



A Military Town on the Colonial Georgia Frontier

Defending Utopia

The ruins of old Frederica remind us of the grim struggle for empire in the Southeast two and a half centuries ago. The main contenders were those ancient rivals, Spain and Great Britain. They both claimed the land between St. Augustine and Charleston. But one was a waning power in this part of North America while the other was embarked upon a vast empire stretching from Maine to Carolina. As a buffer along her southern frontier, Britain planted the colony of Georgia—the last of the original thirteen and the first since the founding of Pennsylvania by Quakers half a century earlier—in the unoccupied territory below the Carolinas.

The colony sprang as much from a spirit of benevolence as from the realities of imperial politics. Like the Quaker venture, Georgia was an experiment in idealism, though born more of this world than the next one. In the 1720s England had been swept by a wave of sentiment to remedy the plight of the thousands of poor persons drifting without jobs or languishing in debtors' jail. To salvage these "worthy poor," a number of prominent Englishmen—among them James Ogle-

James Edward Oglethorpe, a man of vision, compassion, and vast energy, was the founder and leader of the Georgia colony during its first decade. Under his guidance, the colony welcomed immigrants of diverse religious views and national origins, banned slavery and rum, and successfully resisted Spanish attack.



Oglethorpe University

thorpe, a soldier and politician concerned with the welfare of both the poor and the empire—petitioned the Crown for a grant of land south of the Savannah River. The government welcomed this enterprise, seeing in it a way to hold the Spanish in check while relieving social distress at home.

In 1732 George II granted to a board of Trustees all the land between the Savannah and Altamaha Rivers and westward from their headwaters to the Pacific—a tract larger than the realm itself. Englishmen of all classes rallied to the idea of this new Utopia in the American wilderness. Money poured in, public and private, and the first shipload of 114 persons departed under the leadership of Oglethorpe. Reaching Georgia in January 1733, they made their way up the Savannah River 18 miles to their new home.

Spurred by the energetic Oglethorpe—who was everywhere "building the Town, Keeping peace, laying out land, Supplying the Stores with provision, encouraging the faint hearted &c"—an orderly town which took the name Savannah rose on the bluffs.

Settlement was one of Oglethorpe's purposes; another was defense against the Spanish menace. In 1734 he sailed down the coast looking for strategic points to fortify. He found a likely site on a sea island just below the mouth of the Altamaha. This was St. Simons, an island thick with live oaks draped in moss, with good water and a fertile upland. Two years later he returned with the first settlers, 44 men (mostly craftsmen) and 72 women and children, and laid out a military town on a bluff overlooking a sharp bend on the inland passage up the coast. He named the town for Frederick, the king's only son. It came to be Oglethorpe's favorite town in Georgia.

The settlers' first task was to build a fort. Under Oglethorpe's direction, they soon raised an earthen work whose design reflected the classical ideas of the 17th-century French military engineer Vauban. Over the next several years Oglethorpe transformed this work and the town itself into a formidable position. Frederica is defended, said a visitor in 1745, "by a pretty strong Fort of Tappy, which has several 18 Pounders mounted on a Ravelin in its Front, and commands the River both upwards and downwards; and is surrounded by a quadrangular Rampart, with 4 bastions, of Earth well stockaded and turfed, and a palisaded Ditch."

Behind the fort, on a large field planted in corn by the Indians, Oglethorpe staked out 84 lots, most of them measuring 60 feet by 90. Each family received a lot for building and 50 acres in the country for crops. The first dwellings were palmetto huts, but these were eventually replaced by substantial houses built of wood, *tabby* (a crude concrete made of burnt oyster shells), and brick in the prevailing Georgian style. The main thoroughfare was Broad Street, 75 feet wide and shaded by orange trees. It ran from the fort to the town gates. Frederica's artificers included a blacksmith, whose shop stood within the fort's north bastion, a wheelwright, and a public baker, whom Oglethorpe brought over as an indentured servant to fill that essential need.

Except that it lacked a church spire, Frederica in the 1740s might have passed for a village in the English midlands. The population reached about 500, and the town took on an air of permanency. Tradesmen and craftsmen prospered. Farmers grew crops in the surrounding fields, doing the work themselves, for slavery was banned in the colony. Most families supplemented their diet with the abundant game of the region, taking aim at almost anything that moved.

Oglethorpe got along well with the local Indians (Yamacraws and Creeks). Their trade was important to the first settlers, and in the campaigns against Spain, they fought alongside the British. A German settler from Salzburg sketched this couple in 1736.



Royal Library of Copenhagen

The first settlers at Frederica lived for several months in crude palmetto huts.



The Hawkins-Davison Houses

This tableware and wine bottle are a few of the many domestic artifacts unearthed at Frederica.



The families that lived in the two houses above were among the first settlers of Frederica. Dr. Thomas Hawkins and his wife Beatre lived in the house on the right. He was the regimental surgeon, town physician and apothecary, and an officer of the court, positions which gave him a sizable income. Their neighbors were Samuel Davison and his wife Susanna. Industrious and well liked in town, he was a tavern keeper, a town constable, and ship inspector.

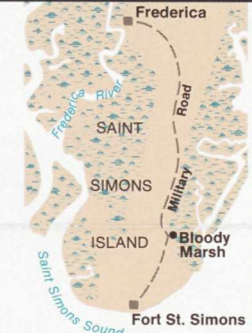
The Battle of Bloody Marsh

After repelling Oglethorpe at the gates of St. Augustine, the Spanish gathered an armada and, in June 1742, sailed north to invade the English colonies and regain lands they considered rightfully theirs. Oglethorpe faced this threat with no support from either the Carolinians or London. Rounding up Indians, militia, and Scottish Highlanders to go with his regulars, the resourceful commander was tireless in preparing his defenses. Altogether, he had about 900 men but faced twice that number.

The Spanish commander was Manuel de Montiano, governor of Florida. His objective was to destroy Frederica and lay waste the coast as far north as Port Royal, in South Carolina. After capturing that town, he planned to strike at the English plantation system by freeing the slaves in the surrounding countryside.

In early July his ships ran by the guns of Fort St. Simons and landed troops a few miles up the inland passage. Outflanked, Oglethorpe

During the troubles with Spain, Frederica was defended by two companies of redcoats: Oglethorpe's own regiment (carried on the rolls as the 42d Regiment of Foot) and the Highland Independent Company, stationed at Darien, a Scottish settlement on the Altamaha River, and at Fort St. Simons. Above: a Highlander private and grenadier sergeant of the 42d.



pulled back to Frederica. On July 7, about 200 Spaniards advanced up the military road connecting the two forts. Oglethorpe routed this column with a fierce attack. When Montiano learned of this repulse, he sent several hundred men forward to cover the retreat. Several miles along the road these troops ran into a British ambush posted "in a Wood with a large... Meadow in their Front." In a battle in which the marshes ran red with blood, the British routed this force too with a galling musket fire. Within a week Montiano's army evacuated St. Simons and were soon back in Florida, ending the last Spanish threat to Georgia.

War and Decline

Spain saw the Georgia settlements as a threat to her interests in Florida. Spoiling for a fight, Oglethorpe returned to England in 1737 to raise troops for the war he knew was coming. A year later he was back in Georgia at the head of a 630-man regiment of British regulars, styled the 42d Regiment of Foot (Oglethorpe's). It was formed from a few hundred troops from Gibraltar and most of the privates of a standing regiment in England, the 25th Foot.

The regiment was composed of eight companies of infantry and one of grenadiers. They were equipped with the long musket—the famous "Brown Bess"—and the infantry sword. The elite troops of the regiment were the grenade-carrying grenadiers, who were picked for their size and skill in combat. These troops Oglethorpe garrisoned mostly at Frederica and a new fort, Fort St. Simons, built on the south end of the island.

In 1739 war broke out between Britain and Spain over the slave trade. Fighting ranged over the Caribbean and up the Georgia coast to Frederica. Expecting a Spanish attack, Oglethorpe enclosed the town within an earthen wall and a palisaded moat, ten feet wide and fed by the river. Not one to wait passively for the enemy to strike, the aggressive Oglethorpe set out in early 1740 to capture St. Augustine. Taking some 900 troops and 1,100 Indian allies, he laid siege to the Spanish town but could not breach its defenses. By mid-summer, his plans all awry, the frustrated Oglethorpe was back in Frederica.

The initiative now passed to the Spanish. Collecting 50 sail and an army of 2,000 men, they descended on Oglethorpe's troublesome salient in early July 1742. A column advanced to within sight of Frederica but was beaten back by the British. This was the high-watermark of the Spanish invasion. Later that same day, Oglethorpe's men ambushed another column at Bloody Marsh and won a decisive victory. Within a week the dispirited Spanish evacuated the island as Oglethorpe proclaimed a day of thanksgiving for this deliverance.

Born of war, Frederica expired with the coming of peace. Oglethorpe himself, after one more foray against Spanish Florida, sailed away to England for the last time in 1743, and his regiment was disbanded in 1749. Without the money brought in by the several hundred soldiers, the shopkeepers and tradesmen and the town itself could hardly prosper. By 1755 Frederica presented a picture, as a visitor put it, of "houses without inhabitants, barracks without soldiers, guns without carriages, and streets overgrown with weeds." Though the town hung on a few years longer, even surviving a fire in 1758, it had outlived its purpose and soon fell into ruin.

Frederica in 1742

The park is on St. Simons Island, 12 miles from Brunswick, Ga., and can be reached via U.S. 17 and the Brunswick—St. Simons causeway. Hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. There are no camping or picnicking facilities at the park.

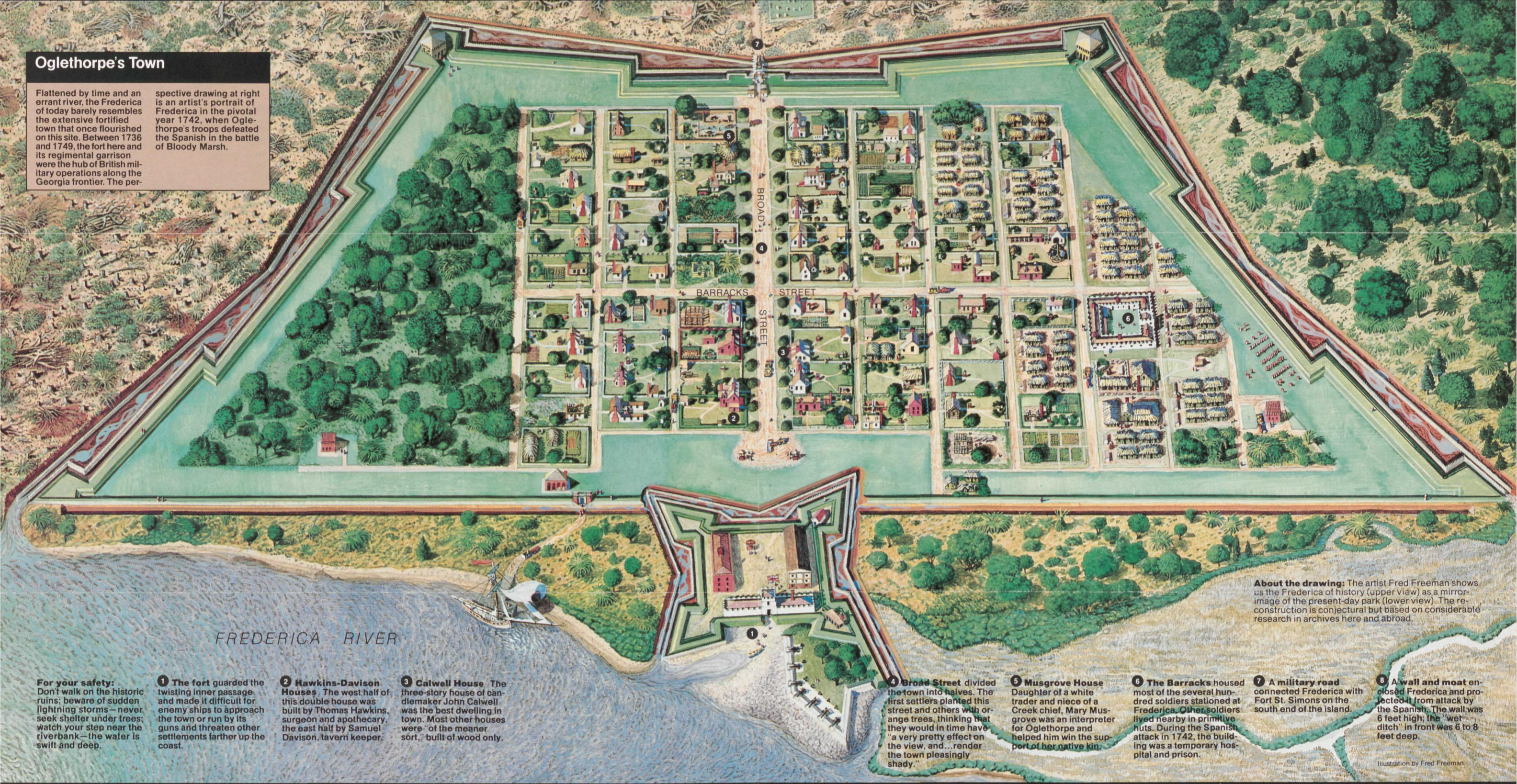
Bloody Marsh Battle Site, a detached unit of the park, is 6 miles south of Frederica. On July 7, 1742, British troops ambushed a Spanish column here, halting an attack aimed at Frederica.

Fort Frederica National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Route 9, Box 286-C, St. Simons Island, GA 31522, is in charge.



Oglethorpe's Town

Flattened by time and an errant river, the Frederica of today barely resembles the extensive fortified town that once flourished on this site. Between 1736 and 1749, the fort here and its regimental garrison were the hub of British military operations along the Georgia frontier. The perspective drawing at right is an artist's portrait of Frederica in the pivotal year 1742, when Oglethorpe's troops defeated the Spanish in the battle of Bloody Marsh.



About the drawing: The artist Fred Freeman shows us the Frederica of history (upper view) as a mirror image of the present-day park (lower view). The reconstruction is conjectural but based on considerable research in archives here and abroad.

For your safety: Don't walk on the historic ruins; beware of sudden lightning storms—never seek shelter under trees; watch your step near the riverbank—the water is swift and deep.

- 1 The fort guarded the twisting inner passage, and made it difficult for enemy ships to approach the town or run by its guns and threaten other settlements farther up the coast.
- 2 Hawkins-Davison Houses. The west half of this double house was built by Thomas Hawkins, surgeon and apothecary, the east half by Samuel Davison, tavern keeper.
- 3 Calwell House. The three-story house of candlemaker John Calwell was the best dwelling in town. Most other houses were "of the meaner sort," built of wood only.
- 4 Broad Street divided the town into halves. The first settlers planted this street and others with orange trees, thinking that they would in time have "a very pretty effect on the view, and...render the town pleasingly shady."
- 5 Musgrove House. Daughter of a white trader and niece of a Creek chief, Mary Musgrove was an interpreter for Oglethorpe and helped him win the support of her native kin.
- 6 The Barracks housed most of the several hundred soldiers stationed at Frederica. Other soldiers lived nearby in primitive huts. During the Spanish attack in 1742, the building was a temporary hospital and prison.
- 7 A military road connected Frederica with Fort St. Simons on the south end of the island.
- 8 A wall and moat enclosed Frederica and protected it from attack by the Spanish. The wall was 6 feet high; the "wet ditch" in front was 6 to 8 feet deep.

Illustration by Fred Freeman

Visiting the Park

A good way to see Frederica is to browse among the ruins, relating the old relics to the once-expansive town depicted above. Eight of the principal ruins are described here. For a sequential tour of the park, follow the self-guiding exhibits that begin outside the visitor center.

