



San Simón: The story of the Spanish Missions and Native American Villages of St. Simons Island



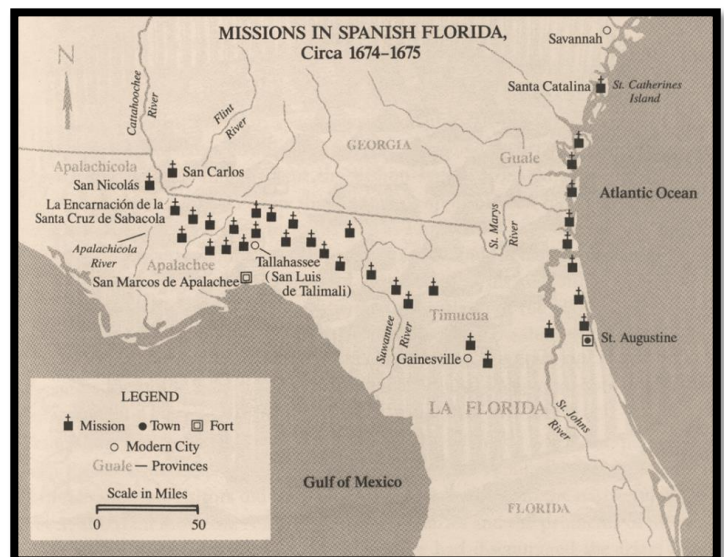
Early Beginnings Though De Soto, Hernandez, and Cortez are seen as the great explorers and conquerors of the Spanish colonial age, the true conquerors of the new world were the Spanish Missionaries. Traveling in small groups or alone, the Spanish established missions on the outskirts of the known world. Missions were Spanish-style self-sufficient villages established to promote conversion to Christianity and became the focal points of Native American and European interaction. During their attempts at Christianizing the local tribes, missionaries made what are viewed as the first anthropological studies of southeastern tribes. One missionary, Father Francisco Pareja, developed the first writing system for Timucuan, and published the first work in indigenous language in 1612.

St. Simons

By the 1580s, Spanish Franciscan friars set up a system of missions throughout Florida (along the future Georgian coastline), near important native villages. Mission San Buenaventura de Guadalquini (1597/1609-1684), was established on the south end of the island. This mission and the associated Indian village of Guadalquini were in the Mocama province; part of a larger Timucuan population.

Mission Life

For the Mocama and other Native American people, life at a mission village was different from life outside it. At the mission, a sedentary, non-nomadic way of life was promoted, with a focus on farming and labor. Corn, wheat, and vegetables were raised, and part of the Natives' crops was taken as tribute to the colonial government. The native people from the missions were drafted to work as transporters, couriers, cattle ranchers, or river pilots. It is difficult to determine what the native people thought of mission life and the colonial government. Some were drawn to the missions for protection from other tribes and some embraced the new life and teachings. Some likely pretended to conform to Catholic life while still maintaining Timucua religious beliefs. Some accepted the Spanish religious authorities but rejected the political and military authorities.



Decline of the Mission System

As the English in Carolina grew in prosperity, Spanish fortunes and those of their native allies rapidly declined. With supplies of guns and ammunition now much closer at hand, slave raids by the Chichimeco tribe continued as the Spanish missions gradually retreated south, away from the aggressors. By 1675, the province of Mocama was settled by non-Christian Yamassee while the Christianized Guale and Mocama has been reduced to a total of 326 people. In that same year two Yamassee towns, San Simón and Ocotonico, were established on St. Simon's Island north of the Mission of San Buenaventura de Guadalquini (located near the current lighthouse). These villages, occupied by natives from different chiefdoms co-existed for the next few years in peace.

An attack in 1680 by England's Indian allies the Creeks, led to the abandonment of San Simón. It was in late April of the year that an English-led party of some 300 Indian allies attacked the Spanish missions once again, preying first upon the small Yamassee town of San Simón before attacking the Mission a Santa Catalina de Guale on St. Catherine's Island. Although only a few Yamassee and Guale were killed in the 1680 attack, it was enough to convince the local natives to flee the Spanish villages and missions.

The constant attacks led to the consolidation of closure of numerous missions as the missionaries and natives relocated closer to the Spanish capital at St. Augustine, and its large fortress; the Castillo de san Marcos. 61 years later in 1736 the old abandoned fields of San Simón would be chosen by Georgia's founding Governor, James Edward Oglethorpe, as the spot to build Fort Frederica.



Archeology

Little is known about the day to day life at San Simón or of the other villages and mission on St. Simon's Island. No definitive location of the other villages or of the mission has been established as of 2014, though promising archeological work in an attempt to locate the Mission San Buenaventura de Guadalquini near the St. Simons Lighthouse, found scattered remains of Native American and Spanish wares.

During the 1950's archeological investigations at Fort Frederica uncovered scattered remains of the former Native American Village of San Simón, in the form of San Marcos Complicated Stamp pottery. The development of Fort Frederica and it's village has muddied the archeological record but also protected it from modern development. Further research may offer us the opportunity to increase our knowledge of the refugee village of San Simón and glean information on how or if the occupants were assimilated into the Spanish missionary system. Such research will help us uncover this oft forgotten but integral portion of the nation's history.