

Fish Island's Historical Past: A Citizen's Perspective on
What We Stand To Lose

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What We Stand to Lose

Sometimes we don't realize the value of something until we stand to lose it, forever. Such is the case with Fish Island, that pristine piece of Old Florida that we have all grown so accustomed to seeing, alongside the Matanzas, in all of its splendor. Flocks of Roseate Spoonbills, gathering at dusk along its wetlands are a common sight, and one that, perhaps, we have taken for granted. Looking across the 312 Bridge to the decimation being done from the development called, Antigua, one can't help but wonder: When will be the last time we see them there? The detrimental impact of development upon this area will be immense and irreversible.

D.R. Horton, the largest home developer in the country, plans to decimate Fish Island, by clear-cutting and filling some 73 acres for a housing development. Fish Island has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places (8SJ62NR) since 1972, due to its importance in Florida's history. This document, signed by Governor Reubin Askew, reads in part, "...in Recognition of Its Significance and to Encourage Its Preservation."

Most people we speak to haven't heard the story of Fish Island, which exists only in bits and pieces dating from the 1700s to the present. It lies within the written descriptions of historians and scholars, in newspaper articles and in letters, in Spanish census records, in the records of Spanish tariffs, in archeological surveys, in cultural resource assessments, in published and unpublished first hand accounts, in letters written by Fish himself, in maps from the 1700s, in documents from the State of Florida, in letters written by previous landowners, and of course, in the lives of those who lie buried within its own hallowed grounds.

It is no wonder that this story remains largely untold, as we found no signs of any comprehensively written narrative, encompassing all of the pieces of the history of Fish Island.

In an effort to further inform this discussion, we have tried to connect the dots of this story based on a review of records, including those from the Fish Island files at the St Augustine Historical Society Research Library (SAHS-RL), as well as, other

scholarly sources. We have tried to both understand and underscore the less talked about, and yet, very relevant parts of the history, as accurately as the sources allow. Some sources conflict on exact dates, and in this case, we have included both. For clarity, we have italicized direct quotations. This written perspective contains both sourced material and our own perspectives.

In the Introduction we have provided a brief overview of Jesse Fish's early years. We have then emphasized in greater detail the two critical aspects of Fish Island's history that have not been adequately recognized, and consequently remain largely unknown to the community. The first is the significance of Jesse Fish's very large orange plantation, "El Vergel", as the actual site of the first commercial orange grove in our State and in the Nation. The second is the abundance of historic evidence pointing to the likelihood that unmarked burials (dating back to the 1700s) of a number of African slaves and others still exist on Fish Island.

Introduction

The story of Fish Island encompasses parts of three distinct historical periods in St Augustine: The First Spanish Period (1565–1763); the English Period (1763-1784); and the Second Spanish Period (1784-1821).

The story begins in New York in 1724 or 1726, the date Jesse Fish was born. (1, 4) He was of English descent, and as a young boy of ten or twelve, he set sail out of New York with the Walton & Company of New York, a shipping company, who since 1726 held the contract to bring food provisions and supplies to the Spanish Garrison in St Augustine. (2,3) In explaining his young age at employment, it's been suggested that Fish's father had died while working for the firm, and that "*Jesse was employed in his place as an act of kindness.*"(4)

Jesse Fish arrived in St. Augustine in 1736, where he resided for the next 54 years until his death on February 8, 1790 on Fish Island. (1) He was reportedly sent to St Augustine by the Walton Company in order to learn the Spanish language, laws, and customs while living with a prominent local Spanish family, the Herreras. (1,3) He became so proficient in these areas, that within a few years he obtained the commission as "*Agent of Supplies*", the company's sales representative in Spanish Florida, a role in which he remained until 1763. (1,3,4). There is much written about what transpired with Jesse Fish in 1763 and thereafter. He resided in El Vergel beginning in the First Spanish Period, through the English Period, and until his death in the Second Spanish Period.

In 1763, at the end of the First Spanish Period, when Florida was occupied by the British, all Spanish Floridians were given 18 months to leave, but many were landowners, and they were also permitted to sell their properties within that time frame. Jesse Fish, though raised in Spanish Florida, was of British descent, not a

Spaniard, and so was permitted to stay. A representative of the Spanish government, Senore de la Puente in early 1764, after being unable to sell the Spaniard's properties quickly enough, transferred most of the ex-patriots' land deeds to Jesse Fish, who supposedly had a confidential agreement to act on their behalf as their agent, by selling or renting their properties and then sending money back to them in Cuba or to other places. This arrangement and whether Fish acted in good faith remained a point of controversy for years until his death and afterwards, resulting in many land disputes and court cases involving his descendants.

Because of the massive land transfer that he acquired after the 1763 exodus of Spaniards, Jesse Fish became the owner of most of the properties in St. Augustine, in addition to lands we believe that he already owned on Anastasia Island. Following the transfer of properties from the departing Spaniards to him in early 1764, a map of the City, shows Jesse Fish as the owner of the majority of properties in St Augustine. It is unclear whether he may at times have resided in any of the St Augustine homes he had acquired. We can speculate that if he educated his children, they would have presumably attended school in St Augustine. At the end of his life, he reportedly had lost everything but El Vergel, due to the payments of his debts. He is said to have died penniless and a recluse on Fish Island, where he was also buried.

He had married 17-year-old Sarah Warner, the daughter of the Harbor Master in 1768 when he was in his forties. They had two children, Jesse Fish, Jr. and Phoebe Furman Fish, before the marriage ended in separation blamed (according to several accounts) on her "madcap" behavior. At his death, his descendants included his wife and children, and Clarissa Fish, "a certain black woman" said to be the "servant" to Jesse Fish Jr., and mother to their seven children, Sophia, Betsy, John, Maisy, Diana, Harriet, and Phebe. (12)

By comparison, there is far less available documentation about the details of what transpired in Jesse Fish's life during the years between 1748 and 1763. It has been reported that he was held as a prisoner of war by the Spanish starting in 1739 during Spain's war with the British under King George, and he is said to have arrived back to live as a free man in St Augustine *"in 1748, following the end of hostilities"*. (5) Jesse Fish has been described in many ways: as a scoundrel, a spy, a slaver, the savior of St Augustine, and a land grabber, just to name a few.

We surmise from what we have read that during the years subsequent to his return to St Augustine from his imprisonment, Jesse Fish became engaged in business dealings on several different fronts. He is on record as continuing to work many years as a shipping agent for the Walton Company, at times traveling and actually sailing ships for them. It seems likely that during these years he also became engaged in overseeing the establishment and growth of his very large, commercial, orange plantation on Santa Anastasia Island, and the records that we found of his slave imports begin in 1752. (10)

Fish Island, is the last remaining undeveloped parcel of Jesse Fish's original 10,000 plus acre land holdings on Anastasia Island, and the site of the remains of his former Plantation home, a blockhouse, a coquina block well, two tombs, a wharf, a channel system and of his previous orange groves. As previously mentioned, this area has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1972, because of its relevance to Florida's history.

Site of Florida's First Orange Grove

On the parcel we now call Fish Island, sometime in the mid-1700s or later, Jesse Fish established a "world famous" and very large Plantation, called El Vergel. In a resolution passed by the Directors of the St Augustine Historical Society on February 10, 1975, they state in part, "...Whereas, Fish Island has been identified by historians as the location of Florida's first orange grove. NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Directors of St Augustine Historical Society that Fish Island is worthy of preservation...."

It's well documented that Jesse Fish exported tens of thousands of oranges and hundreds of barrels of juice, and was known for the high quality of his fruit, as far away as London, where it was "*preferred before all others in the making of shrub*" (8). El Vergel enjoyed "*international renowned*", had 3000 mature orange trees (9), and Jesse Fish is referred to by historians as "*Florida's first orange baron*"(8). On Census records his profession is simply listed as "*Planter*". (13)

Florida is synonymous with the orange, so relevant and storied, that our State flower remains the orange blossom. It is depicted on our welcome signs, our license plates, and made nationally famous by our beloved "Orange Bowl" in Miami. The commercial citrus industry is crucial to Florida's economy and has earned a lasting place in Florida's history.

There are conflicting reports on the actual year of El Vergel's establishment, how Jesse Fish first acquired it, and when and where it began appearing on early maps of Spanish Florida. (5) Some place its beginnings around 1763 at the end of the First Spanish Period, and suggest that Fish "*laid claim to an old Spanish estate*" on Anastasia Island involving 10,000 acres, which included Fish Island, or that it was included as part of the transfer of lands from departing Spaniards (6) Others characterize the date of its establishment as "*unclear*". (5,6) In many accounts its date of establishment is not addressed.

Based on the available records that we have reviewed, which are summarized below, we feel there is reason to believe that Jesse Fish first established El Vergel, his Plantation Home and his many acres of orange groves on the parcel of land we now call Fish Island, in or about the mid-18th century, 1748 -1750.

In 1789 the Governor of Florida, referring to the year 1763, writes of Fish, *“At the time of the cessation of the Province to the English (which occurred in 1763), Fish was already established in his residence, that he himself had prepared and planted on Anastasia Island, where he now lives. His principal and nearly only product was oranges and its juice with exportation of which during the time of the British Government he did important trade.”* (2) This description given in 1789, the year before his death (1790), places Fish as *“already established”* at El Vergel by the end of the first Spanish Period. It confirms that by 1763 he was already living there in his residence on Anastasia Island, where he had planted and, eventually, produced oranges and juice for exportation.

In 1805 Andre Michaux, the Botanist to King Louis the XVI of France, in referencing his visit to Jesse Fish describes Fish’s *“five hectares of orange trees on Anastasia Island”*(7) writing, *“ They are sweet, very large, have a thin skin, and are more esteemed than those brought from the West Indies. It is fifty years since the seeds of this species were brought from India, and given to an inhabitant of this island, who has increased them so much as to have made an orchard of them of forty years. I had the opportunity of seeing this fine plantation when I was in Florida in 1788.”* (1,7) As a point of clarification one hectare contains 2.47 acres, which gives us some idea of the size of the groves, present at Michaux’s visit to El Vergel in 1788.

Michaux’s reference to Fish’s oranges and his having made an *“orchard of them of forty years”*, if accurate, would date the beginning of El Vergel to 1748 or there about. Michaux also described that Fish had lived on the *“isle of St Anastasia”* for 52 years. (7) This would be consistent with other reports, including Fish’s own, that he came to St Augustine in 1736. (2)

It is further explained that in 1763 at the end of the First Spanish Period in St Augustine, Fish acquired *“by deed”* land (including *“185 houses and a larger number of lots in St Augustine”*) from the departing Spaniards, and in addition to the *“10,000 acres on Anastasia Island where he lived, Fish also owned more than 850 acres in different tracts most of which were on Moosa Creek... Fish claimed that he purchased the land on Anastasia Island from the Spaniards during the First Spanish Period.”* (7) This explanation seems to distinguish the lands he owned on Anastasia Island, which would encompass some 10,000 plus acres, including what we now call Fish Island, as separate from the property Fish acquired from the departing Spaniards at the end of the First Spanish Period in 1763, and is consistent with the previous two accounts.

Others describing the size of the Planation have described that by the close of the British Period (1784), *“El Vergel Plantation consisted of, in part, 3000 mature citrus trees, orchards, and 200 horses”*. (5) Interestingly, Census records also document *“wild horses”* existing on Anastasia Island in the 1700s.

During Michaux's visit to Fish Island in 1785, he also is said to have described El Vergel, *"as a paradise that had withstood pillages by pirates and survived domination by two countries, England and Spain."* (7) In thinking about that statement for just a moment, this pristine island and all of the history that lies within has survived the *"pillages by pirates and domination by two countries, England and Spain"*, and now it faces decimation by a housing developer, D.R. Horton.

Fish Island is likely the actual site of the very beginning of the commercial orange industry, of any size and stature, in Florida and in the Nation. We join many others who have advocated that Fish Island and its significant history be preserved, not demolished.

Unmarked Burial Sites on Fish Island

We submit that there is ample historical evidence that over the course of some 40 years on this very large Plantation, many African Slaves lived and worked in the orange groves of Jesse Fish's, El Vergel, and some surely must have died there. In keeping with the known slave burial practices of the time, presumably, some would have then been buried on Fish Island in unmarked graves.

We believe the existence of unmarked burial sites of African slaves on Fish Island is not just likely, but probable, based on the records we have reviewed. Jesse Fish reportedly remained, a Protestant until the end of his life, according to census records and by other accounts. (13) This would have made it unlikely that he would have allowed his slaves to be baptized as Catholics, as was the practice of most Catholic slave owners in Spanish Florida. Catholic Baptism provided a path for both African Slaves and Freed Slaves to be buried in Catholic cemeteries.

Halbirt first introduced the probability that slave quarters and unmarked slave burials exist on Fish Island. According to Carl Halbirt's 2001 "Cultural Resource Assessment of Fish Island: The 18th-Century Plantation Home of Jesse Fish (8sJ62), commissioned by the City of St Augustine: *"In addition to Fish's remains, the possibility exists for slave burials on the island, but their location is unmarked and unknown at this time. At least 17 slaves lived at the plantation and its probable that there was some mortality."*(p.38)

Halbirt further describes, *"Between 100 to 300 feet north of the main house is the area of the proposed slave or workers quarters."* (p.57) Halbirt states, *"Finally, monitoring should occur for all ground-penetrating construction or tree removal activities both within and outside the protected zones to insure that any significant archeological features (e.g., prehistoric or historic burials) undocumented during archeological field testing are recorded and, if need be properly conserved."* (p.58). Halbirt also recommends the use of *"...remote sensing equipment (e.g. ground penetrating radar) to determine if additional gravesites are nearby."*(p.57)

The “Dorr Map” dated 1759, shows 8 tiny buildings on Fish Island, located north of the main house, which are speculated to have been slave quarters. (14)

During the period between 1752 and 1763 Jesse Fish is also recorded as being the owner of 133 African Slaves imported into Florida. 95 were males and 38 were females, and included in this number were 56 children, who were 12 years of age or younger. The youngest was a 5 year-old girl. Her name was Melchora. These records are sourced from the “Book of Indultos (1752-63, Cuba 472.AGI)” and found in Appendix 9 “Slave Imports Into Florida 1752-63”, found on pp.269-274, in the book entitled, “Black Society in Spanish Florida”, written by Jane Landers.

In her book, Landers, who is the foremost scholar of this aspect of our History, states that *“Jesse Fish, introduced most of the African-born slaves registered in the decade preceding Spain’s loss of Florida (1752-63)”*. There is a precipitous increase in the numbers of slaves Jesse Fish imported in the year 1763 (see Graph, Appendix 1), leading to speculation that he imported slaves in order to sell them, which remains a possibility. He has also been characterized as a *“slaver”*, who kept the company of others, also so described.

We found no records of slave sales by Fish in either his accounting books or mentioned in other sources. Using slave labor on Plantations was also a common practice in the St Augustine area, and given the sheer size of El Vergel, it is highly unlikely that Jesse Fish could have cared for and managed these groves without some help. It is possible that Jesse Fish imported slaves either to trade for profit, to use as his labor force, or to replenish his labor force because of slave mortality on his plantation, El Vergel. These three possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and we believe that it is more likely than not, that African Slave deaths and their unmarked burials occurred on El Vergel over the course of some forty years.

Towards the end of his life in 1790, Jesse Fish self-reported owning slaves at his home on Anastasia Island, as recorded on 3 available census records as follows: *1783: sixteen slaves; 1786: fourteen slaves - “None baptized”; and 1787: seventeen slaves.* (13) As mentioned, it is specifically recorded in the 1786 Census record beside his 14 slaves: *“None Baptized”*, confirming our suspicion that it would have been most unlikely for a Protestant to baptize his slaves in the Catholic faith. That same year, Fish also recorded for the census *“another Negro (male) added, free, Catholic, called Diego”*(13) Being unbaptized would have prohibited slaves from being buried in a Catholic cemetery at that time in St Augustine, also increasing the likelihood of their burials having been on Fish Island.

Nowhere are better primary source descriptions of the history of slavery in Spanish Florida found, than in Jane Landers book entitled, “Black Society in Spanish Florida”. Reading this makes real the trauma and inhumanity they suffered. Landers describes people by their names. She speaks of the process of registering slaves through a *“tribunal consisting of the Spanish Governor, the royal treasurer, the royal accountant”*, during which each enslaved person was physically examined, assigned

a name and a “*pieza*” or value of either a whole, 2/3, 1/2 or 1/3, for which an import tax was then collected. (11)

She does not spare the reader with euphemistic language. Landers states, “*The final act was to brand the slaves with “RF”, usually on the left shoulder*”, proof that the Royal duty had been paid. Landers reports that even children, including the youngest of Fish’s listed Slaves, Melchora, were not spared and that many enslaved children were recorded to have had signs of physical injuries and abuse. (11)

That some mortality was probable, as Halbirt first mentioned, is underscored by these descriptions and the harsh conditions of plantation life for slaves in Spanish Florida. According to information available from the “Report of the Database Project of Enslaved Americans”, en-slaved persons who worked on Plantations reportedly had high mortality rates “*from the regular violence, poor nutrition, and excruciating labor of plantation life*”. It was a common practice to bury African Slaves in unmarked graves on the premises of the Plantations on which they lived and died.

We have also found records describing four additional burials on Fish Island, including those of two Protestants, and a mother and a father, who met their untimely death there. This confirmed what we had been told about Protestants who died in St Augustine being “*rowed over*” to Fish Island for burial, prior to the days of the Huguenot Cemetery.

The evidence of two Protestant burials on Fish Island: excerpted from the respective records found in the SAHS Research Library include a William Williams who “*died in night of 28th of November... he was buried at El Vergel of Jesse Fish, as he was a Protestant*”, (believed to be around 1807); and of a Samuel Williams (date unknown), according to a typed letter signed by his grand-daughter, Victoria Margaret Williams on February 14, 1917. She describes in her letter that her Grandfather Samuel Williams put into port at St Augustine, contracted pneumonia, and died, but was buried on Fisher’s Island (hand written above the typed Fisher’s is the word “*Fish’s*”) because he could not receive Christian Burial in St. Augustine, “*as he was not a Catholic*”.

In her unpublished manuscript, “Florida in 1870 and 30 years Later”, on pages 16 and 17 Alice E. Browne describes walking Fish Island and meeting a mother and her six children who having no other place to go, were living there in the ruins of the old Plantation. She continues in her description of the “*fate of the family who preceded the present one in occupancy of the premises*”, describing that a lightning strike had killed the parents, leaving six children behind, until a passing boat came ashore and found the children alone with the two dead parents. She states, “*...the dead parents were found. They gave the latter decent burial and took the little orphans up to St Augustine...*” (15), suggesting that the deceased mother and father were buried on Fish Island. Given the circumstances, it is unlikely that they would have been placed in graves marked by a stone tomb.

Conclusions

Up until this point in time, The City of St Augustine Commission, the University of Florida (UF), and the State of Florida have gone to great lengths in forming alliances to preserve the history of this City, we all love so much. They have made the compelling case that all of its parts are significant, precious, and should be preserved, and not forgotten.

Would the City and the UF Historic St Augustine alliance allow a developer to pour thousands of tons of fill and concrete over either the Tolomato or Huguenot Cemeteries, burying them and hiding any sign of their very existence forever?

Most people would say, No; a reasonable assumption, given how the City Commission and the University of Florida Historic St Augustine alliance have approached the issue of the Confederate monuments downtown, which serve to memorialize those who died in the Civil War. In response to requests to take down the monuments, instead, they have chosen to preserve them and to add contextualization, as accurate reminders of our divided and tumultuous history.

Our understanding is that the General Loring Monument, standing in the yard of the UF-controlled Government House, also contains his remains. Ironically, in 1827 Ralph Waldo Emerson, about his trip to St. Augustine, is said to have described *“slaves he saw auctioned in the Government House yard, including the sale of four children without the mother who had been kidnapped therefrom”*. (16) Many voices have argued against disturbing the remains of just one man, an acknowledgement of a shared belief in our society, that hallowed ground should not be disturbed.

Why then would the City of St Augustine and the University of Florida, in their roles as preservers, conveyors, and guardians of our history, stand by, and allow a developer D. R. Horton to pour thousands of tons of fill dirt and concrete over those souls still buried on Fish Island?

According to Chapter 872.05 of the 2018 Florida Statutes, *“It is the intent of the Legislature that all human burials and human skeletal remains be accorded equal treatment and respect based upon common human dignity without reference to ethnic origin, cultural background, or religious affiliation. This section applies to all human burials, human skeletal remains, and associated burial artifacts not otherwise protected under chapter 497 or other state law and found upon or within any public or private land in the state, including submerged lands.”*

An unmarked human burial is defined in the following way:

*(f) “Unmarked human burial” means any human skeletal remains or associated burial artifacts **or any location**, including any burial mound or earthen or shell monument,*

where human skeletal remains or associated burial artifacts are discovered or believed to exist on the basis of archaeological or historical evidence, excluding any burial marked or previously marked by a tomb, monument, gravestone, or other structure or thing placed or designed as a memorial of the dead.

We feel the parameters outlined in this Statute are pertinent to the abundance of historical evidence (just described), pointing to the likelihood of unmarked human burials on Fish Island. We urge the City, the University of Florida, and the State to afford the same treatment and respect (based on a shared societal value of common human dignity) to those unmarked human burials of African Slaves and others on Fish Island, as they have already shown in preserving the General Loring Confederate memorial. Allow them to rest, undisturbed, in this place, Michaux, so long ago, described as a “Paradise”.

The Dr. Robert B. Hayling Freedom Park Memorial faces Fish Island, as if he is looking across the Matanzas River directly at the past; an odd coincidence or meant to be?

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