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FORT CAROLINE

By T. FREDERICK DAVIS

IN 1562, Jean Ribault, seeking a location in the new world for a colony of Huguenots from France, discovered the St. Johns River.¹ He went ashore on Batten Island at the mouth of the river, where he and his party united in a prayer of thanksgiving for the safe journey across the sea. This seems to have been the first service of the Protestant faith in North America. Leaving a marker of possession at the mouth of the river, on the south side, Ribault sailed northward along the coast. Near Port Royal, South Carolina, he left a small party of men and set sail for France to bring over the colony. Upon his arrival he found civil war raging and a delay of two years was experienced in sending the colonists to America. In the meantime, the men at Port Royal abandoned the post and most of them eventually returned to France.

The expedition sailed under the command of Rene de Laudonniere, who, like Ribault, was an ardent Huguenot. Arriving at the St. Johns River in June, 1564, Laudonniere examined several locations for the colony and selected a site in a little plain formed by the westerly slope of St. Johns Bluff, on the south side of the St. Johns River six miles from its mouth. Ground was broken for the fort June 30, 1564. They named the colony Fort Caroline, in honor of Charles IX, king of France, who at that time was only fourteen years of age, the actual ruler of France being the famous Catherine de Medici.

The fort was in the shape of a triangle with the apex pointing south. Two sides were in the form of

¹ Modern place names are used in this paper.

fought Protestant and Protestant fought Roman Catholic, the Spaniard Pedro Menendez organized an expedition under a charter from the king of Spain, the purpose of which was to drive the Huguenots from Florida. It is a peculiar relation of events that Menendez came in sight of the Florida coast on the same day that Ribault appeared off the mouth of the St. Johns River with the relief expedition, and the same day, too, that Laudonniere was hoisting sail for the abandonment of Fort Caroline, August 28, 1565.

Menendez sailed along the coast seeking the French colony and at Anastasia Island he learned of its location from the Indians. With five ships he sailed up the coast to reconnoiter and discovered four French ships anchored off St. Johns bar. It was night and he anchored near them. The French, suspecting trouble, cut the cables and sailed for the open sea, with Menendez in pursuit. They outsailed the Spaniards and Menendez returned to Anastasia Island, unloaded his supplies and made preparations for fortifying the place. This was the beginning of St. Augustine. The French vessels returned to their former anchorage off St. Johns bar.

Ribault and Menendez at once made their plans to attack each other. Ribault's plan was to attack the Spaniards by sea. Every able-bodied fighting man was ordered aboard and the fleet sailed southward. Off St. Augustine they discovered the Spaniards and prepared to attack, but following a lull the wind freshened to a gale and Ribault's vessels were driven down the coast.

Menendez marched toward Fort Caroline and with 400 men arrived back of St. Johns Bluff about sundown on September 19th, where he camped at the pond shown at the right in the illustration and which is still there. The weather was stormy and it rained

in torrents. The Spaniards were drenched and their powder was wet and useless. At a council of officers they debated the question of attacking Fort Caroline. Menendez alone favored attack, the others suggesting an abandonment of the entire enterprise. By argument and persuasion, Menendez finally convinced them, and before dawn of September 20, 1565, the columns moved forward to the high ground overlooking the fort.

Fort Caroline was sleeping. On account of the stormy weather, the sentries had been withdrawn and the usual precautions suspended. Laudonniere, who had been sick, did not go with the fleet. The others at the fort were principally old men, men unskilled in arms, and women and children, about 240 in all.³

The Spaniards had no trouble in entering the fort, when an indiscriminate slaughter commenced. As soon as Menendez reached the fort he directed in a loud voice that no woman, nor boy under fifteen years of age, should be killed, by which 70 were saved. Laudonniere and others escaped over the walls; after terrible hardships in the marshes, they reached the mouth of the river, boarded two small French vessels and sailed for France, where they arrived in time. Several escaped to the Indians and were protected by them. In round numbers, 140 people, including two Englishmen, who had been left at the fort by Hawkins, were slain at Fort Caroline by the Spaniards, who did not lose a man. Menendez left a garrison at Fort Caroline, which he renamed San Mateo, and returned to St. Augustine.

Ribault's fleet was wrecked along the coast below St. Augustine. Nearly all of the Frenchmen reached the shore in safety, where they seem to have col-

³ For Laudonniere's and other French accounts see Hakluyt's translations.

lected in separate parties and attempted to march back to Fort Caroline, which they did not know had been captured. The Indians soon carried news to Menendez that a party of Frenchmen was at Matanzas Inlet and he went there to meet them. There were 208 in this party. Menendez spared eight of them and put the rest to the knife, though one of the latter revived and returned to his comrades down the coast. Several days later reports reached Menendez that another party of Frenchmen was at the same place. Ribault was with them. The former procedure was repeated here—some 150 surrendered and all were killed except sixteen. The sands of Matanzas were now soaked with the life-blood of 333 Huguenots, including Ribault and some of his principal officers.

Some time afterward Menendez got word that another party of Frenchmen was building a fort farther down the coast. Sending down three boats to cooperate, he marched with 300 men to find it. Upon his approach all the Frenchmen fled to the woods. He sent them word to surrender and they would be kindly treated, whereupon 150 came in and 20 refused, saying they would rather be eaten by the Indians than surrender to the Spaniards. The account now becomes so confused that it is impossible to tell what happened. Menendez did not return directly to St. Augustine, but boarded a boat and sailed for Havana for supplies, carrying 20 Frenchmen along. No mention is made of the destiny of the others; they, too, may have been killed or possibly taken to St. Augustine as servants or slaves.

Assuming that the figures are fairly correct, having been recorded by Meras, ⁴ brother-in-law of Men-

⁴ For a translation of the Meras memorial see *Pedro Menendez de Aviles*, by Jeannette Thurber Connor, Florida State Historical Society, 1923.

endez and an eye-witness to several of these events, and allowing say 30 to cover those unaccounted for, the Huguenot colony at Fort Caroline, including Ribault's reinforcement, numbered about 800, of which Menendez killed 471, at least.

Thus Spain retained her title to Florida ; but there came an echo. A fiery Frenchman named Gourgues organized a private expedition in France to wreak vengeance upon the Spaniards in Florida. With three ships and a small force he arrived at Easter time in 1568, captured and demolished the Spanish posts on the St. Johns, and with the aid of the Indians, killed or hanged every Spaniard that fell into his hands. This was the most spectacular affair in Florida's early history. Religion played no part in it, for Gourgues himself was a Roman Catholic.

About a month after Menendez captured Fort Caroline, he wrote his king that he still held the women and boys saved at that place. He also indicated that among the boys was one born at Fort Caroline.⁵ Here we have a record of the first white child of Protestant parentage born in North America-more than 20 years before the birth of Virginia Dare. The first Protestant white women in North America landed at Fort Caroline and there the first armed clash between white races in this country occurred.

The little vale in which Fort Caroline was situated has been largely washed away by the currents of the river, almost entirely during the lifetime of people now living. Prior to the 1880's there was practically no erosion at that point, but with the erection of the jetties at the mouth of the river strong river currents developed, which were deflected directly

⁵ Menendez to the King, Oct. 15, 1565: Averette translation in *The Unwritten History of Old St. Augustine*.

against the west slope of St. Johns Bluff. These ate the plain away until the government ripped the shore-line with stone to prevent further damage.

St. Johns Bluff today has an average elevation of more than 70 feet above tide-water. Its face is toward the mouth of the river and is very steep. There has been no erosion on that side. From this elevation one sees across the river the same general view that Laudonniere described when he said from here "a man may behold the meadows [marshes] divided asunder into isles and islets, interlacing one another-a place so pleasant that those who are melancholic would be enforced to change their humour."

Regarding the situation of Fort Caroline, contemporaneous French and Spanish records are in remarkable agreement. After a long personal study of the locality with these accounts in hand, together with the judgment of topographical engineers as to the original lay of the land, my conclusions are shown in the accompanying painting, which is believed to be an approximately correct interpretation of Fort Caroline and environs. My appreciation is due Kenneth Friedman, artist, for the fine art work.