

SAHP-003

Interviewee: Dr. Mike Gannon

Interviewer: Dr. Paul Ortiz

Date: December 16, 2011

O: I thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to do the interview with me. It's a real honor for us.

G: It's an honor for me to be here with you, Paul.

O: Thank you. Well Dr. Gannon, as one of the real noted historians of this field, I wanted to ask you some questions really about the early history of St. Augustine—its development and its unique character. What makes St. Augustine unique among early European settlements?

G: It's unique in the first instance in that it is the first European permanent settlement in what is now the United States, and Canada for that matter. It is notable also for that fact that against all odds it survived and was permanently occupied, including by the British during a twenty-one year period in the middle of the eighteenth century, and survives to this day as the place where European culture, civilization, and religion originated in what are now the United States and Canada. Some people like to claim St. Augustine as being the first city in the Americas, and they use such language as First America to advertise the city, but it was hardly that, because there were numerous [prior] Spanish permanent settlements elsewhere in the New World, starting with Santa Domingo in 1497, just five years after the epic voyage of discovery of Columbus. And then after that [came] San Juan, Puerto Rico; Havana in Cuba; Bogota [and] Cartagena in Colombia; Lima in Peru; and, of course, Mexico City and numerous satellite cities

there. But above the line of Mexico and the Caribbean, St. Augustine is our first site where Spanish—that is, European—civilization took root.

O: Wow. I wonder if you could talk about this larger than life figure, Admiral Pedro Menéndez. As a historian, how would you characterize him and what was his vision for this adventure, I guess?

G: Well, he grew up in the province of Asturias, so he was born in the city of Avilés, a seaport. Born in 1519. Two parents of minor hidalgo—that is, gentlemen rank—and married a prominent woman in the Asturian Province, but then became a pirate, which was an honorable trade in those days. He was a privateer and armed with royal letters of marquee. He went about sacking and seizing enemy prizes, as enemy ships were called. And so successful was he at that enterprise, that in 1562 the king placed him in command of all transatlantic treasure fleets. And early in 1565, Menéndez's career took a third turn. He decided to become, not a conquistador, because the age of [Hernando] de Soto and [Pánfilo de] Narváez was past, and now those [Spaniards] going to [the Indies] were expected to become settlers and entrepreneurs and to build business enterprises. And that's what, in 1565, Menéndez decided to do. [He approached] King Philip II and asked for a charter authorizing him to establish an agri-business empire in Florida and also to conduct mining, which was really a stretch. But he obtained the permission of the king and in the course of that final ceremony he said, I also want to convert the natives to Christianity. I would forsake any other command or dignity that your majesty might bestow upon me in order to have this opportunity to release the natives of Florida from the thickest

[shades] of infidelity. And so the king authorized him to take priests for that purpose and endowed him with that added responsibility of missionary. Ten days after that charter was signed, both the king and Menéndez learned that the French had established a fort inside the mouth of the St. John's River— right smack in the middle of Spanish-claimed, La Florida, and the king authorized Menéndez to take on additional soldiers and arms, and to, quote, drive them out by whatever means you see fit, unquote. And those means turned out to be death by the sword in almost all instances. Menéndez supremely carried out that military mission and in so rough a fashion that people who read of those deeds are taken aback. But Menéndez had his reasons, and we can discuss them briefly. The main thing is to get him over to Florida. He left with a huge fleet— actually two fleets—one from Asturias and the other Northern provinces and another from Cádiz in the south of Spain. Altogether, the two fleets came to a total of thirty-four ships and 2,646 sailors, soldiers, and civilian settlers including women and children. Well, of that number, owing to hurricanes and other storms at sea, only five ships would make it to Florida and only 800 persons. They were mainly soldiers and sailors, but there were also one hundred craftsmen and farmers, some with their wives and children. Those eight hundred landed on September 8, 1565 at a site we know from a map by [Juan Joseph Elisio de la] Puente. I won't go into the large or long names of these individuals, but a map dating from 1769, which points very directly to the site where the Spaniards held their first mass. This was a mass of thanksgiving for a safe arrival. It was celebrated by the fleet chaplain, Father Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales,

Father López we say for short. After which, Menéndez— as his brother-in-law recorded in his log of these events—Menéndez had the Indians fed and dined himself. So here we have a religious service of thanksgiving and a communal meal [with] Spaniards and natives eating together, fifty-six years before the better known Thanksgiving at Plymouth in Massachusetts. Well, St. Augustine had a very difficult time surviving in the first instance because they found that the crops that they wanted to grow would not grow in Florida's low sandy soil, at least at that site along the coastal plain. One hundred of the settlers died of starvation within three months of the landing. Now, that might mystify some people because St. Augustine is the location of abundant seafood, some of the best in the world. Why didn't they eat the seafood? Nobody knows the answer to that question. It's been raised by Samuel Eliot Morison, among other historians, and it puzzles me today because my family moved to St. Augustine from Washington, D.C. in the year 1940—make that [19]41—right at the tail end of the Great Depression, and I went out and got food everyday with my hook and line and my net, and kept us alive for six months before we got our feet on the ground and bought a house and were able to buy groceries in a nearby store, and so on. So this is a mystery, one of the many mysteries surrounding the colony. It could not last indefinitely at the site where it stood because the natives who originally had been very peaceful to their strange visitors rose up and attacked them. And it was decided that the colony, which had begun at a site just north of the site of the first mass, had to be moved across the river to the northern end of Anastasia Island. There, two consecutive wooden forts were built, and they both rotted

because of the water damage that was done to the logs from which the forts were built. Subsequently, with the Indians quieting down, the colony returned to the mainland and [where] the city stands today. One of the streets in St. Augustine, Aviles Street, rightly is called the oldest residential street in the United States. Other streets formed, houses were put up, buildings— by 1600, St. Augustine was a city of 1,200 people with 120 shops and homes, with a church, an Indian mission, a hospital, a library [and] archives, and a city plan— the first city plan in what [is now] the United States.

O: What was that city plan and what was its purpose?

G: Well it was a city plan issued by the monarch in Spain to all of his colonies in the New World, establishing a certain criteria for construction. There had to be a central plaza, for example, and there had to be fronting that plaza a government house and the parish church, and other requirements were made subsequent to those, but that's how the plaza we see today originated, as the Spaniards complied with that. The city streets grew up around a plaza, as they did around plazas established in every capital of every Spanish province in the New World. St. Augustine was a poor community from its outset, relying on trade with the natives and relying in great part on their food technology— their food preparation techniques. Many of the Spanish soldiers intermarried with native women and a mestizo culture developed of half European, half native individuals. Then, of course, you had families building and children being born and the formation of a criollo, or Creole culture, which predominated in St. Augustine. Those few who call themselves peninsulares and came from Spain directly to St. Augustine, or

by way of ports such as Havana, they looked down on the criollos and so you had not only the major criollo element, but you had this intense stratification and competition between the criollos and the peninsulares, that even infected the mother house of the Franciscan Friars. Those struggles even happened within friary walls. But St. Augustine managed to survive thanks to the native foods, to which they became adjusted, and we know what those foods were from the late sixteenth century because archaeologists have found the food remains, both flora and fauna. And we know what the native diet was because we know what the Spanish diet was. And the archaeologists have done historians a great service and assistance by turning up this valuable information. St. Augustine managed to struggle through decade after decade, and then met the major problem of defending itself against enemy arms, particularly pirates who in the late seventeenth century hit the city very hard. And then, of course, you have in 1702 the siege of the city by forces from South Carolina. All of the residents of the city sought shelter in a just completed fortification, the castle of St. Mark, Castillo de San Marcos, and were saved by the walls of that castle, which were constructed from coquina rock. Coquina is a rock formed of seashells, the tiny mollusk shell, technically called donax [Donax is a genus of small, edible saltwater clams, marine bivalve mollusks]. Sometime way back in some Cenozoic Era period, billions of these little seashells were piled up on the shore of Anastasia Island. There are only three other—pardon me, four— other sites in the world where you find these piles of coquina rock, and three of them in Florida and one on the [West coast] of Africa. The great property of coquina was its

ability not to shatter upon the impact of a cannonball, but to absorb the cannonball. When Colonel [James] Moore from South Carolina came to besiege the city in 1702 and loosed his artillery upon the castle, he was totally frustrated because the walls didn't crack at all. The balls just stuck in the wall[s] and at the end of a day of bombardment, the castle looked like a chocolate chip cookie. The Spaniards would come out at night with crowbars and take the balls out and return them with prejudice to the enemy with their own guns. Well, Moore eventually just had to stamp his feet in frustration and leave. So we survived that. Then in 1740, General Oglethorpe, the founder of the first English colony in Georgia, came with an even larger force to besiege St. Augustine and its castle. And he, too, was defeated by the castle. He, too, limped home in disgrace. So St. Augustine is a city not only that managed to survive its hunger, but managed to survive its enemies. And all the way up to 1763, which ended the first Spanish period.

O: Dr. Gannon, what role did religion play in the everyday life of the colony?

G: Religion suffused everything. All aspects of life had a religious character. Religious festivals throughout the year dictated the change of seasons. The pastor was the most respected person in the community, other than the governor. We have to remember that most of Spanish life in the first Spanish period, from 1565 to 1763—a period of 198 years—was contracted pretty much around St. Augustine. We have missions out on the field we can talk about later, we have ranches out in the field, which we can talk about, but Spanish life in Florida was primarily contracted to this small town on the coast at the inlet of the

Matanzas River. It had a very vibrant religious life, and we can identify much of it through the parish registers, which from 1594 still exist. We don't know what happened to them from [15]65 to [15]94, but from 1594 to the present we have a continuous record of baptisms, marriages, and burials. They form a marvelous sociological and anthropological source for our knowledge of who the people were, family networks, family names, people going in and out of the city from Cuba. There was always a strong connection with Cuba, particularly with soldiers who would be sent on duty to St. Augustine and then reassigned by the Cuban headquarters to other sites. Always there was the priest, whether it was the pastor or the chaplain at his chapel in the Castillo de San Marcos, conducting services, hearing confessions, presiding over marriages. The bell would ring announcing the hours, the parish church bell, and everyone identified with the Catholic faith in a way that might seem strange to us today with our more relaxed appreciation of the role of religion in life. In those days, it stood at the very core of Spanish existence.

O: Dr. Gannon, I wonder if we can talk about the relationship between the Europeans and Native Americans. There were a number of incidents and characters. One I'm thinking of is Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas, and who had a special concern for Native Americans. Can you talk about the impact of—

G: All right, well, now in order to discuss that we have to go back to a period before St. Augustine was even conceived of, much less founded. We have to go back to the 1530s and [15]40s. Bartolomé de las Casas, [a Dominican priest,] was a great champion of the native people throughout Mexico and the [isthmus], and

also the Caribbean Islands. He had his greatest impact in Mexico where he became known as the apostle of the native people, and he opposed the Spanish practice of enslaving natives and using them for servile labor and denying them basic human rights and many times abusing them physically, causing hurt and death. He said, this is not right, the gospel is not taught by iron, it's taught by love. He preached that gospel all over Latin America, then finally went to his home country of Spain and preached it at the very court of the Spanish monarch. There one year he held a famous debate with a Spanish jurist named Sepulveda. Sepulveda defended all of these evil practices, but it was las Casas who won the debate and eventually won the day. In 1542, new laws for the Indies were promulgated by the Spanish monarch and they stipulated that the native peoples of the Americas were to be regarded as fully developed human beings, possessing immortal souls, and they were to be accorded all of the rights and dignities accorded Spaniards themselves. Now, this was a remarkable event if you think about it. In the course of a comparative few years following the beginning of the Spanish settlements in the Americas, a Spanish king would stop in the middle of his conquest[s] to ask the question, is what I'm doing unjust? I don't know when that ever happened before in European history. And he not only asked the question, but he charged that an investigation be conducted to determine the ethical and moral values involved here. And as a consequence, he changed the whole concept of what it meant to be a human being and to be a Christian in the case of the natives of the Americas. Think how long it has taken our own United States to do much the same. Yes, in the course of the Civil War

Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, but for many slaves that was only a liberation in theory because they were still under the rule of the southern Confederacy. When the war ended there was a kind of forceful introduction of African Americans into the American civil framework and numerous African Americans were elected to legislative bodies of the various southern states and many were offered education for the first time. But then after federal troops withdrew in 1877, the old anti-black emphasis returned and all of those rights that the African Americans had enjoyed for a short period were withdrawn. By the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to poll taxes, black codes, servile legislation of one kind or another, the blacks were back in a state of bondage in fact if not in law. They remained that way until 1964 when, finally, [the] Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed by Congress and signed by President Johnson. Think how long a period it took for us— how long a time it took for us to do what the Spanish monarch did in a comparative few decades. So this was a remarkable accomplishment. Unfortunately, the new laws were not promulgated in time to stop Hernando de Soto, who came here, landing at Tampa Bay in 1539, and spread his depredations throughout Florida and six other of the southeastern states of the present American union. Maiming, killing, abusing, , treating these native people of Florida worse than one would treat animals. It was disgusting. De Soto died in 1542 on the banks of the Mississippi River the very year that the new law of the Indies was passed. Thank God, [after De Soto] we were past that in Florida. Unfortunately, if you go to the House of Representatives in Tallahassee today, there's a huge mural that encircles the chamber, showing the

major events in Florida, and, where the Spaniards' relationship to the natives is concerned, the only scene is that of a Spaniard beating on the back of a native of Florida. That hardly represents what was done in Florida after the new laws. One of the great stories written in the early record of North America was the story of the Spanish missions, which began in 1587 at St. Augustine with the establishment of Mission Nombre de Dios, "name of God," and extended as far north as St. Catherine's Island along the Georgia coast, and as far west as modern day Tallahassee. Just ninety years after the founding of St. Augustine there would be 26,000 Christian Indians living [peacefully and productively] in mission compounds across Florida and up the Atlantic Coast, all originating out of St. Augustine, the mission headquarters. This achievement is not recognized in that mural—it is akin to California's legislature having a mural [painted] in its House of Representatives and omitting the great Spanish missions founded there.

O: What was the relationship, Dr. Gannon, between the missions in St. Augustine and the overall relationships between the Spanish and Native Americans?

G: Well, there's a great contrast between the way in which the natives of the northern colonies were treated by the English and the way the natives of the southern provinces, from Florida through Texas to California—what are commonly called the Spanish borderlands—the way the natives were treated there. In the north, there was no major mission enterprise to the native peoples whatever. There was no education given to them, they were not promoted to understand that they were fully developed human beings, the saying originated –

and it was certainly true to the mark—the only good Indian is a dead Indian. In the Spanish provinces it was just the opposite. The Spaniards went out—I'm talking now about the Franciscan Friars, members of the order of Friars Minor from Spain—they walked out in their grey, cowled habits with no more than their sandals and a staff to walk with, with no material goods whatever, because that was their ethic. They were to live off the land and to live off what was given to them. They walked out into the wilderness of interior Florida and established mission after mission after mission. There they lived among their native charges— I say charges in a sense that they were parishioners, they were students and so forth—they were hardly slaves. They were never thought of as a work force. They lived among their native people in the same way that Peace Corps volunteers live among native societies today. They treated the natives with a totally pacific attitude. They instructed them, teaching them reading and writing, European agriculture, European architecture, and building construction, and in every way educated them for a fuller life than they had enjoyed before. So this is a remarkable contrast and it's alluded to very rarely in American history books, if at all. As we all know, it's the victors who write the histories and the English won out for hegemony over the continent, including the Spanish borderlands and they wrote up the histories as they wanted [them] to appear. They managed to handle the Indian matter by just leaving the Indians out of the picture altogether. I come out of that—I'm Irish so I come out of that [English]-speaking tradition. I'm embarrassed that as the English colonies were formed and so many giant figures arose who proved to be our founding fathers, that

none of them took the approach that the Spanish friars had taken two and one centuries before.

O: Dr. Gannon, why do you think that most Americans ignore this more—and I love the term you use—pacific history about relations, because you're exactly right, when I was learning history and even through college, I mean I received—it was almost as if the history was written through, under the hand of Andrew Jackson or something. Why do you think most Americans don't learn or don't understand this more pacific history of the Spanish borderlands?

G: Because they never concentrated their studies in this region. They never did the research; they thought that all early American history ended at the southern Georgia border and [that] the South did not include all of the good things that happened in Texas and New Mexico and Arizona and California. The only notion that they have of the missions in California is that there was a romantic mission period from which buildings still stand. Well, yes they do stand, but many of them are not authentic because they were destroyed during the great earthquake. When they were rebuilt, they were rebuilt with I think some of Hollywood's set designers in charge. So they're not all that appealing to historians or archaeological experts. But they deserve to have their record known, and it's a very good record. The missions of California were not as successful as the missions of Florida. No present states' old Spanish missions matched what was done here in Florida. This was an amazing experience, and of course those missions were destroyed by the English. In 1702 the English come down from Carolina. They destroy[ed] all the missions along the intracostal

waterway one by one, killing many of the Indians in the process. They came to St. Augustine [and] destroy[ed] the pioneer mission of Nombre de Dios. They burn[ed] the parish church, [in fact,] they burn[ed] the whole city to the ground, except for the hospital. [But] the worst [invasion] was in 1704 when Colonel James Moore, who had failed so badly here in 1702 to capture the castillo, returned to destroy something he knew he could destroy [with impunity]. [And that was] the primitive, wooden, thatch-roofed mission buildings scattered all through the area around [present-day] Tallahassee—all those counties adjoining Leon County and including Leon. One after another he burned them to the ground and he—well, we know the figures. Historian John Hann has come up [them: Moore] killed 1,000 Christian Indians. He took 2,000 back to Carolina as slaves, and they are lost to our [history]; there's no slave narrative to tell us what happened to them. [This was the largest slave raid in the history of our country,] and [two] thousand he forced into exile, east and west. Some fled to St. Augustine for protection under the guns of the Castillo, the castle. The rest fled west as far as Mobile, and of those we know of only one family that still survives. I'm in communication with the father of that family of Apalachee Indians. Only one family now in this year of 2011 left as a visible sign of a great Christian culture that we had in the district around Tallahassee prior to 1704. [The catastrophe is not mentioned in American history textbooks.]

O: Why were the English so obsessed with attacking St. Augustine and the missions? What was their beef with—

G: It wasn't so much a beef. It was cupidity. It was a desire to occupy Florida and add it on to the list of English colonies on the Atlantic coast. That was their desire: power, and additional empire. It did not work. The Spaniards [held on to Florida by their fingernails].

[Laughter]

O: Dr. Gannon, you talked about some of the laws earlier. What kind of impact—I believe it was the 1573 Law of the Indies—what kind of an impact did that have on the trajectory of St. Augustine in the broader—

G: Well I don't know that 1573 was a pivotal year. It [was] a time when St. Augustine adjusted the character of its streets and buildings to conform to [official] Spanish [town planning]. And it was a time in which we really see the wisdom of the residents of St. Augustine [in moving] back to the mainland from Anastasia Island. They had no future there and they realized it. [There] are a few decisive years that you can point to. [I] would name the last years of the seventeenth century as decisive for the construction of the Castillo de San Marcos, which saved the city [in 1702 and again in 1740]. I would name 1607—prior to that—as a decisive year. That's when the Spanish friars first marched westward out of St. Augustine to the district of Gainesville and founded [there] the mission. San Francisco de Potano, the first interior mission in what is now the United States, and the first [Indian] school in the interior of what is now the United States. That mission, by the way, was established [in the same] year [that English] Jamestown was founded, and prior to the founding of Santa Fe in

present-day New Mexico. That was a decisive year. The years in which Florida resisted the English attacks in 1702 and 1740 definitely were decisive. And then of course the end of the first Spanish period in 1763, when, thanks to a treaty ending the French and Indian War, Florida was handed over to Great Britain. And it was a very large Florida because [English] Florida [stretched] from the Atlantic all the way to the Mississippi River.

O: Dr. Gannon, now I've heard you and also Dr. Jane Landers talk about the lives and the impact of Africans in Florida. Can you talk about that? I know that there's a fort just north of the main St. Augustine. Can you speak about that?

G: Well, the best way to introduce that story, which Jane knows so much better than I—[is] to say, [that] the first underground railway ran south rather than north. It was slaves on the plantations of Georgia and Carolina who fled south to St. Augustine, [who] constituted the first underground escape[es]. And the interesting thing is that the Spaniards were open to their coming and treated them as free people, and allowed them to have their own community and fortification at a place called Mose, a short distance north of the Castillo, "the castle." There they lived their own lives the way they wanted to. They had help. There was a Franciscan friar or a secular, or parish priest, who would minister to them there. They married, often having a Spanish soldier or officer as best man. They gradually moved into St. Augustine society and were treated very fairly, I believe, and it showed what freed slaves could do if given their opportunity to accomplish something on their own. That was a great first step for African Americans in our society, and Fort Mose deserves to be honored for that, and it

is increasingly honored for the great symbol that it is, [the first sanctioned free black community in our country.]

O: Now, Dr. Gannon, you mentioned earlier the relationship of St. Augustine to other points of Spanish settlements such as Cuba, for example. Could you situate for us the role that St. Augustine played, kind of vis-à-vis the other points of Spanish civilization?

G: Well, St. Augustine existed on the very periphery—northern periphery—of the Spanish empire in the Americas. It was terribly exposed. It could never feed itself for one thing, and had to be supplied with money and foods from Mexico twice a year. A subsidy that was called a situado had to be put together in Mexico, placed on ships, and taken to St. Augustine to keep that orphan colony alive. St. Augustine had no real respect in the rest of the colonies, but it certainly had a lot of respect back in Spain, where the royal families always called St. Augustine, the always loyal city of St. Augustine. That doesn't mean that the Spanish monarchs were all together satisfied that St. Augustine was making a contribution. It is sometimes said, well, it served as a protection for the treasure fleets, which sail through the Florida Current, which is the correct name for that fast moving four nautical mile current that we call popularly the Gulf Stream. But by the time the treasure fleets came to the latitude of St. Augustine, they were far out to sea, and St. Augustine never played a [role] in the protection of the plate fleets: [sand bars at its inlets presented deep draft warships from entering or departing that port]. It was said that St. Augustine stood as a mark of Spanish ownership of the continent and Spain should keep St. Augustine there for that

purpose, if for none other. [In 1607], the [Spanish] king called the further existence of St. Augustine into question, saying, I wonder if we need to keep a presence there. I mean it's nice to say that we have a footprint on the continent, but it's not doing anything for us. We're not deriving a single thing from it. We're always contributing something to it. And so the king asked that a study be done, and sent emissaries to St. Augustine to see if it wouldn't be a better idea to close down the city and its military installation, such as it was. Well, who saved the city? It was the Franciscan Friars. Because they said to these visitors from Spain, look, we have converted all of these native people to Christianity, now you want us to leave them to return to paganism? Is that the depth of your faith? And they challenged these men on that point and they said, all right all right, we'll carry that word back. [Laughter] And St. Augustine was saved.

O: And so it had really as much to do with the belief, the religious faith, even more so than maybe material reasons, in terms of saving the city?

G: Yes. Yes, I believe so. I think the spiritual overcame the material.

O: Wow. That's an amazing story because again, I mean the American historical narrative would look so different if St. Augustine and that whole narrative that you're telling was kind of at the center of our narrative. It would be completely different.

G: Um-hm. Yes, it would be completely different. Well, hand it to the Spanish monarchs, that they made a spiritual decision. It's not often that people in power make such decisions.

O: Exactly. Dr. Gannon, earlier you were talking about the blend of cultures. I mean sometimes we refer to this as mestizaje, or a kind of, “a blending or mixing of cultures.” I wonder if you could expand upon that and what role that kind of mixing of cultures had in St. Augustine.

G: Well, it was so common that it didn't disfigure anyone's reputation to have mixed blood. I can't give you the proportions. Through the ages there have been studies that would enable another scholar than myself to come up with a suggested proportion of mestizos to pure Spaniards in the city at any one time. The only people to whom that became a problem were the peninsulares who come with pure blood out of Spain, and look down on those who've mixed origins. But it didn't stop the people of St. Augustine from going about their business and succeeding in keeping the city alive, eventually getting into ranching and eventually going out of St. Augustine's low sandy soil to find rich loam elsewhere, and to begin successful farming and ranching. Also, they had commercial fisheries and they started the orange groves of Florida, and that turned out to be a profitable crop. So they survived and I don't believe that the people of St. Augustine looked down on one another because of their origins. I think that they all got along about as well as people could. It was only that division between criollos and peninsulares that mattered. It was a problem that, as I said earlier, even afflicted the Franciscan Friars at their mother house, as the two fought for leadership over the order.

O: Dr. Gannon, I've heard you do this before in lectures when you talk about the—and even today you've done this to a certain extent—can you talk a little more,

maybe do a comparison and contrast between St. Augustine and Jamestown?

What are some of the similarities between those two settlements and some of the outstanding differences?

G: Well, one of the similarities is that they both had what the Jamestown people called a starving time, and they lost many people to starvation, more at Jamestown proportionately than at St. Augustine. I gave a talk on that and other factors that have afflicted— that did afflict both Jamestown and St. Augustine— in a talk that I was invited to give to the Virginia Historical Society. I started out by reminding them that Virginia was claimed by Spain—Ajacán was what the Spaniards called the province. And so my talk was entitled, Carry Me Back to Old La Florida.

[Laughter]

O: That's great.

G: Which they received with chuckles just as yours, I'm pleased to say. And I pointed out the commonalities that could be found between St. Augustine and Jamestown. Both colonies [struggled] to survive. There were many more people in St. Augustine—many more mouths to feed there. The landing party in 1565 numbered 800. At Jamestown it was 104, max, and they both had to make a living out of a wilderness. They were really not prepared for certain challenges that faced them; they both had to defend themselves against Indians on occasion. They had to feed themselves and so on, and yet there were some striking differences. At St. Augustine you had a more denominational religious

life than you found at Jamestown. The priest had a role in St. Augustine that the minister did not have at Jamestown, and this was one striking difference that you can see between the two. Jamestown in the end failed and English life centered at Williamsburg. St. Augustine did not fail and its seat of government remained in place. As the capital city, St. Augustine survived right through three different periods. During the twenty-one year British occupation from 1763 to 1784, St. Augustine was the capital city, and the Spanish government house was occupied by the British governors, and then when the Spanish returned it was as though they'd hardly left. Not too many changes had been made in the city and [the Spaniards] picked up where they had left off. And [some] of the people who had— not many, I shouldn't say that, but a significant number of people who had left St. Augustine in 1763 and moved to Cuba— returned, and took up their former residences. So there are similarities and differences. One of the characteristics of the recent Jamestown 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of that settlement, was the announced recognition that, yes, St. Augustine was the prior permanent settlement. At last that issue has appeared to resolve itself into the dew. Recently, I got an email from a gentleman in Jacksonville who wants to stage a history detective-like story, pitting Jamestown against St. Augustine on which was the prior settlement, and I haven't responded because I'm trying to pick the right words. [Laughter] Basically, what I want to tell him is that, I think that if you went and asked the people at Jamestown, you'll find that there is no argument. Why don't you talk with them first? And then if you think there still is one, give me a note back, but I know that the archaeologists up there—I know

that the woman, a wonderful woman, who headed the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the founding of Jamestown, totally accepts the fact that St. Augustine was the prior settlement, and of course historians to a person have said this for a hundred years, people who've known anything about the historical record.

O: Exactly. Well, along those lines, I think I've heard you in the past discuss your, the Grinch Who Stole Thanksgiving. I wonder if you'd talk about that.

G: Well, in 1965, which was the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Augustine, I published a book entitled *The Cross in the Sand*. It was a history of the Catholic Church in the early years of European Florida from the first discovery and naming of Florida in 1513, through the founding of St. Augustine in 1565, all the way up to 1870, which was the date of the establishment of the first diocese of St. Augustine when you could say the Church had matured. In talking about the early Spanish period, I mentioned the landing of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and his 800 compatriots at St. Augustine. I said that the fleet chaplain— soon or immediately to become pastor of St. Augustine—Father Lopez, celebrated a mass [of Thanksgiving for the colonists' safe arrival] and there was a communal meal afterwards, [Spaniards and natives eating together], and in a throwaway line, I said, it was the first community act of thanksgiving in the first permanent settlement in what is now the United States. It was a throwaway line and nobody mentioned it, it didn't attract any attention of the newspapers, but twenty years later in 1985 I got a call from the head of the Associated Press Bureau in Jacksonville. He said, Dr. Gannon, we've received a request from the AP Chief

Bureau in New York to come up with something new for Thanksgiving. This was about four or so days before Thanksgiving. The AP headquarters people are tired of the image of the Pilgrims and their black and white outfits with their big buckles, they're tired of Priscilla and all of the other pilgrims, so called. They'd like to have something new, something different. Do you know anything new? I said, I'm sorry I don't, I know something old. I told him about the first thanksgiving and its characteristics and how as one of the chroniclers who was present said, the Indians imitated all they saw done and so forth; they were fully engaged in this cultural event and this thanksgiving service and communal meal. He said, that's dynamite, I can use that, and I gave him as many details as I had. And out of all the states, the Florida recommendation was accepted in New York, and they wrote that story and sent it out on the AP wire to newspapers, radio and television stations, all across the country. Well, all hell broke loose in the Gannon household because my phone started ringing with calls from all over the country—from feature writers, from talk shows, from just about every media type person you can think of. I was on the phone—[almost] three days and three nights. I fielded the calls as best I could and I remember I got called by all kinds of DJ shows, including hard rock DJs. I remember one from Ventura, California. He said, is this the professor in Florida who says that there was a Thanksgiving in St. Augustine before there was one in Massachusetts? I said, yes. He said, Okay, stand by professor baby. I'm gonna slip you in between Twisted Sister and the Boomtown Rats. [Laughter] So I was big in Ventura, but I was also big—as you can imagine—in New England. And those calls were unpleasant.

Some were courteous, some were not. I felt bad about those who were displeased by my findings, but, after all, the word had been out there for twenty years and this wasn't anything shockingly new. If anybody wanted to look at the historic record it was there for anyone to read, but that didn't make any difference with some people. There was a Boston television host of an evening show, the largest television station in Boston—I forget the call letters—he said, I'd like to interview you by satellite on my evening news show today. So he sent me down to a point west of Ocala where there was a big satellite dish. And so I went there, and before we went on the air, he came on the screen to welcome me to the program and thanking me for driving down to do this. He said, Dr. Gannon, you might want to know that as we speak, the selectmen in Plymouth are holding an emergency meeting to contend with this new information that there were Spaniards in Florida before there were Englishmen in Massachusetts. I said, Fine, and you can tell them for me that by the time the Pilgrims came to Plymouth, St. Augustine was up for urban renewal. [Laughter] And then the next day a reporter for the Boston Globe called me and he said, I thought you'd like to know that in New England you've become known as, the Grinch Who Stole Thanksgiving.

O: [Laughter] That's great. Dr. Gannon, we've talked earlier about the distinctive cultures and some of the intersections between those cultures, and you have talked about Native American, European, and African. I wonder, could you talk about maybe the confluence of those cultures and perhaps also clashes between

those cultures, and kind of how they impacted the unique character of St. Augustine?

G: I think one of the principal characteristics of colonial St. Augustine is that there were no real clashes between nationalities or races that occurred within or without the city proper. St. Augustine was our first melting pot. We not only have Spaniards and native peoples living together and marrying each other and adopting each others' customs, but we also find people coming in from Germany, and France, the Netherlands and adapting to life in St. Augustine and mixing right into this ever-moving melting pot. The first that we have in the history of our country. So when people talk about clashes of cultures, that may have happened elsewhere, it didn't really happen in St. Augustine. St. Augustine was a very receptive colony, and it didn't have any lock on the gate, and everybody was welcome to come in so long as he or she made a contribution to keeping the colony alive.

O: Dr. Gannon, you mentioned earlier that even when St. Augustine was a relatively small town—I think the population figure you mentioned was about 1,200 or 1,500 early on—it seems to me that you mentioned it was also kind of a city of workshops.

G: Yes.

O: Can you describe what types of workshops those were? What people did in them, how they—were those trades?

G: Yes. There were clothing stores and people would take yarn and whole cloth from commercial ships that arrived in port and make britches and coats out of them and so on. They were carpentry shops. St. Augustine was—until 1702— a lumber and thatch type of town, using lumber planks and palm thatch. The lumber had to be sawed to length and to width, and had to be placed just so for the building to stand up to the strong winds that always came in the fall and the heavy rains that always came as just being part of Florida. So trained carpenters [worked] in their own shops and turned out these materials. There were also people who mixed paints and plasters. People don't realize that these homes—being of very rude construction—had to be protected against the weather, and plaster was one of the means in which that was done. As a matter of fact, even the seashell castle of St. Mark was covered with plaster. When we look at the castle today, seeing before us the raw seashells composition of the exterior, that's not what the Spaniards saw. They saw a castle whose seashell walls were covered entirely with an off-white plaster, and then around the upper edges there was a bright red band that went just under the gun embrasures, all the way around the curtains and the bastions of the castle proper. The sentinel towers were all covered with bright red plaster. If you go to Athens in Greece and look at the Parthenon, what you're seeing is the Parthenon in ruins. All its marble exterior is gone. When you look at the castle of St. Mark in St. Augustine, what you're seeing is a castle in ruins, and I have been arguing for thirty years that the castle should be re-plastered. We're restoring everything else in St. Augustine, why don't we restore the castle?

O: What's the argument against that?

G: Oh. The tourists would be put off completely. Business would collapse to have this bright shining thing out there all white and red and so forth. That doesn't attract anybody. The castle attracts people because it has this old, brown texture and you say, now that's something antique. But put a prettified plaster on it and all this red decoration, visitation to St. Augustine will collapse. That's the usual criticism that I hear. But more and more scholars are joining this line of thinking. Maybe sometime after I pass on to that historical archives in the sky it will happen. [Laughter]

O: What were some of the other—you mentioned earlier the unique character of coquina and its qualities, and you also mentioned this early tradition of craftsmanship—what were some of the distinctive or important building techniques that people used in the city to kind of erect structures and keep them intact in this real tough weather environment?

G: The specifics of an answer to that question I do not know. For that, Herschel Shepard would be a good guide, Bob Steinbach— both historical archaeologists or architects. They know the building construction techniques and materials far better than I do. I follow on what I learn from them. They would have the answer to that question. I'm not an expert on that at all. I will say this, I know a little bit about the coquina rock. In that, in the early years of St. Augustine's foundation, the Spaniards learned of the presence of that rock when natives took them across the river and told the Spaniards to dig, and they dug and hit all of this

rock: square miles of coquina stone underground. But they had no tools with which to mine it, to transport it, and use it. And then in 1670 the English founded Charleston, and all of a sudden the governor at St. Augustine realized, that's so close, we're vulnerable to attack, we need a stronger fortification. He begged the governor of Cuba and the King of Spain to provide the money and the tools to use this coquina rock for building a more substantial fortification than the tiny wooden fort that they had at the time. So experts came from Havana with those tools and with the engineering skills to quarry it. When first quarried, coquina is relatively soft. They quarried it in big slabs so it would hold together and left it out in the sun to dry. Then when it had dried, then they lightered it on rafts across the Matanzas River to the building site where you see the castle today and then they lifted those slabs into place. Of course they had no idea at the time that coquina rock had that special property that allowed it to save the city, namely, when hit by a cannonball, it would not fracture. It would simply [makes noise] suck in the cannonballs. It was learned only in the first siege, that of James Moore in 1702, and of course they said [that that was] an act of providence. Thank you God for this shell rock. [Laughter] We never would have survived without it.

O: Wow. That's an amazing story. It was an act of God if you think about it. Wow. Dr. Gannon, you alluded to the sense that St. Augustine was—in the context of the Spanish empire—almost an outlier or maybe on the frontier, on the edge of the Spanish empire. Over the centuries it received a lot of notable visitors.

Could you talk about maybe some of the notable visiting bishops or kind of outstanding visitors to the city?

G: Early in the seventeenth century St. Augustine received a visit from Bishop Altamirano—we'll just use his last name—the bishop of Havana in Cuba. Actually the diocese was called the diocese of Santiago de Cuba, and he was making a visitation on behalf of the king to see if the missions of Florida were truly successful. At that time—this was 1607—there had not been an entry into the interior yet, the missions all existed just south of St. Augustine and north across the St. John's to St. Catherine's Island along the Georgia coastal islands. Well, Altamirano was very impressed by what the friars had accomplished, and he wrote so to his monarch, [the] queen, and told her that this was a magnificent achievement. He mentioned the large number of baptized Indians he had confirmed—that is, to whom he had given the sacrament of confirmation. He spoke of the devotion of the friars, he spoke of the hardships under which they lived. As a matter of fact, one of the lines in his report to the queen was, in those places they eat their bread in sorrow. Well, it was a great tribute to what the friars, against great odds, had accomplished. They were men who lived out their lives there, thirty, forty years, until death set the final seal on their sacrifice. Altamirano was one, and then in the 1670s, three quarters of a century later, Bishop Calderón, who was the bishop of Santiago de Cuba at that time, comes for an even more extensive visitation. This time he has not only the coastal island missions to visit, but all of those stretching west, from St. Augustine to Gainesville, then to the juncture of Santa Fe and Suwannee Rivers, then finally to

Tallahassee, where there were tens of thousands of Christian Indians. He was enormously impressed again as his predecessor had been, by the devotion and success of the friars and by the quality of the Christian lives being led by the natives, particularly in Apalachee around Tallahassee. He talked of their devotions during Holy Week—a period when he was there—and how they stood for long periods of time in the chapel praying and how many of them were using prayers that had been written out by the friars who had provided them a phonic language of some kind. He wrote about their hard work, their industriousness, and how well their buildings were made. His only complaint was that the women wore no tops, and he decreed that in all of Florida all of the women will wear shirts of one kind or another. And so all of the clothes makers hurried to produce shirts for the women and then when the bishop returned to Havana they took them off again. [Laughter] But he was impressed and he was—along with Altamirano— was one of the two distinguished visitors who came to Florida during the first Spanish period.

O: What was the cultural influence, Dr. Gannon—you talk a lot about the impact of the Franciscan Friars and their incredible toils—was there a reciprocal influence of Native American culture back on the Spanish? Do we see evidence of that?

G: Yes, I suppose we do in terms of living off the land. The natives were very adept at that. Sometimes when crops failed they went into the woods and they lived of certain leaves and berries and so forth, and of course animals that they shot with their bows and arrows. They never forgot how to do that, and it saved a many native community in times of harvest failure or some other devastation of food

sources. So I'm sure they taught the friars that in return, and the friars lived, too off what the Indians were able to do in the woods. So there's one instance that I can think of.

O: Okay. Now you had mentioned a little bit about piracy earlier on. Did piracy have an impact on the growth and development of St. Augustine during this?

G: Well, not a significant impact. Pirates occasionally would come ashore and do damage to some small installation or whatever, and seize something of value and cart it away, and then toward the end of the seventeenth century there was a major attack by Robert Searle, a noted Caribbean pirate, who landed with brigands and killed about sixty Spaniards—many in their beds—along Calle Real, now St. George Street, and caused great hurt. I'm sorry to say that that happened, but I'll tell you it was good for the Spaniards in a way, because it alerted them to what might happen if the English got too close. When Charleston was founded, that was the sign [that] the Spaniards better do something to beef up their defenses.

O: Okay. It was a wake-up call in a way.

G: It was a wake-up call. We've been waded off I think.

O: Well, Dr. Gannon, I want to thank you so much, I know you are really busy. It means a lot to me personally. Thank you for spending time and talking with us.

G: It's been a pleasure, thank you.

[End of Interview]

Transcribed by: Chelsea Lutz, March 14, 2012  
Audit edited by: Taylor Jeanot, May 30, 2012  
Final edited by: Diana Dombrowski, March 2013