National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Fort Matanzas National Monument
Florida

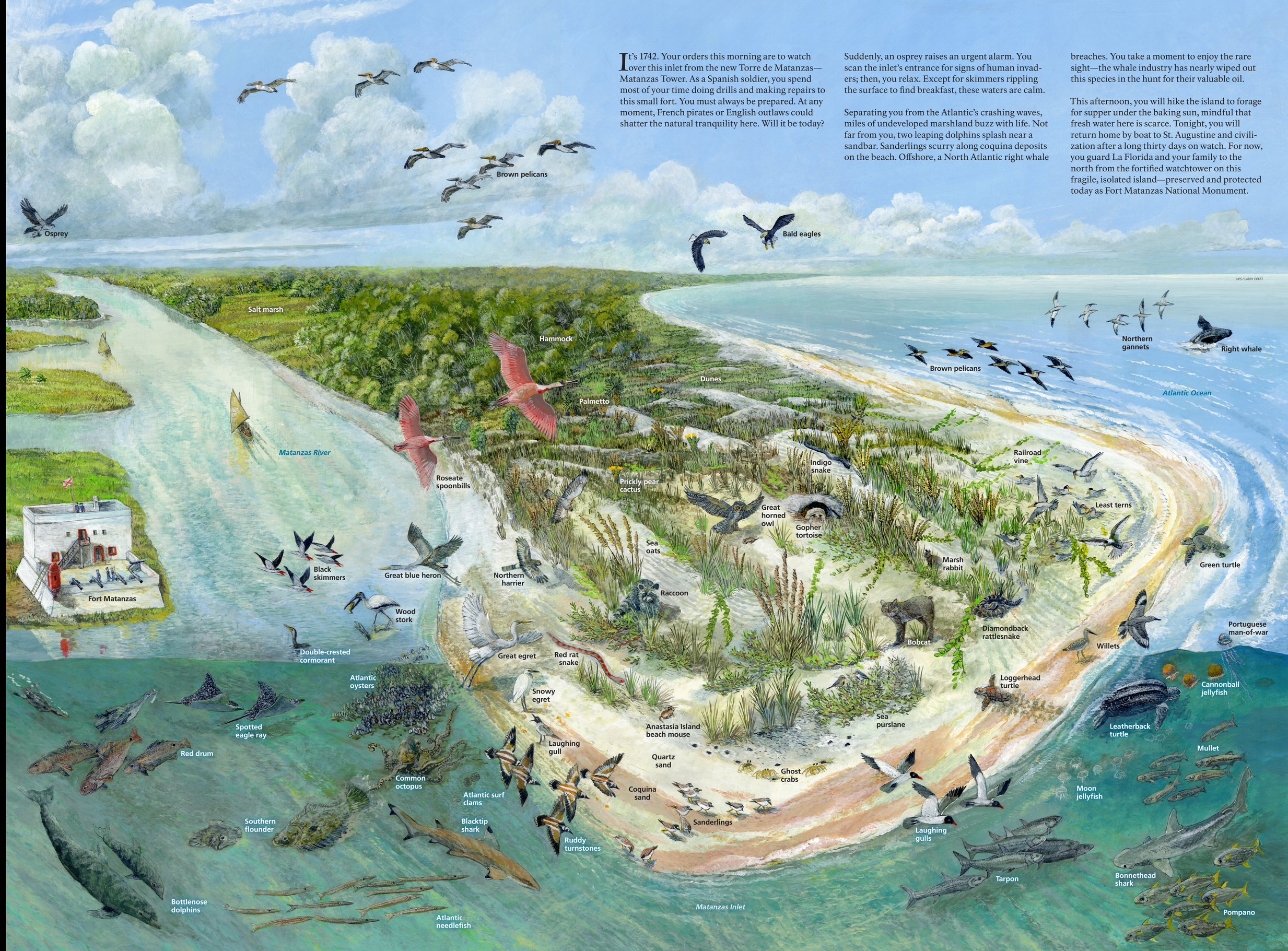
Fort Matanzas

It's 1742. Your orders this morning are to watch over this inlet from the new Torre de Matanzas—Matanzas Tower. As a Spanish soldier, you spend most of your time doing drills and making repairs to this small fort. You must always be prepared. At any moment, French pirates or English outlaws could shatter the natural tranquility here. Will it be today?

Suddenly, an osprey raises an urgent alarm. You scan the inlet's entrance for signs of human invaders; then, you relax. Except for skimmers rippling the surface to find breakfast, these waters are calm.

Separating you from the Atlantic's crashing waves, miles of undeveloped marshland buzz with life. Not far from you, two leaping dolphins splash near a sandbar. Sanderlings scurry along coquina deposits on the beach. Offshore, a North Atlantic right whale breaches. You take a moment to enjoy the rare sight—the whale industry has nearly wiped out this species in the hunt for their valuable oil.

This afternoon, you will hike the island to forage for supper under the baking sun, mindful that fresh water here is scarce. Tonight, you will return home by boat to St. Augustine and civilization after a long thirty days on watch. For now, you guard La Florida and your family to the north from the fortified watchtower on this fragile, isolated island—preserved and protected today as Fort Matanzas National Monument.

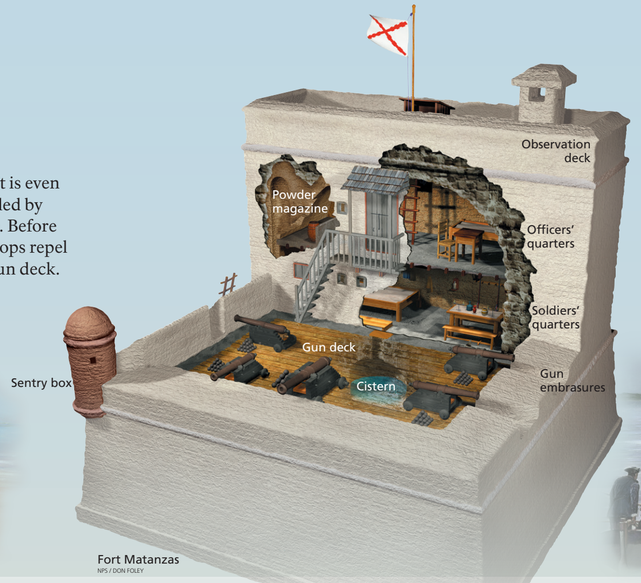


Fort Matanzas

The main threat to St. Augustine is from the north by sea. The city is also vulnerable from the south by river. Beginning in 1569, Spain's military builds a series of wooden watchtowers along the Matanzas River, approaching St. Augustine. Wind, water, and heat repeatedly wear down the towers. In 1740 the Spanish replace the southernmost tower with a masonry fort.

Fort Matanzas proves its worth before it is even completed. In 1742 twelve British ships led by Gov. James Oglethorpe appear offshore. Before they can enter the inlet, the Spanish troops repel them with cannon fire from the fort's gun deck.

NPS / STEVEN N. PATRICIA



Fort Matanzas
NPS / DON FOLEY

NPS / STEVEN N. PATRICIA

The site…was the most advantageous and proper to keep under cover the entrance into the bay through this point.

Lt. Ramón de la Cruz, 1820

Spanish officer, 1700s
NPS / RICHARD SCHLECHT

The Life of a Soldado in the 1700s Every 30 days, a fresh crew—an officer, two gunners, and four privates with provisions—rowed from Castillo de San Marcos for rotation at Fort Matanzas. Families remained in St. Augustine, where the soldado (Spanish soldier) likely worked a second job. From this remote outpost, he took part in patrols, maintenance, or small-scale fighting. He also guarded supplies and prisoners or aided shipwreck victims. For leisure, he played music or gambled. His single-pot meals included rice, vegetables, beans, and meat with bread or hardtack for dipping. When rainwater in the cistern ran low, he hauled fresh water from streams a few miles away.

Fort Matanzas, 1912
HENRY HIRD / VISIT ST. AUGUSTINE

Fort Matanzas, 2018
NPS

Before European Settlement Timucua people occupy most of northern Florida for several hundred years. They grow crops, hunt for food, and trade with other tribes and newcomers from Spain—until relations deteriorate.

Left: Timucuan stone projectile point
Right: Fishbone hair pin or needle
CITY OF ST. AUGUSTINE

1513 After Juan Ponce de León's exploration, Spain claims Florida. Power struggles among Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain play out in the New World over the next few centuries.

1564 The French establish Fort Caroline. Built with the help of the local Timucua, it is one of the first attempts by Europeans to start a colony in the New World. France's presence disrupts Spain's ambitions to dominate New World trade and culture; years of conflict ensue.

1565 To stop French expansion in the area, Spain establishes St. Augustine. In September a French fleet from Fort Caroline sent to attack the town is hit by a storm and wrecks far to the south of St. Augustine. The site where Spanish soldiers kill the French shipwreck survivors is called Matanzas—the Spanish word for slaughter.

1569 The Spanish build an unarmed wooden watchtower, thatched hut, and stockade at Matanzas Inlet (*above*). The structures fall victim to the elements and must be replaced often.

1588 British defeat Spanish Armada

1607 English settle Jamestown

1619 First enslaved Africans brought to Virginia

1672–95 Spain builds Castillo de San Marcos to protect St. Augustine (*map below*).

1740 When Great Britain lays siege to St. Augustine, Spain starts building a solid coquina (shellstone) fortification at Matanzas Inlet. Unable to carry large cannon through these shallow waters, a ship would be outgunned by the fort's artillery.

1742 Two British longboats enter Matanzas Inlet (*above*) in September. Assuming the new fort is not ready for combat, the British are surprised by cannon fire from the gun deck. They return in April 1743, but rough seas turn them back; they make no other attempts to attack the fort.

1763 Spain cedes Florida to Great Britain as a result of the Seven Years' War (1756–63). Many Spanish colonists and most of the dwindling population of Timucuas evacuate to Cuba.

1775–83 American Revolution

1783 Defeated in the American Revolution, Great Britain returns Florida to US ally Spain. As pressure for colonial independence grows, conflicts in Florida plague Spain.

1821 Spain cedes Florida to the United States on March 3. Florida becomes the 27th US state on March 3, 1845.

1853 After years of neglect, the fort has deteriorated. Ceilings and walls are cracked, the river has undermined the foundation's southeast corner, and vegetation overruns the exterior. Restoration begins in 1916 to preserve the fort for its historic value.

1861–65 US Civil War

1914–18 World War I

1924 On October 15 President Calvin Coolidge designates Fort Matanzas a national monument. Originally under the War Department, ownership transfers to the National Park Service on August 10, 1933.

1929 Great Depression

1939–45 World War II

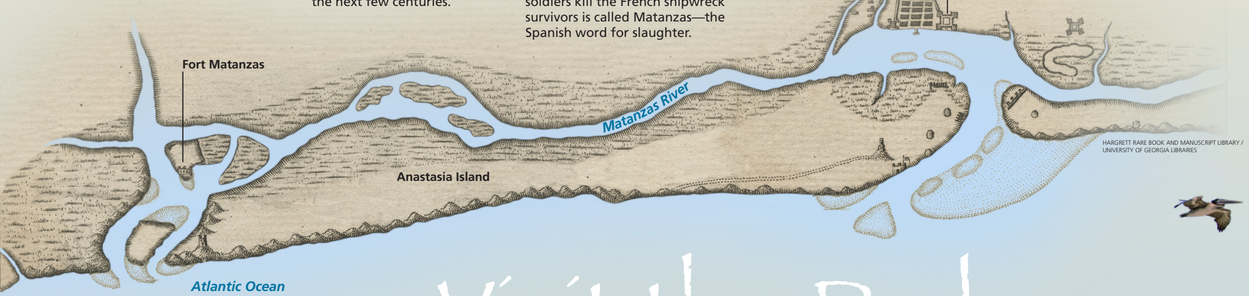
1964 Civil Rights Act

1972 The National Park Service begins free ferry service to the fort. More repairs stabilize and restore the fort, and rooms are historically furnished.

1999 Historic fort chimney reconstructed.

1500 1600 1700 1800 1900 2000

FIRST SPANISH FLAG—NPS; ALL OTHER FLAGS—WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



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White ibis
FWS / KIRK ROGERS

Brown pelicans in formation
PIXABAY

Visit the Park

View of the fort across the Matanzas River
NPS

Fort Matanzas National Monument is 14 miles south of St. Augustine via FL A1A. The park is open 9 am to 5:30 pm daily; closed Thanksgiving and December 25. Admission is free.

The visitor center has information, a film, a sales area, and exhibits on natural and historic features.

Visit the fort only by ranger-led tour. A passenger ferry runs hourly on the half-hour from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm, weather permitting. Get a boarding pass (free) at the visitor center.

Swim Safely Rip currents are dangerous! Swim with caution. • There are no lifeguards on duty at the park. It is recommended you swim only at guarded beaches. • Park (free) at beachside and riverside lots; closed daily at 10 pm. Overnight parking is prohibited.

Enjoy a Safe Visit The climate is hot and humid. Drink plenty of water. Watch for overexertion. Wear sunscreen, cool clothing, sunglasses, and a hat. • Watch the weather. Seek shelter during storms. • Do not climb or sit on fort walls, rocks, or cannon. • Do not walk on oyster shells.

EMERGENCIES CALL 911

Regulations Alcohol and metal detectors are prohibited. • Glass containers are prohibited on the beach. • Docking private vessels at the fort and letting off passengers are prohibited. • Pets must be leashed. Clean up after your pet. • Federal law prohibits firearms in many areas; refer to signs posted at entrances. For more information contact a ranger. • A complete list of regulations is on the park website.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For more information go to the visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website. The ferry and Coastal Hammock Trail are wheelchair-accessible; the fort is not.

More Information Fort Matanzas National Monument is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.

Fort Matanzas National Monument
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National Park Foundation.
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View from the Fort Matanzas watchtower
NPS