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MATANZAS IS SPANISH FOR 'MASSACRE'

By: HAMPTON DUNN

FORT MATANZAS NATIONAL MONUMENT --- They call it Rattlesnake Island, this water-surrounded stone fort with the bloody name of Matanzas, which is Spanish for "massacre."

The weird name comes from that dreadful fortnight back in 1565 when the Spanish explorer Don Pedro Menendez, founder of St. Augustine, ordered the execution of several hundred French Huguenots to wipe out any French challenge to his nation's holdings in the New World. The fort stands in a waterway known as Matanzas Inlet.

Menendez was lauded by King Phillip II of Spain for the slaughter not because the victims were French, but because they were Lutherans which he regarded as "pirates." They had surrendered unconditionally.

Down through the years this little military outpost has figured in other historic events. After attacks by the British, by pirates and by Indians, the Spanish finally built the fort. It was completed in 1742 and looked then as it does today, a sturdy masonry structure with a minaret-like sentry box. It served through the years as a vital defense to St. Augustine. The stone was native coquina quarried from the King's quarry on nearby Anastasia Island.

The fort ruin was designated a National Monument by Presidential proclamation in 1924. It is 14 miles south of St. Augustine on Florida A1A. The Monument includes 308 acres on Rattlesnake Island, where the fort is located, and Anastasia Island, where the visitor center is. The fort is accessible only by boat.