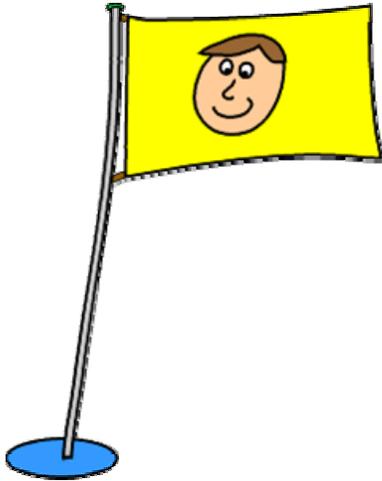




St. Johns Bluff: Changing Times, Changing Flags



The Timucua and their ancestors lived along the edges of the St. Johns River and St. Johns Bluff for thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans. For thousands of years, from the first humans to today, the Bluff has provided residents of this area with sustenance and protection.

Beginning with French settlement during the sixteenth century and continuing almost to the twentieth, the bluff played a vital role in the military and political issues of the day, flying the flags of five nations from its heights during that history –French, Spanish, English, Confederate and American.

French Arrival

The area near St. Johns Bluff was chosen by the earliest European explorers as an ideal location to build a fortification. In 1562 Frenchman Jean Ribault arrived at the St. Johns River and scouted the area for a future location to build a settlement for French Huguenots who were fleeing persecution in Europe. Two years later Rene de Laudonniere returned to settle; under his command Fort Caroline was built.

Laudonniere described the view from the Bluff in his journal in 1562, and it is a view which can still be seen today by visiting the Ribault Column. “I therefore climbed

straight to the summit of it, where we found nothing but cedars, palm trees and laurels of such a superb odour that balm was nothing in comparison...As for the beauty of the place, the sea is plain to be seen, and more than six leagues around the Belle River the plains are all cut up into isles and islets by interlacing streams.”

Fort Caroline was captured by the Spanish and renamed Fort San Mateo in 1565. The Spanish maintained the fort only briefly and for a time the areas around and including the Bluff went unused by a European nation.

St. Johns Town

When Florida came under British control in 1763, citizens from Britain as well as the colonies were encouraged to move to northeast Florida. Many loyalists came south to Florida to escape the American Revolution. Some received land grants and started plantations; others were encouraged to move into the new towns planned by the government, including that of St. Johns Town on St. Johns Bluff. Settlers were lured by such incentives as wharf areas for water access, greenways and community areas, views of the beautiful river, and the supposed health benefits of the sea air. The British also established a fortified battery on St. Johns Bluff to defend against American forces

invading East Florida. The population grew rapidly to 1,500 or more and the town soon included 300 houses, shops, a doctor and a clergyman. Poised to become the center for trade for the plantations along the St. Johns River, the fortunes of the town shifted when control of Florida was returned to Spain in 1784. Most of the former British residents abandoned the area, the town was largely dismantled, many homes were taken by ship to new locations still controlled by the British such as the Bahamas, and for the moment the bluff was left essentially deserted, with only three families remaining to live as Spanish subjects.

San Vicente Ferrer

With the Spanish government once again in control, it recognized the value of the St. Johns River for trade and for access to the interior. Shortly after the new Spanish governor arrived in 1784, he stationed a small detachment of troops at St. Johns Bluff and ordered the establishment of the battery of San Vicente Ferrer in order to control the river, monitor boat traffic, and

insure that travelers and traders had the appropriate authorization. Troops stationed at the battery and along the river were charged with finding soldiers that had deserted, locating runaway slaves and delivering them to St. Augustine, and inspecting boats traveling the river. The battery had a gunboat at its disposal to aid in investigations.

Plantations on the Bluff

By the late 1780s, the potential of the bluff for agricultural development was recognized. Manuel Romera was given 100 acres where Fort Caroline National Memorial now stands and Francisco Estacholy held the fifty acres that surround the Ribault Column today; he also held the position of boss of the post office canoes, which were used for communication up and down the river. Romera and his slaves cultivated the area, still at that time called

San Vicente Ferrer, until 1812 when during The Patriots Rebellion a group of rebels seized the abandoned Spanish supply depot located on the bluff. In 1817 Zephaniah Kingsley, who also owned Fort George Island and several other area plantations, purchased both tracts of land and held them until 1838. Subsequent owners farmed the land until life was disrupted by the Civil War; in 1877 the Bluff was confiscated for missed taxes.

Civil War

In 1861, Florida voted to leave the Union and join with other Southern states in the Confederacy. By late 1862, St. John's Bluff was occupied by the Confederate Army under the command of Brigadier General Joseph Finegan. Guns were positioned atop hastily erected fortifications in order to protect access to Jacksonville, 18 miles upriver.

On September 17, acting on a tip from a runaway slave that the Confederates had occupied the bluff, six Federal gunboats under the command of Charles Steedman assembled at Mayport Mills, approached to within 600 yards of the bluff, and quickly opened fire on the fortifications, raining shot and shell on the fixed positions atop the bluff for the next five hours. Steedman soon realized that the rebels could "not be dislodged except by a combined land and naval attack."

On October 1, the Federal gunboat squadron once again approached the bluff, while a force of 1500 Federal troops landed

and began advancing on the rebels, through the almost impassable swamp-like terrain. Outflanked, the Confederates atop the bluff hastily evacuated, leaving their camp fully intact. While the gunboats waited on the St. Johns River, Federal soldiers entered the Confederate camp, removed the guns, razed the fortifications, and raised the Stars and Stripes over the bluff. The Federals had taken the bluff without a fight.

The abandonment of St. Johns Bluff by the Confederates opened the way for Federal gunboats to move up the St. Johns River and for Federal troops to occupy Jacksonville for the second time. While Jacksonville changed hands several more times during the war, Federal gunboats maintained control of the St. Johns River and of St. Johns Bluff for the duration of the war.

Spanish-American War

With the outbreak of hostilities with Spain in 1898, Jacksonville residents implored the federal government for protection, fearing that Spain would strike first at their city in retaliation for its active support of the Cuban revolutionaries against their Spanish masters.

When the Secretary of War ordered guns and mines for Jacksonville's protection, St. Johns Bluff was chosen as the site for a battery. The Bluff was cleared and a small landing wharf constructed; a small railway track was laid from the boat landing up the



Bluff and a roadway to the top was built. By the time the United States officially declared war on April 25, 1898, the gun emplacements were nearly ready.

The river was mined for extra protection and an army camp (nicknamed "Camp Cuba Libre") was located in Jacksonville. As it turned out, the area saw no military action and the Bluff never participated in a skirmish. On August 12, 1898 the peace protocol was signed. The mines in the river were ordered removed, although work on a permanent gun emplacement continued. Two eight-inch guns were subsequently mounted, although they were never fired and troops were never stationed at the battery. The six buildings originally used for storage and dwellings were all demolished by 1900. Eventually, the temporary wooden structures were taken down for use as spare building materials elsewhere, leaving only the cement gun emplacement.

20th Century Activity on the Bluff

The City of Jacksonville was originally 18 miles upriver from St. Johns Bluff, but with its steady growth after the turn of the century, Jacksonville gradually grew to encompass the area of St. Johns Bluff within its city limits. The area of the bluff developed into a pleasant residential neighborhood.

During the 1930s and '40s, interest began to grow in establishing a site to commemorate Jean Ribault's original establishment of Fort

Caroline and of a colony for religious freedom. On September 21, 1950, authorization for the establishment of Fort Caroline National Memorial was approved by Congress and signed by President Truman, to be situated on undeveloped land that had originally been designated as the St. Johns Bluff Military Reservation during the Spanish-American War. The park initially opened on a part-time basis in 1957.

The Bluff Today

Fort Caroline National Memorial and the Timucuan National Preserve strive to keep the long shared history of St. Johns Bluff alive for all visitors.

Visitors today have the opportunity to visit St. Johns Bluff to see the re-created Fort Caroline, the park's visitor center with its exhibits exploring the lives of the early Timucua, and a replica of the stone column placed by Jean Ribault at the mouth of the

St. Johns River in 1562, as well as to explore the marsh and woodlands of the bluff at the Theodore Roosevelt Area.

Fort Caroline National Memorial is a unit of Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve and is located 13 miles east of downtown Jacksonville, on Fort Caroline Road.