

A Brief History of the Oldest House

The González-Alvarez House, known to generations of tourists and townspeople as “the Oldest House,” is one of the country’s best documented and studied old houses. Its site presents a unique record of life in St. Augustine over more than 400 years.

1565-1702

For more than a century after its founder, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, landed in 1565, St. Augustine was a military outpost, and as such was a threat to other nations. Raided and burned by Sir Francis Drake in 1586, sacked by English pirates in 1668, and reduced to ashes again by English troops from Carolina in 1702, its early history was marked by conflict and violence.

Despite that violence, archaeologists can show continuous occupancy of the Oldest House site from the early 1600s to the present day.

Palm thatching and logs or boards formed the earliest shelters here, for the Spanish soldiers and settlers had to use what material came easiest to hand. An early structure on this site, built of those materials, was burned, probably in the 1702 fire. What house it was, what family was left homeless, we don’t know.

The flames died, and the British marched back northward. A new start and new shelters were immediate necessities.

1702-1775

Now construction could be more substantial, for royal permission was granted to use coquina, the native shellstone from across the bay on Anastasia Island. At the Oldest House site, a floor for the two main rooms was laid of *tapia* (tabby), a mixture of lime, shell and sand. That, with the coquina walls, mark this oldest part of the Oldest House as typical of Spanish St. Augustine.

Not many years after the little one-story, flat-roofed house was thus rebuilt, Tomás González y Hernández was living there. He had come from the Canary Islands, married a local girl in 1723, and we know that their baby died in the house in 1727.

For forty years the González family lived here, not too far from Tomás’ duties as an artilleryman at the great stone fortress, the Castillo de San Marcos. When Florida was ceded by Spain to Great Britain in 1763, the town’s 3,000 Spanish residents, including González and his family, had to leave.

1775-1790

In the midst of the British period, Sergeant-Major Joseph Peavett, a well-to-do English soldier, purchased the house and started the chain of alterations which brought the little building to the shape and size we see today.

In 1786, two years after Spain regained control of Florida, Peavett died. Not many months later his widow, Mary, married John Hudson, a young Irish adventurer with little money sense.

To pay off Hudson's debts, in 1790 the house was sold at auction to a newly arrived Spaniard, Gerónimo Alvarez. He, and his descendants after him, lived in the house for almost a hundred years. Here they saw Florida become a part of the United States in 1821, and here they lived through the dangers of the Seminole Wars and the Civil War. Finally, in 1882 the house passed into other hands. In the next four decades it was home to various occupants, including those who first opened it to the public as "The Oldest House in the United States."

1918 - Today

The St. Augustine Historical Society acquired the old house in 1918. After historical research, archaeological studies, restoration and renovation, the Society now presents the house for what it is, a structure that tells us much about life in colonial St. Augustine. In 1970, the U.S. Department of the Interior designated the González-Alvarez House a National Historic Landmark. Landmark status is granted only to properties judged as possessing "exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States." Throughout the country, fewer than 2,500 historic places have received this national distinction.