

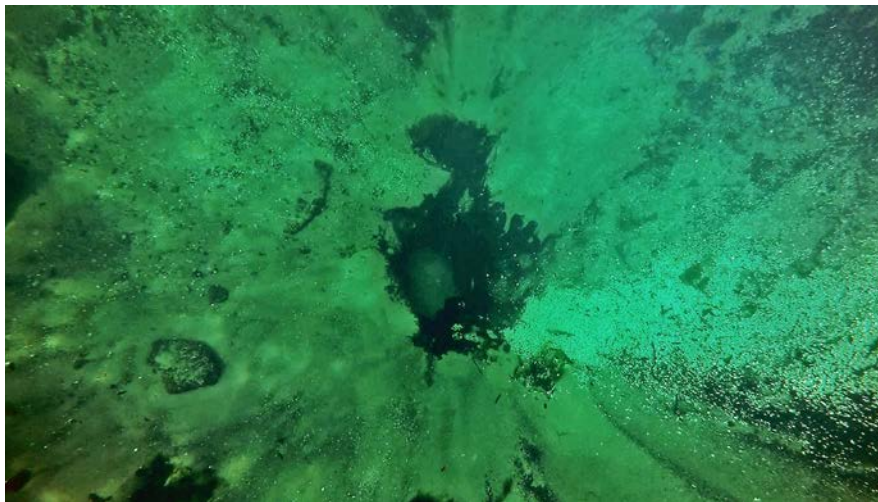
JOURNAL OF FLORIDA STUDIES

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF THE IDEA AND PLACE THAT IS FLORIDA

Volume 1, Issue 6, 2017

Immersed in the Millennial History of DeLeon Springs

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Invigorating spring water emerges from a small cave at the pool's bottom

Peering into the primeval darkness of an irregular opening in the bedrock thirty feet underwater, the cavern's interior gradually emerges. Hollow white snail shells carpet the cramped passageway just a few feet below the cave's low-hanging ceiling. The erratically sculpted stone is porous limestone formed from the fossil remains of tiny sea creatures over thirty million years ago when Florida was still under the

ocean (Florida DEP 2013). This small underwater grotto is located at the northwestern edge of the DeLand Ridge, a modestly elevated area running parallel to the immense St. Johns River system. The cave channels a powerful current of refreshingly cool water from a surficial aquifer located in beds of sand, clay, and shell, along with much older water from the Floridan Aquifer in the underlying

limestone (Wikipedia 2017). On average, over 17 million gallons per day (St. Johns WMD 2017) flow almost horizontally through the cavern and then abruptly surge upward through a stone bottleneck just a few feet wide at the cave's mouth.

At the water's surface, this remarkably potent stream forms a near-circular spring "boil" as it meets Florida's warm humid air and the playful shouts of elated children leaping into the always brisk, 73° pool. This quietly enchanting swimming hole, known to contemporary visitors as DeLeon Springs, has drawn human beings for at least six thousand years, producing a bewilderingly rich heritage that includes prehistoric first Americans, four different groups of enslaved African plantation workers, Yuchi-speaking refugees, Seminole warriors, Union Army raiders, circus acrobats, Mexican farmworkers, and millions of pancake-hungry Florida tourists. Some of these diverse people were taken to DeLeon Springs by brute force, some came hunting for food, some arrived ready to do battle, and others came searching for profit; but all of these people undoubtedly shared the profound sense of relief that comes with bathing in the spring's consistently restorative waters. This simple act of immersion in the spring pool establishes an experiential bond between today's swimmers at DeLeon Springs State Park and the

astonishing assortment of humans that have bathed there for thousands of years.



The spring's circular "boil" in front of the remnants of an ancient burial midden

The human presence near these life-sustaining waters dates back to at least the Middle Archaic Period (6,000-3,000 BCE). Scuba divers found extraordinary evidence of this extremely early settlement while exploring immediately next to the spring's limestone vent at the pool's bottom. In 1985 and again in 1990, they uncovered ancient dugout canoes buried underwater in peat that were carbon-dated to around 6,000 years ago, making them possibly the two oldest watercraft ever found in the entire Western Hemisphere (Hartmann 1996). Unfortunately, both canoes, one made from bald cypress and the other from southern yellow pine, were severely damaged during attempts to recover and preserve them. According to the late folk historian, Bill Dreggors, six or seven other Native dugouts of unknown age were also discovered in DeLeon Springs when it was

cleared of debris earlier in the 20th century (DeLeon Springs 1997). These boats were supposedly stored in the upper part of the restored mill house, but later disappeared and their current location is unknown.

Apart from the two carbon-dated prehistoric boats, nearby large archeological sites at Mount Taylor, Hontoon Island, Salt Springs, and elsewhere in this middle portion of the St. John's River basin provide additional evidence that people have been living near the river banks close to DeLeon Springs for at least six millennia. In addition, the extraordinary Archaic Period funerary site of Tick Island is located less than five miles to the west of the spring. The island was the final resting place for at least 175 ancient Americans, making it one of the largest burial sites in the United States from this early period. Those interred at Tick Island had surely visited DeLeon Springs and bathed in its soothing, mineral-rich waters, since it was far nearer than the other large springs in the area: Blue Spring, Alexander Springs, and Silver Glen Springs. Archaeological exploration into what remains of the massive main burial mound at DeLeon Springs did not reveal any ceramics, dating it to roughly the same period as Tick Island. Of the 11 different field specimens taken by archeologists from the main DeLeon Springs mound, eight

contained human bones, suggesting a very high concentration of bodies (Denson 1995). Given that the vast majority of this burial midden was destroyed by those "developing" the site, it may even be that there were more burials at DeLeon Springs than at the ancient cemetery of Tick Island.

After having gradually increased over the course of 12,000 years following the last ice age, sea levels finally stabilized around 6,000 years ago. As a result, water was once again flowing from DeLeon Springs as it hadn't for 120,000 years, turning what had previously been a dry sinkhole into a seemingly perpetual source of clean water. The waterways of the St. Johns basin served as an aquatic trail system for the area's first prehistoric Americans and their dugout canoes served an essentially vital role in accessing aquatic food resources. Early Floridians would have deeply revered the birthplace of the waters that sustained them with abundant fish, snails, turtles, birds, alligators, and other game. They would have also taken advantage of the spring's constant temperature, its waters comfortingly warm on freezing winter mornings and deeply cooling in the sweltering mid-day summer heat. The first Floridians no doubt cherished the spring's life-enhancing waters just as visitors to DeLeon Springs State Park appreciate the

opportunity for physical and psychological refreshment there today.

Hundreds of banded mystery snail shells (*Viviparus georgianus*) spin perpetually in the current emerging from the east side of the spring's limestone shaft. These constantly "chattering" shells are an extraordinary phenomenon unique to DeLeon Springs, a visual and auditory reminder of the presence of early Americans who left them there. The whirling snail remains and those that carpet the cavern floor below are debris left by the same people that created the various pre-Colombian archeological features nearby. These snail shells are the primary component in the main burial mound from the early Mount Taylor period (4,000-2,000 BCE) (DeLeon Springs State Park 2006, 16), as well as in the other more recent Native shell middens near the spring. The later middens also contain fiber-tempered clay pottery, a development that local people did not begin using until about 2,000 BCE (Milanich 1998, 29) at the beginning of what archaeologists call the Orange culture. The more recent middens also contain "chalky" or "ashy" style pottery tied to the subsequent St. Johns culture, the predominant ceramic type found at DeLeon Springs. St. Johns pottery was tempered with freshwater sponges and their distinctive spicules, a ceramic

practice that began roughly between 1000- 500 BCE.

The St. Johns culture was still alive with the Mayaca people who inhabited the DeLeon Springs area in the 16th century when Spanish conquistadors unknowingly triggered catastrophic epidemics of European diseases such as smallpox and typhus among the Natives. The Mayaca, like other indigenous Americans, had little immunity to these previously unknown illnesses. The resulting plagues, along with the consequent social disruption, led to a precipitous population decline. In fact, if there is any lengthy gap at all in recent human occupation of DeLeon Springs, it would most likely be during the 1700s when the Mayaca had mostly died or emigrated, and Native immigrants from further north that we now know as Seminoles were just beginning to move into the Florida peninsula.

The spring's current namesake is Juan Ponce de León, the Spanish explorer who led the first European expedition to Florida in 1513 and who the Spanish chronicler Fernández de Oviedo said was sailing in search of a legendary Fountain of Youth. Many writings about DeLeon Springs in the 20th century even included a purported quotation from the Spanish conquistador's logbook, stating that he "ascended a large river, passing through two small rivers and three lakes, whence we came to a great boiling spring which

the Indians call 'Healing Waters.'" This captivating bit of pseudohistory was the work of Fred Burt, a creative developer who wrote his personal account of local events in 1929 to add romantic allure to the local real estate market. According to DeLeon Springs State Park manager Brian Polk:

In 1929, Fred Burt, a local entrepreneur from New York, wrote his version of the area's history. He had this to say about DeLeon Springs, "There seems to be little authentic history of Florida, and practically none of DeLeon Springs. We must, therefore, rely almost wholly upon legends ... as well as call upon our imaginations to round out our local history." He used his imagination to create an elaborate fictional history of the spring, complete with a fabricated quote from Ponce de León's diary (Polk 2013, 6).

Modern historians all agree that the Spanish explorer never sailed up the Atlantic coast to the mouth of the St. Johns River, so he could never have come even remotely close to the spring that now bears his name.

The first Spaniards who actually did explore the St. Johns River near DeLeon Springs did not arrive until more than 50 years after Ponce de León's "discovery" of Florida.¹ In the summer of 1566, the Spanish Adelantado and founder of St. Augustine, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés led two brigantines (boats with two sailing masts) carrying a combined total of 50 men and rations for 10 to 12 days on an expedition upriver.² Menéndez was investigating whether it was possible to

reach Lake Okeechobee, then known as Maymi, via the St. Johns. The Spanish conquistadors traveled south to a point less than 11 miles to the northwest of DeLeon Springs near Volusia. A somewhat less ambitious French expedition had explored what they called the *Rivière de Mai* two years earlier, but this prior journey had not gone south beyond Lake George, making Menéndez and his crew the first Europeans to make contact with the Mayaca people living along the St. Johns. The Mayaca were hunter-gatherers, unlike the Freshwater Timucua that lived further downstream who were farmers. Mayaca culture appears to have been strongly oriented around the middle part of the St. Johns River, extending from the southern shore of Lake George, south to the lands of the Jororo people further upriver.



Pedro de Menéndez de Avilés

Long before Menéndez's two sailing ships anchored at the principal Mayaca community, the people living there had spotted them and fled into the surrounding forest. The Spanish searched the village and even entered some of the empty homes. The Adelantado sent his Native interpreter out in search of those who were hiding, in particular their leader, Macoya. His translator, Perucho, knew Macoya personally and could communicate with the locals because he had lived as a captive of a chieftain in an Ais village further south, and the Ais language was similar to that of the Mayaca. The villagers recognized the interpreter and gradually began to reappear in response to his assuring words. Menéndez asked that the chieftain come to meet him, and a few Natives went in search of their leader. In the meantime, people brought gifts of fish for the Spaniards. Word came back from Macoya that he would not appear and that the Europeans should leave without venturing further up the river. Macoya added that his people were upset because the Spanish had come to their land without permission. Menéndez responded with a message saying that he still wished to proceed south and requested 2 or 3 Mayaca to guide his group. Macoya, in turn, answered negatively to both requests. Leaving the two large sailing ships anchored at the village and ignoring the wishes of Macoya, the Adelantado

ordered a small craft to row further upriver. After a few miles, the Spanish boat came to a narrows said to be a mere two pike-lengths (about 20 feet) across in a waterway that the Spaniards thought had been blocked deliberately with stakes to halt their advance. The stakes were more likely some sort of trap for fish or other aquatic game rather than a hasty and wholly inadequate attempt to stop the unexpected intruders. The small Spanish boat easily pushed through the flimsy barricade but then came to a place where it faced a strong opposing current of water and Mayaca men threatening from the banks with bows and arrows, indicating they would attack if the Spaniards continued. Fortunately for the Mayaca, the Spanish gunpowder was moist due to recent summer rains, leaving the intruders vulnerable to potential harm from the Natives' more primitive weaponry. The explorers decided not to risk venturing further, returned to their two sailing ships and headed downriver back to their fort at San Mateo (formerly the French Fort Caroline).

The location of the main Mayaca community where these extraordinary encounters with Menéndez took place is unclear, even though a historical plaque under the historic live oak in the town of Volusia states that the Spanish missionary outpost of San Salvador was once located there. It seems more likely, however, that

both the principal Mayaca village and the site of the armed confrontation with the Spanish expedition were somewhat closer to Lake George. The detailed description of a relatively narrow passageway along the massive St. Johns River described in the chronicle written by Menéndez's brother-in-law, Dr. Gonzalo Solís de Merás (Solís 2017), does not even remotely resemble the area near contemporary Volusia, even if one takes into account changes in the river's course produced by 20th-century dredging. However, north of the town of Volusia and south of Lake George, there is midden evidence of numerous Mayaca settlements along the river and several places have narrows more similar to those described in Solís de Merás' writings. The waterway now known as Morrison Creek, for example, was once the main river channel prior to dredging and, in conjunction with the nearby archaeological site, seems like a far more reasonable location for the Spanish expedition's encounter with the Mayaca than does Volusia. Whatever its location, the Mayaca people living at DeLeon Springs at that time would have been regular visitors to their nearby cultural center and the home village of their primary leader.

With "La Florida" nominally under Spanish control, the conversion of the Mayaca and other Natives to Catholicism was attempted through a series of simple

missions along the Río San Mateo (an early Spanish name for the St. Johns River) that were founded in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. There is no evidence that Spaniards ever lived at DeLeon Springs in spite of some sources suggesting that they did.

However, Spanish missionaries surely came closer to DeLeon Springs than did Menéndez's expedition and they may have even stopped at the spring as they travelled south up the St. Johns on their way to more remote Mayaca settlements and even further upriver to those of the Jororo people. The Mayaca were notably uncooperative with the invading Spaniards. As a result, even in 1602, there were still 100 Mayaca living in the main village that Menéndez had visited nearly half a century earlier, and they had not yet accepted Christianity (Hann 1993, 119). By the 1650s, however, variants of a place named San Salvador de Mayaca appear on lists of established Spanish missions, indicating a measure of success by the friars among the Mayaca (Hann 1993, 114). Most of these early missions remained in place along the St. Johns River for the rest of the 1600s, but the one at San Salvador was apparently abandoned by its priest in 1681 who declared that he had left nearly 80 Natives still living there (Hann 1993, 123). Spanish records indicate that there were some 150 Natives in Mayaca in 1689 as

Indians from other nearby villages had come to the San Salvador mission that by then was the headquarters for the friars in the region (Hann 1993, 126). In 1699, a Spanish priest was killed in another mission among the Mayaca (Hoffman 2002, 164) and the Natives temporarily abandoned the San Salvador mission in 1701 fearing Spanish/Timucuan retribution attacks. After most of the Mayaca returned to the mission in November of that year, we know almost nothing else about these people and their culture. Most surely succumbed to European diseases and oppressive conditions, but a few apparently migrated south to the shores of Lake Okeechobee and others moved north near St. Augustine. It may be that a few remnant Mayaca still occupied or visited DeLeon Springs during the early 1700s even as groups of Muskogee and Yuchi-speaking refugee groups began to migrate south into the Spanish territory of Florida, escaping conflicts with British colonists and diseases in Georgia and elsewhere in the southeast.

In 1763, at the close of the French and Indian War, Florida came under British control, and "in 1779, Panton, Leslie and Company, the largest British firm specializing in the Indian trade, obtained a land grant covering 500 acres that included DeLeon Springs. Presumably, the British trading firm wanted the trading

concession with a band of Seminoles reported to be living at the spring" (DeLeon Springs State Park). A 1779 survey document describes the site as being "on the head of Spring Creek" some six miles east of the St. Johns River, a part of "Lomond Grove," and located immediately to the north of property owned by Thomas Forbes, another member of the British trading firm (Florida Memory). There is no record indicating that any of the traders ever occupied or even visited the site but there is a trail marked on the survey map indicating that it connects with the trading company's "Panton and Forbes Upper Indian Store" in Volusia.

During the second period of Spanish rule (1784-1821), the crown began to encourage non-Spanish colonists to migrate into its Florida territories by offering large land grants. One of these early colonists was William Williams, a Loyalist planter born in North Carolina who had lived briefly in Florida when his family moved there after the Revolutionary War.³ Shortly after Florida returned to Spanish control, Williams and many other British planters moved to the Bahamas. After running a slave plantation in the islands for 17 years, he received a Spanish grant in 1803 for a property along the Halifax River and moved there along with a former slave as his mistress and their three children. Finding this first

[illegible]

In 1823, the Williams' descendants sold the property to a Georgia native, Major Joseph Woodruff. When Woodruff first came to the spring that winter with 12 African slaves, he put them immediately

Joseph Woodruff's 45 African slaves (Schene 1976, 15), the second set of captive workers at Spring Garden, primarily cultivated cotton for sale and raised dairy cows for the Woodruff family, but severe challenges limited the plantation's early success. "A terrible fever spread swiftly through the plantation and, to complicate matters, the livestock came down with distemper. His wife Jane lost her newborn child, and their provision ship

sank before it could reach Spring Garden with much-needed food and supplies" (Volusia County). The plantation was nearly lost, but a boat eventually arrived with supplies, and regular trips by Woodruff's wife Jane and their small children to urban life in St. Augustine gradually helped improve their well-being. As their slave-driven agricultural enterprise began to succeed, the Woodruffs traveled to Charleston in 1828 with the intention of buying equipment for processing sugar, a crop that was becoming increasingly important on the various slave plantations east of the St. Johns River. Joseph Woodruff traveled to New York to seek the needed equipment but died a few weeks after his return to Charleston, then in the midst of a yellow fever epidemic. His wife Jane never returned to Spring Garden. The plantation itself seems to have somehow continued, however, since a document from the following year listed over sixty slaves working on the Spring Garden site, another 19 slaves owned by Joseph and Jane's nephews from the neighboring property, plus 4 others whose ownership was "in dispute" (Digital Commons).

List of Negroes at Spring Garden, with their ages taken January 1829.		
Name	Age	Notes
Peter	44	
Mary	18	
John	14	
...
Peter	1	
Mary	2	
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Peter	16	
Mary	17	
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Peter	18	
Mary	19	
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Peter	20	
Mary	21	
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Peter	22	
Mary	23	
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Peter	24	
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Peter	64	
Mary	65	
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Peter	66	
Mary	67	
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Peter	68	
Mary	69	
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Peter	70	
Mary	71	
...

List of Woodruff slaves at Spring Garden in 1829

By 1830, the Woodruffs' descendants had sold the Spring Garden property near the spring to Colonel Orlando Rees of South Carolina who saw the flowing spring waters as a potential source of mechanical power for his future plantation. With the help of a Scottish engineer, Rees dammed the spring for the first time around 1831 and built a sugar mill powered by its artificially raised waters. This spring-powered mill was the only one of its kind in Florida. Before long, his purchase had become a large and productive slave plantation. The Scottish engineer visited Rees again in January of 1832, along with famed naturalist and painter John James Audubon, arriving by land from the Bulow Plantation further to the northeast. Audubon wrote about the journey enthusiastically, making a comparison to travel in Africa. He recounted that, "we perceived the tracks of living beings and soon saw the huts of Colonel Rees' Negroes. Scarcely could even African

travelers have approached the city of Timbuktu with more excited curiosity than we felt in approaching this plantation" (Proby 1974, 311). Apparently, Rees did not actually live immediately next to the spring and the adjacent sugar mill because Audubon wrote that he had to be shown the way to get there from Rees's residence. Audubon noted vast accumulations of shells in and around the spring, obviously the middens made by earlier Native inhabitants over the course of thousands of years. He also described a nauseating sulfurous smell, no longer present today except in the muck below the dam. Rees even showed Audubon another similar nearby spring that was no longer flowing, but unfortunately makes no mention of its exact location at Spring Garden.

The family of Major Joseph Woodruff's brother George owned property a few miles to the northwest of the spring. George's sons, Joseph and Henry, had once lived on these lands with their relatives and in 1834 decided to return to Florida after their Aunt Jane's death. As tensions between whites and Florida Natives intensified, the Woodruff brothers moved their slaves and cattle to their late uncle Joseph's former plantation at Spring Garden, now owned by Colonel Rees. Shortly thereafter, a young Seminole servant of Henry shot and killed his master while travelling between the two

properties. In response, Henry's brother Joseph departed quickly to St. Augustine in order to muster a band of militiamen to seek revenge for his sibling's death and to secure the spring and nearby family properties. When the white militia group of 20 men arrived at Spring Garden in December of 1835, the Second Seminole War had already begun, and the Woodruff property was now in the hands of Native warriors and their allies, the Black Seminoles. The Black Seminoles were escaped slaves and free Blacks who had developed a hybrid culture that included African, Native American, and Hispanic traditions. The spring's new residents, said to be under the leadership of Ee-mat-la, or King Philip, had burned the sugar mill at Colonel Rees' plantation and freed the 160 slaves working there (Rebellion 2005, Tally) as part of their efforts to undermine the whites' exploitative economic system. The later whereabouts of this third group of Spring Garden plantation slaves is unknown. They most likely joined what became the largest slave rebellion in United States history (Rebellion 2005, The Slave), uniting with groups of Black Seminoles, the African allies of the warring Seminoles, to fight against the genocidal goals of the United States Army as it attempted to enforce the 1830 Indian Removal Act. The defenders of the burned-out plantation chased young Henry Woodruff and his

militiamen back to their boats, killing one man and wounding two others (Francke 1986, 203). One can easily imagine the Native and Black victors wading into the relatively warm spring waters to recuperate and revive themselves after this battle to maintain their freedom. The Seminole-Black Seminole occupying force continued to enjoy control of the former Spring Garden plantation until the fall of 1838 when Brigadier General Joseph Hernández led his soldiers to the area from the recently destroyed Dunlawnton Mill and returned to St. Augustine with 53 Native captives, including the Seminole leader Ee-mat-la and Yuchi Billy, along with 16 Black prisoners (Sunderman 1953, 142). Hernández would go on to become the first Hispanic member of the United States Congress.

In 1849, Thomas Starke purchased the Spring Garden property from a descendant of the Rees family for \$1,400.⁵ Soon after, he had the sugar mill rebuilt and had his slaves cultivating both cotton and sugarcane (Grenier 2014, 68). When Starke died in 1855, the plantation came under the supervision of John Starke, Thomas' son, and the family estate included a large contingent of 95 slaves, the fourth and final group of slaves forced to work at DeLeon Springs (John Starke). Just a few years later and only months prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, the 1860 census of slaves showed

that the plantation had grown to a total of 106 people (Brooke). The revived Spring Garden plantation also began producing food supplies, including cattle, in support of the Confederate war effort. In 1864, Union Army General William Birney led raids into Florida to disrupt the Southern cause, including an attack on Spring Garden that destroyed the sugar mill for the second time in just thirty years. The Union raiders seized the plantation's store of cotton, and freed the Starkes' large contingent of captive workers (Grenier 2014, 68). Unfortunately, even with the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery the following year, severe racism persisted for another century in most of Florida and a normalized pattern of racial segregation continued at DeLeon Springs until well into the 20th century. Volusia County schools did not integrate until 1970.

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John	102
John	103
John	104
John	105
John	106

List of slaves held by the Starkes at Spring Garden (John Starke)



Postcard painting of the DeLeon Springs Inn with diving platform

In 1872, Major George Norris purchased the Spring Garden site. Six years later he established the spring's first lodging, the Spring Garden House, marking the debut of the area as a tourist destination for wealthy northerners wintering in Florida (Wayne 2010, 92). The railroad established a stop near the current state park entrance in 1886 and the area's name was changed from Spring Garden to DeLeon Springs in order to promote tourism ventures by linking the spring to the legendary Fountain of Youth. After Norris, the property changed hands several times and, at one point, a large pavilion was built atop the remains of the ancient burial mound just to the east of the pool for square dances and other events.

In 1925, the DeLeon Springs Inn, a small hotel also known as the Casino, opened its doors for winter guests. A diving platform more than 40 feet tall was erected at the northwest corner of the pool, although its extreme height was reduced over time due to safety

considerations. Further development nearly destroyed DeLeon Springs in 1926 when the retaining bank on the west side of the spring was increased in height with the goal of strengthening the water current to the mill in order to generate electricity. The added water weight at the bottom of the spring, however, so impeded the flow of water that the spring was forced to emerge below the dam in the spring run, turning the original spring into a muddy pond for several months (Bass 2012, 8). Using heavy machinery, the new spring vent was successfully plugged with concrete and debris, eventually bringing the main spring back to life. According to Bill Dreggors, there used to be two springs here and one of them had been filled in (DeLeon Springs 1996). It may be that the "new" spring in the run was this earlier spring, also mentioned by Audubon in 1832, temporarily coming back to life. The DeLeon Springs Inn itself maintained its privileged place right next to the spring until 1967 when termite damage forced its owner to demolish the structure.



Map at the DeLeon Springs State Park visitor center

In 1953, a massive and costly renovation created a water-themed attraction park surrounding the spring. Apart from a rejuvenating swim in its "Fountain of Youth," the park offered a Wild Animal Compound, a Jungle Cruise, and even waterskiing elephants as part of the Jim Rusing Water Skiing, Boat and Jumping Show. The first skiing elephant at the spring was named Sunshine Sally and a second water-skiing elephant named Queenie "trained to water-ski at Ponce de Leon Springs in the winter of 1958-1959" (Circus Historical Society). Queenie died 52 years later in Valdosta, Georgia. DeLeon Springs' attraction years also brought other truly extraordinary activities to the spring such as a speedboat driving through an enormous ring of fire, an acrobatic high-wire act performed over the spring run, and an underwater observation area at the northernmost part of the pool for watching synchronized swimming shows. A few Seminoles even returned briefly to the spring in the form of a family demonstrating Native crafts.



Liz Dane with her skiing elephant Queenie

George Thofehrn purchased the property in 1967, but by 1980 he was considering selling the land to developers. Meg Johnson and a group from the DeLeon Springs Garden Club came to the rescue and created the Save Our Spring organization, working for two years to promote the idea of converting the spring into a new state park. With the support of 13,000 signed petitioners and substantial financial help from Volusia County, DeLeon Springs became part of the Florida state park system in the summer of 1982 and currently hosts over 200,000 visitors each year.

Around the same time that DeLeon Springs became a state park, the area became home to an increasing number of Mexican immigrants that found work in northwest Volusia County's large ornamental fern industry. The vast majority of these farmworkers have roots in south-central Mexico, primarily in and around the states of Guerrero, Michoacán, Jalisco, and Guanajuato. Most adults in this population speak Spanish, just as the conquistadors did who came into this area over 450 years ago, when it was becoming part of Spain's vast Latin American colonial empire. While the majority of local Mexicans share Hispanic ancestry, the majority are also descendants of indigenous American ethnic groups that once spoke Nahuatl, Purépecha, Otomí, and other south-

central Mexican Amerindian languages. Their hybrid, mestizo culture includes innumerable Hispanic elements, but also embraces cultural sensibilities that local Mexicans hold in common with Native inhabitants of DeLeon Springs who lived here for thousands of years. These connections that the local Mexican community has with indigenous America include the high consumption of corn products, strong extended-family connections, comfort in nature, and its genuine respect for hard work. According to the most recent census information, over 12,000 Mexicans currently live in west Volusia County and the overwhelming majority lives within a 20-minute drive of DeLeon Springs. As a result, Mexican families are some of the most frequent visitors to the park, especially in the hot months of summer when the fern industry is less active and school is not in session. In spite of the numerous cultural differences between these recent Mexican immigrants and the various indigenous inhabitants of this area over millennia, the fact is that people of Native American ancestry are once again refreshing themselves in the spring waters here for the first time since the Second Seminole War.⁶



The pool and restored sugar mill at DeLeon Springs State Park

These days, the most consistent year-round visitors to DeLeon Springs are hungry tourists and locals who come to eat the wholesome pancakes served in the cozy Old Spanish Sugar Mill restaurant, a beloved local institution established by the Schwarze family in 1961. On busy days, people wait for a table while sitting outdoors immediately next to the spring, and some of them take advantage of the opportunity for a quick dip. Once inside the restored millhouse, they enjoy the experience of cooking their own custom-made pancakes on griddles built into the restaurant's dining tables. In spite of the state park's extensive interpretive efforts to inform its guests, however, few of those savoring their pancakes can imagine the vast historical context that surrounds them.

Sitting on one of the benches near the Sugar Mill, one can see the remains of the massive burial mound built by first Americans thousands of years ago. Peering underwater, a perceptive visitor

can see the discarded snail shells left by more recent groups of indigenous peoples. Even though we now know that there never was any Spanish settlement at DeLeon Springs, the sign in front of the Old Spanish Sugar Mill reminds us that, hundreds of years ago, Spanish conquistadors did indeed arrive close-by. The millhouse itself brings to mind the hundreds of Africans brought to the Spring Garden plantation by force to cultivate and process cash crops for their white owners. This abusive system of slavery ended here thanks to Seminole and Black Seminole warriors, and later Union infantrymen. From then on, various entrepreneurs “developed” the site as a tourist attraction until it came into the public domain as a Florida state park.

Today’s visitors to DeLeon Springs see the joyful smiles of children of all ages squealing and splashing in the spring’s refreshing waters. Their exuberant faces bring to mind their ancestors. These youngsters are the descendants of Native

peoples, the first inhabitants of the Americas; of enslaved Africans, the first people to farm Spring Garden; and of Europeans; including defenders of slavery, invading Spaniards, and other European immigrants. In this current chapter of DeLeon Springs’ extraordinary millennial saga, its perpetually invigorating waters consistently help remind of us of our integrity with nature. This experience creates a social atmosphere where diverse human cultures can more easily appreciate one another through playful social interactions while immersed in one of Florida’s most beloved swimming holes.



Kids chilling out together in the DeLeon Springs pool

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Mr. Phil Eschbach for his gracious sharing of resources regarding his ancestors in the William Williams family. Thanks to Stetson University American Studies Professor Paul Croce, DeLeon Springs State Park Manager Brian Polk, and Old Spanish Mill owner Patricia Schwarze for their helpful suggestions for improving this article. Special thanks to Stetson History Professor, Dr. Andy Eisen, for sharing his recent research on local slavery, especially his successful efforts to recover the names of slaves held at the Spring Garden plantation that are included as photographs in this article. Thanks also to the staff of the West Volusia Historical Society for their kind assistance.

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Notes

¹ Milanich suggests that Spanish slavers and entrepreneurs without the sanction of the crown may have actually been the first Europeans to reach Florida. Milanich, Jerald T. 1995. Florida Indians and the Invasion from Europe. Gainesville: University of Florida Press. 107.

² The expedition initially included three boats and 100 men, but Menéndez sent one of the boats back with 50 of the men so as to make their onboard rations last longer.

³ Much of the information about William Williams was graciously provided by Mr. Phil Eschbach, a direct descendant of Williams.

⁴ The name is difficult to read on the document, so this name may be in error.

⁵ According to Pat Griffin's 2003 park history research: "He bought the section of the plantation that Joseph Woodruff previously owned...He paid \$1,400 for the acreage on January 15, 1849" (St. Johns County Deed Book. Misc. A).

⁶ There was a Seminole exhibit during DeLeon Springs circus attraction years in the 1950s when a few Natives worked demonstrating indigenous crafts.