St. Augustine Settled
1565

Historians credit Juan Ponce de Leon, the first governor of the Island of Puerto Rico, with the discovery of Florida, Easter Sunday, March 27,1513. While on an exploratory trip in search of Bimini, where the fabled Fountain of Youth was said to be, he sighted the eastern coast of Florida. Ponce de Leon claimed the land for the Spanish Crown, naming it Florida after the Easter season, known in Spanish as Pascua Florida. This newly claimed territory extended north and west to encompass most of the southeastern lands of the North American continent, thus enlarging the vast territory already claimed by the Spanish as New Spain in Mexico, and Central and South America.

For the next 50 years, Spain tried at least six times to settle Florida; all failed. In 1562, a party of French Huguenots (Protestants) succeeded; they landed near the mouth of the St. Johns River close to what is now Jacksonville and claimed Florida for themselves. They established a colony and Fort Caroline in 1564, in what is today Jacksonville. When the Spanish discovered this intrusion upon their claimed land, they were not happy; its location posed a threat to their treasure fleets that sailed the Gulf Stream beside the east coast of Florida on their way from Central and South America to Spain. Upon receiving this news, King Philip II of Spain instructed Don Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, Spain's most capable admiral, who was assembling a fleet for an expedition to Florida, to remove it.

On September 8, 1565, with much pomp and circumstance and 600 voyagers cheering, Menéndez set foot on the shores of Florida. He named the colonial settlement St. Augustine; in honor of the saint whose feast day fell on the day he first sighted land. Menéndez quickly and diligently carried out his king's instructions. He attacked, sacked, and completely destroyed the French fort and settlement, thus consolidating Spain's authority on the northeast coast of Florida. St. Augustine was to serve two purposes: as a military outpost, or Presidio, for the defense of Florida, and a base for Catholic missionary settlements throughout the southeastern part of North America.

Maintaining St. Augustine as a permanent military colony, however, was not easy. Without the courage, perseverance, and tenacity of the early settlers, the community may not have survived. English pirates and corsairs pillaged and burned the town on several occasions in the next century. Clashes between the Spaniards and the British became more frequent with the establishment of English colonies in the Carolinas (1663) and later, in Georgia. Consequently, in 1672 the Spanish began construction of a permanent stone fortress, Castillo de San Marcos, which was completed in 1695. British attacks continued for various reasons, over the next two hundred years.

As for the missionary settlements, they did not fare much better. Beginning in the 1630s, a series of missions stretching from St. Augustine to the Florida panhandle supplied St. Augustine with maize and other food crops, and the Apalachees, who lived at the missions, were required to send workers to St. Augustine every year to perform labor. The missions were destroyed by Carolina and Creek raiders in a series of raids from 1702 to 1704,

The Treaty of Paris in 1763, ending the French and Indian War, gave Florida and St. Augustine to the British, accomplishing by the stroke of a pen what pitched battles had failed to do. St. Augustine came under British rule for the first time and served as a Loyalist (pro-British) colony during the American Revolutionary War.