

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 50
Number 3 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol 50,*
Number 3

Article 7

1971

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Recommended Citation

Milanich, Jerald T. (1971) "Tacatacuru and the San Pedro de Mocamo Mission," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 50: No. 3, Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol50/iss3/7>

TACATACURU AND THE SAN PEDRO DE MOCAMO MISSION

by JERALD T. MILANICH*

DR. WILLIAM R. BULLARD of the Florida State Museum and this author made an archeological survey of Cumberland Island, Georgia, in June 1970, primarily to locate prehistoric Indian village sites.¹ An extensive shell midden area displaying Spanish and historic Indian ceramics was found, and a preliminary surface collection was made. In the next several weeks more samples of surface material were secured, and from these artifacts and from physical characteristics of the site, information regarding the historic and proto-historic aboriginal occupations of the island can be derived. It seems likely that this was the site of the Timucuan village of Tacatacuru, and if so, then it was also the location of the Spanish mission of San Pedro de Mocamo.

Cumberland is the largest and the southernmost of the Georgia sea islands located immediately north of Fernandina and Amelia Island. The presumed Tacatacuru site² is on the inland waterway side of the island bordering tidal marshes and Cumberland Sound. The center of the site is 3.6 miles from the northwest tip of Amelia Island. The shell midden runs almost a mile along the island's edge, with its south end on the old Thomas Carnegie family estate of Dungeness.³

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1. Dr. William R. Bullard, associate curator in anthropology, Florida State Museum, Gainesville, accompanied the author on this expedition.
2. Identification of the site of Tacatacuru is not absolute, though extremely likely.
3. Thomas Carnegie was the brother of Andrew Carnegie of Pittsburg. Dungeness was built after 1882 when Thomas Carnegie purchased much of the island. The estate's name was not new; around 1740 General James Oglethorpe built a hunting lodge with that name on Cumberland. Between 1786 and 1790 the wife and other heirs of General Nathaniel Greene, commander of the American Revolutionary Army in the Southern Department, began to build a large estate, also named Dungeness. Orange and olive groves stood there once, and plantations of rice, indigo, and cotton, but at the outbreak of the Civil War the sea

Erosion of the site by the tidal action of the sound has exposed numerous small, shell middens scattered along the four-to five-foot high sound bank. From the relative amounts of potsherds lying on the eroded bank and on the sound's bottom, it is apparent that the major occupied portion of the site was the northernmost 300 yards, just north of the Dungeness wharf. The erosion along this sector has exposed in profile in the bank a line of nine or ten individual shell piles, each twenty to thirty feet in diameter and appearing from the surface to have been circular. These piles, thought to be adjacent to individual house sites, are evenly spaced about every 100 feet along the bank. Back roughly 100 feet from the bank is another line of four individual piles, discernible from the surface as low humps. Undergrowth makes it difficult to locate more piles in this second line, but the observed piles, all circular, are parallel to the first line. All the piles seem to be of uniform thickness, 0.6 to 0.8 foot, and together suggest a village laid out on an elongated, rectangular grid plan.

Ethnohistorical information regarding the Tacatacuru village and mission is scarce, but it does identify the village inhabitants as Timucuan speakers and gives hints as to the village location. At the time of first contact in Florida, aboriginal Timucuan speakers were distributed in a wide northeasterly line from Tampa Bay to Cumberland Island.⁴ Several dialects of the Timucuan language were spoken in this area.⁵ Although the dialects seem to have been mutually intelligible, the cultures of the various tribes differed greatly. Each tribe maintained separate political systems and did not recognize themselves as subtribes of the large Timucuan group.

The Timucuan speakers on Cumberland Island were the Tacatacuru tribe.⁶ As was often the case among the Indians of the southeastern United States, the main village took the same

islands were abandoned. Later affluent Northerners began competing with each other in the acquisition of the islands, and this is when Thomas Carnegie bought nearly all of Cumberland. For a brief history of the islands during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see Burnette Vanstory, *Georgia's Land of the Golden Isles* (Athens, 1956), 163-72.

4. Adelaide K. Bullen, "Florida Indians of Past and Present," *Florida from Indian Trails to Space Age*, 3 vols. (Delray Beach, 1965), I, 317-50.
5. A. S. Gatschet, "The Timucuan Language," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, XVIII (Philadelphia, 1880), 479.
6. John R. Swanton, *The Indian Tribes of North America* (Washington, 1952), 144.

name as the tribe. The Tacatacuru dialect was a separate Timucuan dialect, further confirming the separate tribal status.⁷ That a Timucuan dialect was spoken on the island is confirmed by accounts of a trip to the island by the Spanish governor Pedro de Ibarra in 1604. He is reported to have been able to use the same Indian interpreter in his travels from St. Augustine north to Cumberland Island, the languages in that area being so similar. Once passing north of the island a new interpreter had to be employed.⁸

Spanish occupation of the island began in 1569 with the establishment of a Spanish garrison or presidio.⁹ Previously, European contact was limited to infrequent and temporary visits. It is known that in 1562 the Frenchman Jean Ribault landed on the island.¹⁰ Throughout 1564-1565, the period when the French attempted to establish themselves on the St. Johns River, the French and Tacatacuru were allies.¹¹ After Pedro Menéndez captured Fort Caroline and set up a garrison at St. Augustine, the Spanish sought to Christianize the Indians. Jesuit missionaries were sent to Florida for this purpose, but they were not very successful. When a party of Jesuits led by Father Pedro Martinez tried to land on Cumberland Island on September 28, 1566, they were repulsed, and Martinez and three of his companions were slain by the Tacatacuru.¹² The chief of the Tacatacuru was ordered executed as punishment for the murder of Father Martinez and the three members of his party and eleven Spanish soldiers killed on the island.¹³

The garrison on Cumberland Island was established to prevent further incidents by the Tacatacuru and to protect communication and supply lines from St. Augustine to the Spanish settlements to the north. Supply ships from Spain did not arrive and the garrison could not be supported. Adequate clothing and arms

7. Gatschet, "The Timucuan Language," 479.

8. John R. Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians and Their Neighbors* (Washington, 1922), 14.

9. Woodbury Lowery, *The Spanish Settlements within the Present Limits of the United States, 1562-1574* (New York, 1905), 289.

10. Swanton, *The Indian Tribes of North America*, 144.

11. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "Florida" referred to nearly all of the southeastern United States and portions of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas.

12. Lowery, *The Spanish Settlements within the Present Limits of the United States, 1562-1574*, 271-74.

13. *Ibid.*, 289-90.

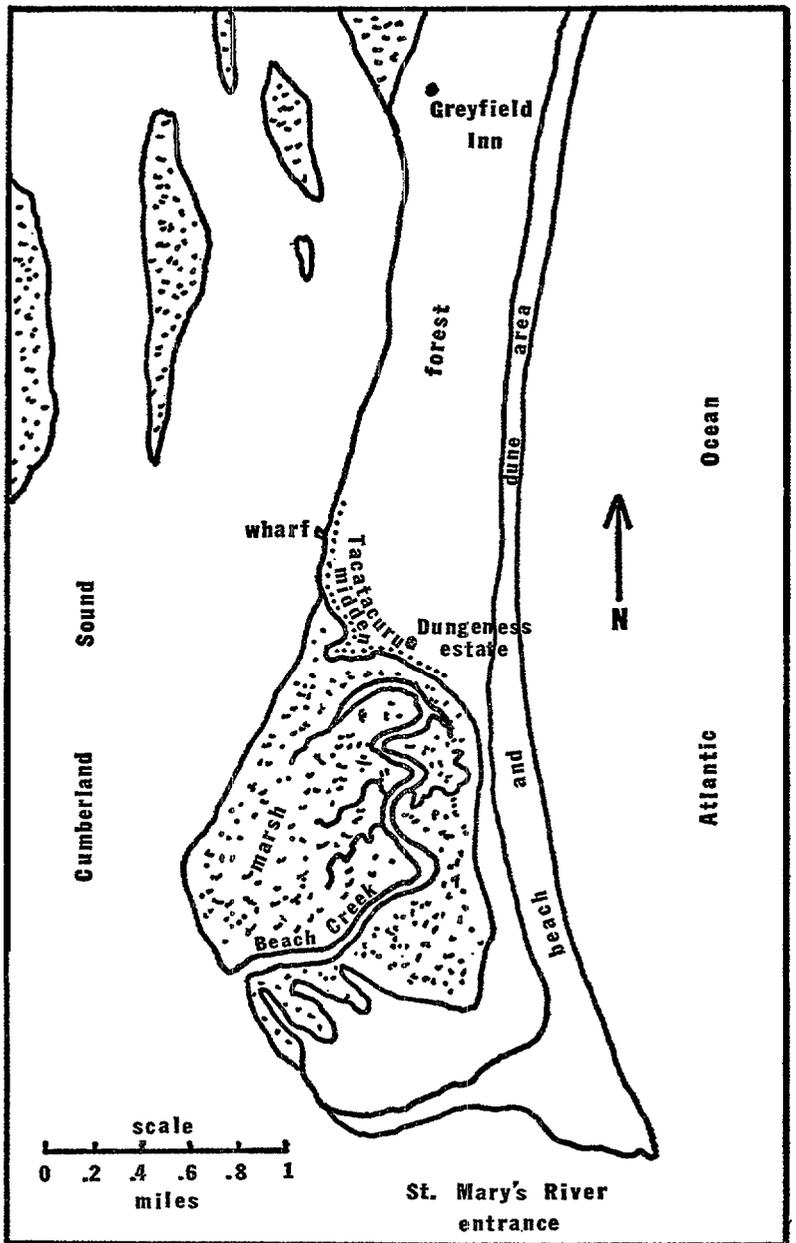


Fig. 1. South end of timberland Island.

for the soldiers were not available, and the buildings fell into disrepair. In 1570, Pedro Martinez Aviles ordered a reduction in troop strength at the garrison.¹⁴ Spanish colonists never settled on the island, and for the next seventeen years there seems to have been little Spanish-Tacatacuru contact.

After the departure of the Jesuits in 1572, the Franciscan order received permission to missionize Florida. In 1587 a Franciscan priest, Father Baltasar Lopez, arrived on Cumberland Island to admister to the Tacatacuru and to establish the San Pedro de Mocamo mission.¹⁶ The island still commanded a decisive military position, and it was necessary to have the Indians as allies. Father Lopez remained on the island constantly until 1603 except for a visit to New Spain in 1599, and a journey to St. Augustine in 1601.¹⁶ By 1596 Lopez had been joined by Fathers Pedro Fernandez de Chozas and Francisco Pareja.¹⁷ It is believed that Pareja wrote his dictionary of the Timucuan language while on Cumberland Island.¹⁸ He left San Pedro, and in 1602 he was stationed at the San Juan del Puerto mission on Fort George Island near present-day Jacksonville.¹⁹

The mission was attacked by canoe during the Guale rebellion of 1592.²⁰ The Tacatacuru chief, a Christian convert,

14. *Ibid.*, 356-57.

15. Maynard J. Geiger, *Biographical Dictionary of the Franciscans in Spanish Florida and Cuba, 1528-1814* (Patterson, 1940), 68. Mocamo is a Timucuan word meaning "on the sea." The province of Guale to the north of Cumberland Island was also known as the "Provincia de Guale y Mocama." Probably the name was used to refer to the mission after the Yamasee Indians from Guale moved southward onto Cumberland Island. It first appears on a 1655 mission list. Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 90.

16. Geiger, *Biographical Dictionary of the Franciscans in Spanish Florida and Cuba, 1528-1814*, 125.

17. Maynard J. Geiger, *The Franciscan Conquest of Florida, 1573-1814* (Washington, 1937), 87-88.

18. A. S. Gatschet, "The Timucuan Language," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, XVI, XVII, XVIII (Philadelphia, 1887, 1888, 1890).

19. Geiger, *Biographical Dictionary of the Franciscans in Spanish Florida and Cuba, 1528-1814*, 121.

20. In September 1597 the Guale Indians located along the central and northern coast of Georgia rebelled against the Spanish priests. This dispute first arose over Spanish interference with the Guale's marriage and inheritance customs. After slaying their own priest, Father Pedro de Corpa, the Guale united with several other Georgia coastal tribes. Four more priests were killed and one held captive before the attack on San Pedro. Finally in October of the same year, Spanish forces advanced north of Cumberland Island into the rebellious area. It was not until July 1598, however, that the rebellion ended and the captive

warned the priests who were able to repel the invaders. For his efforts the chief, Don Juan, received a letter of commendation from the Spanish king, 200 ducats, and a daily ration of food equal to that received by the regular Spanish soldiers.²¹ After the attack the island was abandoned for a time, and the priests withdrew to St. Augustine; the Indians, led by Don Juan, moved to the San Juan del Puerto mission.²² By February 1598, the priests had returned to the island.²³ In 1603 Governor Goncalco Mendez de Canço journeyed up from St. Augustine, and was appalled at the dilapidated condition of the mission structure. Masons, carpenters, and supplies were brought from Florida, and the church was rebuilt and rededicated. Present at the dedication on March 10, 1603 were Governor de Canço, Father Lopez, and Doña Ana, niece of Don Juan and new chieftainess of the island.²⁴ By 1604 Doña Ana had been replaced by Doña Melendez who greeted the new Florida governor, Pedro de Ybarra, on his arrival.²⁵

Father Juan Bautista Capilla was sent to the island in 1605 and remained there two years.²⁶ Another priest, Pedro Ruiz, who had arrived in 1604, used the mission as a home base for missionizing excursions into the interior of Georgia.²⁷ The exact date of the mission's end is not known. In 1655 the name appears on a list of Florida missions.²⁸ Sometime between 1655 and 1675 the Tacatacuru population withdrew from the island, pushed southward or west by a mixture of Guale and Yamassee Indians, who were in turn being forced south by the English and the slave trade.²⁹ A letter from Governor Pablo de Hita

priest freed. A detailed account of the rebellion and the attack on Cumberland Island is found in Geiger, *The Franciscan Conquest of Florida, 1573-1814*, 71-115.

21. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

22. *Ibid.*; 104-05.

23. *Ibid.*, 160-63. Archaeological materials from San Juan del Puerto now undergoing analysis at the University of Florida may confirm the migration of the Tacatacuru to San Juan.

24. *Ibid.*, 173.

25. Geiger, *Biographical Dictionary of the Franciscans in Spanish Florida and Cuba, 1528-1814*, 38.

26. *Ibid.*, 100-01; Geiger, *The Franciscan Conquest of Florida, 1573-1814*, 173.

27. Geiger, *Biographical Dictionary of the Franciscans in Spanish Florida and Cuba, 1528-1814*, 125.

28. Swanton, *The Indian Tribes of North America*, 144.

29. Geiger, *Biographical Dictionary of the Franciscans in Spanish Florida and Cuba, 1528-1814*, 129.

Salazar to the Spanish king, March 8, 1680, mentions two Yamassee settlements, with a total population of 100 persons, on Cumberland Island.³⁰ The mission's name does not occur on Calderon's 1675 list of missions, though a new mission, San Felipe, is cited as being on the island.³¹ The last documented account of the mission is a reference that in 1690 two priests, Francisco de Rojas and Leon de Lara, were sent to the island.³² At this time Spain's hold on East Florida was weakening and within fifteen years the entire Florida mission system had collapsed.

From the accounts of the Guale invasion of the island it is apparent that the mission was south of the north end of the island, but just how far south is not indicated. One account places the mission one league north of two mission stations thought to have been on Amelia Island.³³ This description would place the mission at its presumed location. Another suggested location two leagues north of the mouth of the St. Marys River would place the mission somewhat farther north.³⁴

Because of the lack of large deposits of historic Indian and Spanish materials elsewhere on the island, it seems permissible to locate Tacatacuru near the Dungeness wharf where such materials exist in great quantity. The water depth at this point is thirty feet, a sufficient depth for the Spanish brigantines to dock.³⁵

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30. Lucy L. Wenhold, transl., "A 17th Century Letter of Gabriel Diaz Vara Calderon, Bishop of Cuba, Describing the Indians of Indian Missions of Florida," in *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, XCV, No. 16 (Washington, 1936), 10. It seems probable that with the intrusion of the Yamassee the San Pedro mission was renamed San Felipe. In a 1680 list the new mission was listed as San Felipe de Athuluteca, while in 1643 the old mission had been listed as San Pedro Athuluteca. See Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 322. Surface collections from the island suggest that the Tacatacuru village and a later Yamassee occupation were in the same immediate area, ceramics from the two cultures being found together. The documentary and archaeological information both suggest that the San Pedro mission was rededicated as San Felipe with the name "Athuluteca" being used at times for both missions. Excavations would be useful in determining if both churches were one and the same.
31. Geiger, *Biographical Dictionary of the Franciscans in Spanish Florida and Cuba, 1528-1814*, 65, 98.
32. *Ibid.*, 121.
33. John R. Swanton, *Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Washington, 1946), 187.
34. United States Coast and Geodetic Survey *Map 841-SC, St. Simons Sound to Tolamato River* (Washington, August 1969).
35. John M. Goggin, *Space and Time Perspective in Northern St. Johns Archeology, Florida* (New Haven, 1952), 61, 80.

Large ships were needed to transport supplies and troops on and off the island. A study of the modern navigation maps of the inland waterway shows that the wharf area is the only practical place to bring in sizable cargo vessels. Only one other place, Brickhill Bluff near the north end of the island, has a harbor that would have been deep enough for the brigantines. To reach the bluff, however, ships traveling from St. Augustine would have to sail the length of the island, then enter the Brickhill River and sail southward to the harbor. Such a trip seems impractical, especially in view of the island's importance to St. Augustine.

The ethnohistorical documentation of the replacement of the indigenous Timucua by the Yamassee proves to be highly significant when the pottery types collected at the site are examined. It would be expected that Timucua occupation of the site would be represented by St. Johns pottery and the historic Yamassee occupation by San Marcos pottery, two very distinct ceramic series. St. Johns pottery has elsewhere been correlated with the Timucuan speakers of the Florida east coast. Two distinct ceramic series are indeed present at the presumed Tacatacuru site. However, it is a clay or sherd-tempered ware rather than St. Johns pottery that occurs with the later Yamassee San Marcos pottery.

This suggests that the Tacatacuru made a sherd-tempered type of pottery quite different from the Timucuan-speaking tribes immediately to the south in Florida. Such a situation does not seem unlikely when the separate tribal status of the Tacatacuru is considered. Another cultural difference between the Tacatacuru and the St. Johns area Timucua is the pattern of depositing midden refuse. In the St. Johns culture, middens are large areas of consolidated mounds such as those observed by Andrew E. Douglass, an archeologist who visited the area in the 1880s.³⁶ The Tacatacuru middens, however, are separate, small piles. This latter pattern was also observed at prehistoric sites on Cumberland Island, while the St. Johns pattern can be traced back nearly 2,000 years on the Florida east coast.

The historic Tacatacuru probably developed culturally out of a long line of sherd-tempered pottery makers, most likely the

36. Andrew E. Douglass, "Some Characteristics of the Indian Earth and Shell Mounds of the Atlantic Coast of Florida," *American Antiquarian*, VII (March 1885), 74-82.

Wilmington-Savannah Tradition found after A.D. 700 on the Georgia coast.³⁷ Clay or sherd-tempering and the Tacatacuru midden deposition pattern must be traits which continue on the Georgia coast into the prehistoric period. Excavated data from southeastern Georgia is needed to further identify the prehistoric cultural predecessors of the Tacatacuru.

It is known that the Tacatacuru were Timucuan speakers who were probably descendants of the Wilmington culture. The Potano Indians of north-central Florida are also postulated to have developed out of the Wilmington culture, and it is known that they also spoke a Timucuan dialect.³⁸ Together, the Potano and Tacatacuru cases strongly suggest that the prehistoric Wilmington peoples spoke a Timucuan language. If this is true, a proto-Timucuan language must have been spread over a great part of the Florida and Georgia coasts as early as A.D. 700.

On the basis of ethnohistorical documentation and archeological survey, the San Pedro de Mocamo mission and the Timucuan village of Tacatacuru are thought to have been located on the inland side of the south end of Cumberland Island, Georgia. Ceramic collections suggest that the later mission of San Felipe de Athlulteca, associated with Yamassee Indians, also was located there. The Tacatacuru inhabitants of the island did not have a culture like that of the Timucuan speakers of the Florida east coast. They differed in pottery manufacture and settlement pattern, the latter indicated by midden deposition. It is likely that the Tacatacuru evolved out of local southeastern prehistoric cultures, most probably the Wilmington and Savannah. This implies that the prehistoric coastal cultures of Florida and Georgia both spoke a related Timucuan language. At the time of the San Pedro mission, there was a Timucuan-speaking population on Cumberland Island who retained some of their Wilmington-derived culture traits.

37. Joseph R. Caldwell, "The Archeology of Eastern Georgia and South Carolina," *Archeology of Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor, 1952), 312-21. In his paper, "Chronology of the Georgia Coast," presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Archeological Society in Columbia, South Carolina, on October 31, 1970, Caldwell presented new radiocarbon dates for the Wilmington and Savannah cultures on the Georgia coast, dating Wilmington after circa 700 A.D.

38. Jerald T. Milanich, "A Definition of the Alachua Archeological Tradition" (M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1968), *passim*.