



Archaeology of the New Smyrna Colony

Produced for the City of Port Orange,
the City of New Smyrna Beach and Volusia County
by Southeastern Archaeological Research, Inc.



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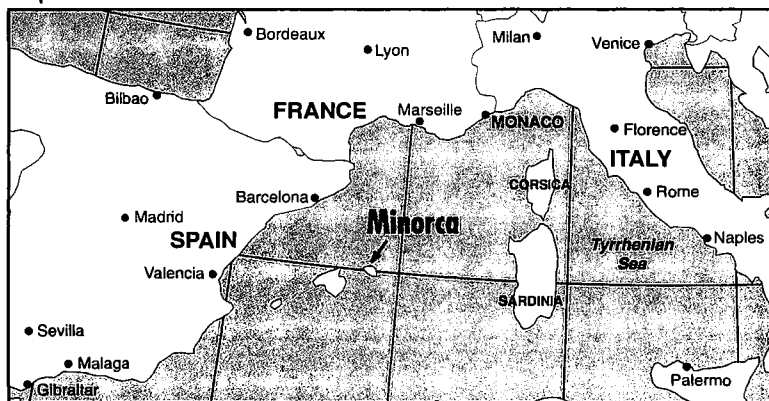
Origin and Demise

The New Smyrna settlement was the product of British attempts to populate Florida with colonists who would benefit the Crown. Britain had obtained Florida and the Mediterranean island of Minorca from Spain in 1763, following a global war involving several European powers. She quickly divided her new possession into two administrative districts—East and West Florida—with the Apalachicola River as the dividing line. St. Augustine became the capital of East Florida and James Grant was appointed governor.

Britain's desire to colonize Florida was spurred by the need to offset her costly dependence on imported commodities such as indigo, silk, cotton, rice, cochineal, wine, and oil. To encourage agricultural development, land grants were offered to prospective plantation owners at easy terms, and financial rewards were bestowed if planters grew cash crops for export to England.

Dr. Andrew Turnbull, a Scottish-born physician and wealthy member of London society, was one who accepted the challenge. Turnbull and Sir William Duncan were awarded grants of 20,000 acres each and, together with Sir Richard Temple, the three partners provided the capital necessary to develop a large plantation in Florida. Turnbull was chosen as plantation manager. His first task was to travel to East Florida to choose a location for the plantation settlement and begin preparing for the colonists. On his return to England, Turnbull began finding capable laborers to work on the plantation. For these he turned to the island of Minorca, where a three-year crop failure had left many farmers destitute. He was able to recruit about 1100 Minorcans as indentured servants and added 200 more laborers from Greece and about a hundred from Italy, France, Corsica, and Turkey.

The exact terms of indenture under which Turnbull's colonists agreed to emigrate are unknown because copies of executed contracts have never been located. Historians have suggested that the indenture period ranged from 3 to 10 years and that land ownership or the ability to rent the worked land was given following completion of the indenture period. Turnbull himself wrote that after a 10-year indenture period the colonists could cultivate under a rental agreement for 99 years.



On April 17, 1768, Turnbull assembled his 1403 colonists at Gibraltar and, after loading them onto eight ships, set sail for East Florida. The voyage took nearly four months. Hardships at sea, particularly scurvy and infections, took their toll in lives. When the ships reached New Smyrna in August, the number of colonists had been reduced to 1255. To make matters worse, housing and accommodations were in place for only about 500. Palm huts were quickly constructed to provide shelter. Meant to be temporary, they were still being used by some of the colonists a year after their arrival.

The colony experienced a cycle of bad and good years during its short history. While at first the colonists suffered many deaths from ill health and poor nutrition, they managed to clear and plant agricultural fields, erect additional housing, and assist in the construction of a plantation infrastructure. The good years, 1771–1773, were characterized by a fall in the death rate, an increase in agricultural crop yields, and a somewhat stabilized lifestyle. Bad years began again with severe droughts in 1773 and 1775. With crop yields down, the colonists went hungry and in 1774 the death rate again began to climb.

Although weather conditions improved after 1775, and crop yields rebounded, the colonists' discontent increased. There was a growing concern that Turnbull would never honor the contracts under which the colonists had agreed to come to Florida. The colonists also resented their overseers, many of whom had previously worked black slaves. The mix of ethnic groups, with their different languages and customs, as well as problems with Indians, also made matters desperate. Finally, Turnbull's inability to produce marketable crops in quantities large enough to satisfy his investors cost him their support, as well as that of the British government. The end of the New Smyrna colony came in 1777 when the plantation was virtually abandoned by most of the surviving colonists who fled to the safety and security of St. Augustine.

*Turnbull raised cattle and grew rice, corn, sugar, hemp, cochineal (a native parasite of the prickly pear cactus that was used to manufacture a red dye), and cotton. But his primary agricultural focus was indigo (*Indigofera suffruticosa*). Considered "the king of dyestuffs," the brilliant blue dye commanded a high price in Europe. Indigo was profitable only on large plantations, such as New Smyrna, because expensive equipment was required for its production.*

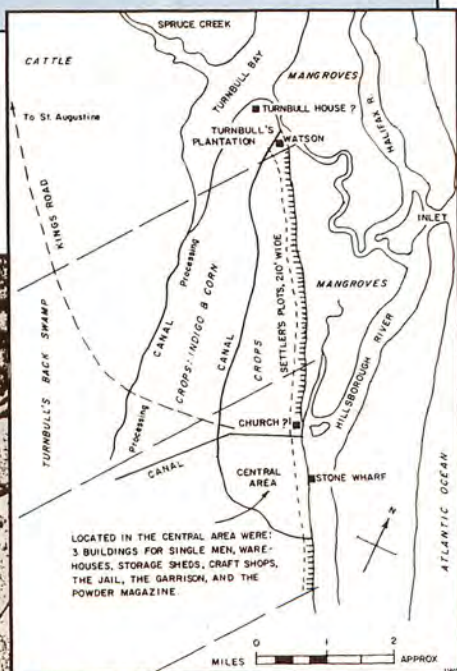
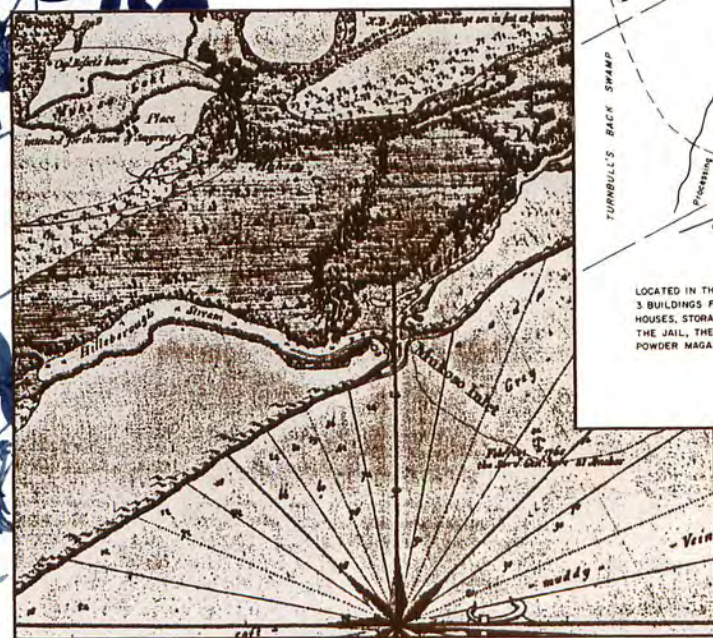
After the plant was harvested, it was placed in a tiered vat system that was used to steep and ferment the vegetation and extract the dye. The rotting vegetation smelled so hideous that even buzzards refused to frequent the area around an indigo vat. The dye was then poured off, allowed to dry, and cut into bricks for shipment to England.

Many buildings were constructed during the nine-year existence of the colony including houses and support structures for the colonists, slaves, and overseers, workshops, storehouses, a church, wharves, and agricultural buildings. These extended from Spruce Creek south into the modern community of Edgewater. The central core of the settlement was located in what is now part of downtown New Smyrna Beach. Early maps show the King's Road, an official highway that connected St. Augustine with New Smyrna, ending near the present downtown area. Turnbull's own house was believed to be located at the north end of New Smyrna Beach near Spruce Creek, on his personal 300-acre grant.



The New Smyrna colony was named for the birthplace of Andrew Turnbull's wife, Gracia Maria Rubini, who was born in Smyrna, Asia Minor, in 1736. Said to be of Greek descent, Gracia was educated in Paris where she met Turnbull who was there studying medicine. The two were married in 1753 and Gracia eventually gave birth to 12 children. Both Turnbull and his wife died in Charleston, South Carolina, Turnbull sometime between 1786 and 1788, his wife in 1798.

Conjectural map of the New Smyrna Colony from Mullet on the Beach by Patricia C. Griffin.



1767 map showing the area first chosen by Andrew Turnbull for the New Smyrna colony.

Courtesy of Dorothy Moore

determine the true origin and function of this feature. By that time, the coquina ruins had been reconstructed to resemble a fort. But the truth is archaeologists and historians still are unsure of the structure's purpose.



1994



A horizontal number line is labeled from 0 to 100 in increments of 25 (0, 25, 50, 75, 100) with the unit "centimeters". Above the line, a bar graph is plotted. The bars represent the number of students for each length: 0-25 cm has 10 students, 25-50 cm has 15 students, 50-75 cm has 20 students, and 75-100 cm has 15 students.

Another 50 years passed before archaeologists again paid serious attention to New Smyrna. Many believed that few intact deposits associated with the colony could have survived modern development. However, in 1995,

Sketch map of a coquina-lined vat and ditch complex.



Although exciting and important discoveries were being made, the efforts were piecemeal and often occurred during construction with no advance warning. Consequently, in 1998, the cities of New Smyrna Beach and Port Orange, along with Volusia County, obtained a grant from the Florida Department of State to conduct a comprehensive survey to locate archaeological sites associated with the colony. The survey was conducted by Southeastern Archaeological Research, Inc. with Roger Grange and Dot Moore serving as consultants. Nearly 40 colonial-period archaeological sites were documented, including several that contain significant structural remains.



Photo credit: New Smyrna Beach Daily Journal

Archaeologist Roger Grange points to the remains of an eighteenth-century building.

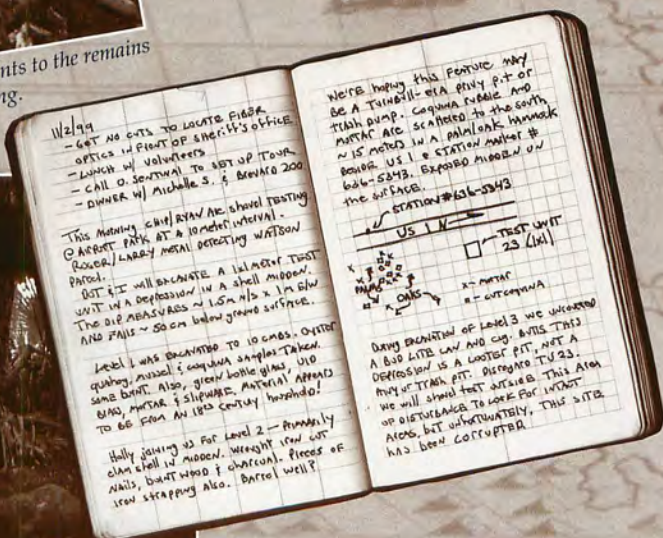


Archaeologists survey for evidence of the New Smyrna colony.

Photo credit: James Pochurek



Photo credit: James Pochurek



Tabby floor of a colonial structure.

After more than two centuries, New Smyrna's original town plan is beginning to emerge once again. Archaeological surveys and excavations are adding a visible, material dimension to the documented history of the colony. An overlay plan of the settlement has been developed that will make the task of locating additional remains associated with the colony much easier. Future archaeological surveys and excavations, in combination with focused historical research, will provide a wealth of new data with which to fill in the gaps about life in eighteenth-century New Smyrna. Finally, historians and archaeologists will be able to contribute additional chapters to the story of one of Florida's greatest colonial experiments.



Archaeologists walk the shoreline searching for evidence of the New Smyrna colony.

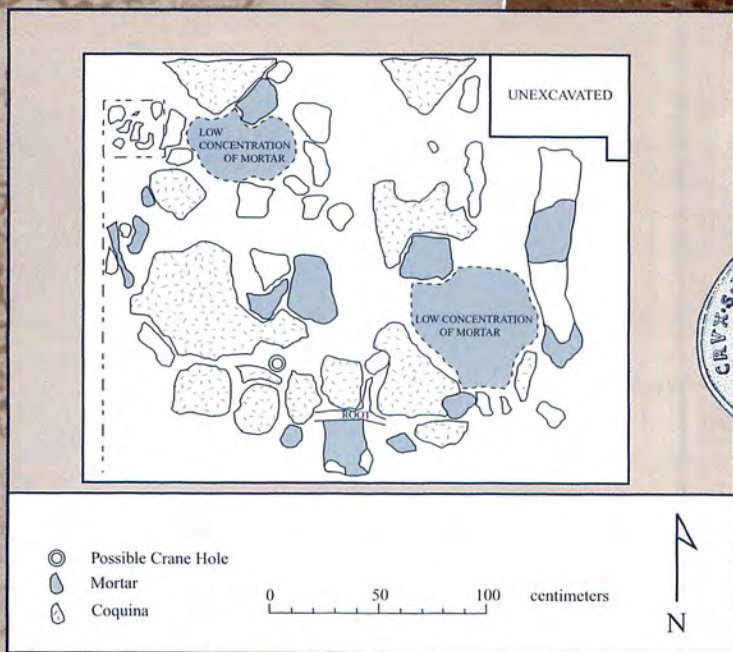
Photo credit: James Pochurek



Archaeologist holds a colonial button found during a survey.



Photo credit: Robert Austin



Plan drawing of coquina blocks and mortar flooring from a colonial building.

New Smyrna Beach's Archaeological Resources



Photo credit: Roger Grange

A volunteer exposes the foundations of an eighteenth-century house.

In 1996, archaeologists excavated the remains of a colonial house that was threatened by construction. The building was rectangular, measuring about 13 by 28.5 feet. It had a central chimney with two fireplaces and hearths, one for each of two rooms separated by internal walls. The chimney, fireplaces, and

hearths were built of coquina, a naturally occurring rock that was obtained from nearby quarries. The floor was mortar mixed with sand and shell. Charred posts at regular intervals around the wall indicate that the building had a post-and-beam framework. Wood impressions in fragments of wall mortar, and charred wood lathing with embedded nails, indicate that the walls were made by nailing horizontal split-wood lathing to the vertical posts and covering these with mortar. No roofing material was recovered but the house probably had a palmetto thatch roof.



Perhaps the most well-known, and certainly the most visible, material remains associated with the New Smyrna colony are the coquina foundations at Old Fort Park in downtown New Smyrna Beach. The function of the foundations remains a mystery. An early account, written in 1776, about a year prior to the colony's demise, states that construction of a "very large stone building" had begun at New Smyrna for "a mansion house." During the 1930s, the ruins were "restored" by WPA workers. Believing that the thick coquina walls represented



Photo credit: Robert Austin

Massive coquina foundations in New Smyrna's Old Fort Park.

a fort, the restorers added bastions, but there is no historical or archaeological evidence for such a reconstruction. Some archaeologists and historians have recently suggested that the foundations originally supported a church or perhaps a large storehouse. Archaeological excavations suggest that the latter interpretation is most likely. The depth of the footers, the massiveness of the coquina walls, and the thickness of tabby floors found next to the structure imply a commercial or industrial use. In addition, the wear patterns on the floors indicate a great deal of foot traffic, such as might be expected in a commercial building.

A network of canals, believed to have been dug by Turnbull's colonists, is visible today running through areas of New Smyrna Beach and unincorporated Volusia County. The South Canal is the present dividing line between New Smyrna Beach and Edgewater. The North Canal once ran through the center of the downtown area, and portions can still be seen west of town. A third canal is located just south of the city's municipal airport. These three canals were linked by a fourth, longer canal that ran north-south, beginning at Turnbull Bay. These hand-dug canals, a massive undertaking by an already overworked people, may have served several purposes for the colony, such as irrigation, drainage of swampy lands, and transportation within the colony.



Photo credit: Dorothy Moore

The South Canal, one of the best preserved examples of Turnbull's canal system.



Photo credit: Dorothy Moore

Scale model of typical colonist's house. Reconstruction based on data from archaeological excavations in New Smyrna Beach.

Preserving New Smyrna Beach's Heritage

With a few exceptions, the physical remains of the New Smyrna colony are relatively fragile and endangered by development, vandalism, and neglect. Preserving archaeological sites requires planning and commitment. More importantly, it requires education. While most people have an intrinsic interest in the past and in archaeology, they must be educated about the public benefits of studying and preserving important sites.

Why should we save significant elements of our past? Because the past creates and affirms cultural, social, and community identity. In many ways, a community without a past is like a person suffering from amnesia: without memory or physical reminders of past events, there is a loss of identity, social worth, and meaning.



Archaeologists, historians, and planners work together to identify and protect archaeological sites.

Photo credit: Dana Ste.Claire

The past resides in the memories of individuals, in historical documents, and in material remains such as buildings and archaeological sites. While the details of the past become blurred as memories fade or individuals pass away,



Photo credit: Dorothy Moore

Coquina blocks are all that remain of the Old Stone Wharf.

and written accounts of historical events may be biased by political or social contexts, material remains present to us a relatively unbiased representation of past events and processes. They provide tangible expressions of shared values and ideas that can be seen, touched, experienced, and interpreted from a variety of perspectives. For this reason, they are capable of merging the past with the present in a physical, visceral way that is often more powerful than the written or spoken word.

Archaeological and historical sites also contribute to the cultural diversity of a community by including the history and traditions of ethnic and cultural groups different from our own. And since visiting historical sites ranks at the top of many visitors' lists of things to do and see in Florida, preserving and developing historical resources can translate into an increased economic benefit for the state's residents. In short, archaeological resources can contribute to a sustainable community where cultural heritage is valued and nurtured for the benefit of all.



Photo credit: James Pochurek

Local residents allowed archaeologists to test their properties for evidence of the colony.



Photo credit: Robert Austin

Visitors tour a colonial vat and ditch complex in New Smyrna Beach.

For Further Reading

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The search for Andrew Turnbull's New Smyrna colony is an archaeological adventure that has only just begun. Research continues in New Smyrna Beach and surrounding areas to locate, investigate, preserve, and interpret the physical remains of the colony. The following individuals and organizations deserve special thanks for their contributions on behalf of this exciting quest.

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and

The many private landowners who have graciously allowed access to their properties to allow archaeologists to search for the Turnbull colony.



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