Early European Conflicts in Florida

Pedro Menéndez de Avilés
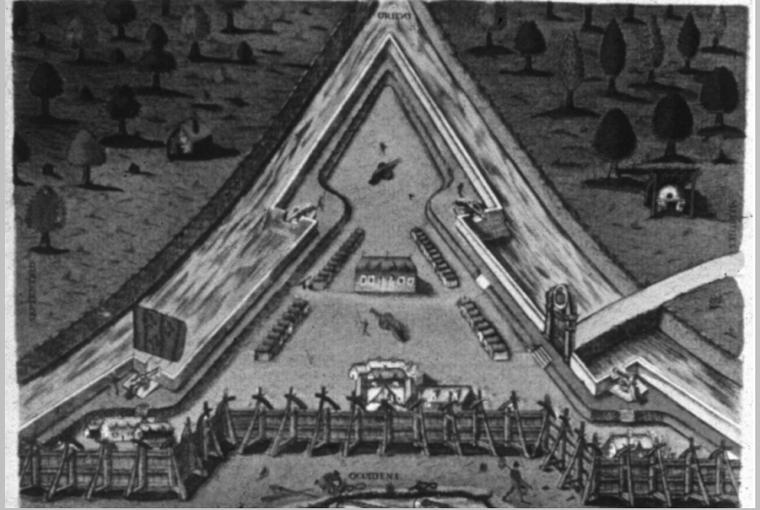
Fort Caroline

The Massacre of the French and the Spanish claims

Throughout the history of American colonization, encounters between the various European nations sometimes proved profitable, but often planted the seeds of conflict. Tensions from the old world filtered into the new with these foreign settlers in America. The first enounter between two different European nations in the new world were between the French and Spanish over the control of the land the Spanish named *La Florida*. The European history of Fort Matanzas National Monument begins with an incident almost 200 years before the construction of the fort at Matanzas. The Spanish massacre of French forces in 1565. It took place near or possibly within the area which now makes up the monument. The incident initiated Spanish control of Florida for 235 years and led to the naming of the Matanzas River.

Mission Underway

When King Philip II of Spain learned that the Frenchman Rene de Laudonniére had established Fort Caroline in Florida (*1 on map*), he was irritated. The colony sat on land claimed by the Spanish crown. Spanish treasure fleets sailed along the Florida coast on their way to Spain and Fort Caroline provided a perfect base for French attacks. Worst of all to the devoutly Catholic Philip, the settlers were Huguenots (French Protestants). Despite Philip's protests, Jean Ribault sailed from France in May 1565 with more than 600 soldiers and settlers to resupply Fort Caroline.

General Pedro Menéndez de Aviles, charged with removing the French, also sailed in May, arriving at the Saint Johns River in August, shortly after Ribault (*2 on map*). After a brief sea chase, the Spanish retired south to a site they had earlier surveyed, a Timucuan village called Seloy. The Spanish came ashore on September 8th and established and named their new village "St. Augustine" (*3 on map*) because land had first been sighted on the Feast Day of St. Augustine, August 28th.

Kings Orders

Before leaving Spain, Pedro Menendez signed an agreement discussed between himself and the council of King Philip II on March 15, 1565. He was awarded the title as Captain General in this expedition to Florida. Menendez was responsible for some 800 people, including sailors, soldiers, and civilians, and the many items necessary for

colonization and provisions of war. In addition with being charged with establishing a military colony in Florida, Menendez's orders (or Asiento) stated *"If there on the said coast or land some corsair settlers or any other nations not subject to His Majesty, arrange to throw them out by the best means possible, which seems best to him."*

French Resistance

Jean Ribault sailed on September 10th to attack and wipe out the Spanish at St. Augustine, but a hurricane carried his ships far to the south, wrecking them on the Florida coast between present-day Daytona Beach and Cape Canaveral (4 on map).

At the same time, Menéndez led a force to attack Fort Caroline. Since most of the soldiers were absent, Menéndez was easily able to capture the French settlement, killing 132 of the men in battle. Forty-five of the inhabitants, including Laudonniére and the artist Jacques LeMoyne, were able to escape to ships and return to France. Over fifty of the women and children were found taking shelter. Menendez spared them and sent them by ship to Havana. He later learned from Timucuan Indians that a group of white men were on the beach a few miles south of St. Augustine. He marched with seventy soldiers to where an inlet had blocked 127 of the shipwrecked Frenchmen trying to get back to Fort Caroline (5 on map).

Misfortunes of of the French

With a captured Frenchman as translator, Menéndez described how Fort Caroline had been captured and urged the French to surrender. Rumors to the contrary, he made no promises as to sparing them. Father Lopez's writings say *"that he [Menendez] would make no promises, that they must surrender unconditionally, and lay down their arms, because, if he spared their lives, he wanted them to be grateful for it, and, if they were put to death that there should be no cause for complaint."* Having lost most of their food and weapons in the shipwreck, they did surrender. Father Lopez also reported *"Finding they were all Calvinists, the Captain General ordered them all put to death; but, as I was a priest, and had bowels of mercy, I begged him to grant me the favor of sparing those whom we might find to be Christians. He granted it; and I made investigations, and found ten or twelve of the men Roman Catholics, whom we brought back."* 111 Frenchmen were killed. Only sixteen were spared. A few who professed being Catholic, some impressed Breton sailors, and four artisans needed at St. Augustine.

Two weeks later more French survivors appeared at the inlet, including Jean Ribault. On October 12th Ribault and his men surrendered and met the same fate. This time 134 were killed. From that time on, the inlet was called Matanzas meaning "slaughters" in Spanish.

Why did this happen?

Was this a cruel, cold-hearted act by the Spanish? Was Pedro Menéndez blindly following orders to rid Florida of the interlopers? Was it a religious conflict? What would the French have done to the Spanish if the hurricane had not wrecked their ships? Maybe there is even more involved. With food already low and no chance for resupply until spring, would there have been food and shelter for all if the French had been brought back to the new village of St. Augustine?

Perhaps, as leader of his people, Menéndez knew that survival of the French in October might have meant the starvation of everyone by May.

Sources: Lyons, Eugene. *The Enterprise of Florida*. The University Presses of Florida, Gainsville, 1976
Original Source: "The Founding of St. Augustine." Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales 16th Century. In *Old South Leaflets* Volume IV. Boston: Directors of the Old South work. Old South Meeting House.