

**"THE OLDEST HOUSE IN THE UNITED STATES,"
ST. AUGUSTINE, FLA. AN EXAMINATION OF
THE ST. AUGUSTINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S
CLAIM THAT ITS HOUSE ON ST. FRANCIS
STREET WAS BUILT IN THE YEAR 1565 BY THE
FRANCISCAN MONKS**

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CHARLES B. REYNOLDS

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(26)

"The Oldest House in the United States"

St. Augustine, Fla.

**An examination of the St. Augustine
Historical Society's claim that its house
on St. Francis Street was built in the
year 1565 by the Franciscan Monks**

By CHARLES B. REYNOLDS

**NEW YORK
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1921**

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THE PURPOSE OF THE INQUIRY.

ST. AUGUSTINE is famed as the oldest town in the United States. Because of its age one looks for old things. The visiting tourist expects to find relics of the distant past, material tokens of the city's romantic history. But except for the Fort, the Gateway and the narrow streets, there are no such reminders here. In the absence of genuine antiquities, mercenary ingenuity has invented spurious ones. The stranger knowing no better accepts the false for the true.

Under these circumstances an extensive and flourishing system of faking has been developed to coax the coin from the winter tourist. As a rule, the inventors and promoters of the fakes are not natives nor old-time residents.* Not being of St. Augustine stock, they have no pride in the town to make them jealous of its good name. They are not in the least troubled that their dishonest practices give the town notoriety as a city of fakes. They tell their revenue-producing lies with such assurance and repetition that some of the home folks themselves after a time accept the frauds, and not only grant the fakers immunity, but when the fakes are attacked rally to the defense of them and cry out that the business interests of the town are in jeopardy.

This was just what happened last winter when I published an article on the "Fakes of St. Augustine," and at the next meeting of the Board of Trade excited members (including the City Manager) took the floor to denounce the "attack," and at a meeting of the Historical Society the wail went up that "every business interest of St. Augustine had been damaged." The fakes, it will be noted, are "business interests."

There is an organization which bears the name of the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science. Notwithstanding the conventional import of such a title, the Society exploits the most audacious of the "oldest house" fakes. The anomaly of the situation is to be explained by one of two assumptions: Either the St. Augustine Historical Society is so ignorant of St. Augustine history and so credulous, as honestly to accept the lies told to it and by it told to others about the age of its St. Francis street house; or else the Society knows the history of St. Augustine, knows therefore that the story of the age of

*The individual who is the chief promoter of and profiler by the Society's St. Francis street house enterprise and to whom the Society farms out its commercialization of Fort Marion is a person who is not a citizen of St. Augustine nor of Florida.

the house is a lie, and yet for its own reasons sponsors the date and hoaxes the public. It is for the Society to tell us which of the two assumptions it would have us adopt as the one more in keeping with the character and dignity of a historical society.



In the spring of 1920, visiting St. Augustine after an absence of some years, I found flourishing there three varieties of fakes for tourists. In the Florida Standard Guide and in an article in Mr. Foster's Travel Magazine (January, 1921) I described what I had seen and heard—the Ponce de Leon mission cross fake, the string of lies told by the Society's guide who conducted my party through the Fort, and two of the oldest house fakes, in particular that of the Historical Society on St. Francis street. Events in the city's history were recalled and historical authorities were cited to demonstrate that the Ponce de Leon mission and the oldest house were fictions; and the suggestion was made that the mercenary deceptions ought to be suppressed for the sake of the city's good name.

The action which followed on the part of the Historical Society was reported in the St. Augustine Evening Record of March 9:

"At a regular meeting of the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science, held in the reading rooms of the Hotel Ponce de Leon Tuesday evening, Chauncey M. Depew, of New York, president of the organization, presided, and . . . put the question, unanimously carried, placing the Society on record as not disposed to dignify the alleged slanderous articles of C. B. Reynolds with a reply, but to again assert to the world the belief of the St. Augustine Historical Society members that the dates and data it sets forth are right and correct, cannot be disproved, and are as near the facts as true lovers of history can establish from meagre historical records and priceless traditions handed down from father to son."

The Record of April 12th published a letter in which I said:

"I assume that we are all sincerely desirous of establishing the truth about the Historical Society's house on St. Francis street and about the Ponce de Leon coquina cross. As one step toward that end I suggest that a committee of investigation be selected, say of five members, three to be named by the Historical Society and the Board of Trade and two by me. My only stipulation is that no individual who is personally making money out of the Society's activities shall have place on the committee. I will very gladly submit my evidences, drawn from the contemporaneous records of the time, which I think will show beyond any dispute the falsity of the claims which have been called in question by me, namely, that the house on St. Francis street was built

by Franciscan monks in 1565, and that the coquina cross belonged to a religious mission established by Ponce de Leon in 1513.

"I invite the Historical Society and the Board of Trade to join with me in such an endeavor to establish the truth, and I request that the findings of the committee may be given publication in the Record."

And I added that I thought I had "a right to expect the support of the citizens of the town, the Board of Trade and all members of the Historical Society who are solicitous for the ascertainment of the truth."



The Historical Society and the Board of Trade having declined my invitation for an inquiry into the truth of the matters under review, I am now submitting to a wider consideration, with respect to the St. Francis street house, what I had intended to lay before the committee. In essential respects it is a repetition of what was said in the article on "The Fakes of St. Augustine," but with more detail and with citations of chapter and verse for the historical sources quoted. It was intended also to submit to the committee the several works referred to that the correctness of the references might be verified. Those who are interested will doubtless find the volumes in the library of the Historical Society, though it is difficult to reconcile the Society's having them with the curious notion held by the members that we are obliged to rely on priceless traditions handed down from father to son.

SOME HELPFUL DATES.

- 1565. Pedro Menendez establishes St. Augustine.
- 1586. Francis Drake burns St. Augustine.
- 1665. John Davis burns St. Augustine.
- 1702. Governor Moore burns St. Augustine.
- 1763. Florida is ceded to Great Britain. Spanish leave. English occupy St. Augustine.
- 1783. Florida is retroceded to Spain. English leave. Spanish occupy St. Augustine.
- 1821. Florida ceded to United States. Spanish leave. St. Augustine becomes an American town.

THE HOUSE ON ST. FRANCIS STREET.

In the year 1882 G. F. Acosta, administrator of the estate of Mrs. E. A. Acosta, petitioned the Court for an order to sell the lot at the corner of Marine and St. Francis streets, for the benefit of the infant owners. The petition drawn by his attorney, C. M. Cooper, set up that the large lot had its greatest value from its frontage on Marine street, that it was vacant except for an old dilapidated house rented to negroes, "from which no more had been received than money to pay the taxes, and at times not enough to pay the taxes," and that "the property as it stands yields no rent."

The Court having granted the order of sale, the lot was sold; the building on it was rehabilitated from its negro occupancy, and was enlarged, extended both on the east and on the west, and variously altered. Shortly thereafter it was used by the new owner for the business of oldest house. Succeeding owners exploited it for the same purpose, and in 1918 the business was taken over by the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science. Because of the prestige given by its name the Society has largely developed the business, for the popular notion of a historical society leads the average person to accept as fact what such a society says on a historical subject. The tens of thousands of persons who have visited the Society's house on St. Francis street presumably have believed the statement because made by a "historical society," that the house was built by Franciscan monks in 1565 and is the oldest house in the United States.

Like every historical assertion made by a historical society, this one is a legitimate subject of examination, to test its accuracy. Such an examination if thoroughly and honestly made will disclose whether the Society's claim for the antiquity of the house is based on historic truth, or whether the building in its character of "oldest house" is the fake that I said it was in my article on "The Fakes of St. Augustine."

It is such an inquiry that I propose to make in the pages which follow.

THE RECORDS.

The year 1565, when the Society says its house was built, was the year in which Pedro Menendez de Aviles established Fort St. Augustine. It was long ago, but the records of the time are available. Contemporary accounts were written by Mendoza (1), who was Menendez's chaplain, and by Meras (2), brother-in-law of Menendez and official chronicler of the enterprise. Menendez (3) himself wrote long letters to the King and to others. Barrientos (4), who was a friend of Menendez's, wrote a history based on Menendez's own official report to the King. Barcia (5) in a later work drew his material from original sources. The "Unwritten History" compiled by Miss A. M. Brooks (6) contributes to our information. In these several records may be found material to determine the points at issue.

(1) Relacion hecha por el Capellan de Armada Francisco Lopez de Mendoza, del viaje que hizo el Adelantado Pedro Menendez de Aviles a la Florida.

(2) Memorial que hizo el Doctor Gonzalo Solis de Meras de todas las jornadas y sucesos del Adelantado Pedro Menendez de Aviles, su cufiado, y de la Conquista de la Florida y Justicia que hizo en Juan Ribao y otros franceses.

(3) Cartas de Pedro Menendez de Aviles.

The three foregoing are reprinted in Eugenio Rudiaz y Caravia's "La Florida, su conquista y colonizacion por Pedro Menendez de Aviles," Madrid, 1893. The references to the several works are to the pages of the Rudiaz volumes in which they are printed.

(4) Vida y hechos de Pero Menendez de Aviles... Compuesta por el maestro barrientos, Catredatico de salamanca, 1568. In Dos Antiguas Relaciones de la Florida publicadas por primera vez por Genaro Garcia, Mexico, 1902.

(5) Ensayo Cronologico para la Historia General de la Florida, por Don Gabriel de Cardenas z Cano [Barcia], Madrid, 1723.

(6) The Unwritten History of St. Augustine, copied from the Spanish Archives in Seville, Spain, by Miss A. M. Brooks, and translated by Mrs. Annie Averette, St. Augustine.

How the St. Augustine Historical Society esteemed the work of Miss Brooks was told by President De Witt Webb in his address before the Society, March 14, 1917: "In alluding to the early members of the Society, I should have mentioned as among the most active and valuable, the labors of Miss A. M. Brooks. Her book, 'The Unwritten History of St. Augustine,' is of the greatest value, and all her work for the Society... was devoted to its best interests." (Year Book, 1916-1917, page 8.)

(7) Souvenir of the Two Oldest Relics in the United States: Oldest House and Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Fla. Illustrated in colors with history. Published under the auspices of the St. Augustine Historical Society and Institute of Science, 1920. This is quoted, not for historical data, but for the Society's statements respecting the age of the house. The audacious mendacity of the booklet gives it an unique place among publications of historical societies.