

# Fort Frederica

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Fort Frederica National Monument  
Georgia



ILLUSTRATIONS: NPS, KENNETH TOWNSEND

## 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 more than 250 years ago. The main contenders were those ancient rivals, Spain and Great Britain. They both claimed the land between St. Augustine and Charleston. But Spain was a waning power in this part of North America while Great Britain was embarked upon a vast empire stretching from Maine to Carolina. As a buffer along its 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 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. In the 1720s England had been swept by a wave of sentiment to remedy the plight of thousands of poor people drifting without jobs or languishing in debtors' jail. To salvage these "worthy poor," a number of prominent English citizens—among them James Oglethorpe, a soldier and politician concerned with

vision, encouraging the faint hearted &c"—an orderly town that took the name Savannah rose on the bluffs.

Settlement was one of Oglethorpe's purposes; another was defense against the Spanish. 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 skilled workers) 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 palisadoed Ditch."

Behind the fort, on a 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 houses built of wood, tabby (a crude concrete made of burnt oyster shells), and brick in the prevailing Georgian style.

The main road was Broad Street, 75 feet wide and shaded by orange trees. It ran from the fort to the town gates. Frederica's artisans 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.

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. Tradespeople and skilled workers 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, shooting almost anything that moved.

**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

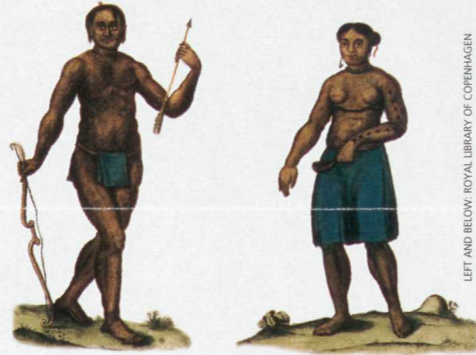
the welfare of both the poor and the empire—petitioned the Crown for a grant of land south of the Savannah River. The government welcomed this enterprise, seeing it as a way to hold the Spanish in check while relieving social distress at home.

In 1732 George II granted to a board of Trustees all the land between the Savannah and Altamaha rivers and west from their headwaters to the Pacific—a tract larger than Britain itself. English people 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 people 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 pro-

Oglethorpe got along well with the local Yuchi, Yamacraw, and Creek Indians. Their trade was important to the first settlers, and in the cam-

paigns against Spain, they fought alongside the British. A German settler from Salzburg sketched this Indian couple in 1736.



LEFT AND BELOW: ROYAL LIBRARY OF COPENHAGEN

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



### The Hawkins-Davison Houses

The families who lived in these 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 that 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, town constable, and ship inspector.



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

### 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, 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 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 returned to Florida, ending the last Spanish threat to Georgia.

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. At left are a Highlander private and a grenadier sergeant of the 42d.

### War and Decline

Spain saw the Georgia settlements as a threat to its 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 carried 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, 10 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 awry, the frustrated Oglethorpe was back in Frederica.

The initiative now passed to the Spanish. Collecting 50 sailing vessels 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-water mark of the Spanish invasion. Later that 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 to England for the last time in 1743, and his regiment was disbanded in 1749. Without the money brought by the several hundred soldiers, the shopkeepers, tradespeople and the town 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 fell into ruin.



# Fort Frederica in 1742

## Oglethorpe's Town

Lost to time and a wandering river, Frederica today barely resembles the extensive military town that once flourished here. Between 1736 and 1749 the fort and its regimental garrison were the hub of British military operations along the Georgia frontier.

In this conjectural illustration, artist L. Kenneth Townsend portrays Frederica in the pivotal year 1742 when Oglethorpe's troops defeated Spanish troops at Bloody Marsh.

Like Savannah, Frederica was a planned town, built by the "worthy poor" transplanted here by Oglethorpe and his fellow Trustees. It was a thoroughly English town, with spacious streets and substantial houses built in the Georgian style. An admiring traveler described the scene for the *London Magazine* in 1745: "Some houses are built entirely of brick, some of brick and wood, some few of tabby work; but most of the meaner sort of wood only."

Of all his settlements in Georgia, Oglethorpe liked this one best. He was fond of the town's military air and proud of his troops, who "made as fine an appearance upon the parade as any Regiment in the King's service." His own home—a cottage standing amid a grove of live oaks with a garden and orchard nearby—seemed to a visitor like "a neat country village where the consequences of all the various industries of an European farm may be seen."



## Frederica Today

The park is on St. Simons Island, 12 miles from Brunswick, Ga., and can be reached via U.S. 17 and the F. J. Torras (Brunswick-St. Simons) Causeway. There are no camping facilities at the park. Hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**Bloody Marsh Battle Site**, a detached unit of the park, is six miles south of Frederica. Nearby are the remains of Fort St. Simons, built on the south end of the island, and the old military road that connected the fort with Frederica. Gully Hole Creek, scene of an earlier skirmish, lies half a mile east of the visitor center. The

site is marked by a state historic plaque.

**Help us protect Frederica** Keep in mind that Fort Frederica is an archeological site and the remains here are fragile. *Please do not disturb any surviving foundations, bricks, or tabby.* Notify a park ranger if you see potsherds or other fragments so that they can be collected and documented to help complete the picture of life here in colonial times. Federal law prohibits digging or using metal detectors within the park.

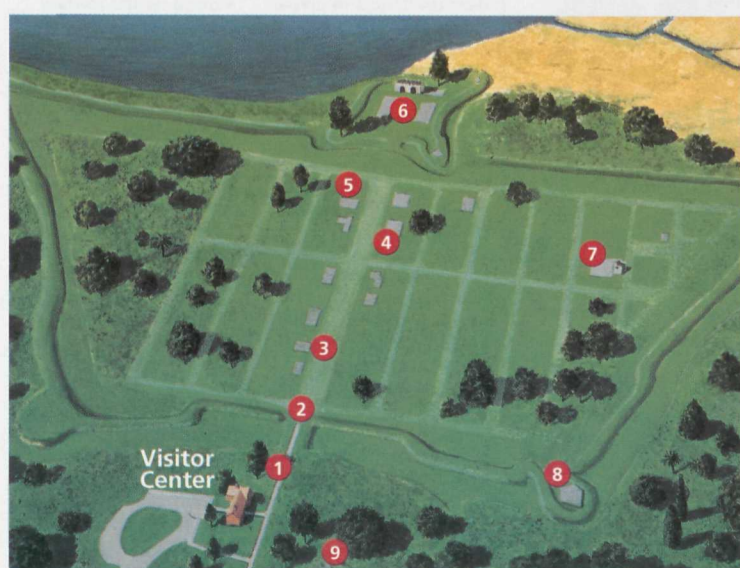


ILLUSTRATION NPS/ROB WOOD

## Touring the Park

A good way to see Frederica is to browse through the town site with this guide in hand. Sites are marked on the map at left.

- 1 A military road connected Frederica with Fort St. Simons, six miles away on the south end of the island. More like a path cut through a forest than a road, it crossed marshy ground on a causeway. British troops marched down this path to battle invading Spanish troops in 1742.
- 2 The town gate controlled land access to Frederica. Soldiers routinely stood guard here.
- 3 Broad Street divided the town into north and south wards. The first settlers planted orange trees along this street, thinking that in time they would have "a very pretty effect on the view, and render...the town pleasingly shady."
- 4 The three-story Calwell house was the best dwelling in town. John Calwell made candles and soap here and his wife kept a shop.
- 5 Two prominent families occupied the Hawkins-Davison houses. The west half was built by Thomas Hawkins, surgeon and apothecary, and the east half by tavernkeeper and town constable Samuel Davison. They ran their businesses on the premises.
- 6 A tabby fort guarded the twisting water approach to the town. The fort was square with bastions on each corner and separated from the town by a palisade and moat. Inside were a magazine for guns and ammunition, officers' quarters, storehouses, and a forge. A spur battery, lost long ago to the river, mounted six or seven cannon.
- 7 The barracks housed most of the several hundred soldiers garrisoned at Frederica. Other soldiers lived nearby in palmetto-thatched huts.
- 8 The northeast bastion is a remnant of works Oglethorpe built in 1739 when invasion threatened. He fortified the town with an earthen rampart, a moat six- to eight-feet deep, and a cedar palisade 10 feet high.
- 9 The burying ground, of which little is known, lay just east of town.

Outside the gate, townspeople traded with local Creek and Yuchi Indians.

## For a Safe Visit

- Lightning storms are dangerous. Seek shelter in the visitor center or your car but not under trees.
- Watch your step near the riverbank; the water is swift and deep.
- Don't climb on the fort or cannon.
- Parents should keep a careful watch on small children.

## Related Sites

Visit other nearby parks to learn more about colonial Georgia. Fort King George State Historic Site in Darien is a reconstruction of the first British outpost in Georgia. From 1721 to 1736 it protected the Altamaha River and inner passage from French and

Spanish attack. Wormsloe State Historic Site on the Isle of Hope near Savannah preserves the ruins of an extraordinary plantation built 1739-45. The fortified home of Noble Jones, one of Georgia's first settlers, stood on this site. At Fort Morris State Historic Site, 40 miles south of Savannah, are the remains of a once-prosperous port city and an earthen work captured by the British in the Revolutionary War.

Several NPS sites in Florida also figure in Frederica's story. Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, in Jacksonville, preserves areas

relating to the British occupation of Florida from 1763 to 1784. Castillo de San Marcos and Fort Matanzas national monuments in St. Augustine remind us that Spain also claimed the land on which Frederica stood and was willing to fight for it.

**More Information**  
Fort Frederica National Monument  
Route 9, Box 286 C  
St. Simons Island, GA 31522-9710  
912-638-3639  
[www.nps.gov/ffor](http://www.nps.gov/ffor)