

Take a Tour of “America’s Oldest...

CELTIC City” - St. Augustine !

by Albert Syeles, President of Romanza

Every March “Spanish” St. Augustine, Florida, USA, celebrates its Celtic roots with the only St. Patrick Day Parade in Northeast Florida, and the nationally recognized “St. Augustine Celtic Music and Heritage Festival”.

We tend to think of St. Augustine’s history as being primarily Spanish. Even the significant British Colonial period here, which spans the American Revolution, only gets occasional attention. But in recent years, tens of thousands of heritage tourism visitors have discovered and celebrated St. Augustine’s CELTIC roots. Although over half of the citizens of St. Augustine can claim Irish, Scottish, Welch, or other Celtic ancestry, residents and visitors alike are still learning how Celts are prominent in our fair City’s long and remarkable heritage. St. Augustine’s has an amazing Celtic history, including Colonial Governors and historic vicars of Celtic decent, stories of romance and mystery, and most extraordinarily: St. Augustine was *founded by Celts!*

We begin our City tour at City Hall /The Alcazar and the Statue of Don Pedro Menendez



Was the founder of St. Augustine and Governor of La Florida in 1565, Don Pedro Menendez, Celtic? Menedez and his 800 colonists were from the northern, Celtic region of Spain. The people of his home town, Aviles, and the surrounding regions: Asturias, Galicia, and Basque, are of Celtic decent! They have their own language, closer to Portuguese than Spanish. The people of Northern Spain are Spanish-Celtic and share many traditions with the Scots and Irish.

They play bagpipes called “gaita”, and wear kilts called “falda escocesa”.



Aviles still celebrates its Celtic roots with the annual “Festival Intercéltico de Avilés” of more than 100 groups including huge gaita competitions! This music has more in common with the “Celtic Nations” of Brittany, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Man, Scotland and Ireland than with Spanish music from Castille or Andalusia.

According to former Mayor George Gardner, “Our city’s heritage is more bagpipes than bullfights”. Separated by a range of mountains from the rest of Spain, Asturias and Galicia in Northern Spain are different in several ways from the Southern parts of Spain. The country looks green, and the music sounds somehow familiar to ears used to listening to Irish or other Celtic music.” Music is a compelling reflection of a culture, as is the array of Asturian pipe bands, led by the gaita which is arguably the forerunner of the Scottish bagpipe.

St. Augustine was founded by Celts... *Spanish Celts!*

Castillo San Marco - 1784 the Spanish government stationed the **Hibernia Regiment** in St. Augustine with 460 Irish soldiers. The Spanish military welcomed these Irish expatriates, who couldn't return to their homeland. They came from a militarized society with weak central authority, and had a professional reputation for bravery as soldiers. Several Irish and Scottish military men even rose to the position of Governor of Spanish Florida. The arrangement allowed the Irishmen the opportunity to keep spirited, armed and trained to face any challenge, including the possibility of returning to Ireland. The garrison and its men interacted with the townspeople in many ways and with notable incidents.

Murder Mystery on Charlotte Street

On the night of November 20, 1785 the only violent crime in the Second Spanish period disrupted life in St. Augustine. **Lt. Guillermo Delaney** of the garrison was attacked near the home of his girlfriend, Catalina Morain. Delaney lingered with his wounds for two months, but could never describe his assailants before he succumbed. Delaney was apparently not the only admirer of this "seductive seamstress". Two men were jailed, but were later found to be falsely accused. Two other soldiers, known for either violent temper and jealous rages, or scandalous conduct with a servant girl, were imprisoned for perjury and for implicating the two innocent men. At least one of them was suspected of conspiring with Catalina. Evidence was scarce. The Governor was unable to prove the murder charges and turned to the slow wheel of bureaucracy in Spain. In the interim, some of the witnesses were transferred out of St. Augustine, and the case grew cold. The two men were still in jail in 1790, when the Governor's term ended. The murder of Lt. Delaney remains officially unsolved.

Narrow Streets, Pipers and Bravado

Rory McIntosh, captain of His Majesty's Highlanders, always attended by Scottish pipers, paraded the narrow streets of St. Augustine, breathing out fire and slaughter against the 13 revolutionary "whig" colonies. During the American Revolution, Florida was the "fourteenth British Colony" that remained loyal to the Mother Country. "Old Rory" was a most extraordinary character, a kind of Don Quixote, who even in old age, was at all times ready to storm any whig fortress that might present itself. In 1778 the garrison of St. Augustine marched to attack whig-occupied Savannah. One morning with the fortification of some fine Scottish spirits, Rory decided on his own initiative to attack a small whig fort on the route, despite the protests of his compatriots. He approached the gate and commanded "Surrender!" He was promptly hit in the face with a rifle ball and fell, but immediately recovered. Rejecting calls from his own to run for his life, he called back "Run yourself, but I am of a race that never runs", retreating backwards safely into the lines, flourishing his sword, keeping his face to the enemy.

Government House

Besides Florida's first Spanish Colonial Governor Don Pedro Menendez, six more Colonial Florida Governors were of Celtic decent: **Brigadeer Sebastián Kindelan y O'Regan** (Irish decent; Second Spanish Period), **Enrique (Henry) White** (Irish decent; Second Spanish Period), **General Patrick Tonyn** (Irish decent; British Period), **Major General James Grant , Laird of Ballindalloch** (Scottish decent; British Period), **Admiral John Eliot** (Cornish decent; British West Florida), **Brigadier General Montfort Browne** (Irish decent; British West Florida), **George Johnstone** (Scottish decent; British West Florida).

Clandestine Romance

Our visit to Government House includes a little "romanza". In 1785, the clandestine marriage of the lovely Dominga de Zespedes, daughter of the Governor, upset her family, embarrassed her father and put him in a delicate position as the head of the Spanish government in Florida.

Lt. Juan O'Donovan was posted by the Spanish to St. Augustine with the Hibernia Regiment, composed of soldiers from Ireland. Dominga and O'Donovan wanted to marry. But Lt. O'Donovan did not meet the criteria for the noble Zespedes family. O'Donovan was not Spanish. His officer's pay was not sufficient to provide a household that would be adequate in the eyes of her father.

On May 29, 1785 the couple used the excitement of a grand party in the Governor's Mansion to sneak away from the festivities. Father Miguel *O'Reilly* was lured to the house of Dominga's friend Angela, hearing she had suffered a serious accident. He arrived to find Dominga and O'Donovan. Instead of giving last rites, the priest married Dominga and Lt. O'Donovan. The couple promptly returned to the grand party and announced the bond.

O'Donovan was arrested immediately for marrying without the permission of his commanding officer and was sent to Havana under arrest. Officials and even the King of Spain examined the case over the next two years, but the marriage was valid. Finally in March 1787, O'Donovan was returned to St. Augustine and to his wife of almost two years with whom he had never lived.



Plaza de la Constitucion – In 2012 St. Augustine celebrated the bicentennial of Spain’s 1812 Constitution and our unique Constitucion Monument in the Plaza. This is the only remaining Monument to Spain’s Constitution. All the rest of the 1812 Constitucion Monuments *in the world* have disappeared – except ours. The Monument was erected by the order of Florida’s Spanish Governor **Sebastien Kindelan y O’Regan**. (Both his parents were Irish. NOTE: Our City Manager, John Regan, says he is no relation.) Brigadeer Kindelan’s name is still on the 200-year-old Monument. When Spain’s King returned from exile in 1814, he dissolved the fledging Constitucion and issued orders to destroy all monuments to it. Some say that since St. Augustine spent the entire treasury building it, we just hid the Monument’s plaque in the church until it was not forbidden any more in 1820. Others say we just didn’t get the memo.

Cathedral-Basilica (Across the street from the Constitucion Monument)

Irish Priests **Thomas Hassett** and **Miguel O’Reilly** supervised the construction of St. Augustine’s beautiful Cathedral from 1793 to its completion, and consecrated it in 1797.



Aviles Street: Padre Miguel O’Reilly House Museum

Father O’Reilly’s house was the St. Augustine parish rectory. He and fellow Irishmen were the colony’s principal pastors in the Second Spanish Period. O’Reilly was born in Ireland where the English were still suppressing the Catholic faith. He was trained for the priesthood in Spain, and sent to St. Augustine in 1777 to minister to the Menorcans. He became the chaplain of the Hibernian Regiment and “vicario” of the entire Colony. Here he was the teacher of Felix Varela, the Cuban writer and hero who is now up for Sainthood.

Finally we move to Mission Nombre de Dios

The mission is not only the site of Don Pedro Menendez’s first landing and the first European settlement in the U.S. with his 800 Colonists; it is also the site of America’s first Mission and Parish. Irish priests, fleeing English Protestant rule in their native land, made their way to Spain and its colonies like St. Augustine. The Catholic Church in Spain trained and assigned numerous Irish priests to be the Colony’s vicars. Other priests were born in Spain or Portugal of Irish parents, and were often engaged by the Jesuits and the Franciscans because they spoke English. **Ricardo Artur (Richard Arthur)** was one of these. He served in St. Augustine between 1598 and 1606, was one of the first parish priests in America. He was of Irish decent.

St. Augustine’s has a long and amazing Celtic history that started right at the beginning in 1565. St. Augustine was founded by Celts... Spanish Celts. We are not only the Nation’s Oldest City, we’re the **Nation’s Oldest Celtic City!**

Explore our “European” city, loaded with history, many cultures, beauty and great food!

Find the CELT in YOU in America’s Oldest CELTIC City.

SIDEBAR

St. Augustine Celtic Music and Heritage Festival and St. Patrick's Day Parade

St. Augustine's Celtic Music and Heritage Festival is "*arguably the finest collaboration of Celtic artists assembled in the United States*".

St. Augustine's St. Patrick's Day Parade has already been recognized internationally by "Ireland of the Welcomes" magazine, as one of the United States' 7 most remarkable St. Patrick celebrations.



The sounds of the ancient Celtic peoples of Scotland and Ireland are as alive today as ever at the St. Augustine Celtic Music Festival, every March in downtown at Francis Field on Castillo Drive. *Find the Celt in you* as you take in the sights, sounds and tastes of centuries of European history. Celtic clans from around the world show their ancestral pride, the St. Patrick's Day

Parade marches through the streets of the Oldest City's Historic District, Highland games athletes demonstrate their mind-boggling strength, and vendors offer up Celtic cuisine and handmade crafts.

But the hands-down favorite of the St. Augustine Celtic festival is the music. Scottish and Irish bands playing both traditional tunes and modernized renditions of the ancient Celtic music appear live on stage throughout the two-day premier event:

- The Festival began in 2011 with 5 Celtic headliner bands and 24 total performers from Europe, including official "Irish Folk Legends" The **Dublin City Ramblers**, and Spain's triple-platinum, Asturian bagpiper and flautist Jose **Hevia**, *who hails from Aviles*, Don Pedro Menendez's home town and St. Augustine's Sister City!
- In its second year, 2012, the Festival attendance grew to 10,000 and introduced headliner Scots-born **Albannach** and 9 other bands.
- The 2013 headliner was Scotland's Hall of Fame **Tannahill Weavers** with a dozen other acts. The festival grew to 15,000 and became the fastest growing Celtic festival in America.
- In 2014 New York's unblinkingly political and thoroughly Irish **Black 47** reprised their 2011 appearance in a special final appearance as part of their "Farewell Tour".
- In 2015 **Makem & Spain** headlined 8 international Celtic bands on the main stage.
- In 2016 sensational **Seven Nations** returns for the first time since 2011. Perennial crowd-pleasers **Albannach**, the **Dublin City Ramblers** and **Rathkeltair** return along with many more.

Aye, so if you're thinking about missing this one, yer talking oot yer fanny flaps.