The End of the French Presence in La Florida

After more than a year imprisoned in the Tower of London, Jean Ribault was released and went home to France. In the spring of 1565, the French Crown prepared to send Ribault back to La Florida to strengthen the French presence there. A Spanish spy in the French town of Dieppe, on the English Channel, made King Philip II of Spain aware of the ships, soldiers, and supplies being readied for the voyage. Of particular interest to Philip II was the military equipment (guns and cannons) that was loaded for the trans-Atlantic journey.

To Philip II of Spain the French were not only trespassing on land assigned by the Holy Catholic Church to the Spanish Crown, but they were also heretics violating the faith he was sworn to uphold. Already furious that French Huguenots had established a second settlement in La Florida, Philip II instructed a trusted advisor to sail with a large fleet to the New World, establish a permanent Spanish presence in La Florida, convert the natives he encountered to Catholicism, and drive the French “heretics” out of Spanish lands “by what means you see fit.” The advisor’s name was Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the very same advisor who three years before had recommended that Spain abandon all efforts to settle La Florida.

Menéndez had gained royal favor years before by taking action against French pirates in the waters surrounding Spain. Later, he was placed in charge of escorting the Spanish treasure fleets from Havana to Spain. In his service to the Spanish Crown, he had gained a reputation for prompt and decisive action. Now, he was entrusted with the largest armada of ships and colonists that had ever left Spain for the New World. In late June 1565, Menéndez set sail for La Florida with nineteen ships containing over 1,500 people, including soldiers, sailors, locksmiths, millers, silversmiths, tanners, sheepshearers, and farmers. Many of these men had wives and children who joined them.

Shortly after the voyage began, the ships were scattered by a hurricane. After the storm had passed, Menéndez could only account for five of the nineteen ships that had begun the journey. He continued without the others to Puerto Rico, where they found four vessels from the previous nineteen-ship group that had preceded them. With this diminished force, Menéndez moved against the French. Leaving most of the settlers who had joined him in Puerto Rico, Menéndez left for Florida with five ships, 500 soldiers and 200 sailors.

On August 28th, after two weeks at sea, Menéndez and his forces reached Cape Canaveral and headed north. They stopped at the French-named “River of Dolphins” and renamed the area “St. Augustine” in honor of arriving in Florida on the Catholic feast day of San Augustín. That same day, Ribault had arrived at Fort Caroline. As Menéndez crept up the Florida coast, Ribault took over for the sickly de Laudonniere and set the colony of Fort Caroline to work strengthening the French settlement on the River of May, which we now call the St. Johns River.

The Spanish headed north as quickly as they could, hoping to get to Fort Caroline before Ribault arrived with French reinforcements. On September 4th, Menéndez sailed up to the mouth of the St. Johns and immediately saw four large French ships at anchor on the other side of the sandbar that marked the entrance to the river. Despite seeing other French ships further upriver, Menéndez ignored the warnings of his officers and decided to challenge the French. As the wind died and night fell, the Spanish ships glided in among the French vessels. They anchored within speaking distance of the French ships at the bar, and after a long silence Menéndez hailed the nearest vessel. He was answered, “France.” “And what are you doing in the territories of King Philip of Spain?” he asked. “Begone!” was the reply. Menéndez then asked, “Are you Catholics or Lutherans?” and was answered, “Lutherans of the new religion.” The French officer then inquired who his questioner was and what was his errand, and was answered, “I am Pedro Menéndez, commander of this armament, which belongs to the king of Spain, Philip the Second. I have come here to hang and destroy all the Lutherans whom I shall find either on land or sea, according to my orders received from the king, …and these orders I shall execute to the letter; but if I should meet with any Catholic on board your vessels, he shall receive good treatment. As for the heretics, they shall die.”
The threat of Menéndez, coupled with an attempt by some Spanish sailors to board a French vessel, caused the captains of the French vessels to cut their cables and put to sea. The Spanish ships followed, firing their heavy bow-cannons at the French boats. They chased them far, but could not catch them. "These enraged devils," wrote a member of Menéndez’s fleet, "are such capable seamen, and maneuvered so well, that we could not take one of them." The Spaniards finally turned back toward the coast, followed by the Frenchmen, who saw the smaller Spanish vessels enter a river about thirty miles south of the St. Johns River, and the larger ones, including Menéndez’s flagship, anchor at its mouth. They also saw Spanish soldiers and provisions landed not far above that anchorage. With this important news the Frenchmen hastened back to Fort Caroline and reported to Ribault all they had seen. He immediately prepared to attack his enemies with his ships and his whole land force.

For the next three days after arriving back at St. Augustine, Menéndez put all available men to work unloading the rest of the supplies from the ships and built a fortification around the council house of a local Indian chief. Finally, on September 8th, amid trumpets, cannons, and flags, Menéndez came ashore and claimed all of the surrounding land in the name of God and King Philip II. Mass was said, and Menéndez’s men took oaths of loyalty to him as governor of the new colony and military commander. Local natives took part in the ceremony and the feast that followed. Thus, the town of St. Augustine was born. It is now the oldest surviving settlement in the United States.

Meanwhile, on the St. Johns River, a war council was held in Laudonnière’s quarters as he lay sick in bed. Ribault decided to pursue Menéndez south before he could build any fortifications, despite de Laudonnière’s objections. On September 10th, Ribault left Fort Caroline with 400 soldiers, 200 sailors, and twelve ships, leaving behind 240 men to defend the settlement, most of which were too ill to be depended on to fight if the need arose.

The next day the Huguenots found the Spanish ships anchored just off St. Augustine, about thirty miles to the south of the entrance to the St. Johns River. Noticing that the largest ship was missing, Ribault ordered his boats to pursue the missing vessel instead of attacking the Spanish at their hastily built base. This turned out to be a fatal mistake; an unexpected hurricane (they were all unexpected in those days) soon bore down from the north, scattering Ribault’s ships before smashing them along the beaches as far south as Cape Canaveral.

Menéndez, unaware of the extent of the French disaster, realized that Ribault would have no way of returning to Fort Caroline as long as hurricane-force winds and rain continued from the north. He seized the opportunity to take Fort Caroline. With twenty axemen to clear the way, 300 harquebusiers (soldiers who carried large primitive muskets called harquebuses) and 180 other soldiers, Menéndez marched through intermittent driving rain for three days to cover the forty swampy miles to the Huguenot settlement, sometimes through water so deep that swimming was required. It was raining furiously at dawn on September 20th when Menéndez pointed at Fort Caroline and gave the order to attack with the cry of “Santiago!”

The French who had been left to guard the fort overnight had been relieved by their commanding officer due to the inclement weather. As a result, the fort had been left defenseless. The French were completely taken by surprise. Said a survivor later, “They vied with one another to see who could best cut the throats of our people.” In an hour, 132 Frenchmen were killed and almost sixty women and children were taken prisoner; fifty others, including de Laudonnière, Le Moyne, and Ribault’s son Jacques, escaped through the dark woods to two small ships that Ribault had left behind. They immediately set a course for France, never to return to La Florida.

Renaming the captured fort “San Mateo” (St. Matthew), Menéndez left 300 men there to guard it, and headed back to St. Augustine, where he arrived on September 24th. Four days later, local Indians brought word of a large group of Frenchmen walking along the shore several miles south of the Spanish settlement. Immediately, Menéndez set out with 50 men to meet their avowed enemies.
Eighteen miles south of St. Augustine, the salty waters of the river that flow past the city bend eastward and meet the Atlantic Ocean at a lovely inlet with a menacing name—Matanzas, which means “the slaughters” in Spanish. Here, at dawn on September 29th, Menéndez and his soldiers met the French survivors. The French had no way to cross the river. Knowing this, and believing that the Frenchmen were tired and hungry, Menéndez demanded that they all surrender to the Spanish. A French sergeant replied that they would surrender on the condition that their lives would be spared. As Father Francisco Lopez, Menéndez’s chaplain who was present on the beach that morning, later wrote:

“...our brave captain-general answered ‘that he 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 that there should be no cause for complaint.’ Seeing that there was nothing else left for them to do, the sergeant returned to the [French] camp; and soon after he brought all their arms and flags, and gave them up to the general, and surrendered unconditionally. Finding they were all Lutherans, the captain-general ordered them all put to death; but, as I was a priest, and had... 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. All the others were executed, because they were Lutherans and enemies of our Holy Catholic faith.”

In order to carry out the executions, Menéndez had the Huguenots ferried across the river ten at a time. They were then given food and drink until all of them were accounted for. Then, he ordered the prisoners’ hands to be bound and for them to be marched behind the dunes near the beach. Once out of view of the other prisoners, the unlucky Huguenots were put to the knife.

On October 10th, word came that another large group of Frenchmen were stranded on the same spot. Menéndez marched to Matanzas Inlet with several soldiers the next day, where they found 320 French soldiers under the command of Jean Ribault. Upon seeing the Spaniards led by Menéndez, 170 Huguenots refused to surrender and marched south, leaving Ribault and 150 of their comrades at the mercy of the Spanish. The French commander was brought over the river to speak with Menéndez. Finally, the two leaders met. It was later said that Ribault offered a large ransom for his life, but Menéndez had him executed like all of his men, with the exception of four professed Catholics and a dozen drummers and trumpeters.

The Frenchmen who had refused to surrender marched as far south as Cape Canaveral. Once there, they used the wood from one of their wrecked ships to build a fort and a small boat. After learning of their whereabouts, Menéndez set out by land and sea to capture them. Some men marched along the shore while others moved along at about the same pace (25 miles a day) in ships just offshore. Finally, on November 26th, the Spanish reached the French and persuaded all but twenty to surrender without a fight. In return, Menéndez promised to make them all prisoners and send them back to Europe, a promise that he kept. There is no historical record about what happened to the twenty Huguenots that did not surrender on the beach.

Many months later, when King Philip II of Spain read Menéndez’s report of such complete victory in La Florida, he wrote a cramped little note in the margin: “As to those he killed, he has done well.” This rout of the “heretical” Huguenots seemed to suggest to Philip II that their cause had been righteous and that God favored the Catholic nation of Spain. The massacre of the two groups of Huguenots brought condemnation upon Menéndez and the Spanish monarch. Indeed, the French ambassador to Spain reported to Paris that Philip II
and his advisors were more pleased about the result of Menéndez’s actions against the French than if the victory had been against Muslim invaders.

Defenders of Menéndez, and the Spanish commander himself, maintained that his victims were foreigners without any right to be in Florida, that they were not soldiers but pirates intent on preying on Spanish ships, and that they were Lutherans—the name given to all Protestants by 16th-century Catholics—and therefore heretics who should be put to the sword for blasphemy. Another point in Menéndez’s favor was that he did not have the resources to take 350 Huguenot prisoners: he did not have enough ships to transport them, enough men to guard them, nor enough food to sustain them and his own colony. Besides, as long as these Frenchmen remained, they would remain a threat to the security of St. Augustine. His defenders also pointed out that if Menéndez was a cold-blooded murderer, then why did he spare 150 Huguenots near Cape Canaveral? Their answer is because these men posed no threat to St. Augustine or its food supply.

With his total victory over the French in Florida, Menéndez set to work building the town of St. Augustine, establishing Catholic missions for the Indians throughout La Florida, and building forts to prevent any further intrusion by foreign powers, most especially the Protestants of France or England. St. Augustine would go on to serve as an important Spanish colony by providing protection and supplies for the Spanish gold fleets that sailed from Havana, Cuba, to Spain each spring. It also provided a base for missionaries and traders who explored as far north as the Appalachian Mountains and Chesapeake Bay, establishing outposts in the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina (including the settlement of Santa Elena, which was a stone’s throw away from the prior French settlement of Port Royal), and across northern Florida. With England’s creation of the Carolina colony in the 1660s and Georgia in 1733, St. Augustine would become a base for attacks on these Protestant rivals and a refuge for Indians fleeing English slaving raids and Africans escaping plantation slavery until England was given Florida by the Spanish as a result of the Seven Years’ War in 1763.

As for the French, they dropped any further plans to challenge Spanish authority in the southeastern part of La Florida, instead choosing to settle parts of the far northern regions of North America in order to take advantage of the fur and timber trade in what is now Canada. Menéndez had been extremely fortunate in his dealings with a numerically superior French force: if things had worked out a little differently, Jacksonville (the present-day site of Fort Caroline), and not St. Augustine, might now be known as the oldest permanent settlement in the United States.

Questions

1. For what two reasons was King Philip II of Spain angry about the French Huguenot settlement at Fort Caroline, on the St. Johns River?

2. Who did King Philip II send to La Florida, and what were his instructions?

3. In his first action against the Huguenots at Fort Caroline, why do you think that Menéndez did not take any of the settlers who had journeyed with him to the New World?

4. Using the information in the text, create a brief timeline of the three months of events from August 28-November 26, 1565, starting with Pedro Menéndez de Avilés first reaching the Florida coast.

5. For what reasons did the Spanish consider Menéndez successful in his mission to La Florida?

6. What were the lasting effects of the establishment of St. Augustine and the decimation of the French Huguenots in Florida in 1565?

7. What conclusions can you draw about religious movements in Europe and the Americas and their influence on colonial society and government?