and beyond comfy rooms make CDS a get-away destination.

*Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte, N.C.-based journalist. His work has been featured at The New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, Metropolis Magazine, Salvation South, Southern Living, Charlotte magazine, NASCAR Illustrated, American City Business Journals, Business North Carolina, The Jewish Daily Forward, and others. Read more from him at <https://michaeljwrites.com/>.*

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