

Resilience: A Community's Efforts to Center Black Heritage in St. Augustine, Florida

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From June 2020 to February 2022, a group of cultural and academic institutions in St. Augustine, Florida worked together to develop and facilitate the “Resilience: Black Heritage St. Augustine” project. This year-long collaboration aimed to bring together the many threads of Black history interwoven into the city. In this chapter, the authors explore the successes and challenges of developing a broad collaborative project, drawing attention to successful community engagement strategies and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the project. The chapter offers an exploration of the white and European-centered narratives embedded in the interpretation of St. Augustine’s history and the ways in which the resilience project combats these narratives and articulates a commitment to diversified and inclusive collections, language, and storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Social unrest, isolation, and uncertainty marked 2020. The nation bore witness to a reckoning of racial inequality issues in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The historic summer touched all corners of the country, including St. Augustine, Florida. Over the past five centuries, Black St. Augustinians exercised hope, resilience, and liberty in the face of ever-changing political and social tides. As practitioners and educators of history, local cultural and educational institutions came together to work towards better allyship to the Black community, developing inclusive programming and initiatives to capture St. Augustine’s diversity. The “Resilience: Black Heritage in St. Augustine” project – a

year-long celebration throughout 2021 – emerged as a multi-institutional collaboration intended to better center the many contributions that the Black community has made and continues to make in St. Augustine.

Collaborative projects, when successful, have the potential to create deep community connections and inspire continued change. However, creating a successful collaboration takes more than just a great idea. Although the authors had some previous experience with collaborative project management and leadership through St. Augustine Archival Society, a local professional development group, nothing at this scale had yet been attempted. Careful thought, open-mindedness, flexibility, and patience are just some of the qualities the authors discovered are necessary to ensure a large-scale collaboration is successful, both in the short and long term. This chapter will explore the history and context of racial diversity in St. Augustine, detail the strategies employed in the development and manifestation of the “Resilience: Black Heritage in St. Augustine” project, discuss obstacles faced in ensuring the project delivered meaningful results for the community, and consider how the Resilience project may inspire future generations.

BACKGROUND

St. Augustine is located in the northeastern region of Florida, approximately 40 miles south of Jacksonville, and holds the distinction of the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in the present-day United States (Deagan, 1980). The city’s recorded histories focus primarily on its deep Hispanic roots. Although this is undoubtedly a significant part of St. Augustine and Florida’s story, this European and white-centric focus leaves out the stories of the many diverse members of this historic community. These stories began even before St. Augustine existed. In 1513, two free Black men sailed with Spanish Conquistador Juan Ponce de León on the first-known expedition to La Florida. Subsequent Spanish expeditions to the peninsula included free and enslaved Black people, who served in various roles as translators, soldiers, sailors, and artisans, among other roles. When Spanish conquistador Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded St. Augustine in September 1565, his ships landed with approximately 50 free and enslaved Black men and women, and the first recorded births and baptisms of Black St. Augustinians appear in parish records as early as the 1590s (Parker, 2014). All of this occurred before the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619.

Not all St. Augustinians of African descent identified as Black, African, or African American. Under Spanish rule, St. Augustine boasted a rich and complex society that blended African, Spanish, and Native American beliefs and traditions (Parker, 2014). Many of St. Augustine’s colonial Black population came from various regions in West Africa and Cuba, Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua, Venezuela, Colombia, and the Canary Islands. Identity then and today is a complex and ever-changing social construct that the authors of this chapter endeavor to understand and respect. The term Black will be used in this text, not to diminish but rather to acknowledge the diverse cultures, people, backgrounds, and experiences of the African Diaspora.

Unlike British colonialism, Spain’s institution of slavery granted enslaved people certain rights and protections. Spanish laws, derived from ancient Roman traditions, held that slavery was an unnatural condition not based on race, for God created man free. As a result, their laws established how enslaved people could become free. These laws extended to St. Augustine. By the 1700s, the multi-cultural city became a sanctuary for those escaping slavery in neighboring British colonies. This precursor to the

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