

New plan for old Spanish Quarter will be sensitive to history and archaeology

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If you've walked down St. George Street lately, you might have noticed some bright new signage along the way announcing a Spring opening for a totally revamped Colonial Quarter living history museum, but in spite of some slick new packaging and features, renovators say they are taking careful pains to ensure one of St. Augustine's most significant sites will be sensitive to archaeology and retain its historic accuracy.

Work is underway to recreate the former Colonial Spanish Quarter - now renamed The Colonial Quarter

"If what you're hearing now about the Colonial Quarter now sounds exciting, just wait until the spring opening. I think people are going to be amazed at the transformation," said Dr. Roger Smith, who has been hired by Pat Croce's group, Colonial Quarter LLC, as the official historian and director of historic programming for the museum.

Archaeology assistant Brandy Ham with a few finds from a mid-1800s garbage dump where a replica wooden watchtower will be featured as part of the Colonial Quarter.

Headed by Pat Croce, who also owns the neighboring St. Augustine Pirate & Treasure Museum, Colonial Quarter LLC was selected in June by a panel from the city and the univer-

sity to take over management of what was formerly known as the "Colonial Spanish Quarter." City budget woes forced a closure of the museum in early 2012.

The museum sits on two acres, which archaeologists believe is the site of nine early wooden forts built before the Castillo De San Marcos. The property also includes renovated and rebuilt first and second Spanish period structures that were the focus of a community volunteer project in the 1960s and early '70s.

Among the living history exhibits Smith confirms will be the interpretation of a 17th century wooden watchtower, which, just this week, prompted the first exploratory archaeological test digs on the northeast corner of the property in years; a continuation of the popular blacksmith shop already on the site; a resident gunsmith - and most excitingly - a 16th century boatyard that will demonstrate ongoing construction of a Caravel ship like those used by the early Spanish explorers of the area.

"We are in the beginning stages, and there is a lot of work to be done, but I think residents who've been concerned are going to be pleased with the results and the historic presentation of the city's history," Smith said.

Smith said he and museum staff members have been working hand-in-hand with archaeologists and historians from the University of Florida to ensure the accuracy of each exhibit, and he is currently working on scripts for tour guides as well as the composition of the interpretive panels that will be then be submitted to the UF committee for review.

“Everything we do here will be guided by input from archaeologists and the university’s historians. We want people to have confidence in the historic accuracy of interpretations,” said Kari Cobham, Croce’s vice president of media and communications.

As outlined by Smith and in a working interpretive plan for the museum, the site will be divided into four major time period quadrants:

- The First Municipality - 16th century Spanish
- The Fortified Town – 17th century Spanish
- The Garrison Town – 18th century Spanish
- The 14th Colony – 18th century British

“Due to the space limitation, there’s really no way we could depict everything that went on here in St. Augustine in some 447 years of history, but this will be a great overview for visitors for whom we hope to put the city’s history more in context,” Smith said.

Fencing will be constructed along San Marco Boulevard as well as between the time periods to provide visitors with a more immersive experience.

An outdoor corridor, “Flags of St. Augustine,” will also feature interpretive text panels of each of the time periods and each of the flags that have flown over the city.

The signage on St. George Street not only shows the return of the popular Spanish Colonial period tavern, “Taberna del Gallo”, which will be renamed “Taberna del Caballo”, but also – in what was formerly a rustic wine and souvenir shop – a British Publick House, called the “Bull and Crown,” which will serve historic pub fare.

The “COMING SOON” poster at the entrance to the old Spanish Quarter museum depicts a lantern-lit outdoor amphitheater for “lively historical entertainment” and the chance to take part in a musket drill and other interactive offerings. “What we’re hoping to provide is an immersive, hands-on experience that will take visitors through the St. Augustine of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries,” said spokeswoman Kari Cobham.

Thursday afternoon at the site found workers making repairs and hauling away debris, along with a team of archaeologists from a private firm at work where the interpretative of the 17th century watchtower is planned on the northeast corner of the property bordering San Marco Avenue.

“We are aware that this is a very sensitive archaeological area, so we are proceeding very delicately,” said Chris Newman, senior archaeologist with Archaeological Consultants, Inc., as she and assistants Eric Giles and Lauren Braddock hovered over one of the four holes dug measuring about 3’x 3’.

She said the team has also studied research from past digs on the site – including those by the University of Florida’s Dr. Kathleen Deagan, and the discovery just last year by City Archaeologist Carl Halbirt of the remains of what he believes to be one of the earliest fort structures (from the late 1500s to early 1600s), located elsewhere on the site near the trolley pull-in on San Marco Avenue.

Historian Smith said the fort discovery is one reason they were being very cautious. “This is St. Augustine, so you never know what you might find.”

“Everything is being driven by the archaeology. It’s our goal to be good stewards of what’s beneath our feet,” Smith said, adding that this was another reason the exhibits would be portable and “will call for very little ground invasion anywhere.”

Concerning the area of the test holes for the watchtower, Newman said the team hasn’t found any areas in the test holes where there’s not been some fairly heavy disturbance of the archaeological layers through the years.

“It’s all a jumble, but we are finding a few things of interest,” she said, adding that one hole did show evidence of a mid-1800s trash pit.

In view of curious passersby on San Marco Avenue, Newman said the team began their “shovel tests” at the site last Monday, and planned to continue the exploratory digs where the tower would be erected through early next week.

One of the team members, Brandy Ham, who had spent the afternoon manning a sifter, showed off some example of the day’s finds as they were being noted and tagged by Newman. Included was what looked to be a slender iron bolt that still showed threads, a few nails, bits of shell and bone, and a mid-1800s clear glass medicine bottle.

Also found this week by the team: some animal bones; bits of pottery, pearlware and creamware; some buttons made of bone and shell; a few fasteners and more shells. Newman said they plan to eventually test and date the finds.

“It’s all still very exciting, because each object tells the story of a moment in someone’s life who stood on this very spot. I want to come back and see what they do,” said Jonathan Eaggleston, a recent St. Augustine transplant from Virginia who was watching the dig from over the fence after a tour of the fort. “This is the very reason I was happy about moving to

St. Augustine. I can't imagine living in a place with no history, because Virginia is so rich with it. But St. Augustine goes back even further. I didn't realize this, but it's going to be fun to educate myself."

According to Smith, the watchtower will be constructed of pine wood to resemble one shown in the area of the plaza on the Baptista Boazio 1589 map, which depicts the infamous sacking of St. Augustine by Sir Francis Drake.

"It's important to note - we aren't claiming there was a tower on this site, but this will be constructed very similar to the one on the Boazio map so people can see what this would have been like," he explained.

In view of the bay and the Castillo fort, Smith says visitors will be able to climb to the top of the 35-ft. tower, which will feature an interactive map table to get a sense of how the coastline has changed over the years and how the vulnerable settlement back then would have needed to keep up a constant watch for potential enemy ships, Indian attack or approaching French or English raiding parties.

"The world for colonists was not a safe place back then. The early colonists would have been in constant peril of attack with this also being a strategically important military outpost for the Spanish," said Smith.

Smith said the new museum will also bring back the community volunteer program, and also hopes to make use of local reenactment and living history interpretation groups for educational demonstrations and special events.

For more information on volunteer opportunities, email Roger@colonialquarter.com.

Follow the Colonial Quarter on Twitter to keep up with the latest information on the project.

