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In Search of Lost Frenchmen: Archeological Investigations at Canaveral NS

Although Canaveral National Seashore, established in 1975, and located along Florida's eastern coast, is associated with the intrepid spirit of men and women who explored and, in a limited way, colonized outer space from the nearby Kennedy Space Center, it is also associated with another fascinating story of exploration and colonization. In the mid-1500s, both France and Spain simultaneously promoted settlement of the New World, an environment that was almost as unknown at that time as space was in the 20th century. Both countries sought control over the eastern coast of *La Florida*, identified by Juan Ponce de Leon forty years earlier. Recently published archeological investigations at Canaveral NS have uncovered evidence to better understand the conflict between French and Spanish settlers, and the fate of defeated French survivors.

The site was first brought to the attention of NPS archeologists by Douglas Armstrong, an avocational relic hunter who collected archeological objects from Cape Canaveral beaches before the establishment of the national seashore. (Federal laws forbid the removal of archeological objects from federal lands.) In accordance with the Archaeological Resource Protection Act, which encourages cooperation and exchange of information between federal archeologists and private individuals having collections of archeological resources and data obtained before 1979 (ARPA; 16 USC 470aa), archeologists from the NPS Southeast Archeological Center (SEAC) and Armstrong examined the site and the resulting collection together in 1989.

Armstrong not only collected numerous artifacts, but had the foresight to map the location of his finds and the finds of other collectors as well. The objects included coins, ships' hardware, sword parts, and jewelry. In 1990, one of the authors (Brewer) examined Mr. Armstrong's collection and noted that several of the items were of French origin and that other materials had been reworked using technology unavailable to the aboriginal inhabitants.

For instance, Armstrong had recovered a short spike that had been reworked. This spike had been chiseled along a line where the spike had been previously folded while being wrought from the original iron. The chiseled section had then been turned back upon itself. This type of metalworking required not only a set of specialized tools such as a hammer, chisel, anvil, tongs, bellows, and clamp, but also knowledge about properly heating the metal to the temperature necessary to work the object. Although the intended function of this item may never be known, it is undoubtedly the work of a European craftsman.



Cut metal spike with turned-back section, evidence of European metalworking techniques. (NPS photo)

The 16th century dates of coins found by Armstrong suggested that the site had been occupied by Europeans associated with the fierce fighting over this part of Florida by France and Spain. NPS archeologists suspected that the artifacts were related to the events surrounding the destruction of Fort Caroline in 1565, and decided to investigate further.

Early French and Spanish Colonies in Eastern Florida

During the 16th century, European nations all wanted part of the riches of the recently discovered New World. Spain, the world's leading power during this time, already had a foothold in the Americas and France wanted a share of the riches that the Spanish were gaining through trade and plunder. France's first attempt to stake a permanent claim in North America was at Fort Caroline in northeastern Florida, a settlement near the mouth of the St. Johns River which empties into the Atlantic Ocean. After the initial discovery by Jean Ribault in 1562, his lieutenant, René de Laudonnière, with about 200 soldiers and artisans, established Fort Caroline in 1564, about 40 years prior to the founding of Jamestown, the earliest English colony. This colony, however, was located on land that the Spanish had considered to be theirs since the time of Columbus. When King Philip II of Spain learned that de Laudonnière had established Fort Caroline, he was furious. Spanish treasure fleets sailed along the eastern Florida coast on their way to Spain and Fort Caroline could easily provide a French base for attacks on the ships.

The settlement barely survived the first year. Good relations with the Indians eventually soured and, by the following spring, the colonists were close to starvation. Twice, mutinous parties had sailed off to make their own fortunes and some were eventually captured by the

Spanish, revealing the presence of the French colony. The remaining colonists were about to leave Florida in August 1565, when they spotted sails on the horizon. Fellow countryman Jean Ribault had arrived with a relief expedition of supplies and 600 soldiers and Huguenot settlers, including women and children.

On learning of Ribault's departure to support Fort Caroline in Florida, Phillip II of Spain sent the recently appointed Governor of New Spain, Admiral Pedro Menendez, to remove the French by all means necessary. After an initial skirmish at sea near Fort Caroline, Menéndez retreated south and established a base of operations at St. Augustine, 35 miles away. (This temporary fortification later became the City of St. Augustine, the oldest continually occupied colony in the present day United States.) On September 10, Ribault's four galleons appeared off the coast there, determined to remove the Spanish presence. Unfortunately for the French, however, a hurricane arose, with bad weather lasting almost two weeks, that blew the French fleet down the coast to Cape Canaveral, and destroyed all of their ships.

Realizing that Fort Caroline was defenseless, and taking advantage of the bad weather, Menendez marched his forces overland, launching a ruthless dawn attack on the fort. The only survivors were about 50 women and children, who were taken prisoner, and a few defenders who managed to escape, among them de Laudonnière, who had been too sick to leave the fort. The rest were killed during the fighting or were executed afterwards.

South of St. Augustine, many of Ribault's shipwrecked crewmen survived the storm and one such group slowly made their way walking up the coast. They were halted by the waters at present-day Matanzas Inlet. Menéndez learned from local Timucuan Indians that a group of white men were on the beach a few miles south of St. Augustine, so he quickly marched with soldiers to the inlet that blocked the shipwrecked Frenchmen from returning to Fort Caroline.

With a previously captured Frenchman as translator, Menéndez told the group that Fort Caroline had been attacked and was now in Spanish hands and urged the French to surrender. Having lost most of their food and weapons in the shipwreck, many did so, allowing themselves to be bound. However, when Menéndez then demanded that they give up their Protestant faith and accept Catholicism, they refused. Menéndez apologized but said they had put themselves in God's hands, and ordered their slaughter (the name "Matanzas" meaning "massacre" marks the spot to this day). Only sixteen were spared - a few who professed being Catholic, some impressed Breton sailors, and four artisans needed at St. Augustine. Two weeks later, more French survivors, including Ribault, appeared at the inlet. On October 12, Ribault and his men surrendered and were also executed; again, for refusing to give up their Lutheran faith.

Three weeks later, Menéndez heard that the remaining French, who had marched south from Matanzas Inlet, were building a fort and ship at Cape Canaveral. He took troops, some by land, and others by sea, and headed down the coast to remove them. The French fled into the woods when they spotted the Spanish approaching. Menéndez, however, offered them safe passage should they surrender. Most of them agreed to the terms, but about 20 declared that they would rather be "devoured by the Indians" than surrender to the Spaniards. The Spaniards destroyed the fort and buried the cannon that the French had salvaged from the wrecks, taking the prisoners to a friendly Indian village, and leaving those who had fled into the brush.

The fate of the 20 Frenchmen who refused to go with Menéndez has always remained a mystery. The year after the massacre, Menéndez sent Gonzalo Gayón along the east coast to the Indian villages of Mayaca in an attempt to make peace among the warring tribes in the interior. During this trip, Gayón entered Mosquito Lagoon at Ponce de Leon Inlet and established contact with the local Indians at Nocoroco and other tribal towns. There he ransomed two or three Frenchmen who had fled from Menendez the previous year.

Archeological Investigations at the Site

Historical references to Frenchmen living somewhere in the vicinity of Cape Canaveral in the mid-1500s are intriguing but, in the late 1980s, physical evidence for such was lacking. However, the archeological investigations undertaken in 1990 and 1995 by SEAC at the site have provided tantalizing, if not conclusive, evidence for such an occupation.

The site is a multi-component shell midden deposit located on the eastern edge of Mosquito Lagoon, within the present national park boundary. The aboriginal component extends over the entire site area, while the historic component is located at the southern tip of the site. The site is easily accessible from water but, inland from the midden, a very dense palmetto thicket dominates. The local vegetation consists of cedar, palm, scrub oak, and palmetto with a light understory.

The 1990 investigations began with the establishment of a grid over the site, tied into the benchmark that had been previously set by Mr. Armstrong. Once the grid was set, surface reconnaissance and a metal detection survey were conducted, and all of the "hits" were then investigated via shovel testing. When that was completed, a series of excavation units were laid out based on Mr. Armstrong's finds and the results of the metal detection survey. The 1995 investigations included topographic mapping, controlled surface collection, systematic shovel testing, more controlled metal detection, and further limited subsurface testing.

Evidence of French Occupation

Ceramics

The majority of the ceramics recovered from the site were aboriginal, consisting primarily of plain sand-tempered St. Johns wares, the latter indicative of the late aboriginal and early contact period. St. Johns Check Stamped and the later Halifax or sandy St. Johns wares were

also recovered. There were, however, a few intriguing historic period ceramics recovered. One piece was a piece of colonoware which shows evidence of having been both coiled and wheel-thrown, but was made of local clays and fired in a reduced-oxygen pit fire. Fifteen olive jar sherds were also recovered. Although usually attributed to the Spanish, these storage jars simply reflect a western Mediterranean ceramic tradition that includes French, Moroccan, Italian, and even Greek historic antecedents. In addition, several pieces of Normandy Stoneware were also recovered from one of the units that contained several metal items and a number of the French coins.

Metal Artifacts

Numerous metal fragments and items were recovered from the site by the earlier relic hunters and during the 1990 and 1995 SEAC archeological investigations. While the presence of these items might indicate that they were simply scavenged off the beach by the native inhabitants, other evidence suggests otherwise.

The most chronologically significant and diagnostic group of metal artifacts recovered were the coins. Generally, these were French coins dated to the 16th century, minted during the reign of Henry II (1547-1559). The coins were made of *billon*, which is an alloy of silver with more than its weight of copper, tin, or other base metal. These coins are known as Douzains aux croissants. On the front is the ecu, or cross and shield emblem with three fleur-de-lis inside, and topped with a crown. Below the ecu is a letter designating the workshop where the coin was minted. Several of the coins were made at mints at Lyon, LaRochelle, and Montpellier or Nantes. On the reverse side of these coins is a cross made up of four small intertwined croissants, each tipped with a fleur-de-lis, with two alternating H's and small crowns between each arm of the cross. A second type of coin has a block style cross with raised dots between each of the arms, all connected by a semicircular filigree.



French coin found at the site. (NPS photo)

Probably the most convincing items to suggest the French presence are the cut spikes, spikeheads, and other examples of metalworking technologies that were beyond the capabilities of the native population, yet are present in such a number that simple pilfering of a nearby shipwreck doesn't seem to adequately explain their numerous presence and many forms.

Many of the metal artifacts appear to have been hot-forge cut. This would indicate the presence of some sort of forge-and-bellows system, since a campfire alone would not be sufficient to heat the metal to the high temperature necessary to sufficiently soften the metal to cut it with a chisel. No evidence of a furnace or forge was discovered on the site. However, the forge simply could have been a shell-lined pit, with bellows to increase the temperature. A portable forge, which could have been carried on a litter and would have, likely, been part of the ship's complement of standard equipment, was another option.

A number of spike heads, cut from their shafts, were also recovered. Again, the use of European technology is suggested by the cold-chisel method of cutting the spike, rather than bending the metal back and forth until broken. Cutting the spike head from its shank required tremendous heat, in the neighborhood of 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. Although we have no evidence for the use of the spike heads, Mr. Armstrong suggested that they were used for hammer heads or, possibly, small anvils, for the manufacture of decorative items. A number of the small metal items, mostly made from copper, showed evidence of hammering. Other items, made of billon and copper, appear to have been cut with small shears.

Fauna

The faunal remains recovered from the site were dominated by saltwater shellfish and boney fish; limited avian, reptile, and mammal remains were also present. Based on a detailed analysis of the 1990 faunal assemblage, the primary sources of food for the site's inhabitants consisted of saltwater shellfish, specifically quahog clams, oyster, and coquina; and boney fish including mullet, sheepshead, trout, drum, catfish, and jack. This marine-based subsistence pattern was supplemented by fowl and turtles. In addition, larger animals such as deer, alligator, and shark were occasionally brought into the settlement.

After a steady increase in frequency in faunal remains in the lower levels, there was a decline in overall resource use in the upper 40 cm of the excavated units. The decline in resource use may have been the result of fewer people visiting the site during the time that the latest levels were deposited. A reduced use of the site may have been linked to shifts in the seasonal rounds and the time of year during which the site was visited. French sailors may also have excluded Native Americans from the site during their occupation; individual Native American families, recognizing the potential for violence associated with the sailors, may have also avoided the settlement.

Winter use is consistent with the recognized patterns of site usage in this coast area. However, the seasonality data from the site does not exclude the possibility that the site was used intermittently throughout the year.

Based on analysis of the faunal material, it is proposed that changes in the overall procurement strategies took place over time at the site. There was a general rise in shellfish harvest through time. Oysters replaced clams in level 6, and coquina replaced oysters in level 5. Beginning in level 5 and increasing through levels 4 and 3, there is a greater dependence on deer, as opposed to raccoon or opossum, with significant dropoff in the upper levels. The use of boney fish increased through from the lower levels until level 4, and then declined. Finally, although birds were never heavily utilized, they suddenly become a notable resource in level 4, and those used are almost exclusively gulls.

The major decrease in utilization seen between levels 4 and 3 may represent the beginning of the French occupation. The gull remains also hint at a non-aboriginal occupation. The occurrence of gull remains within documented aboriginal faunal assemblages in coastal North American sites is infrequent (or they have not been recognized as food remains). This shift in bird exploitation may be indicative of European subsistence activities.

The presence of mullet bones suggests the use of nets, fish traps, and/or weirs. The use of nets is supported by the recovery of several net weights manufactured from the locally available calcareous sandstone and limestone. Mr. Armstrong recovered a net weight that had been manufactured from sand cast lead. Faunal analysis conducted on the ¼” screen samples from two of the units indicated that most of the fish caught were between 3 and 4 foot in length. These could have also been caught with hook and line, however, no evidence for this technology was recovered.

Conclusions

The wide range of metalworking evidence at the site suggests that shipwrecked sailors (perhaps the remnants of Ribault’s fleet) were creating survival equipment, i.e. tools and status items (jewelry) to trade with the Native Americans, upon whose trust and friendship their very survival depended. The presence of 16th century European materials, especially reworked French coins, metal fragments and ship parts in various stages of remanufacture that utilized technologies beyond the scope of proto-historic Native Americans, suggests that the site had been occupied by non-Native Americans during the 1500s. Many of the items had been worked into various aboriginal-styled artifacts such as plummets, janglers, tinklers, and beads that would appeal to Native Americans. The iron items that were hot-forge cut and worked into apparent survival tools such as hammers, points, awls, chisels, and drills, suggest that metalworking was also occurring on site. The terminus post quem of the historic component of the site, based on the coins, is 1552.

Changes in the subsistence strategies at the site, like the sudden increased hunting of birds, especially seagulls, suggest that the site had been occupied by a group of people who were culturally different than earlier inhabitants. Those factors, combined with certain anomalous artifacts, such as colonoware and Normandy stoneware, point to a European presence. Although we initially thought that evidence of European structures and a “smithy” might be uncovered at the site, hindsight suggests that this would not have been likely. If the French survivors did live with the local natives, they would have done so as clandestinely as possible, for their very lives depended on the good will of their hosts, and they certainly didn’t want to be spotted by the Spanish.

Historic records report numerous Spanish efforts to either root out or ransom the reported Frenchmen living with the Indians. For example, in 1566, Gayón ransomed some Frenchmen from the Indians at Nocoroco within what is now Tomoka Florida State Park. There is also a brief anecdotal reference to a journal entry of several elderly Frenchmen and a mulatto boy in a green-built barque joining an English fleet off the coast of Florida in 1608, with the ship and the Frenchmen returning to France. This group, too, may have been part of the remaining French survivors. If so, they had lived with the Indians for over 40 years. Both accounts suggest that the shipwrecked French did survive along the Florida coast for a number of years. The site offers the first concrete evidence for survival of 16th century French soldiers in the Cape Canaveral area.

Learn more about [Cape Canaveral NS](#).

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