

History & Nature

In 1528, Panfilo de Narvaez traveled over land from Tampa and arrived at this site with 300 men. Impressed by the area located at the confluence of the Wakulla and St. Marks rivers, Narvaez built and launched the first ships made by white men in the New World. In 1539, Hernando de Soto, along with 600 men, followed the same route taken by Narvaez.

By 1679, the Spanish Governor of Florida started construction on the first fort built at the junction of the two rivers. The logs used were coated with lime to give the appearance of stone. The fort stood for three years before it was looted and burned by pirates. In 1718, Captain Jose Primo de Ribera arrived to construct a second wooden fort.

Construction began on the first stone fort in 1739. Progress was low, and the fort was less than half complete when it was delivered to the English in 1763. By 1787, Spain regained control of the fort, reoccupying it for 13 more years. Spanish rule was challenged in 1800 by a former British officer named William Augustus Bowles. Bowles attempted to unify and lead an independent Creek nation of 400 Indians against the Spanish, eventually capturing San Marcos.

In 1821, Florida was ceded to the United States, and U.S. troops were sent to occupy the fort. Three years later, the fort was abandoned and turned over to the Territory of Florida. By 1839, the fort was returned to the U.S. Government and construction of a federal marine hospital began 18 years later, utilizing stones from the Spanish fort.

The final confrontation at San Marcos occurred in 1861 when the Confederates took the fort, renaming it Fort Ward.