

The hurricane that struck Florida's northeast coast in September 1565 bore no colorful female name and gave no advance warning of its coming. But for this interference of nature, the history of this region might well have been different, for it was here in the aftermath of that storm that Spain quashed the French attempt to control Florida and began the continued occupation of this site.

THE SPANISH-FRENCH STRUGGLE

Throughout the later 16th century, France was wracked by religious warfare between Catholics and Protestants (Huguenots). In the hope of uniting his countrymen against a common enemy, Adm. Gaspard de Coligny, leader of the Huguenots, sent Jean Ribault, also a Huguenot, to establish bases within Spanish America in the name of the King of France. His first attempt in 1562 at Charlesfort failed. A second expedition under René de Laudonnière two years later built Fort Caroline on the St. Johns River. Such an act was an affront to the Spaniards, for they regarded the settlement as trespass on land they had discovered and explored. Just as repugnant to the Spaniards was the fact that almost all these French colonists were Huguenots, for the Spaniards regarded them as heretics. Fort Caroline also threatened the route of merchantmen and treasure galleons returning to Spain from the Caribbean via the Gulf Stream. And the French already had a long history of plundering Spanish ships. To remove the twin menaces of French encroachment and heresy, King Philip II dispatched Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, an able seaman and devout Catholic, to settle Florida.

On August 28, 1565, Ribault arrived off the mouth of the St. Johns River. That same day, Menéndez made his landfall at Cape Cañaveral, 250 kilometers (160 miles) to the south. He immediately turned north and followed

the coast looking for the French. On September 5 they met and after a preliminary skirmish, Menéndez sailed off to the south to establish a base of operations that grew into St. Augustine.

In the two weeks that followed, each side jockeyed for position, for they both knew that a confrontation must come. Ribault reasoned that it was best to take the initiative while he enjoyed numerical superiority. His plans were well-laid, but his timing was disastrous, for the fateful hurricane wrecked and scattered his ships far down the coast. The weather gave Menéndez the chance he had hoped for. Marching overland through heavy rains, Menéndez captured the enemy base.

The fighting had just begun, however, for Ribault still had almost 500 men. In two groups, the French began marching up the coast toward Fort Caroline. The swift-flowing waters of the inlet at the south end of Anastasia Island, 22 kilometers (14 miles) south of St. Augustine halted the first group. Meanwhile Menéndez and 70 men made their way down the island to the shore opposite the French.

Famished and weary, informed of their fort's capture, and tricked into believing the Spanish force to be much larger, the French surrendered. On September 29, they were ferried ten at a time across the inlet, fed, and led behind the dunes, where their hands were bound. About 60 meters (200 feet) down the beach Menéndez drew a line in the sand and then herded the prisoners together



The two smaller ships above are French. They are from a map by Jacques Le Moyne, a member of René de Laudonnière's 1564 expedition. The large ship is a Spanish galleon. (Illustrations used by permission of the Viking Press.)

for the march to St. Augustine. At the mark the Spaniards fell upon the defenseless prisoners; 111 died but 15 were spared.

Twelve days later, Menéndez heard that the second group of 350 Frenchmen had likewise halted at the inlet. Again there was a parley—this time with Ribault himself, who saw the gruesome evidence of the first massacre. Ribault returned and told his men everything. He advised surrender, for he believed, it appears, that the Spaniards would show mercy. But during the night more than half of his men fled south.

The next morning, October 12, Ribault and his remaining men handed their battle flags to Menéndez.

As before, the Huguenots were brought across the water and again the white sands were darkened with blood. That day 134 Frenchmen lost their lives; 16 were spared. Later, Menéndez sought out those who had fled; most he took to Habana as prisoners.

Matanzas, which means slaughters, had received its name.

The 16th-century was a creative, adventurous age of artistic brilliance, exploration, expansion, and nation building. It was also a brutal age of war, religious fanaticism, and Machiavellian intrigue. Politically the era belonged to such figures as Philip II of Spain, Elizabeth I of England, and Sir Francis Drake. They fashioned the events of their epoch and gave it its special character.

The political and religious rivalries of 16th-century Europe also permeated the New World. The drama played out in 1565 by the French and Spaniards in desolate Florida is a significant case in point. The two principal characters of the drama, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and Jean Ribault, typified both the rivalries and the values of the 16th century. So did the issues—religion and territorial expansion. The bloody chapter written in the marshes and on the beaches of Florida had wide ramifications both for the story of European expansion into America and the colonial development of Florida. The massacres at Matanzas were a significant part of that story.

— John Jay TePaske

THE SIEGE OF 1740

In 1733 Gen. James Oglethorpe founded the English colony of Georgia on land claimed by Spain. Hostilities were inevitable, and the War of Jenkin's Ear between Spain and England gave him an excuse for attacking St. Augustine. On June 13, 1740, Oglethorpe began the siege of St. Augustine by blockading the Matanzas River. Anticipating Oglethorpe's attack, Gov. Manuel de Montiano had sent a courier to Habana asking for supplies, for they had enough only for three weeks.

On July 7, a courier reached St. Augustine and told Montiano that six supply ships were at Mosquito Inlet, 110 kilometers (68 miles) further down the coast. He also told Montiano that the British had withdrawn the vessel blockading Matanzas Inlet, and the way appeared clear to provision the city. But simultaneously, an English deserter reported that Oglethorpe planned a night attack during the next six days of unusually high tides, for the high water was needed to cross Matanzas Bay and assault the Castillo.

Six days passed and no attack came, so Montiano sent five small vessels to Mosquito Inlet to fetch supplies. Just as the ships cleared Matanzas Inlet at 4 o'clock that afternoon, they met two British sloops that were taking soundings. The sloops opened fire and took up the chase. The fighting continued until twilight when the British sloops returned to their squadron. Their withdrawal gave the Spanish flotilla the opening they needed. They promptly entered Matanzas Inlet, sailed up the river and docked at St. Augustine that same night to the joyous relief of the inhabitants.

Fearing the approaching hurricane season, the British fleet decided to sail for safer waters. Lacking naval support and knowing that the city was now well-supplied, Oglethorpe raised the siege on July 20, 1740.

BUILDING THE TOWER

The British siege of 1740 convinced Gov. Manuel de Montiano that he needed to have more than just a wooden tower at Matanzas Inlet. Had the British been able to seize that point, they would probably have been able to starve the city into surrender. Montiano therefore ordered engineer Pedro Ruiz de Olano to build a strong, stone tower. Craftsmen came from St. Augustine and convicts and royal slaves did the heavy labor. Stone was quarried on Anastasia Island.

Construction was difficult, for long piles had to be driven deep into the mud to support the rising stonework. Repeatedly the British and their Indian allies tried to stop construction, but their efforts were in vain. By the end of 1742, work was complete. Next year the British attacked again, but heavy seas foiled their efforts. They withdrew, never to return.

TIMES CHANGE

Though British plans to acquire Matanzas by conquest always failed, they did gain all Florida by treaty in 1763. They, too, regarded Matanzas Inlet as the key to St. Augustine, and usually kept seven soldiers and two cannon there, but no attacks came. Spain had planned to capture Matanzas and advance upriver to the Castillo de San Marcos during the American Revolution, but these plans never materialized.

With the passage of time the tower began to fall into disrepair. By 1821 the interior was already in ruins, and the gun platform's east wall and its foundation had cracked. Little interest was taken in the tower after the United States took control. Blockade runners used Matanzas Inlet during the Civil War and for barely a decade the inlet was a port of entry. This activity, however, had little effect on the old tower for soon the area was abandoned. In 1924 the fort was designated a National Monument.



Pedro Menéndez de Avilés established the base camp that grew into St. Augustine after his first encounter with the French near Fort Caroline.

St. Augustine was well located. It commanded the entrance from the ocean and was surrounded by water on three sides. The only chink in its armor was Matanzas Inlet. If an enemy ship could cross the bar into the Matanzas River, it could confront the town at its southern end, or sail up the San Sebastian River and attack from the rear.



Slaughters is the English translation for Matanzas. Here on September 29 and October 12, 1565, between 200 and 300 Frenchmen, all Huguenots, were put to the sword by the Spaniards. These Frenchmen were less than half the force which had set out from Fort Caroline to attack Menéndez at St. Augustine. Their ships had been scattered and wrecked by a hurricane.

North of here about 61 kilometers (38 miles) was Fort Caroline, the first full-scale attempt at colonization by the French.

The roots of sea oats extend into the sand and prevent erosion. Individuals who cut, break, or in any way destroy the ecologically valuable sea oats are subject to fines and imprisonment.

Do not swim in the treacherous waters near the inlet or climb on the fort walls. Be wary of sharp oyster shells. Exercise caution and use common sense so that your visit will be a safe and happy one.

The marshy little island that Gov. Manuel de Montiano and Pedro Ruiz de Olano chose for the stone tower was naturally defensible and only a short cannon shot from the inlet channel. It was well-situated for defending St. Augustine's back door.

In 1569 a wooden watchtower and a thatched hut were built at Matanzas Inlet to house six soldiers who took turns scanning the horizon. If a ship were sighted, a runner or a man in a log canoe set out to warn St. Augustine. Watching and warning was the tower's task, for it lacked any armament.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The park is 22 kilometers (14 miles) south of St. Augustine and can be reached via Fla. A1A on Anastasia Island. The park is open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except December 25. Admission is free.

The park consists of 121 hectares (298 acres) on Rattlesnake Island, where the fort is located, and on Anastasia Island, where the visitor center is. Landing docks for small craft are at both locations. The fort is accessible only by boat. A ferry crosses to Rattlesnake Island daily except Tuesday. A fine bathing beach and the surrounding waters offer a wide variety of water activities.

ADMINISTRATION

Fort Matanzas National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is 1 Castillo Drive, St. Augustine, FL 32084, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

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