

Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Where the Waters Meet

In and around one of the Atlantic Coast's largest urban areas, Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve offers glimpses of Old Florida in some unexpected places. Explore a fort exhibit that recalls the lives and deaths of 16th-century French colonists. Walk among live oaks and thickets of palmettos where pre-Columbian and Timucua Indians once lived. Climb a wildlife observation platform overlooking salt marsh habitat. Visit a plantation where enslaved men, women, and children of African descent labored, raised families, worshipped, celebrated, and mourned. Find tranquility in a day at the beach or winding your way by kayak through the marshy expanse.

Established in 1988, this 46,000-acre preserve includes Fort Caroline National Memorial, the Theodore Roosevelt Area, Kingsley Plantation, Cedar Point, and thousands of acres of woods, water, and salt marsh. These diverse natural and human stories come alive where the Nassau and St. Johns rivers flow into the Atlantic Ocean—where the waters meet.

Who Were the Timucua?

For thousands of years, native people depended on the rich natural resources of the St. Johns estuary. These pre-Columbian people have left clues to their existence; the most easily recognized are the mounds of shells found throughout the preserve. The Indians who made contact with the first European arrivals to the area in the mid-1500s are today known as the Timucua. The term Timucua actually represents a number of cultural traditions that have become defined by a shared language.

The Timucua who settled along the rivers and islands near the Atlantic Ocean took advantage of the waterways for transportation. Using tools made from the storehouse of natural materials, they felled, burned, and scraped tree trunks to make dugout canoes. They hunted and gathered in the forests and marshes, fished, and collected oysters and clams. Discarded shells were piled atop the mounds accumulating from successive generations. It is these ever-present shell mounds that testify to the importance of the water for survival.

The Timucua of this area first encountered Europeans in 1562 when French settlers arrived at the St. Johns River. The Timucua offered food and even helped the strange newcomers build a fort. As with other Florida native peoples, though, they did not long survive contact with Europeans. Spanish rulers, who had driven out the French, imposed their own culture, including spiritual beliefs through the Spanish mission system. European diseases, to which the Timucua had no immunity, devastated the

population. Only 550 Timucua were recorded in 1698, from a population once in the tens of thousands. Today, no known indigenous people call themselves Timucua.

Fort de la Caroline

On May 1, 1562, a French voyage of discovery led by Jean Ribault arrived at the mouth of the St. Johns River. After exploring the area they erected a stone marker and sailed north. Two years later an expeditionary force led by René de Laudonnière established the first French colony in what is now the United States. They chose a site along the south bank of the river a few miles inland from the mouth. The colonists, mostly Huguenots, named their colony “la Caroline” in honor of King Charles IX. The Timucua helped them build a triangular fort.

Good relations between natives and newcomers were difficult to maintain. Moreover, problems with leadership, homesickness, hunger, and disappointment at not finding material wealth led to discontent among the colonists. In August 1565, just as they were about to abandon their colony, reinforcements led by Jean Ribault came from France. King Phillip II of Spain, a Catholic, viewed the French as “heretics” and trespassers on Spanish-claimed lands. In September 1565, a force led by Pedro Menéndez de Aviles captured la Caroline and massacred most of its defenders. Though the French recaptured the fort in April 1568, they never again attempted colonization in the area. “La Florida” would remain Spanish for another 200 years.

The climactic battles here between the French and the Spanish marked the first time that European nations fought for control of lands in what is now the United States. It would not be the last time.

Kingsley Plantation

Fort George Island was isolated and reachable only by boat when Zephaniah Kingsley settled here in 1814. The island already had a well-established plantation. Its cash crop was Sea Island cotton, a prized variety with very long fibers suitable for spinning into a fine, strong thread. Kingsley brought his wife and three children; a fourth child was born here. His wife Anna was from Senegal in West Africa and was purchased as a slave by Kingsley in Havana, Cuba. When she and her children were freed in 1811, she acquired land and slaves.

The plantation house was built by slaves and completed in 1798. Nearby in a semicircular arrangement were the cabins of enslaved men, women, and children who labored on the plantation. These thick-walled structures were made of tabby, a mixture of oyster shells, sand, and water. As with other coastal plantations, slave labor was done according to the “task system.” Working without supervision, each slave was assigned a specific amount of work for the day, such as picking one-quarter acre of cotton. Once the task was complete, slaves were expected to use the balance of the day tending to their own family needs.

Under Spanish control, Florida had relatively liberal racial policies. In 1821 Florida became a United States territory and things changed dramatically. To escape the oppressive laws, Anna, her two sons, and some former slaves moved to Haiti in 1837, where Kingsley had established a free colony. In 1839 he sold Fort George Island to his nephew. Zephaniah Kingsley died in New York City in 1843. Anna returned to Jacksonville, where she lived with her two daughters until her death in 1870.

Theodore Roosevelt Area: A Walk on the Wild Side

People have to work in the cities, they can't live in the woods anymore. But they ought to have a place in the woods they can go to.

—Willie Browne, 1889-1970

This 600-acre remnant of Old Florida was the only home Willie Browne ever knew. His parents, William Henry and Eliza Browne, moved to Jacksonville from New York City in 1882. Shortly after Willie was born in 1889, they moved to property east of downtown Jacksonville to escape a yellow fever epidemic. Willie and his younger brother Saxon grew up in a two-story house that overlooked the salt marsh. The boys fished, roamed the vast shell mounds, and explored the ruins of old Confederate gun batteries on St. Johns Bluff. They also tended the family's cattle, chickens, citrus trees, and vegetable garden.

After their parents moved to another house in the early 1900s, the Browne boys remained on the property. They lived off the land and water—farming, commercial fishing, running a sawmill, and selling oyster shells taken from the ancient Indian shell mounds. Saxon died in 1953. Willie lived by himself in a cabin on the property for the rest of his life—without electricity, indoor plumbing, or many other conveniences.

A strong admirer of President Theodore Roosevelt and his conservation efforts, Browne encouraged the public to use his land as a refuge from the modern world. In 1969 he donated his land to The Nature Conservancy. The National Park Service acquired the land in 1990 as part of Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve. Willie Browne died in 1970. He is buried in a family cemetery on the property.

Theodore Roosevelt Area Today

The Willie Browne Trail winds through a variety of habitats, including maritime hammocks, scrub vegetation, freshwater swamp, and salt marsh. Passing over a small wooden bridge, the trail leads to the “shell peninsula,” consisting of mounds of oyster shells left over from 1,000 years of pre-Columbian and Timucua Indian habitation.

The salt marsh is a giant food-producer. As such, it attracts abundant wildlife. Birding opportunities abound, especially at the observation platform overlooking Round Marsh. Year-round residents include wood storks, ospreys, great blue herons, belted kingfishers, snowy egrets, and bald eagles. In winter look for kestrels, saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrows, and green-winged teals. Summer brings roseate spoonbills and painted

buntings. Get a full list at the visitor center.

You may also spot alligators, otters, dolphins, bobcats, gopher tortoises, marsh rabbits, and a variety of reptiles, including snakes. Along the trail lies the foundation of Willie Browne's cabin. Exhibit panels nearby tell about his life and legacy.

Planning Your Visit

Timucuan Preserve Visitor Center and Fort Caroline

The visitor center is located at Fort Caroline National Memorial: Follow the Arlington Expy. (Fla. 115) to Atlantic Blvd. (Fla. 10). Turn north on Monument Road, then east on Fort Caroline Road. The visitor center has a sales and information area, as well as exhibits. A riverside trail leads to the fort exhibit. Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Preserve sites are closed on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

Theodore Roosevelt Area

This area is accessible via a boardwalk trail from Fort Caroline or from the parking lot just off Mount Pleasant Road near the preserve headquarters. Open daily 8 a.m. to dusk. There is a picnic table at the parking area. Bicycles are allowed on the Willie Browne Trail only. 904-641-7155.

Kingsley Plantation

Located on Fort George Island, just off Fla. A1A/105 north of the ferry landing, the site has an information and sales center, and interpretive exhibits are located on the grounds. A trail connects the house complex to the slave quarters. Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. 904-251-3537.

Ribault Club

This former 1920s-era golf club is open to the public, with exhibits on the natural and cultural history of Fort George Island. Open Wed. through Sun. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Facilities are available for special events for a fee. 904-251-2802.

Boating

There are public docks and boat ramps in the preserve (see map). Observe speed limits. Manatees, a protected species, are slow-moving and vulnerable to injury and death by encounters with motorboats.

Fishing

Good fishing spots are Cedar Point, Little Talbot Island State Park, and throughout the preserve from small craft. All federal and state licensing and regulations apply.

For a Safe Visit

All plants, animals, cultural artifacts, and historic structures are protected by federal law; there are serious penalties for violations.

- Much land in the preserve is privately owned; obey posted signs.

More Information

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