

# THE IMPACT OF A TROPICAL STORM ON FLORIDA'S CULTURAL ORIGIN

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The struggle between France and Spain, April 1562 to October 1565, determined Florida's early colonization. In the opinion of the writers, the outcome was strongly influenced by tropical storms assailing Florida's eastern coast in August and September 1565. These storms severely hampered Pedro Menendez de Aviles' land campaign. However, the cost to the French was greater. Storms destroyed most of Jean Ribault's Florida fleet.

## The Events

From the late 1500s until the middle 1600s, Spain explored and colonized the Gulf of Mexico coastline and the Caribbean islands. Ponce de Leon had arrived and named Florida in 1513 (Father Jerome 1964, 10). On 16 February 1562, Huguenot Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France, sent an expedition to Florida under Ribault's command. His 150 men and five ships landed on 30 April on the eastern shore of Florida, near present-day St. Augustine (Lowery 1959, 30). Continuing northward to the mouth of what is now the St. John's River, they planted a French marker and named it The River of May.

Ribault sailed farther northward to South Carolina and established a small colony on 11 June. He left a contingent of men, supplies, and ammunition there and returned to France, arriving on 20 July 1562. However, the colony suffered from Indian attacks and hunger. After a revolt in which their leader was killed, the colonists left. The second French expedition, three ships and a crew of 300, organized by Coligny, left France on 22 April 1564, under the command of Rene de Laudonniere, a self-proclaimed geographer-historian (Bennett 1964, 17-18). In addition, an artist named Le Moyne served as official cartographer. Florida landfall occurred on 22 June. Two days later Laudonniere landed at the mouth of The River of May and was warmly received by Timuquana chief Saturiba. Laudonniere selected an elevated meadowland site a few miles upstream and named it Fort Caroline (Figures 1 and 2). Loudonniere's failure to support Saturiba in an intertribal conflict, however, resulted in the chief's retaliation by withholding

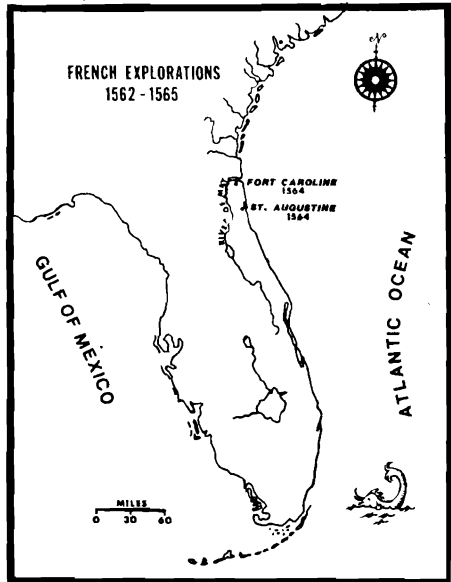


Fig. 1.

food. As conditions at Fort Caroline worsened, many deserted only to be captured by the Spanish.

The morale of the remaining colonists was temporarily bolstered when three English ships arrived under the command of John Hawkins who offered to

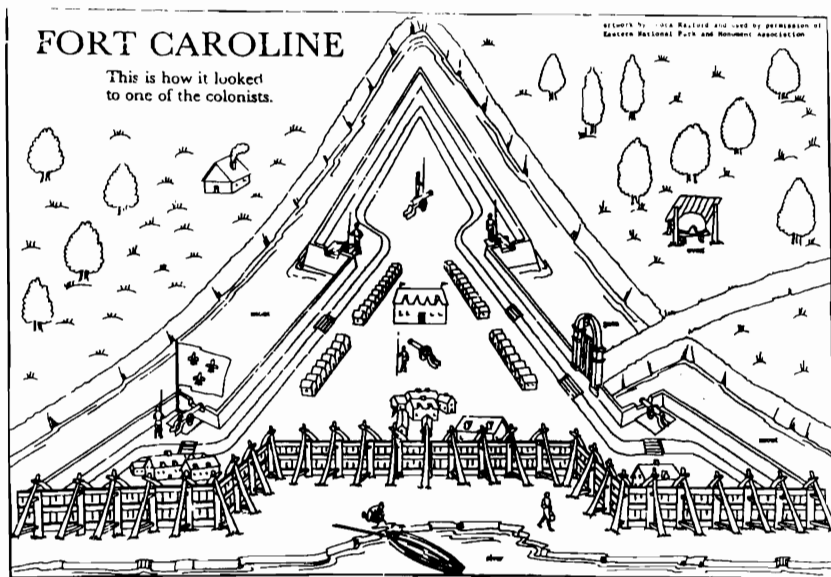


Fig. 2. Fort Caroline. (Artwork by Cora Raiford and used by permission of Eastern National Park and Monument Association.)

transport them to England. Laudonniere declined, but a revolt forced reconsideration. He purchased a ship from Hawkins, outfitted it, and permitted colonists to depart. As they were leaving, the sails of Coligny's third French expedition, once more under Ribault's command, appeared with approximately 600 soldiers, sailors, and colonists, most of whom were Huguenots (Bennett 1964, 33).

When Spain's King Philip heard of Ribault's impending expedition, he prepared a counterattack to drive the French from Florida. Menendez, aboard the flagship *San Pelayo*, commanded a fleet of ten ships and sailed from Cadiz on 28 June 1565 (Lyon 1976, 90). A three-day storm almost destroyed the vessels and separated the ships, but Menendez arrived in Puerto Rico on 8 August. Anxious to reach Florida before Ribault and without waiting for the remainder of his fleet, Menendez sailed for Fort Caroline on 15 August with five ships and 800 men. He arrived in the harbor of The River of Dolphins, today called Matanzas River, and named the site St. Augustine (Lowery 1959, 152).

On 4 September, encountering four of Ribault's ships, Menendez decided to attack (Lyon 1976, 112-14). The French escaped and quickly outdistanced the Spanish ships. Menendez returned to The River of Dolphins on 6 September, where the rest of his ships, delayed by thunderstorms, joined him two days

later. On 8 September 1565 he put his colonists ashore and established St. Augustine. Menendez decided to attack Fort Caroline by land. On 10 September he prepared for the attack and ordered all ships but one to sail for Hispaniola for reinforcements.

The same day, Ribault sailed aboard the flagship *Trinity* from Fort Caroline with seven ships and 600 men to attack St. Augustine (Figure 3) (Bennett 1968, 117). He had

ignored Laudonniere's warning concerning seasonal storms. His plan was to surprise Menendez by confining the Spanish ships to the harbor at St. Augustine. Laudonniere remained at Fort Caroline with seventeen trained soldiers and 223 colonists. He planned to reinforce his defenses but severe storms hampered this.

Ribault's fleet arrived at St. Augustine just as the Spanish fleet was preparing to depart for Hispaniola. Ribault enjoyed a superiority in ships and men and most likely would have destroyed or heavily damaged the trapped Spanish ships. However, as Ribault attempted to attack, high winds and rough seas separated his fleet. The storm increased to a such a level that the original plan was abandoned and the ships became beached south of St. Augustine near Ormond Beach.

Menendez and his crew were also caught in

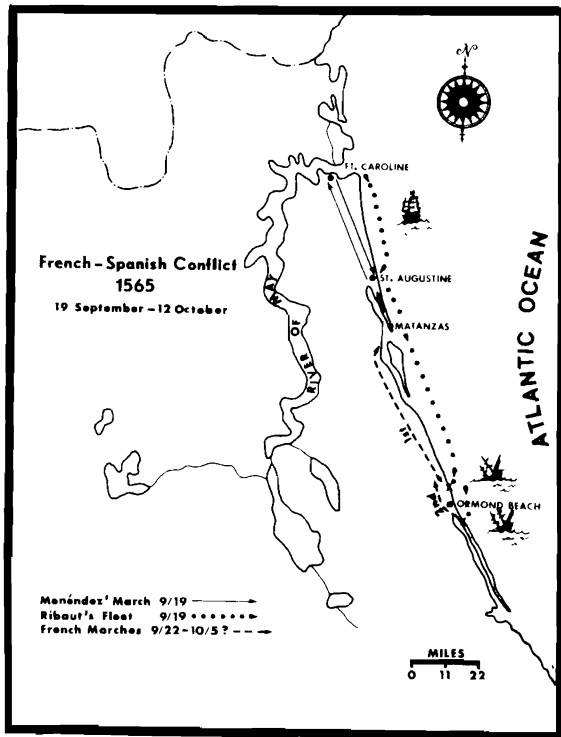


Fig. 3

the storm, which Indians later claimed was the most severe they had ever experienced (Laudonniere 1975, 161). Their march to Fort Caroline took them through waist-deep swamps. However they reached the French settlement and took it on 20 September, renaming it San Mateo. Laudonniere, Le Moyne, and a few colonists managed to escape. The next day, Menendez left for St. Augustine.

A few days later, Menendez learned from Indians that Ribault's fleet had been separated and his men cast upon the beaches. Menendez organized a force, marched south, and intercepted the French survivors. All were killed except ten artisans. Ribault had escaped and organized a second group which marched northward. This group also was intercepted. By 12 October, Menendez had killed Ribault and most of his men, and by late November stragglers had been captured (Manucy 1965, 46-7). French influence and design on the Florida peninsula were thus effectively eliminated.

## The Storms

Frequent summer storms battered the east Florida coastline during the French and Spanish expeditions. Most of these storms were probably well-developed thunderstorms that normally occur this time of year. They result from divergent air flows from the Bermuda High over relatively cool Atlantic waters to the super-heated Florida peninsula. While capable of generating winds in excess of thirty-five knots and precipitation of over one inch per hour, these storms are usually brief in duration. Most storms usually occur in late morning or early afternoon, only occasionally extending into late evening. However, the storm the Indians called "the worst storm they had ever seen" (a "norther") is estimated to have continued from 13 September until 20 September 1565 with the strongest winds estimated to have occurred on either 18 or 19 September. From evidence on record, this disturbance was of a tropical nature, covering a large area. Anemometers, rain gauges, and accurate barometers were not in existence; therefore, no absolute determination can be made considering the type of tropical disturbance.

As the Indians had observed, the intensity of the storm was exceptionally severe. Contemporary information suggests that the storm probably was a slow-moving, well-developed hurricane which followed a track roughly paralleling the east coast of Florida. Since the storm lasted approximately a week, it most likely stalled somewhere near Cape Canaveral as the result of a probable area of high pressure over the southeastern part of the country. This position would help explain the strong northeast winds, which eventually divided and wrecked Ribault's fleet near Ormond Beach.

Hurricanes which form during the month of September may have two areas of origin. This time of the year is normally a transition period. Tropical storms

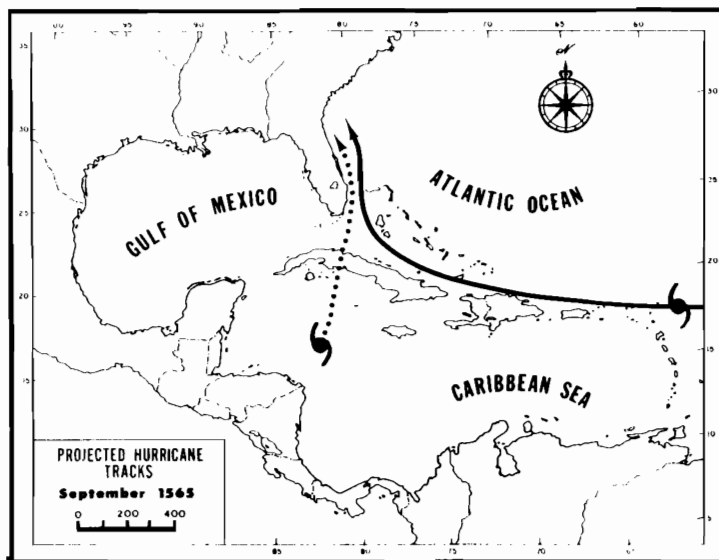


Fig 4.

which form during the early part of the season usually originate in the Caribbean Sea. From approximately the first of August until the middle of September, tropical storms normally form in the southeast Atlantic area, moving back to the Caribbean during the later part of the season. Since the storm occurred during the middle of September, both of these areas of formation must be considered, as shown in Figure 4.

Regardless of the area of origin, the effects of the winds generated by the storm were sufficient to divide and wreck all but one of Ribault's fleet. This event, in conjunction with the capture of Fort Caroline during the same storm, rendered the French survivors an easy target for the forces of Menendez.

The French seemed on the verge of destroying Menendez at St. Augustine. Had this storm not occurred when Ribault's fleet was preparing to attack, Spanish influence in Florida might have suffered severely. Because of the strategic location of Florida relative to Spanish shipping and the overall importance of Florida to Spanish designs in the New World, it is safe to assume that the Spanish would have continued the struggle to remain the dominant power. However a French victory in September 1565 could have given them a decided advantage. It is intriguing to suggest that perhaps Florida today would have had a pronounced French cultural imprint rather than a Spanish heritage.

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... Answers to nickname associations on page 9.

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| 1. Sarasota        | 6. Miami         |
| 2. Gainesville     | 7. Perry         |
| 3. St. Petersburg  | 8. Fort Myers    |
| 4. Tallahassee     | 9. Daytona Beach |
| 5. Yeehaw Junction | 10. Apalachicola |