



FERNANDINA PLAZA HISTORIC STATE PARK

Park Chapter

ATLANTIC COAST REGION



FERNANDINA PLAZA HISTORIC STATE PARK

NASSAU COUNTY, FLORIDA

0 150 300 Feet

River
Amelia

FERNANDINA
(SAN CARLOS)
PLAZA

Historical
Marker

Bench

Interpretive
Panels

Historical
Marker

Park
Sign

GARDEN ST

ESTRADA ST

LADIES ST

AMELIA ST

SOMERULUS

COMMANDANT
ST

WHITE

SAN FERNANDO
ST

NEW ST

ST

OLD
TOWN
FERNANDINA

BLUFFS

EGANS CREEK DR

TO FORT CLINCH
STATE PARK

N 14th ST

TO
DOWNTOWN
FERNANDINA
BEACH

BOSQUE
BELLO
CEMETERY

INTRODUCTION

LOCATION AND ACQUISITION HISTORY

Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park is located in Nassau County (see Vicinity Map). Nestled in the distinctly urban setting of old Fernandina Beach, the park is accessed via Estrada Street. Although the smallest unit in the Florida state park system, the park is admired for its Spanish era history and vistas of the Amelia River and associated marsh islands.

Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park was initially acquired on Dec. 30, 1941. Currently, the park comprises 0.8 acres. The Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (Trustees) hold fee simple title to the park and on Jan. 23, 1968, the Trustees leased (Lease No. 3620) the property to the Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) under a 99-year lease. The current lease will expire on Jan. 22, 2067.

Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park is designated single-use to provide public outdoor recreation and other park-related uses. There are no legislative or executive directives that constrain the use of this property (see the Appendix). A legal description of the park property can be made available upon request to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

SECONDARY AND INCOMPATIBLE USES

In accordance with 253.034(5) F.S., the potential of the park to accommodate secondary management purposes was analyzed. These secondary purposes were considered within the context of DRP's statutory responsibilities and resource values. This analysis considered the park's natural and cultural resources, management needs, aesthetic values, visitation, and visitor experiences. It was determined that no secondary purposes could be accommodated in a manner that would not interfere with the primary purpose of resource-based outdoor recreation and conservation.

DRP has determined that uses such as, water resource development projects, water supply projects, stormwater management projects, linear facilities and sustainable agriculture and forestry (other than those management activities specifically identified in this plan) would not be consistent with the management purposes of the park.

In accordance with 253.034(5) F.S., the potential for generating revenue to enhance management was also analyzed. Visitor fees and charges are the principal source of revenue generated by the park. It was determined that multiple-use management activities would not be appropriate as a means of generating revenues for land management. Instead, techniques such as entrance fees, concessions and similar measures will be employed on a case-by-case basis as a means of supplementing park management funding. Generating revenue from consumptive uses or from activities that are not expressly related to resource management and conservation is under consideration.

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PARK

Park Purpose

The purpose of Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park is to preserve and interpret an essential element of a typical Spanish town plan associated with the Spanish colonial history of the third-oldest city in Florida.

Park Significance

- Officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990, the park preserves the historic plaza of Old Town Fernandina, which was the last planned Spanish town in North America during the late Second Spanish Period.
- The park protects the former site of the central parade ground for Fort San Carlos, a Spanish fort built in 1816 that was used to defend the Spanish colonial town from United States federal troops.
- Intermittent occupation and use of the plaza lot area stretches back over 4,000 years including indigenous cultures, enslaved Africans and Civil War activities.
- From the scenic bluff overlooking the Amelia River, the park provides an ideal location for activities like picnicking and can be reserved for small family gatherings or weddings.

Central Park Theme

Overlooking the Amelia River, Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park is a tiny park that leaves a big impression, overflowing with stories of Florida's dynamic and often tumultuous past.

Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park is classified as a special feature site in the DRP unit classification system. A special feature is a discrete and well-defined object or condition that attracts public interest and provides recreational enjoyment through visitation, observation and study. A state special feature site is an area which contains such a feature, and which is set aside for controlled public enjoyment. Special feature sites for the most part are either historical or archaeological by type, but they may also have a geological, botanical, zoological or other basis. State special feature sites must be of unusual or exceptional character or have statewide or broad regional significance.

Management of special feature sites places primary emphasis on protection and maintenance of the special feature for long-term public enjoyment. Permitted uses are almost exclusively passive in nature and program emphasis is on interpretation of the special feature. Development at special feature sites is focused on protection and maintenance of the site, public access, safety and the convenience of the user.

OTHER DESIGNATIONS

The unit is not within an Area of Critical State Concern as defined in section 380.05; Florida Statutes and is not presently under study for such designation. The park is a component of the Florida Greenways and Trails System, administered by the DEP Office of Greenways and Trails.

There are no surface waters located within the park boundaries. The park is adjacent to Fort Clinch State Park Aquatic Preserve, as designated under the Florida Aquatic Preserve Act of 1975 (Section 258.35, Florida Statutes).

PARK ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Installed two new interpretive panels.
- Implemented park attendance tracking in October 2017.
- Created new annual program-2019 “Cannons on the Plaza.”

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT COMPONENT

Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park Management Zones			
Management Zone	Acreage	Managed with Prescribed Fire	Contains Cultural Resources
FR-1	0.8	N	Y


TOPOGRAPHY

Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park is located in the historic town of Old Fernandina at the north tip of Amelia Island, placing it within the Coastal Lowlands physiographic zone, more specifically within the Atlantic Coast Lowlands, Atlantic Coastal Ridge, Lagoons and Barrier Chain (Puri and Vernon 1959). Fernandina Plaza lies just east of the Amelia River and its extensive saltmarsh system. The elevation of the site is approximately three meters above mean sea level; the terrain is essentially flat. The original topography of the site has undoubtedly changed considerably because of human occupation and the construction of Fort San Carlos nearby.

SOILS

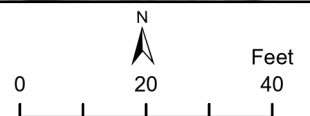
The soils of Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park are Entisols in the psamment suborder. The only soil type is Kershaw fine sand (see Soils Map), which is a gently sloping, excessively drained acid soil common on ridges and isolated knolls. The water table is typically at a depth of greater than 72 inches (Watts 1991). See the Appendix for a complete soil description. No significant soil erosion currently occurs at Fernandina Plaza; however, riverbank erosion does occur on the parcel immediately to the west. If this erosion continues, the shoreline may eventually recede to the park boundary. Management activities will follow generally accepted best management practices to prevent soil erosion and conserve soil and water resources on site.



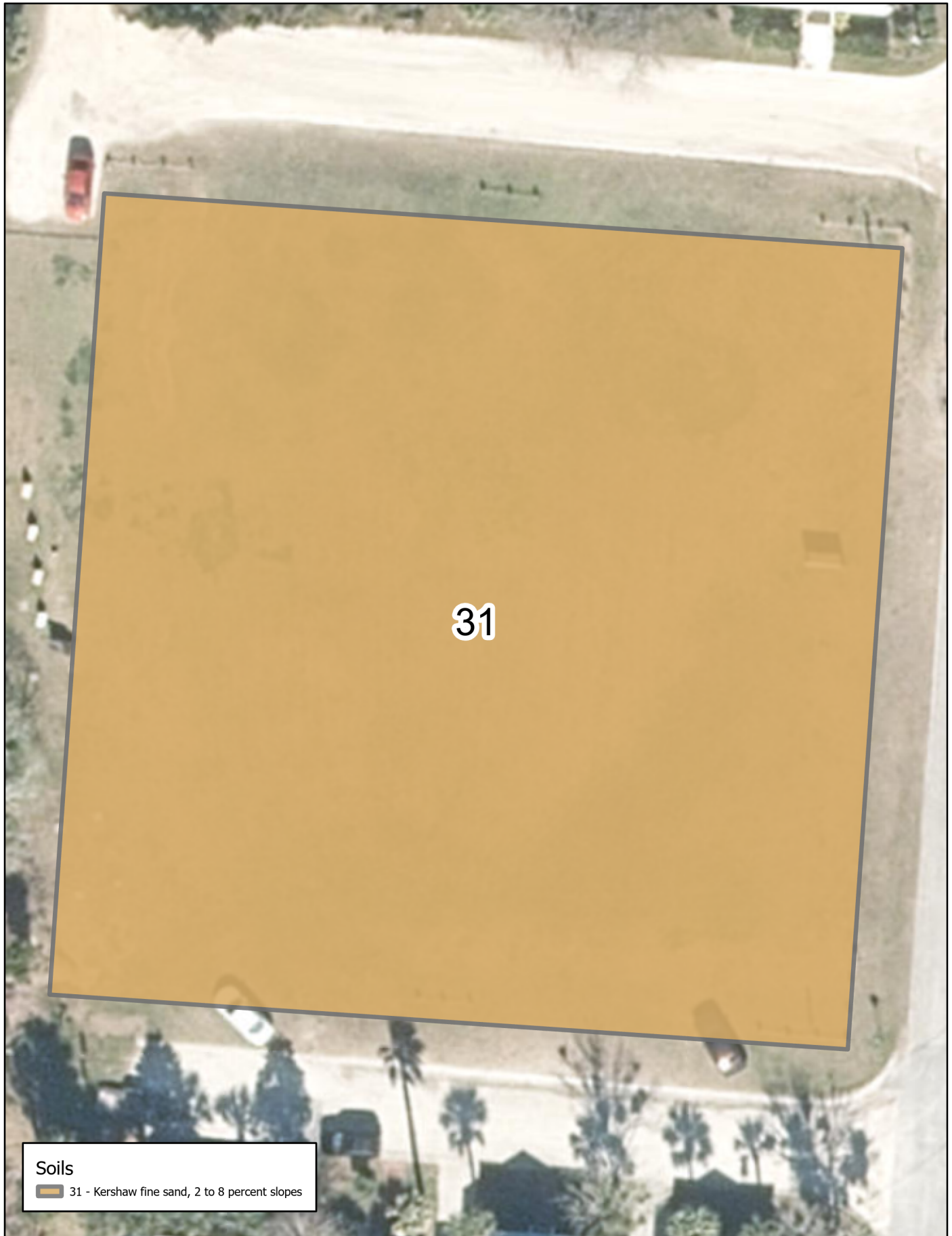
 Park Boundary




FERNANDINA PLAZA HISTORIC
STATE PARK
Management Zones



This graphical representation is provided for informational purposes and should not be considered authoritative for navigational, engineering, legal, and other uses.

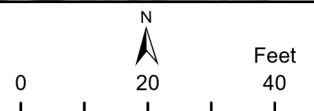


Soils

 31 - Kershaw fine sand, 2 to 8 percent slopes



**FERNANDINA PLAZA HISTORIC
STATE PARK
Soils**



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HYDROLOGY

There are no surface water features at the park. The western property line, however, lies within 10 meters of the Amelia River. The property immediately west of the park is adjacent to the river and has experienced significant long-term soil loss due to erosion along the riverbank. Within Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park, however, soil erosion and runoff are not yet problems because of site characteristics that facilitate water absorption (e.g. level topography, porous soils and complete vegetative cover). Increased use of the park and continued erosion of the shoreline on the adjacent property could eventually cause erosion issues within the park. Currently there are no groundwater concerns.

Objective A: Assess the park's hydrological restoration needs.

- Action 1 - Monitor the site and protect it from soil erosion caused by unauthorized vehicular access or other disturbances.

NATURAL COMMUNITIES

Developed

The entire 0.8-acre park is classified as a developed area. A turf grass lawn and a State of Florida Historic Marker are the only visible features. Management of the plaza will require periodic maintenance of the turf grasses that protect the cultural site from erosion. Maintenance measures will include regular mowing and the removal of any woody vegetation that begins to encroach on the site. Monitoring of shoreline erosion on the adjacent parcel will also be necessary, as will protection of the plaza from vandalism and vehicular damage.

INVASIVE SPECIES

The two dominant plant species recorded to date at Fernandina Plaza are invasive turf grasses. They are not considered a threat, however, because they form a continuous groundcover that stabilizes the site's cultural resources. Regular mowing of the invasive turf grasses is essential for maintaining continuity of the groundcover, preventing invasion by woody vegetation, controlling erosion and protecting cultural resources. Two invasive plant species that are considered invasive, lantana (*Lantana camara*) and paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), have been recorded on property immediately west of Fernandina Plaza, so park staff should be vigilant for their possible spread into the park. If any invasive plants are discovered in the park, control may be achieved through the application of appropriate herbicides.

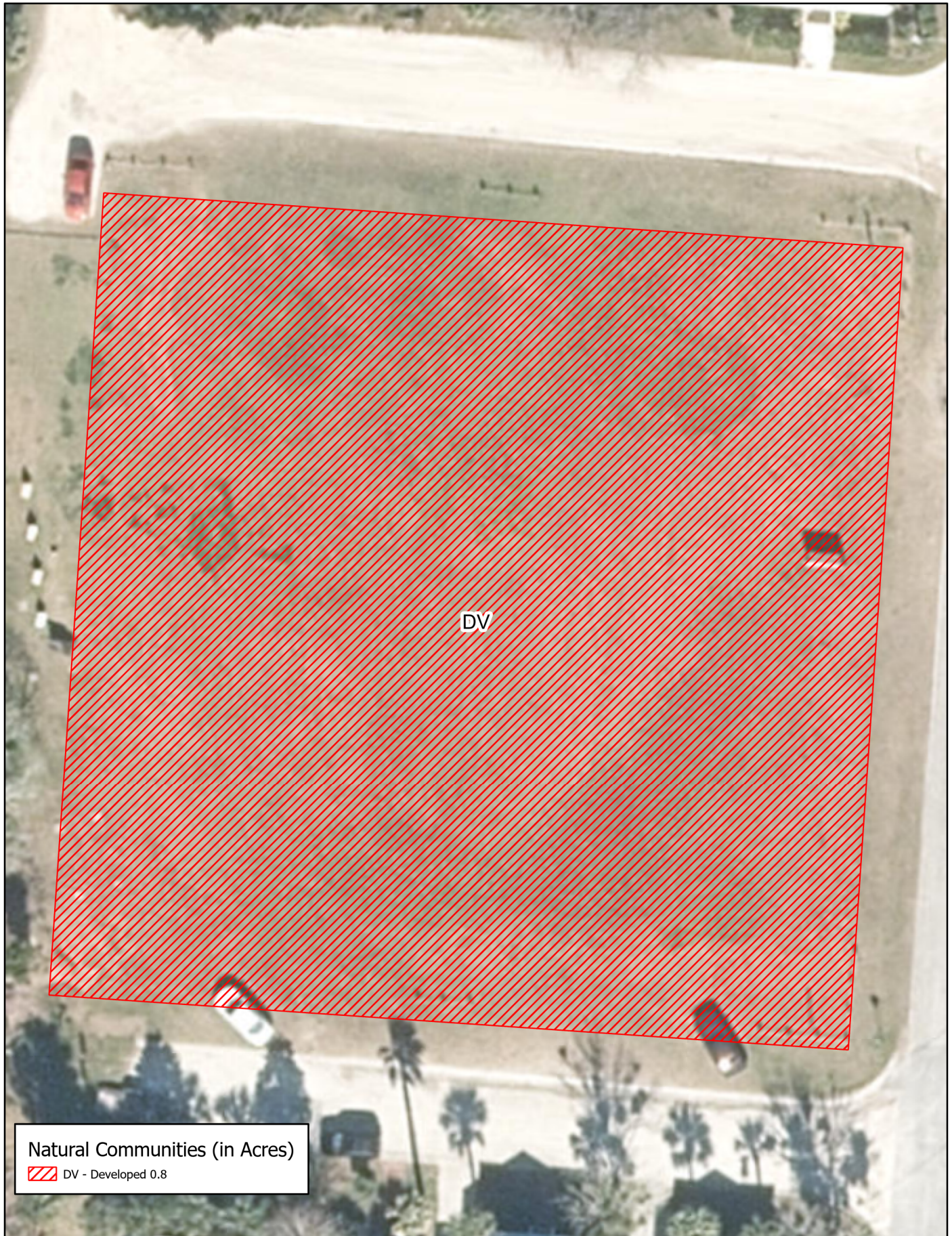
Objective A: Maintain the park free of exotic plant species.

- Action 1 – Annually inspect the park for the presence of exotic plants.
- Action 2 – Remove/treat exotic plants as needed.

No invasive plant species have been recorded at Fernandina Plaza in recent years. As park staff mow the park they should watch for the appearance of invasive species and remove them as necessary.

Objective B: Maintain the park free of nuisance species.

- Action 1 - Remove invasive animals if the need arises.



Natural Communities (in Acres)

 DV - Developed 0.8



FERNANDINA PLAZA HISTORIC
STATE PARK
Natural Communities - Existing Conditions



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CULTURAL RESOURCES

Prehistoric and Historic Archaeological Sites

The Florida Master Site File (FMSF) lists two sites for the park, NA10 (Fernandina Town Lot, or Fort San Carlos) and NA10a, a shell and sand midden within the boundaries of NA10. According to the predictive model for the park, site NA10 intersects the boundaries of Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park (Collins et al. 2012). The plaza site, which archaeologists Ripley Bullen and John Griffin named the Plaza Lot, lies immediately south of the apparent former location of Fort San Carlos (Bullen and Griffin 1952). It represents the largest known undeveloped portion of an assemblage of Spanish properties in Fernandina in the late 1780s, when the Spanish government acquired it in a land exchange. Most of these properties were developed for municipal or military purposes during the Second Spanish Period of 1784-1821, which archaeologists John Griffin and Robert Steinbach consider to be the most significant period in the history of Old Town Fernandina (Griffin and Steinbach 1991). The Fernandina Town Lot is encompassed within and is cited as a contributing property to the Old Town Fernandina Historic Site (NA238), which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1990.

Archaeological investigations at Fernandina Plaza, which began in the early 1950s, have revealed intermittent occupation and use of the plaza lot area for as long as 4,000 years, beginning with the Orange Period (2,000-500 B.C.) and continuing to this day (Bullen and Griffin 1952). Archaeologists in the 1950s initially believed that the site was an extensive village, based on their discovery of a shell and sand midden (recorded as site NA10a) at the northern edge of the plaza lot. More recently, however, the origins of the “midden” have been reinterpreted as a byproduct of earthmoving during Spanish construction activities, and this has prompted reconsideration of the aboriginal activities at the site as intermittent rather than constant (Griffin and Steinbach 1991).

Early observers on Amelia Island (around 1675) had mentioned the existence of a small settlement of Yamassee Indians at the north end of the island (Bullen and Griffin 1952). Historical descriptions of the location of that Yamassee village suggest that it was located at Old Town Fernandina, although there has been no absolute confirmation of that conclusion (Griffin and Steinbach 1991). The Yamassee settlement apparently diversified and expanded, but it was rather short-lived. South Carolinian Colonel James Moore effectively ended it in 1702 when he raided the site during his advance on St. Augustine. All inhabitants were purportedly enslaved, killed or driven away. Later, when Ogelthorpe’s Georgians paused on Amelia Island en route to their siege of St. Augustine (1745-1746), they found the island deserted (Bullen and Griffin 1952).

The town lot (plaza lot) first appeared on a map in 1769. This map contained a layout for the future old town settlement that included a blank space representing an open plaza lot. In the opinion of archaeologist Ripley Bullen, this layout was for a town that was proposed at the time but not yet developed (Bullen 2008). As late as 1777, there appeared to have been no suggestion of actual town development. Except for encampments of English colonial invaders, the site had stood virtually uninhabited since the 1702 English raids on Spanish Florida (Bullen and Griffin 1952). That situation changed in the 1780s, however, when an English widow from St. Augustine named Maria Mattair received a land grant from British Governor Tonyn for 200 acres that included the town lot. Maria and her two children farmed the town lot area from 1784 until 1788, at which time the Spanish colonial government assumed possession after a land exchange that gave the Mattair family equivalent property elsewhere on north Amelia Island (Bland and Associates 2007).

The town lot, or plaza, was an essential element of any Spanish colonial town plan. Government offices were designed to face the plaza, and in the case of this coastal village, the plaza could be fortified for defensive purposes. There is a record of a Spanish army encampment in the Fernandina Plaza area in 1801. The Spaniards established a small fort there, including a battery of three cannons, from 1801 to 1814 (Bullen 2008). The fort was captured in 1812 by the Florida Patriots, a makeshift force of U.S. troops and volunteers under the command of U.S. General George Matthews, but the troops were evacuated in May of 1813 and the Spanish government resumed control, building a larger Fort San Carlos on the site within a couple years (Smith and Bullen 1971). The Spanish hold on the fort only lasted until the summer of 1817, when a succession of adventurers occupied it until federal troops intervened once again in December 1817 (Griffin and Steinbach 1991). By 1821, Spain had ceded Florida, including Fernandina, to the United States. The town lot subsequently faded into obscurity, although the military is known to have used it during both the Civil War (1861-65) and the Spanish-American War of 1898 (Bullen 2008).

Site NA10 originally extended westward to the edge of the Amelia River, but severe riverbank erosion has significantly reduced its area. Archaeologists who conducted digs in 1951 and 1963 estimated that two-thirds of the town lot had eroded into the Amelia River over the years (Smith and Bullen 1971). A small-scale study of the town lot in 2008 discovered that a United States Geological Survey marker used in laying out the grid for the 1963 excavation had completely disappeared and that the replacement marker, located 20 feet south of the original, was threatened by a similar fate (Miller 2009). Today, most of what remains of the town lot site is contained within Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park. It is maintained as an unfenced grassy area.

The town lot, NA10, is in fair condition. Although extensive archaeological sampling and investigation have occurred since 1950, excavation holes were refilled and the resulting grassy surface at the plaza is largely undisturbed by looting or potholes. Vehicular access is unrestricted and occasionally the park has been used as a parking lot. This gives rise to concerns about the long-term effects of such use on an unevenly graded archaeological resource. Site NA10a is in poor condition due to multiple major disturbances over the years.

No significant erosion threatens the cultural resources within the park itself, but chronic erosion along the Amelia River shoreline compromises the portion of the town lot site located on the adjacent vacant waterfront property. If this erosion continues unchecked, the shoreline may recede to the park boundary, necessitating erosion control measures to protect the park's archaeological resources.

While preservation and interpretation of a significant cultural resource are the reasons for the existence of Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park, the park remains essentially undeveloped. This may be interpreted as downgrading the importance of the site's archaeological resources and may diminish their meaning for the area. It also downplays the significance of this footprint of Florida during the late Second Spanish Period. As the National Register nomination notes, the Old Town Fernandina Historic Site constitutes a major portion of the last planned Spanish town in (eastern) North America. The town lot is a relatively unchanged element in that plan and contributes to our understanding of it. As a contributing property to the National Register district, it affords the possibility of important and productive research and study.

Because of the extent of known archaeological and historical resources in vicinity of NA10, management measures for Fernandina Plaza will include conducting extensive historical analyses of the cultural features of the town lot prior to 1821 to ascertain locations and chronology of the features. This will entail additional review of the archaeological fieldwork conducted at the site since the 1950s.

The park will be managed to prevent disturbances to the site from vehicular traffic or vandalism. The shoreline of the adjacent parcel will be monitored annually to determine the progression of erosion and whether it threatens archaeological resources within the park. Any development of the park will be undertaken only with due consideration of the design of historic cultural features. Ground disturbing activities will be conducted only in accordance with DRP policy.

Cultural Sites Listed in the Florida Master Site File					
Site Name and FMSF #	Culture/Period	Description	Significance	Condition	Treatment
NA10 The Town Lot	Historic/Unspecified	Archaeological Site	NE	F	P
NA10a Shell and Sand Midden	Prehistoric/Unspecified	Archaeological Site	NE	P	P

Objective A: Assess/evaluate two of two recorded cultural resources in the park.

- Action 1 - Complete two assessments/evaluations of archaeological sites.
- Action 2 - Develop a simple, repeatable protocol for tracking cultural resource changes at Fernandina Plaza.

Park personnel from Fort Clinch State Park currently visit Fernandina Plaza on a regular basis, checking for signs of natural erosion or damage caused by vehicles, looters or park visitors, and assessing potential threats from invasive exotic plants. However, establishment of a more formalized evaluation process would generate baseline and comparative information for sites NA10 and NA10a. To enable that process, park staff will develop a simple, repeatable protocol for tracking changes at Fernandina Plaza, preferably consisting of a baseline photograph and a condition checklist sheet. Photographs would only need to be retaken if a change in condition occurred at the site.

Objective B: Compile reliable documentation for all recorded historic and archaeological resources.

- Action 1 - Encourage additional archaeological/historical research at Fernandina Plaza.

DRP has already recorded and updated all known sites in the Florida Master Site File and completed a predictive model for high, medium and low probability of locating archaeological sites within the park. DRP will encourage cultural resource research at the park that will consist of three components:

1. Design research: Conduct extensive historical research on cultural features present in the town lot during the period before American acquisition (1821) to determine locations and chronology of features. This will entail additional review of the archaeological fieldwork conducted at the site since the 1950s.
2. Research about past human activities: Conduct further research about past human activities at the town lot to support person-to-person, first-person and participatory interpretive activities.

3. Research about subsurface cultural elements: Provide support for extensive, well-prepared, professionally supervised anthropological research, including archaeology projects. This work should include summarizing previous excavations and planning and undertaking future ground-disturbing research, in compliance with Chapter 267, Florida Statutes.

Objective C: Bring all recorded cultural resources into good condition.

- Action 1 - Design and implement regular monitoring programs for both cultural sites.
- Action 2 - Create and implement a cyclical maintenance program for the park's cultural resources.

The park still needs to develop a standard means of documenting its cultural resource monitoring and cyclical maintenance programs. Improving site NA10 from fair to good condition will require full implementation and documentation of those programs. Current cyclical maintenance activities include regular mowing, removal of invading hardwoods, prevention of vehicular damage to the turf grass cover, and checking for the appearance of invasive exotic plants. Bringing the shell midden site, NA10a, to good condition will entail preventing further disturbance of the remaining shell fragments.

LAND USE COMPONENT

VISITATION

Despite being the smallest unit in the Florida state park system, Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park preserves a significant element of Spanish era history while providing a beautiful panoramic view of the Amelia River. Visitors come to learn about the site's history, picnic on the lawn or take in the sunset. Intended as the central plaza for the original town of Fernandina, this strategic location became the site of former Fort San Carlos, constructed in the early 1800s to defend the northern reaches of Spanish Florida from the United States. The park preserves the site's historic elements and human story while providing an inviting green space in what is today known as Old Town Fernandina.

Trends

The level of visitation is consistent throughout the year, as the park is primarily visited in the evenings to view the sunset.

EXISTING FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The plaza contains a park entrance sign and two historic markers. Several interpretive panels and benches, not managed by the Florida Park Service, are also present outside the park boundary along the Amelia River. Occasionally Fort Clinch State Park staff provide living history interpretive programs at the site, including the firing of cannons.

Facilities Inventory

<i>Plaza</i>	
Historic Marker	2
Interpretive Panels	4

CONCEPTUAL LAND USE PLAN

Detailed Conceptual Land Use Plan Objectives

The use areas at Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park listed below detail specific objectives and action items to be implemented within the 10-year planning cycle.

Vehicle Parking

Objective: Formalize off-site parking.

Given the small size and historic significance of the unit, parking is not provided onsite. Visitors typically park at the western terminus of White Street along the northern boundary. DRP should coordinate with the city of Fernandina Beach to formalize this parking lot. Formalization of parking may yield the need for additional parking.

Park Boundary

Objective: Minimize erosion along the park boundary.

Action Item:

- *Extend low-lying fencing.*

Visitors typically park along the municipal roads that frame the plaza. Unorganized parking along these edges has resulted in partial erosion of the historic lawn. The fencing on the corners of the boundary should be extended around the full perimeter for continuity and to minimize erosion from vehicles. Visitor access points should be provided through openings in the fence where appropriate.

Plaza

Objective: Enhance the visitor experience.

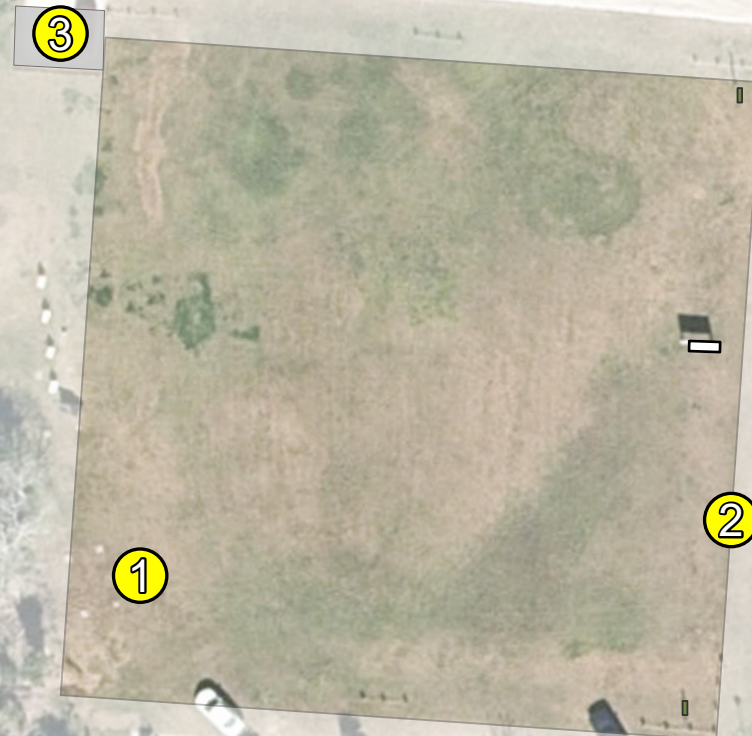
Additional benches are recommended for park visitors to spend more time on the plaza.

OPTIMUM BOUNDARY

Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park is bordered by gridded residential development and the Amelia River. To the south is WestRock paper mill, toward the west is a Florida Forever Board of Trustees project for Tiger Island and to the north is Fort Clinch State Park.

There are no feasible parcels identified for acquisition that are germane to the park's historical context.

Amelia River



● Proposals
□ Structures
■ Historical Marker
■ Parking Lot

- 1 Plaza - Provide additional benches.
- 2 Park Boundary - Continue low-lying fencing.
- 3 Parking Area - Work with City of Fernandina Beach to formalize the parking area.



Fernandina Plaza Historic State Park
Conceptual Land Use Plan



