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ancient civil defense shelter

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



AN ANCIENT CIVIL DEFENSE SHELTER

By HAMPTON DUNN

ST. AUGUSTINE --- One of the earliest and the longest-lasting "air raid" shelters in America is the ancient Castillo de San Marcos here.

One of the purposes for erecting the mighty fortress in the late 1700s was to protect the population of this pioneer city. The sprawling structure with thick masonry walls was designed as a shelter in an emergency. Indeed, it has been a haven for as many as 1,500 persons during a siege.

The Spanish who founded St. Augustine tried to protect the town from enemy attack, the English traders, pirates, Indians and others who were menacing to the Spanish treasure fleets. No less than eight wooden forts had fallen, one by one, including a structure destroyed by Sir Francis Drake, before the stone fort was started.

Construction began in 1672 and continued for 24 years. It was built of native coquina rock, basically hardened sea shells. The fort is a symmetrical structure, with four bastions, a perfection of Italo-Spanish engineers. The gigantic walls are from 9 to 16 feet thick and 30 feet high, and the fortress is surrounded by a moat. Indian slave labor was used to build the fortress, which is the oldest masonry military structure in the United States. The fort was put to the test in 1740 when James Oglethorpe of Georgia beseiged the Castillo for 38 days without success. When Florida became a state, the fort was renamed Fort Marion honoring Revolutionary War hero Gen. Francis Marion, but later reverted to its original name.

