Significance of the Region

The Nation’s Oldest Portsm Heritage Area incorporates the northeastern coast of Florida from the St. Mary’s River at the Georgia border southward to the Pellicer Creek watershed near Flagler Beach. Its boundaries include the port of Jacksonville at the mouth of the St. Johns River and historic St. Augustine, the nation’s oldest city founded in 1565 on the shores of Matanzas Bay. In addition to estuaries, extensive salt marshes and some of the Sunshine State’s most beautiful beaches, an inland waterway traverses the entire region. In fact, this waterway and the myriad streams that flow into it have provided a source of food, transportation and commerce for untold generations of inhabitants.

The region was inhabited by Native Americans for thousands of years before European settlers arrived. The Timucua Indians, eliminated as a result of European diseases and decimation, left behind many village sites, shell middens and burial mounds. The archaeology of the region is rich and fascinating -- some of the prehistoric sites are now protected within public lands and parks. In addition, 500 years of European settlement have resulted in an incomparable historic archaeological heritage on land and underwater. As archaeological discoveries continue on a daily basis here, artifacts and cultural interpretation of the resulting data give visitors a fresh and fascinating look at the region’s remarkable history.

A diverse range of surviving historic structures illustrate the story of Spanish, British and American influences in the region over the last several hundred years. Spanish fortresses and fine homes constructed of coquina, small Spanish homes fronting directly on the streets, Victorian dwellings and extraordinary Mediterranean-style hotels dating to the late nineteenth century stand shoulder to shoulder with modern bungalows and ranch houses along the historic streets of St. Augustine, Jacksonville and the town of Fernandina. Houses that capture the essence of 20th century beachfront living can be found throughout the Jacksonville Beaches, as well as St. Augustine, Fernandina and Flagler Beaches. Lighthouses offer beacons of light to seafarers and historic ports draw international commerce and boating enthusiasts.

Despite hundreds of years of military incursions and cultural exchanges, many residents of the region continue to embrace the cultural traditions of their Spanish, African, Minorcan and Greek ancestors. Spanish architectural styles, regional food and recipes and religious preferences reflect a strong Mediterranean influence throughout the area. British and American influences are also evident. In addition, the first free African settlement in what is now the U.S. claims its home here. World travelers have arrived in the area continuously for nearly 500 years, bringing their own ideas and customs to meld with those already present. Today, the region is
inhabited by a diverse population, many drawn here by their love for the local culture and the pleasing sub-tropical, maritime climate.

The environment of the Nation’s Oldest Port Heritage Area is characterized by extensive marshlands, pine uplands, hardwood hammocks, coastal waterways, barrier islands and broad, sand beaches. Over the centuries, the allure of the region’s sunshine, sea breezes, fishing, wildlife and communing with nature has been impossible to resist by visitors and residents alike. Today, however, the locals whose health and livelihoods depended on the abundance of oysters and the seasonal netting of mullet have been largely replaced. Instead of commercial fishermen, it is far more likely to see cultural and heritage enthusiasts, intrepid sunbathers, bird watchers, golfers, kayakers, bikers and fishermen seeking redfish for fun rather than survival.

For those who are fortunate enough to call the Nation’s Oldest Port “home,” there are numerous daily reminders that this is a special part of the American landscape. Residents take pride in the cultural, historic, recreational and scenic destinations and heritage businesses that define the charming maritime and multicultural character of this area. This pride is abundantly clear to visitors who experience this region’s events, reenactments, festivals, parks, preserves, museums, historical societies, historic districts, galleries, restaurants, markets and trails. It is our hope that you will enjoy learning about the wide and fascinating array of heritage and nature experiences available in the Nation’s Oldest Port Heritage Area.