

Lost and found history



BY LIBBY SWOPE WIERSEMA | PHOTOS BY RUTA SMITH

BEFORE ST. AUGUSTINE, PLYMOUTH ROCK and Jamestown, there was Santa Elena. Never heard of it? You aren't alone.

Beaufort's Santa Elena History Center aims to change all that through its main exhibit, "America's Untold Story." Santa Elena (not to be confused with St. Helena) was a settlement established on what we now call Parris Island in 1566 to serve as the capital of the Spanish colony, La Florida. It was the site of wars, political upheaval, religious discord and cultural battles as French and Spanish settlers jostled for position in the New World.

Opened in 2016, the museum is housed in the town's former

See South Carolina's colonial past in a whole new light when you visit Santa Elena History Center

federal district courthouse, an art deco building that began as a private residence, and then was used as a hospital during the Civil War. Its history is documented on the ground floor of the center and well worth a stop as you take in the center's many displays.

You can immerse yourself in Santa Elena history with a self-guided tour, but enlisting the assistance of one of the



MULTI-USE SPACE The art deco structure housing the museum has previously served as a residence, Civil War hospital and a federal district courthouse.

of the history center. "People think of the Spanish as settling in Florida as we know it today, but the Spanish settled in South Carolina, too—a piece of history you don't usually hear about in the classroom."

We began our tour in a viewing room, where an eight-minute film explained the complex history of European settlements in the area. Afterward, we followed our docent through the second-floor main exhibit, an area that once served as a federal courtroom, moving clockwise through the displays for a chronological perspective.

With colorful maps, films, displays and illustrations, a time that seems downright ancient becomes a vivid, living experience. Santa Elena was founded 70 years after Christopher Columbus made his first trans-Atlantic voyage, a time when Spain, France and England ruthlessly competed to rule both land and sea.

Displays detail each significant event during a time of high stakes, cutthroat imperialism and uncertainty. It's a lot of information to take in, but the history center does a beautiful job of unpacking things bit by bit.

The exhibits also include an accounting of the excavations of Santa Elena, which began in the 1800s under the assumption that the settlement was French. Trained archeologists were of a differing opinion, though, and in the 1950s declared that pottery found at the site was of Spanish origin. A new

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—MEGAN MEYER, DIRECTOR OF SANTA ELENA HISTORY CENTER



GET THERE

The Santa Elena History Center is located at 1501 Bay Street in downtown Beaufort.

HOURS: Open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday.

ADMISSION: \$10 for adults, \$5 for students, \$5 for children ages 7 to 17, and free for children younger than 7. Active-duty military, police and firefighters with IDs also admitted free.

UPCOMING EVENT: The center is hosting its second annual Santa Elena Lowcountry Fair at Cotton Hall Plantation in Yemasee Nov. 2–3, featuring Marsh Tacky races and living history encampments.

DETAILS: (843) 379-1550; santa-elena.org.

knowledgeable docents volunteering at the center will provide deeper insights as you navigate two floors of compelling exhibits. What unfolds as you move through the visual timeline is a story that includes secrets archaeologists uncovered during excavations of the Santa Elena ruins on Parris Island.

"The story of Santa Elena changes everything about the way we think of our origins," says Megan Meyer, director

excavation began in 1979, which led to the discovery of Santa Elena's Spanish forts and Charlesfort—a French settlement that was abandoned just one year after it got its start in 1562. More recent excavations have also uncovered the location of Fort San Marcos, which had eluded archaeologists for about 20 years. You can read all about it in one of the final installments of the main gallery and examine a 3D model of the fort's layout.

After the main gallery tour, we headed back downstairs where we learned about the magnificent Spanish galleon ships through wooden models and film. Children can also sit at computer stations and watch historical videos geared for a more youthful audience. And who's watching over them? Why, none other than a replica of the shrunken head of one of Beaufort's most notorious residents—Blackbeard the pirate.

"This is someone you don't want to



SECRETS NO MORE Visitors delve into the history that has been uncovered during excavations of the Spanish settlement of Santa Elena, on what is now Parris Island.

see on one of those boats," quips Meyer, pointing to the scraggly visage.

The center also has created an "excavation site," a sandbox where children can hunt for replica artifacts of the Santa Elena dig. A gift shop filled with mementos, educational toys and local crafts is

another favorite stop for visitors of all ages, and while they aren't part of Santa Elena's history, the old holding cells from the building's courthouse days are still intact and open for those who wish to briefly experience the jailhouse blues and take a selfie or two. ☺



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