

fort caroline



Fort Caroline: Site of the first confrontation between France and Spain for supremacy over a region that is now part of the United States

Treasure beyond man's imagination was the New World's promise. In the three-quarters of a century after Columbus' discovery, Spanish conquistadores, searching for wealth, founded some 200 settlements in tropical America. But in 1561 the Spanish king, Philip II, abandoned further attempts to settle the vast northern continent of "Florida." Spanish explorers like Ponce de León and Hernando de Soto had found not riches but death in the harsh, inhospitable land.

Meanwhile, in the Old World France was unwilling to concede Spanish domination over the New. But France faced grave problems. European wars and religious strife had left the country weak and divided. Gaspard de Coligny, who as admiral of France was a royal advisor, formulated a plan that would strengthen and unify his country and at the same time challenge Spain in America. A fort in Florida, manned by Huguenots (French Protestants), would provide a base from which the French could attack the Spanish West Indies and the Spanish treasure fleets in the Gulf Stream near the Florida coast.

In 1562 Coligny sent an expedition under the Huguenot Jean Ribaut, a man of experience and ability. Ribaut touched at the St. Johns River, then left a small garrison at present-day Port Royal Sound, South Carolina. Religious civil war in France prevented

reinforcements and supplies from reaching the colonists. After much suffering, the survivors built a vessel and sailed across the Atlantic for home.

When an uneasy peace again prevailed in France, three vessels assembled at Havre de Grace to convey some 300 people, mainly Huguenots, to America. Of this number 110 were sailors, 120 soldiers, and the rest artisans, servants, and a few women — but no farmers. Their commander, René de Laudonnière, was a skilled mariner who had been with Ribaut on the 1562 voyage.

On June 25, 1564, the expedition anchored in the St. Johns River in Florida. The site of the colony was a broad, flat knoll on the river bank about 8 kilometers (5 miles) from the mouth. The Indians helped them raise a triangular fort of earth and wood that enclosed several palm-thatched buildings. Other structures were built in the meadow outside the fort. The settlement was named Fort Caroline in honor of the French king, Charles IX.

The new colony lay in the country of the Timucua Indians, whose chief, Saturiba, presented a wedge of silver to the Frenchmen. He said that it came from hostile Indians farther up the St. Johns. Laudonnière sent envoys upriver, and they found a few more pounds of silver and heard stories of a great chief named Outina, whose allies

Theodore de Bry's engraving shows the French erecting Fort Caroline on the St. Johns River. The site was chosen because "gold and silver . . . were more abundant there."

The site in later years

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

Protect the park and yourself

Picnicking is permitted, but no fires or grills are allowed. The proximity of the river to the fort requires additional caution. Mosquito repellent is advised. Please do not remove any historic or natural feature from the park. Use litter containers.

About your visit

The memorial is about 16 kilometers (10 miles) east of Jacksonville, and 8 kilometers (5 miles) west of Mayport. It can be reached by Fla. 10; turn off on the St. Johns Bluff Road or Monument 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 Superintendent, whose address is 12713 Fort Caroline Road, Jacksonville, FL 32225, is in immediate charge of the memorial.

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.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

When the French entered the St. Johns they were greeted by Indians who presented gifts of corn. But continued French dependence upon Indian-grown food led to difficulties.



wore armour of gold and silver. But Laudonnière's efforts to promote peace between Outina and Saturiba alienated the latter, who denied the French sorely needed food.

There were also troubles inside the colony. Many persons became discontented when Laudonnière refused to allow them to explore for gold until the settlement was strengthened. 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 seized by the Spaniards, who now had firsthand knowledge of the French colony. While the French asserted that the settlement was in French territory, to the Spaniards it was a pirates' nest in Spanish land.

That winter another 66 mutineers, in two colony-built barks, captured three Spanish

vessels before a Spanish squadron cornered them off Jamaica. Some were hanged as pirates, but 26 escaped and made their way back to Fort Caroline, where Laudonnière ordered the ringleaders shot.

During the winter and spring of 1564-65 the Indians withdrew as usual to the forests and hunted until their new crops ripened. Without Indian help, the French were close to starvation. In desperation, Laudonnière seized Outina, planning to ransom him for native beans and corn. He was exchanged, but as the French left Outina's village, they were ambushed and lost most of the supplies. The second party of settlers decided to repair a vessel and sail for France.

The arrival of the English slave trader John Hawkins, who entered the St. Johns to refill

his water casks, gave the French an opportunity to trade cannon and powder for supplies and one of Hawkins' ships. By August 15 they were ready to leave, chafing for a favorable wind.

But a relief fleet was on the high seas. Jean Ribaut had left France with reinforcements — soldiers, gentlemen, and artisans with their families. Aware that a Spanish armada was being readied at Cádiz by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, Coligny had written to Ribaut, "See that you suffer him not to encroach upon you, 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 . . . drive them out by what means you see fit."

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

That same day, Menéndez was off the coast, searching for the French. A few days later he found the French ships anchored in the mouth of the St. Johns. When he tried to board, the French cut their anchor cables and escaped. Menéndez dropped down the coast a few leagues and on September 8 established a colony at St. Augustine.

Against the advice of his captains and Laudonnière, Ribaut made the fateful decision to attack the Spanish. But a hurricane blew up and drove the fleet south, wrecking it many leagues beyond St. Augustine.

Menéndez knew that Ribaut's fleet was paralyzed by contrary winds and guessed that most of the fighting men were with the ships. Taking 500 men, and guided by Indians and a French prisoner, he marched toward Fort Caroline.

The 240 people at the French fort were suffering in the miserable weather. At dawn on September 20, the French commander, believing danger to be far away, sent the sentries to their quarters. The Spanish swept down on the unguarded settlement. In the confusion, someone opened the fort gate, and the enemy poured in. Within an hour it was over. The Spaniards killed 140 and captured about 50 women and children. Laudonnière and a few others fled into the woods. After posting a garrison at the fort, Menéndez returned to St. Augustine.

Jacques Ribaut, son of the captain, had anchored his vessel downstream where it escaped the attack. He rescued some survivors, including Laudonnière and the artist Jacques le Moyne de Morgues, and returned to France.

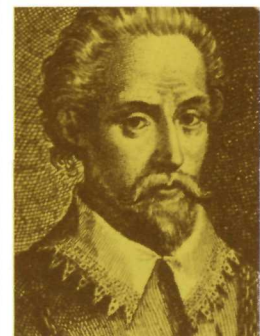
To the south 500 shipwrecked Frenchmen escaped the pounding surf and Indian arrows, only to face Spanish soldiers. Helpless and hungry, about 300 surrendered. Maintaining that the colonists were pirates as well as heretics, Menéndez massacred more than 250 of them at a place that still bears the name Matanzas (Slaughters). Many of those who did not surrender were later captured and sent to Havana as prisoners.

Menéndez, with some exaggeration, 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 both the French and Spanish royal families had a common interest in maintaining friendly relations. Revenge was left for others.

Dominique de Gourgues was a 40-year-old Frenchman from a distinguished Catholic family. But he had once been a Spanish galley slave, an experience that had given him an undying hatred of Spain. In August 1567 he set sail from Bordeaux with three vessels and 180 men to avenge his compatriots.

Landing north of the St. Johns, he enlisted Indian allies. Two batteries near the river mouth were captured, and the forces moved on Fort Caroline, now renamed San Mateo. 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 cut their way through to St. Augustine. San Mateo was burned. Thus was the insult to France wiped out in blood on April 14, 1568.



René de Laudonnière (left), leader of the ill-fated French expedition to Florida, and Pedro Menéndez de Avilés (right), the Spanish commander who captured Fort Caroline.

