

Former St. Augustine re-enactor becomes outfitter of history lovers

Jon Williams uses his experience to open St. Augustine Textiles

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St. Augustine Textiles owner Jon Williams holds historical accurate cloth that he uses to handmade colonial clothing for re-enactors in his store on Tuesday, July 22, 2014.

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A love of history led Jon Williams into the world of historical re-enactments. And that unexpectedly led him into the world of sewing and retail.

Williams has gone from one of the guys who traveled the country in historical garb to traveling the country selling historical garb and equipment to other re-enactors.

And now, Williams can stay home in St. Augustine and serve re-enactors — and anyone else who appreciates history — from his St. Augustine Textiles shop on St. George Street.

“When I started re-enacting 20 years ago, I wish there was a place like this,” he said. “If you come in here and you’re new to it, I’ll direct you.”

Heck, if you know what period of history you're looking to represent, Williams can completely clothe you.

It's a skill Williams learned in the early days of his hobby, partially out of necessity.

Williams liked to bounce around from one period of re-enacting to another, and he constantly needed new outfits.

And they aren't the kind of things you can buy at Walmart.

Williams became friends with a former sail maker who taught him how to sew. So Williams started to make his own clothing for re-enactments.

Soon, he was making clothing for other people. Before long, he was making outfits, ordering accessories and selling them out of a trailer he hauled to re-enactments.

Among the experience Williams has amassed is former president of the St. Augustine Garrison. The Garrison is "a local group of re-enactors who portray the life and times of the Spanish soldiers and their families in 1740s Colonial Spanish St. Augustine," according to the group's website.

He also served as a volunteer for years at the Castillo de San Marcos.

"I just have always loved history," Williams said. "Moving here (23 years ago), the light went off."

While Spanish-American and British history are most popular here (Spanish soldiers are often represented at various attractions, and the British Night Watch Grande Illumination Parade takes place annually), Williams said he participated in re-enactments from many different eras.

He knows exactly what people are looking for and, more importantly, how to obtain it or make it himself.

"Basically, over 20 years I trained myself to do this store," Williams said.

Visitors have to go through a gate at 58 St. George Street to find the textiles shop, but when they do get there, Williams has about 1,500 items available. And if there's something desired by a fellow history lover that's not on display, Williams can probably make it or order it from somebody who can.

Local re-enactor Alex D'Agnillo, who is a member of the Garrison, said it's been helpful to have a store like Williams' textiles shop.

"Given the many periods represented in St Augustine's history, and especially with the upcoming 450th and the events that will involve, I would say it's almost a requirement to have a shop like Jon's in town," D'Agnillo said in an email to *The Record*. "It's especially important to

have someone like Jon as a resource that knows the differences between the periods represented, so he can advise you on what's correct and what isn't, not just someone that will sell you something just to make a sale."

Garrison and Men of Menendez member James D. Fiske agreed that Williams' store is essential to the local re-enactor community.

"Jon's shop is the only local shop that helps keep authentic wear and accessories available," Fiske said in an email. "Jon provides the only useful outlet for the re-enactors and anyone interested in true history."

When he's manning the store, which he opened about three years ago, Williams wears his own creations of historical clothing and enjoys seeing the excitement from customers.

"(Some people) find the store and they're like in heaven," Williams said. "A lot of them (re-enactors from out of town) have planned vacations down here just to come."

There can be a high cost of being a re-enactor for those serious about it. According to the Garrison website, a complete uniform, including a musket, can run to \$2,000.

A lot of re-enactors just starting out tend to put together their uniforms piecemeal, often borrowing some of the items.

Williams tries to keep prices reasonable by stocking his store with authentically designed reproductions. He's not in the antique business.

The only way Williams doesn't support re-enactors at this point is as a fellow participant. He said it was great fun for years, but it was time for him to move on to something else.

"I was lucky enough to turn my hobby into a business," Williams said. "This is what I graduated to. This is my next step and I love it."