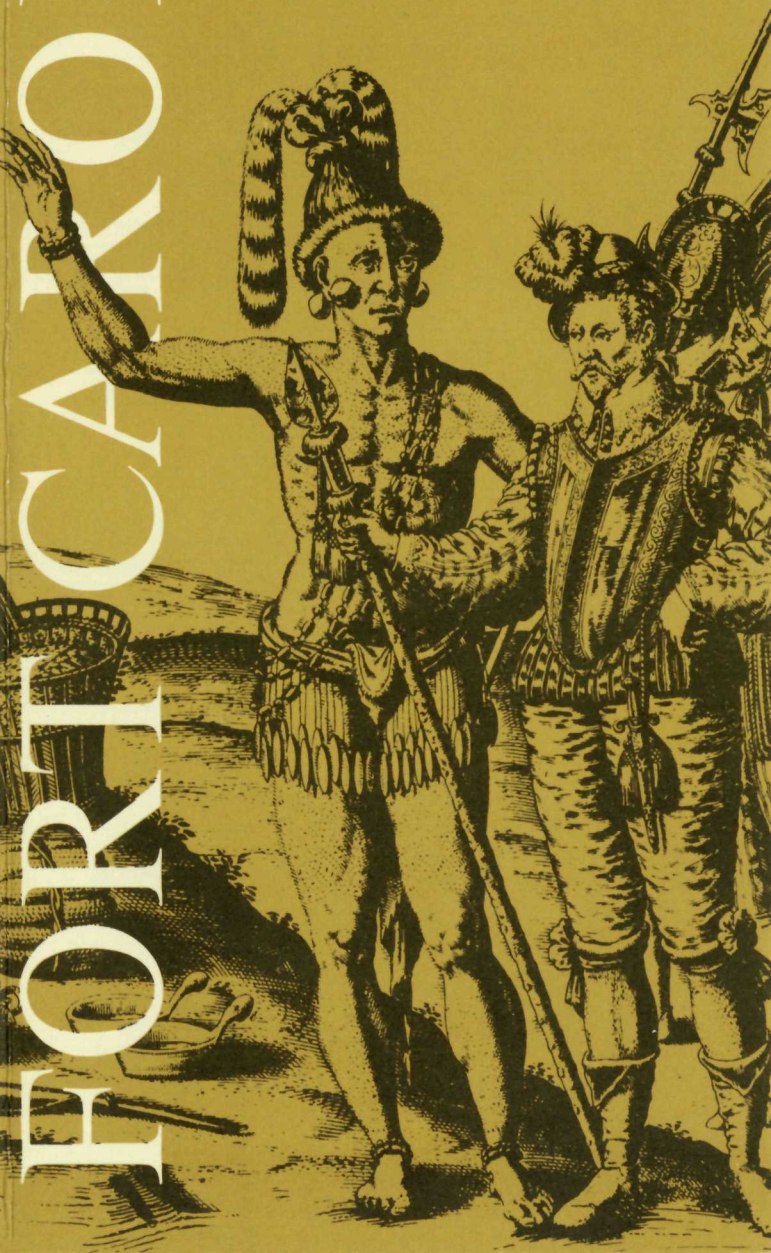


FORT CAROLINE





Pedro Menéndez de Avilés

René de Laudonnière

COMMEMORATING THE FRENCH COLONY OF 1564-65 ON THE ST. JOHNS RIVER OF FLORIDA

When Fort Caroline was founded, no other European colony existed on the North American continent this side of Mexico. By planting this colony, France hoped to acquire a share of the New World claimed by Spain. The French move forced Spain to act and brought on the first decisive conflict between Europeans for a region that later became part of the continental United States. At Fort Caroline, the battle between France and Spain for supremacy in North America was joined.

Treasure beyond man's imagination was the reward of Spanish conquistadores in the New World. Some 200 productive settlements were thriving in tropical America. But to the north, in the vast "continent" of Florida, men like Ponce de León and Hernando de Soto found death, not riches. By 1561 the Spanish King doubted the feasibility of further attempts to settle North America.

During this period, France was often in trouble, torn by religious strife and exhausted by her European wars. The Admiral of France, Gaspard de Coligny, sought to strengthen his country by uniting Catholic and Huguenot (Protestant) against the traditional Spanish enemy. French bases in Spanish America were part of his plan.

For Coligny's purpose, Canada, though already explored by Cartier and Roberval, was too far north. A 1555 settlement in Brazil had been destroyed by the Portuguese. Therefore, Coligny looked to Florida. In 1562 he sent out an expedition under the Huguenot Jean Ribault, a man of rare experience and ability. Ribault touched at the St. Johns River, then left a small garrison at present-day Port Royal Sound, S.C. Civil war in France prevented reinforcement, and after much suffering, the survivors built a crude vessel and sailed across the Atlantic for home.

When an uneasy peace again prevailed, a little fleet of 3 vessels assembled at Havre de Grace to convey some 300 people to a new land. Of this number, 110 were sailors, 120 soldiers, and the rest artisans, servants, and a few women—but no farmers. Most were Huguenots. The commander was René de Laudonnière, a skilled mariner who had been with Ribault on the 1562 voyage.

On June 25, 1564, the expedition anchored off the St. Johns River in Florida. For the site of the colony, the French chose a broad, flat knoll on the river shore about 5 miles from its mouth. With Indian help they raised a triangular fort of earth and wood which enclosed several palm-thatched buildings. Other houses were built in the meadow outside the fort, and the colony was named Fort Caroline in honor of King Charles IX.

The new settlement lay in the Timucua Indian country. Chief Saturiba presented a wedge of silver which he said came from hostile Indians farther up the St. Johns. Laudonnière sent envoys upriver; they procured a few more pounds of silver, along with stories of a great chief named Outina, whose allies wore armour of gold and silver. But Laudonnière's efforts to promote peace between Outina and Saturiba only alienated Saturiba. And the French depended heavily upon Saturiba for food.

There were other troubles. Discontent increased when Laudonnière refused to allow any large scale explorations for gold until the fort and settlement were strengthened against attack. Toward the end of the year mutineers stole a vessel and sailed southward to make their fortunes. After taking a Spanish treasure ship and plundering a Cuban hamlet, they were finally seized by the Spaniards. Now Spain had firsthand information about the Florida colony.

That winter 66 other mutineers seized the 2 barks built by the artisans of the colony and captured 3 Spanish vessels before a Spanish squadron cornered them off Jamaica. Some were hanged as pirates, but 26 escaped and made their way back to the French at Fort Caroline, where the ringleaders were shot.

During the winter and spring of 1564-65 the Indians withdrew as usual to the forests and hunted until their new crops of beans and corn ripened. Without Indian help, the French were close to famine. In desperation, Laudonnière seized Outina, planning to ransom him for corn and beans from native storehouses. The exchange was made, but as the French left Outina's village, they walked into an ambush. Most of the hard-won supplies were lost. The settlers decided to repair a vessel and go back to France.

Just then the English slave trader John Hawkins happened into the St. Johns to refill his water casks. The French traded cannon and powder for supplies and one of Hawkins' four ships. By August 15 they were ready to leave, chafing for a favorable wind.

As the mutineers had proved, the French colony was a threat to Spanish commerce. For the treasure fleets would have to sail past Fort Caroline, following the Gulf Stream seaway to the Azores and home. Further, the fort was a possible base for attack upon the Indies. The French rulers asserted that the settlement was in French territory, but to the Spaniards it was a pirates' nest on Spanish land. A Spanish armada left Cádiz for Florida in June 1565.

But another fleet was already on the high seas. Jean Ribault had left France with reinforcements—soldiers, gentlemen, and artisans with their families—for Fort Caroline. He knew of the armada being readied at Cádiz by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés. "See that you suffer him not to encroach upon you," Coligny had written, "no more than he would that you should encroach upon him."

Menéndez, the foremost admiral of Spain, had equally specific orders. King Philip charged him to explore and colonize Florida, and if there were "settlers or corsairs of other nations whatsoever not subject to Us . . . to drive them out by what means you see fit."

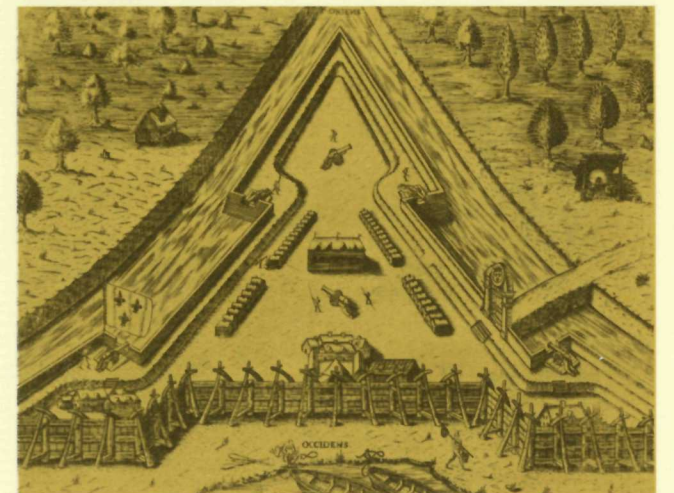
Ribault reached Fort Caroline on August 28, just as the colonists were about to sail for France. Cargoes went back into the storehouses, and there was no more talk of leaving.



The Indians tilled the land with a hoe made of fishbone and wood. After the men cleared the land, the women planted corn and beans.



The French first sided with Saturiba and then with his foe, Outina, and lost the friendship of both. Here they help Outina defeat an enemy.



Fort Caroline was never finished. When the French left, the wooden palisade on the west was torn down and used on a vessel for the voyage.

That same day, Menéndez was off the coast, searching for the Frenchmen. A few days later he found the French ships anchored at the mouth of the St. Johns. He tried to board them, but they cut their anchor cables and escaped. Menéndez dropped down the coast a few leagues, and on September 8 established the colony destined to live through the years as St. Augustine.

Against the advice of his captains and Laudonnière, Ribault decided to attack the Spanish. In the hurricane season, it was a fateful mistake. When a storm blew up, the fleet was driven ashore and wrecked many leagues south of St. Augustine.

Menéndez knew that Ribault's fleet was paralyzed by the weather. He guessed that most of the fighting men were aboard the ships. Now was the time to attack the settlement! With 500 men, guided by Indians and a French prisoner, he marched toward Fort Caroline.

About 240 people were left at the French fort. It was miserable weather, and M. de la Vigne sent his sentries to quarters. At dawn the Spaniards swept down upon the unguarded settlement. In the confusion, someone opened the fort gate, and the enemy poured in. Laudonnière rallied some men; but they were overwhelmed. He and a few others fled into the woods.

Menéndez shouted orders to spare the women and children, but the men were slaughtered. In an hour it was over; the Spaniards had killed 142 and captured about 50 women and children. It was September 20, 1565. After posting a garrison at the fort, Menéndez returned to St. Augustine.

Jacques Ribault, son of the captain, had anchored his vessel downstream, where it escaped the attack. Later he picked up a number of refugees, including Laudonnière and the artist Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, and returned to France.

What about Ribault's shipwrecked men? Perhaps 500 escaped the pounding surf and hostile Indian arrows, only to face Spanish soldiers. Helpless and hungry, 350 surrendered, of whom Menéndez killed 334. The site of the massacre still bears the name Matanzas (slaughters). Those who did not surrender were captured later and their lives spared, for they were no longer a threat.

Menéndez summarized the campaign: "Of a thousand French with an armada of twelve sail who had landed here when I reached these provinces, only two vessels have escaped, and those very miserable ones, with some forty or fifty persons in them."

Destruction of the colony caused a furor in France. But the Spanish held that the colonists were pirates—as well as heretics. And the interests of the French and Spanish royal families, were such that friendly relations had to be maintained. Revenge was a task for others.

Dominique de Gourgues, a 40-year-old Frenchman from a distinguished Catholic family, had no love for Spain.

He set sail from Bordeaux with 3 vessels and 180 men, seemingly equipped for the slave trade, but secretly determined to avenge his compatriots.

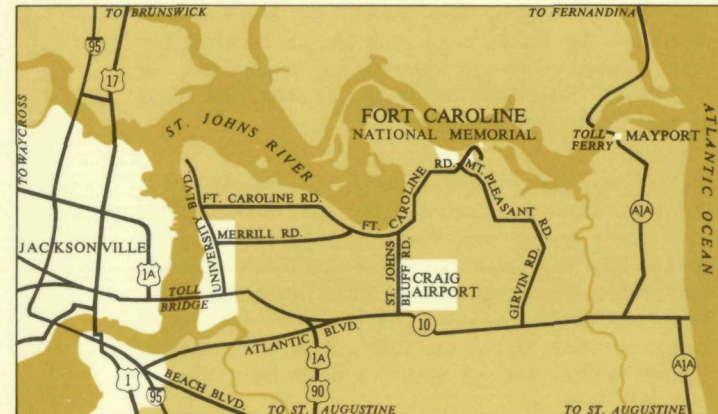
Gourgues landed north of the St. Johns and enlisted Indian allies. Two batteries near the river mouth were captured, and the forces moved on Fort Caroline, now renamed San Mateo. Its guns opened fire. The Spanish made a sortie that was quickly cut down, and the garrison fled to the forest—where the Indians were waiting. A bare handful of the Spaniards won their way through to St. Augustine. San Mateo was burned. Thus the insult to France was wiped out in blood on April 14, 1568.

THE SITE IN LATER YEARS

The site of Fort Caroline no longer exists. Its meadow-like plain and part of the bluff were washed away after 1880 when the river channel was deepened. To help you visualize the scene, the fort walls have been reconstructed upon a vestige of the river plain. The reconstruction is based upon a 16th-century sketch by Jacques Le Moyne, the colony's artist and mapmaker.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The memorial is about 10 miles east of Jacksonville and 5 miles west of Mayport. It can be reached by Fla. 10; turn off on the St. Johns Bluff Road or Girvin Road, then proceed east on Fort Caroline Road.



ADMINISTRATION

Fort Caroline National Memorial is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

A resident manager, whose address is 12713 Fort Caroline Road, Jacksonville, Fla. 32225, is in immediate charge of the memorial.

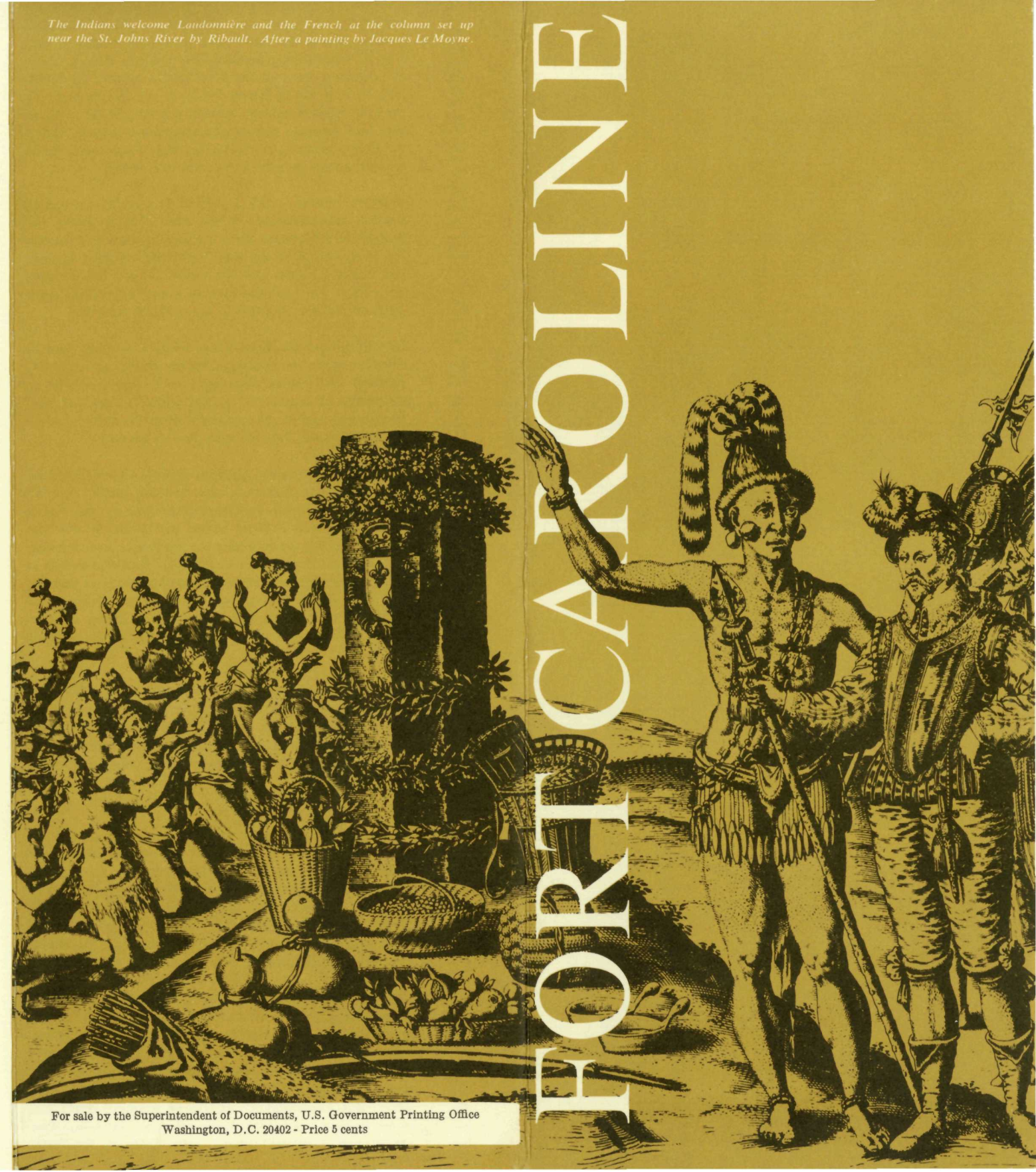
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The Indians welcome Laudonnière and the French at the column set up near the St. Johns River by Ribault. After a painting by Jacques Le Moyne.



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