

St. Augustine and Ancient Scenes

St. Augustine, settled in 1560*, is the oldest city in the United States. St. Augustine's quaintness reaches back to the ancient types of Old Spain for the Spaniards carried to America their ideas of little narrow streets, quaint masonry homes and Old World surroundings that give today the alluring atmosphere to this Ancient City. Many of the Old Spanish Trail cities and towns are rich in this Old World atmosphere; some the ancient Spanish, some a mixture of old Spanish and old French, some the richer mixture of old Spanish, old French, old English and of the adventurous types that explored and settled the South and Southwest in the early days of the New World.

From St. Augustine the padres carried their mission works westward to the Tallahassee country; that was the land of the great Apalache Indians whose prowess and character are admirably related in the De Soto Narratives. There are records of thirty-eight missions, probably of wooden construction for traces of them have vanished. In Texas and the Southwest the missions were built of stone and cement under the direction of skilled architects, engineers and artists and those works remain to fill present generations with wonder.**

From St. Augustine to Pensacola the trails connected. Pensacola lays claim to being older than St. Augustine based on De Luna's expedition of colonists and priests, greater in ships and people than De Soto's, which landed at Pensacola Bay in 1559. The Indians however by shrewd artifices at which they were masters soon disrupted the enterprise and the colonists returned to Vera Cruz. A Spanish fort and settlement were on Pensacola Bay in 1696.

Early Explorations in the West

Parties were working northward from Mexico during the same period Florida was being penetrated. In 1582-83 the Espejo expedition reached the Texas country. Later the Spanish reached inland to Santa Fe, the second oldest city in the United States. Onate reached the Pass of the North (El Paso) with his colonizing expedition in 1598 where he took possession of New Mexico. Santa Fe was founded in 1605 by the nobleman Onate.

In 1683-84 Mendoza with soldiers, priests and Indians went north from Mexico and into the Big Bend country of Texas; was at Comanche Springs (Fort Stockton) while La Salle and his expedition, after missing the mouth of the Mississippi River, were approaching the Texas shore to disembark and soon to perish.

* The date generally given is 1565 but later researches indicate 1560.

** Northwest of Brunswick, Ga., are the ruins of an oyster shell cement mission.

The San Saba Trail developed from San Antonio through the Spanish Pass on the highway west of Boerne to San Saba and the mission established there in 1757. The ruins of this mission still remain; it is north of the highway from Junction, Texas. Near-by was the silver mine which may have been one of the objectives of Coronado when he was exploring in that direction from his base in New Mexico. Other trails branched westward to El Paso and southward into Mexico. Those were the days of mule and pack-trains between San Antonio and Chihuahua, Mexico, and between San Antonio, El Paso and the west.

The first Isleta and seat of missions is on the Rio Grande near Albuquerque. The younger Ysleta on the highway near El Paso is by some thought older than Santa Fe. Across from El Paso in Juarez, Mexico, is the mission of Our Lady of Guadalupe, established in 1659. The Southwest was explored by Coronado beginning in 1540. With 300 cavaliers of Spain, swordsmen, herds and equipment, and 800 Indians, he penetrated into Arizona and New Mexico hunting for the "Seven Cities of Cibola" visioned as cities of gold. Then he sought for the Kingdom of the Gran Quivera through Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, another fabled land of gold and silver.

These were not mere bodies of adventurers, but expeditions worthy of the greatness of the Spain of that period. Coronado's contact with the Indians was more merciful than De Soto's. To the everlasting glory of the eastern natives they faced their mounted and armored oppressors and died defending their homes.

The Texas Missions

San Antonio was founded and became the center for missions in 1718 when the presidio (fort) and the mission that became the historic Alamo were established there. The Texas missions were first settled around Nacogdoches in 1690 and maintained as the Texas outpost after the settlement at San Antonio in 1718. The Franciscan Fathers planted numerous missions in Texas, at Nacogdoches, Goliad, Victoria, San Antonio, Menard, Uvalde and along the Rio Grande at El Paso del Norte. The old missions around San Antonio are revelations in art and architecture and like all the old missions they are remarkable for such a primitive and wilderness location. San Jose mission whose ruins are one of San Antonio's shrines was declared in 1778 "the finest mission in all New Spain." On another occasion it was described the "the Pearl of the Missions." *

* See Old Spanish Trail travelog for detailed history of the missions, settlements and works of the Spaniards.