

Fort Caroline

NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Florida





FORT CAROLINE NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Commemorating the French colony of 1564-65 on the St. Johns River of Florida.

WHEN FORT CAROLINE was founded, there was no other European colony on the North American continent this side of Mexico. By planting this colony, France hoped for a share of the New World claimed by Spain. The French move forced Spain to act and brought on the first decisive conflict between Europeans for the area now included in continental United States. At Fort Caroline, the battle between France and Spain for supremacy in North America was joined.

HIGH ADVENTURE IN NEW LANDS

Treasure beyond man's imagination was the reward of Spanish conquistadores in the New World. Some 200 productive settlements were thriving in tropical America. But to the north, in the vast "continent" of Florida, men like Ponce de León and De Soto found death, not riches. In 1561 the Spanish King forbade further attempts to settle North America.

At this period, France was in trouble, torn by religious strife and exhausted by her European wars. The Admiral of France, Gaspard de Coligny, sought to strengthen his country by uniting Catholic and Huguenot (Protestant) against the traditional Spanish enemy. French bases in Spanish America were part of his plan.

For Coligny's purpose, Canada, though already explored by Cartier and Roberval, was too far north. A 1555 settlement in Brazil had been destroyed by the Portuguese. Therefore, Coligny looked to Florida. In 1562 he sent out an expedition under the Huguenot Jean Ribaut (also spelled Ribault), a man of unusual experience and ability. Ribaut touched at the St. Johns River, then left a small garrison at present-day Port Royal Sound, S. C. Civil war in France prevented reinforcement, and after much suffering, the survivors built a crude craft and crossed the Atlantic to home.

THE FORT CAROLINE COLONY

When uneasy peace again prevailed, a little fleet of 3 vessels assembled at Havre de Grace to convey some 300 people to a new land. Of this number, 110 were sailors, 120 soldiers, and the rest artisans, servants, and a few women—but no farmers. Most of them were Huguenots. The commander was René de Laudonnière, a skilled mariner who had been with Ribaut on the 1562 voyage.

On June 25, 1564, the expedition anchored off the St. Johns River in Florida. For the site of the colony, the French chose a broad, flat knoll on the river shore about 5 miles from its mouth. With Indian help they raised a triangular fort of earth and wood which enclosed several palm-thatched buildings. Other houses were built in the

meadow outside the fort. In honor of King Charles IX, the colony was named Fort Caroline.

INDIAN NEIGHBORS

The new settlement was in the midst of the Timucua Indian country. Chief Saturiba presented a wedge of silver which, he said, came from enemy Indians farther up the St. Johns. Laudonnière sent envoys upriver; they procured a few more pounds of silver, along with stories of a great chief named Outina, whose allies wore armor of gold and silver. But Laudonnière's efforts to promote peace between Outina and Saturiba only alienated Saturiba. And the French depended heavily upon Saturiba for food.



René de Laudonnière, French commander of Fort Caroline.



Gaspard de Coligny, The Admiral of France.



Le Moyne's sketch of Chief Saturiba.

MUTINY

There were other troubles. Restless explorers found that Indian silver came only from wrecked Spanish ships; there were no mines in Florida. Impatient with the wilderness, 13 mutineers stole a vessel and sailed southward to make their fortunes. After taking a Spanish treasure vessel and plundering a Cuban hamlet, they were finally seized by the Spaniards. Now Spain had first-hand information about the Florida colony.

That winter 66 other mutineers seized the 2 barks built by the artisans of the colony and captured 3 Spanish vessels, before they were cornered off Jamaica by a Spanish squadron. Some were hanged as pirates, but 26 escaped and made their way back to the French at Fort Caroline, where the ring-leaders were shot.

FAMINE

During the winter and spring of 1564-65, the Indians withdrew as usual to the forests and hunted for their food until their new crops of beans and corn ripened. Without Indian help, the French were close to famine. In desperation, Laudonnière seized Outina, planning to ransom him for corn and beans from native storehouses. The exchange was made, but as the French left Outina's village, they walked into an ambush. Most of the hardwon supplies were lost. The settlers decided to repair a vessel and go back to France.

Just at this time, the English slave trader John Hawkins happened into the St. Johns to refill his water casks. The French traded cannon and powder for supplies and one of Hawkins' four ships. By August 15 they were ready to leave, chafing for a favorable wind.

SPAIN'S DECISION

As the mutineers had proved, the French colony was a threat to Spanish commerce. For the Spanish treasure fleets would have to sail past Fort Caroline, following the Gulf Stream seaway to the Azores and home. Further, the fort was a possible base for attack upon the Indies. The French rulers asserted that the settlement was in French territory, but to the Spaniards it was a pirates' nest on Spanish land. A Spanish armada left Cadiz for Florida in July 1565.

But another fleet was already on the high seas. Jean Ribaut had left France with reinforcements—soldiers, gentlemen, and artisans with their families—for Fort Caroline. He knew of the armada being readied at Cadiz by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés. "See that you suffer him not to encroach upon you," Coligny had written, "no more than he would that you should encroach upon him."

Menéndez, the foremost admiral of Spain, had equally specific orders. King Philip charged him to explore and colonize Florida,



The French and the Indians in Florida as depicted by Le Moyne.

and if "there were settlers or corsairs of other nations whatsoever not subject to Us . . . to drive them out by what means you see fit."

THE FIGHT FOR FLORIDA

Ribaut reached Fort Caroline on August 28, just as the colonists were about to sail for France. Cargoes went into the storehouses, and there was no more talk of leaving.

That same day, the Spaniard Menéndez was off the coast, searching for the Frenchmen. Five days later he found the French ships anchored at the mouth of the St. Johns. He tried to board them, but they cut their anchor cables and escaped. Menéndez dropped down the coast a few leagues to the south, and on September 8 established the colony destined to live through the years as St. Augustine.

Against the advice of his captains and Laudonnière, Ribaut decided to attack the Spanish. In the hurricane season, it was a fateful mistake. A storm blew up. The fleet was driven ashore and wrecked many leagues south of St. Augustine.

Menéndez knew that Ribaut's fleet was paralyzed by the weather. He guessed that most of the fighting men were aboard the ships. Now was the time to attack the settlement! With 500 men, guided by Indians and a French prisoner, he marched through the storm toward Fort Caroline.

SPANISH CAPTURE OF FORT CAROLINE

About 240 people were left at the French fort. In the miserable weather, M. de la Vigne took pity on his sentries and sent them to quarters. At dawn the Spaniards swept

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.



Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, Spanish governor of Florida.

down upon the unguarded settlement. In the confusion, someone opened the fort gate, and the enemy poured in. Laudonnière rallied some men; but they were overwhelmed. He and a few others got over the walls and fled to the woods.

Menéndez shouted orders to spare the women and children, but the men were slaughtered. In an hour it was over; the Spaniards had killed 132 and captured about 50 women and children. The day was September 20, 1565.

Menéndez posted a garrison at the fort, then returned to St. Augustine.

Jacques Ribaut, son of the Captain, had anchored his vessel downstream, where it escaped the attack. Later he picked up a number of refugees, including Laudonnière and the artist Le Moyne, and returned to France.

MATANZAS

What about Ribaut's shipwrecked men? Perhaps 500 escaped the pounding surf and hostile Indian arrows, only to face Spanish soldiers. Hungry and helpless, 350 of them surrendered. Menéndez had them killed. The site of the massacre still bears the name *Matanzas* (slaughters). Those who did not surrender were captured later and their lives spared, for they were no longer a threat.

Menéndez summarized the campaign: "Of a thousand French with an armada of twelve sail who had landed here when I reached these provinces, only two vessels have escaped, and those very miserable ones, with some forty or fifty persons in them."

FRENCH REVENGE

Destruction of the colony caused a furor in France. But the Spanish held that the colonists were pirates—as well as heretics. And the interests of the French and Spanish royal families were such that friendly relations had to be maintained. Revenge was a task for others.

Dominique de Gourgues, a 40-year-old Frenchman from a distinguished Catholic family, had no love for Spain. He set sail from Bordeaux with 3 vessels and 180 men, seemingly equipped for the slave trade, but secretly determined to avenge his compatriots.

Gourgues landed north of the St. Johns and enlisted Indian allies. Two block-houses near the river mouth were captured, and the forces moved on Fort Caroline, now renamed San Mateo. Its guns opened fire. The Spanish made a sortie; it was quickly cut down. The garrison fled to the forest—where the Indians were waiting. A bare handful of the Spaniards won their way through to St. Augustine. San Mateo was burned. Thus was the insult to France wiped out in blood on April 14, 1568.



Fort Caroline visitor center overlooks lost site.

THE SITE IN LATER YEARS

The Spanish maintained San Mateo throughout the colonial period. During British ownership of Florida (1763-83), another settlement developed here, with a defensive earthwork on St. Johns Bluff. Zephaniah Kingsley, well-known slave trader, built a shipyard nearby during the early 1800's. More gun batteries were raised on the bluff during both the Civil War and the Spanish-American War.

The site of Fort Caroline no longer exists. Its meadowlike plain and part of the bluff were washed away after the river channel was deepened in the years following 1880.

LOCATION

The memorial is about 10 miles east of Jacksonville and 5 miles west of Mayport. It is reached by State Route 10, with turn-

off on the St. Johns Bluff Road or Girvin Road, then east on Fort Caroline Road.

MISSION 66

Mission 66 is a program designed to be completed by 1966 which will assure the maximum protection of the scenic, scientific, wilderness, and historic resources of the National Park System in such ways and by such means as will make them available for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

ADMINISTRATION

Fort Caroline National Memorial was established on January 16, 1953. It is administered by the National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Route No. 1, Box 310, Jacksonville, Fla., is in immediate charge.

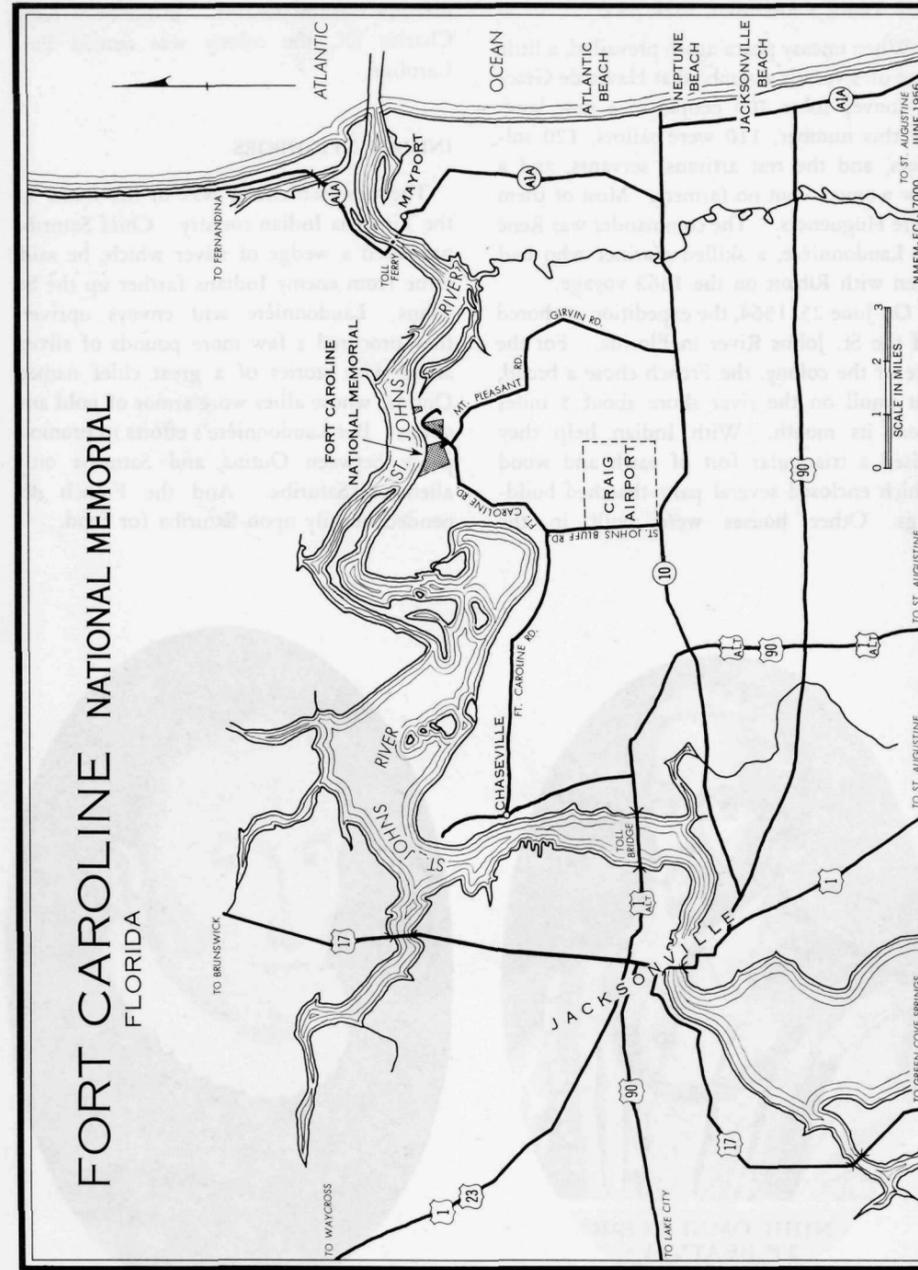


UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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Cover: Fort Caroline after the artist-colonist Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues. His drawings were the earliest known pictures made in North America. Revised 1958. U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1958-O-467425

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