

Contact:

Barbara Golden, Communications Manager

904-669-8142 (cell)

BGolden@FloridasHistoricCoast.com



**ST. AUGUSTINE
PONTE VEDRA**
FLORIDA'S HISTORIC COAST®

Discover the Incredible Story of America's First Free Black Settlement

Fort Mose offers a unique look into the lives of freed slaves with plans to build a reconstruction of the settlement

St. Augustine, Fla. (August, 2023) – St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra, and The Beaches are a goldmine of interesting and groundbreaking history – it comes with the territory when you're the Historic Coast. Visitors can easily identify the European influence; they most likely know the city's Spanish history and its place in the Civil Rights Act. However, the city of St. Augustine has an even more captivating and inspiring history ensconced in its northern border – the first legally sanctioned free Black community in America, Fort Mose.

Traveling south on US-1 from Jacksonville, it's easy to miss the Fort Mose State Historic Park entrance. Just before the two statues of conquistadors standing guard is a road leading east into what looks like a residential neighborhood. Travel through this neighborhood towards the Intracoastal Waterway and enter one of Florida's most significant cultural resources. The settlement of Garcia Real de Santa Theresa de Mose, now referred to as [Fort Mose Historic State Park](#), was established in 1738 as the first legally sanctioned free Black settlement in the United States. Fort Mose's inhabitants were mainly slaves of West African origin who escaped from the British colonies of South Carolina and Georgia to Spanish Florida in small groups. The first group arrived in 1687, comprised of eight men, two women, and a nursing child, traveling by dugout canoe. Along their perilous journey to St. Augustine, escaped slaves were often aided by Native Americans, creating an early Underground Railroad that ran south.

By 1738, more than one hundred brave men, women, and children had journeyed through swamps and dense tropical forests to Fort Mose. The Spanish government officially designated the settlement as *Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose* or *Royal Grace of Saint Teresa of Mose*. It was established as a military and residential community, guarding the northern boundary of St. Augustine. The Spanish crown made two provisions for Fort Mose's residents – they needed to become loyal Spanish subjects and convert to Catholicism. It made sense that slaves would escape to Spanish *La Floride*. Since the thirteenth century, Spanish law made freedom a possibility for slaves – they were allowed rights and protections, including the right to own property, including "self-purchase," as well as freedom of religion, the right to marry, the right to judicial representation, and a strict prohibition against separating family members.

The site was discovered in 1986 during an archaeological dig led by Dr. Kathleen Deagan, a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Florida's Florida Museum of Natural History. The property owner, Jack Williams, permitted the team to investigate the site and, once the discovery was confirmed, sold the property to the State of Florida in 1989. Fort Mose was nationally acknowledged in 1994 as a U.S. Historic Landmark. It is a key stop on the Florida African American Heritage Trail and a Site of Memory of

the UNESCO Slave Route Project. In 2009, the National Park Service named Fort Mose a precursor site on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

Today, Fort Mose Historic State Park is a historical and cultural destination managed by the Florida State Parks Service. In addition to a museum and visitor center, the 41-acre park also offers opportunities for kayaking and canoeing, wildlife viewing, and picnicking. Guests can visit the settlement site, but the original earth and wooden structures that sheltered its inhabitants are gone, lost to the ravages of time. For now, at least. Thanks to the dedication of the Florida State Parks Foundation, in conjunction with partners from the Florida State Parks, the Fort Mose Historical Society, and Drs. Kathleen Deagan and Jane Landers, Fort Mose will soon rise from the ground and have a tangible representation of its magnificent history.

The Fort Mose Reconstruction Project culminates years of planning and dreaming for all involved. The Fort Mose Historical Society set a goal to reconstruct a representation of Fort Mose in the mid-1990s. The project gained real momentum in 2022 when the Foundation earned a competitive grant of \$933,500 from the Florida African American Cultural and Historical Grants Program to aid in construction costs. The Foundation also secured \$250,000 in matching funds from Florida State Parks, the Jacksonville Jaguars Foundation, Florida Blue, The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida, and St. Johns County. The group continues its [fundraising mission](#) and still needs \$500,000 in funding. A groundbreaking is planned for January 19, 2024.

“The impact of this project cannot be overstated,” says Susan Phillips, President and Chief Executive Officer for St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra, and The Beaches Visitors and Convention Bureau. “Fort Mose is a critical piece of African-American history. It should be as iconic as the Castillo de San Marcos or the St. Augustine Lighthouse. It is a beautiful place, but that final historical piece is missing. The VCB is dedicated to sharing the story of Fort Mose and doing what we can to move this project forward. We can’t wait to see school buses with eager children and cars of residents and visitors alike, learning the stories of the brave residents of Fort Mose.”

The reconstruction of this site will breathe fresh air into Fort Mose, providing rangers, visitors, and educators with new interpretive resources for a whole new way to experience and share one of our nation’s most inspiring stories. Fort Mose already offers many activities honoring its history, including a monthly [Militia Muster](#), where guests can experience a free musket firing demonstration from historically-authentic reenactors. Every June, a coalition of free Black Fort Mose militia, Spanish militia, and Native American allies fight the British and Scottish invaders at the [Battle of Bloody Mose](#). This is a reenactment of an actual battle that took place on June 26, 1740, during General Oglethorpe’s invasion of Spanish Florida and resulted in the end of his campaign.

The [Discover Fort Most Jazz and Blues Series](#) is a confluence of history, community, and music. Spread over two weekends in February, the music series offers six exceptional performances and features big-name performers like Gladys Knight, Mavis Staples, The Count Basie Orchestra, Greg Porter, and Trombone Shorty & Orleans Avenue. Stay tuned for the 2024 line-up! Proceeds from the Discover Fort

Mose Jazz & Blues Series support the reconstruction effort. Once the reconstruction is complete, more educational, historical, and cultural events will be possible.

“We’re so excited to see what this project will bring to Fort Mose,” exclaims Phillips. “The rangers, volunteers, and Historical Society do so much already. This reconstruction will help them bring to life the community’s stories and provide an immersive experience for all.”

Fort Mose represents the struggle and triumph of a small and mighty group of people. Be sure to visit this amazing place the next time you book your vacation or staycation to Florida’s Historic Coast.

[Click here for accompanying images.](#) Access Code is **Fort Mose**

Located midway between Daytona Beach and Jacksonville, Florida’s Historic Coast includes historic St. Augustine, the outstanding golf and seaside elegance of Ponte Vedra Beach, and 42 miles of pristine Atlantic beaches. For more information, call 1.800.653.2489 or go to the Visitors and Convention Bureau website at www.FloridasHistoricCoast.com. Check us out on social media Instagram @FloridasHistoricCoast, ViajaStAugustine, Facebook.com/OfficialStAugustine and Facebook.com/ViajaStAugustine, and Twitter @FIHistoricCoast.

###