

SANTA ELENA

*Pierson R. Davis, Honorary Governor
Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Ohio*

PROLOGUE

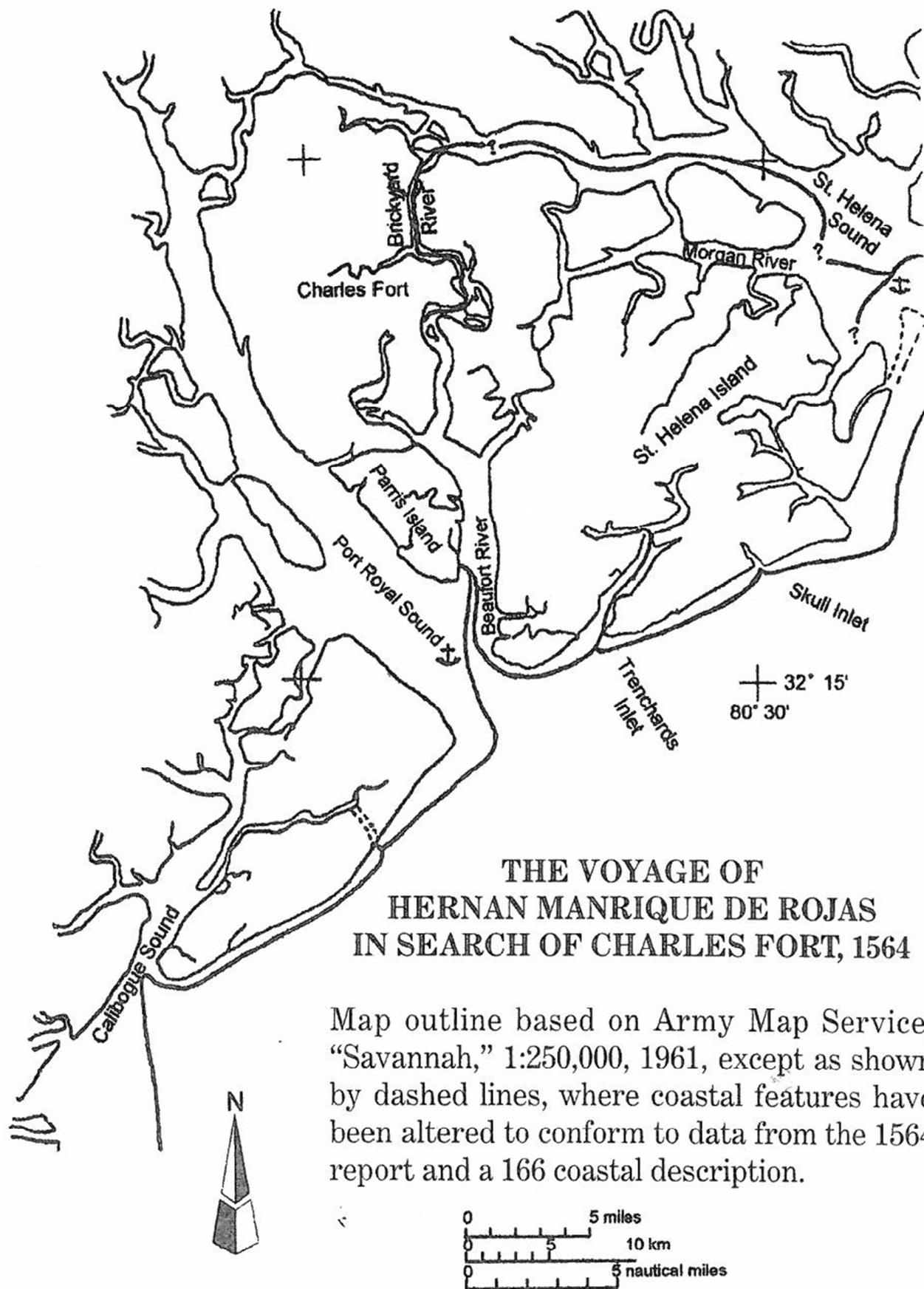
*As for man, his days are as grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth.*

*For the wind passeth over it and it is gone:
And the place thereof shall know it no more.*

“Your Excellencies, you have asked me to witness to the conditions at Fort San Felipe and the town of Santa Elena which the Fort protects, as to the physical emotional and moral circumstances. This is the most northern and distant outpost and settlement in la Florida. To help me keep everything in proper order I ask you to let me start as early as the first efforts to establish this Fort as his Majesty's “window on the Atlantic “as he calls Santa Elena. That will make my witness more orderly and accurate.

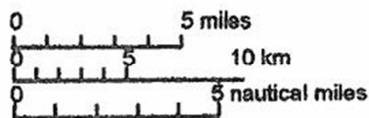
As your Excellencies well know we have the oldest town in the New World, on the island of Hispaniola, and have towns and enterprises elsewhere in New Spain that bring great wealth to Spain and his Majesty. Our treasure fleets must cross the Caribbean then sail north along the coast of la Florida until they reach the Westerlies which will drive them across the Atlantic and home. The Westerlies will occur anywhere from Punta Santa Elena, which was named by Captain Pedro Quexos when he sighted a headland on August 18, 1525 on the feast of Santa Elena and - - - -

“Yes, your Excellency, I will try to hurry, if you will bear with me for a little while - - - and he named it Punta Santa Elena. For ten years starting in 1550 his Majesty tried to get our bureaucracy to go to Santa Elena and provide his 'window on the Atlantic'. He told Luis de Velasco, Viceroy of New Spain, to send Tristan de Luna and Angel de Villefane to Santa Elena as governor of his provinces de la Florida Punta Santa Elena and they ended up setting up a fort on the West Coast of Florida. Finally Villefane reached the harbor at Punta Santa Elena and a great hurricane destroyed three ships and killed twenty-six men and that was the end of the expedition.



**THE VOYAGE OF
HERNAN MANRIQUE DE ROJAS
IN SEARCH OF CHARLES FORT, 1564**

Map outline based on Army Map Service, "Savannah," 1:250,000, 1961, except as shown by dashed lines, where coastal features have been altered to conform to data from the 1564 report and a 166 coastal description.



“Two years later - - -”

“Yes your Excellency I am trying to show how difficult that adventure has been.

“Two years later that French infidel, Protestant, privateer Jean Ribaut was able to build a fort right where his Majesty wanted to build Santa Elena and he named the harbor area Port Royal and it is still called that and he called his fort Charlesfort and it lasted for only a year when the bungling French had to leave.

“His Majesty ordered Governor Mazariego to send a Cuban force to destroy the French settlement and deliver justice fit for the Protestant trespassers and he sent Don Hernando de Maurique Rojas and the frigate “Neustra Senora de la Concepcion “and my army unit to do his Majesty's bidding and - - - .

“Yes your Excellency, I am getting to Santa Elena but I do have to keep it straight in my mind.

“When we reached Charlesfort in June 1564, we burned the fort, found a column erected by Ribaut and found a Frenchman named Roufi and took both of them back to Havanna.

As your Excellencies know, Ribaut returned to reinforce Fort Caroline on the St. John's River and got there just before our great leader Pedro Menendez de Aviles arrived to destroy the fort. Ribaut went in search of us but was wrecked on the beach a few leagues south of the fort at San Augustan where Menendez had anchored our fleet. Then Menendez led his forces, of which I was one, overland and captured Fort Caroline and killed 132 of the men. We executed all those Protestant trespassers, destroyed the fort and took all the women and children back to Fort San Augustan. This was a great victory for Spain and his Majesty. The march we made in a great storm through the swamps and under-growth of those tropical forests was an amazing feat that could have happened only with God's Greatest blessing.

“When we came back to St. Augustine we were told by Indians that Ribaut had lost his fleet in some hurricane and was stranded on the beach about 18 miles to the south and we attacked and after they surrendered we worked justice on most of them but Ribaut wasn't there. I remember October 11th that was the day that scoundrel Ribaut arrived at camp with the remains of his force and sued for peace and we worked the same justice on them.

No your Excellencies, we get to the founding of Santa Elena by that heroic Pedro Menendez who took three ships and fifty of us men, led by Capt. Juan Pardo, to settle Santa Elena in April of 1566 and he also took that Frenchman Roufi as his interpreter since he had lived with the Indians for many years. When we reached Port Royal Sound we met with the Orista Indians, feasted with them and Menendez even convinced them that our religion was the only true one. When that was all done we looked for a place for a presidio and found the ruins of

Charlesfort. Since there was already a moat and an earth parapet Senor Menendez built Ft. San Felipe on that site and that destroyed all evidence of those French infidels.

“It took us fifteen days to build the fort and then a garrison of over 100 men led by Estaban del las Alas was established there along with six pieces of artillery, four of these were from the French fort. Our forts were made of a moat with the dug dirt forming a parapet inside the moat then a wooden palisade was erected between the moat and the parapet and bastions were formed at each corner. Inside the parapet we built a two level casa fuerte - a fortified house you know - - - .

“Iam sorry your Excellency, I sometimes forget that not all civilians are ignorant of military terms.

“Our casa was about 70feet by 150feet with the artillery on the upper level and on the bastions and with arms storage and living quarters on the lower level. The farmers built houses and storage buildings of wattle and daub with thatch-like roofs of palm frond and marsh grass. The houses looked very much like the country houses here in Spain. Most of those farmers came from Castille.

"Your Excellencies, I now come to the information you asked for about the condition of the fort, Santa Elena and the soldiers and people. When we came here on the El Spiritu Santo we left fifty men in each fort at San Felipe, Saint Augustine and San Pedro.

"Your Excellencies it will help me now if you would ask just what information you want.

"You wish to know what artillery arms and munitions remain in the said forts of Florida ? There was left in the fort of San Elena, about forty seven men and fourteen pieces of artillery, among which are two large cannon and one demi-culverin; and the rest are culverins of a small bore, sakers and falconets, well mounted, with their wheels, and that there may be about a barrel of powder for cannon and arquebuses; I know not the quantity there may be, because it is some time since I have been inside the magazine; but there must be very little, because I saw that from San Felipe fort, we supplied the others, which are the forts of St. Augustine and San Pedro, and other points, and vessels which had arrived there, with the cannon powder, and therefore I know that there can be very little of it; and that the soldiers who are left in the fort are poorly equipped and lack supplies, and are without shirts or clothing, for they have none, and some go without; and some have no swords, and those they have are very poor and worn and many of the arquebuses are in bad condition, and others are broken, and they have not repaired them because they have not the wherewithal to do so. The provisions they have are only flour and maize, and nothing else whatever, and that this may last them through the month of December by giving them a pound per soldier each day; - - -

“Your Excellency wishes to know if there be in the country any meat or fish, or any other means of subsistence? There was neither meat nor fish nor any other sustenance, save when a

soldier went to fish at his risk, because they are in the habit of going fishing, and the Indians kill them, and sometimes there came a fish that dragged away the soldier after it and drowned him.

“What governor or head remains in the said province of Florida? In the fort of Santa Elena there remained Juan de la Benera, an ensign and lieutenant of Pedro Menendez (Marques) who is the captain of the fort. - - -

“You want to know whether with the people who were left in the forts and in each one of them, they remain a sufficient defense so that they cannot receive injury? With the men who are left in the said fort of San Felipe, which is at Santa Elena, where I have lived all the time that I have been in Florida, they can defend themselves very well if they do not want for food and munitions, because they have great protection in being at the place where they are - -

“What will be necessary to do in order that the said forts shall have the proper protection against the Indians, French, and other enemies? First, it is needful to supply arms, pikes, swords, arquebuses and munitions, so as to make use of them; and provisions of bread, wine, oil and vinegar, and clothing for the people who are and live therein, because they have great need of all this, and that they should be paid their salaries for the time that each one has served, so that they be able to clothe themselves therewith, and serve his Majesty as is proper; and as they are serving and have served him, and this is the way to keep them quiet in the province of Florida; and they likewise have need of a chaplain to say mass and administer the sacraments to them, since they are Christians”

(Adapted from
Colonial Records of Spanish Florida,
Conner p 315 et seq.)

This was the actual testimony of Francisco Dominques de Castellanos, a corporal in the service of Phillip II of Spain. This ends the dramatization. The corporal's testimony was personalized to add a little feeling to the dry, flat, legal wording of the actual records of the event.)

NARRATIVE

By 1570 it appears that Santa Elena was no longer self-sufficient, barely able to defend itself, and had lost the friendship of the Indians. The land was not as productive as at first believed and this settlement had supplied the other two Florida forts and passing ships.

One of the problems between the Indians and the settlement was the Spanish custom of quartering the troops in the native villages during periods of food shortages. The Indians suffered short food supplies on occasion also, especially in late winter and spring when the settlers also suffered. This practice years later by the British was so abhorrent to the colonists that its prohibition was included in our constitution.

Another blow to the Florida colony in 1574 was the recall of Menendez de Aviles to Spain to serve the King. An armada of 300 ships and 20,000 men was being assembled for the Flanders campaign or perhaps against England. The day this armada was placed under Menendez' command he was stricken with a mysterious illness and died on September 17, 1574, at the relatively young age of 55. It was thought the illness was induced by his foreign travels or perhaps by his enemies. There is room to speculate that had this powerful and brilliant sailor, tactician and politico lead the Invincible Armada in 1588 there might have been a different outcome. What a change that might have made in the history of Western civilization.

Menendez's program to develop the agriculture of La Florida and the domestication and Christianizing of the Indians was abandoned except at Santa Elena where Pedro Menendez Marques, the grand nephew of Menendez de Avilea succeeded in both areas.

For the next six years, the community seems to have struggled with very dry weather that damaged crops and cattle. They became increasingly dependent on the native villages for survival. At that time, there was a military garrison and forty-eight farmers plus their families.

During that period and later, the Spanish existed in part by bartering or begging food from the Indians. At times this method was more strong-arm than begging. The European arms were far superior to the native weapons. Gun- powder and shot, along with cross bows, armor and steel blades far out-weighed the primitive bows, arrows, spears, clubs and knives of the Indians. That certainly gave the Spanish the edge at the bargaining table. The native people had a decided advantage in knowledge of the countryside, and they were masters of stealth and deceit.

There were times and circumstances when there was genuine peace and friendship between the neighbors, but the desperation of near starvation and the Spanish need to rule by force usually ended in conflict. A lot of the apparent friendship and peace of the Indians was a result of fear of the Spaniards' superior force.

At that time, the Spanish felt threatened by the English pressure from the north and Bermuda. The French, though they had lost their land bases, still roamed the coast looking for

Spanish ships and threatening harbors and settlements. The artillery in the casa fuertes and the fort's bastions were facing both landward and seaward. The general in charge of Ft. San Felipe and Santa Elena was Fernando de Miranda, an uncouth and unfit leader. It was said he was unfit to govern anything but cattle. His forces often laughed at his orders. Ensign Hernando Moyano, who it seems was not much better than Miranda, did follow his orders to get food from the natives.

Let's now hear what might have been the words of Andres Calderon, a soldier stationed at Fort San Felipe at Santa Elena.

“On June 17, 1576, Ensign Moyano, an arrogant and ignorant soldier, took twenty of us inland to the Escaimacu village of Chief Orista. There was a feast going on with other chiefs and when Moyano demanded food they refused him but he drew his sword and ordered us to take it anyway. Right then the savages seemed to just disappear into the woods - a trick they have that is impressive and frightening. We told the Ensign that we should leave quickly but as was his manner he called us cowards and other things and ordered us to keep on collecting the food. I had to leave the group and step into the woods for personal needs. While I worked to remove the body armor and outer clothing an old cacique, a chief, came back and asked Moyano just what his intentions were. The Ensign answered that we had come in peace and just needed food and lodging. The old cacique said if that was the case we should extinguish the fuses on our arquebuses and the Indians would return. That ignorant Moyano ordered the men to extinguish the fuses and when that was done the old cacique gave a great shout and those treacherous savages rushed back and slaughtered all my comrades. I had no time to do anything but run away in my nearly naked condition, which may have been the blessing that saved my life for I reached a stream known as Whale Branch and swam for safety. With Indians in pursuit it seemed best to keep to the water in my condition and I swam the seven leagues or so back to Santa Elena. On the way I had shed my clothing and when some children found me exhausted on the bank I was quite naked. They helped me to the fort where I was able to warn the others of the probability of an attack and the massacre of the other twenty who had been with me.

"A friendly Indian brought word that Orista had his men cut off my friend's heads and gave them as gifts to the Guale Indian Chiefs who began gathering to attack Santa Elena. Our commander sent out a scouting party with our war dogs - a not too smart a move knowing that ambush was a favorite tactic of the savages - and all that came back were a few wounded dogs. That was when they attacked the fort and the battle lasted a few hours until all their arrows were gone.

“There were only seventeen of us soldiers left and they were mostly old men and boys who were not skilled at fighting. There were also the residents including sixty women and their children. Our fort was aging and in places the palisades were propped up and there were no munitions left. Shortly after the fight, General Miranda ordered us to abandon the fort and board the three boats he had with him. He had just returned from Ravanna with our pay and other

provisions but not enough to endure more attacks. He had everything put on board and all the people were loaded and as we left the Indians rushed in and pillaged and burned all we had left behind. It was a sad day as we made our way out of the sound and turned for St. Augustine”.

So ends the account of Andres Calderon, a soldier in the service of God, Spain and Phillip II.

General Miranda's actions were later attested to in a report by Don Cristoxal de Erasso at Hayaquanck, Hispaniola on January 17, 1577. The report contained a sworn statement by a sailor named Pedro Gomes from the boat Neustra Senor de la Ayuda confirming the actions taken by General Miranda.

There is a fanciful tale that the women seized General Miranda when he wanted to stay and fight. The women supposedly took him to a ship off shore and threatened to throw him overboard if he didn't give orders to abandon Santa Elena. They also had assumed that he was at the fort all the time and had not just arrived from Hispaniola.

There ends the first 10 years of occupation by the Spanish.

Later in the summer of 1577 Menendez Marques returned to Santa Elena and erected Fort San Marcos. The new fortification was located about 150 paces south of Fort San Felipe and on slightly higher ground. There was a moat on three sides and a creek on the east and beyond the creek salt marshes. Today the eastern half of the fort has been eroded away and there are salt marshes extending for at least one half mile to the east.

San Marcos was a rectangular fort with bastions at the corners to protect all sides. It was constructed in the same manner as San Felipe with a casa fuerte inside the parapet. This fort was larger and better manned than its predecessor and stood for ten years before being dismantled and moved to St. Augustine.

There were many Frenchmen, survivors of a shipwreck, living with the Indians in the general area, perhaps as many as 100. The French had always been able to maintain good relations with the natives, certainly better than the Spaniards had. As a result the Spanish worried about the French influencing the Indians to attack. To prevent this Menendez Marques spent a great deal of time searching for the French around the countryside. There are extensive and detailed letters to Phillip describing the hunt, capture and the “working of justice” on the Frenchmen. The “working of justice” is synonymous with execution.

A letter dated October 21, 1577, from Pedro Menendez Marques to King Phillip described poor conditions at St. Augustine and detailed the provisions needed there and at Santa Elena. He also said he had precut all the lumber for Fort San Marcos at St. Augustine and despite many setbacks finally got to Santa Elena. The Indians surrounded the clearing staying just out of sight, thinking they were preventing the Spaniards from cutting the wood to build the fort. With

the lumber they brought, they were able to complete the fort before the Indians realized what was happening. Menendez Marques only fear was that the Frenchmen might have powder which would more than even the odds, in which case the King must send troops and arms as well as all other provisions, which he listed in great detail. He also noted that if bought in the New World the prices for those provisions plus the freightage was so high that it would save money to build two light ships in Havana, send to Spain and return with those provisions and save the King much money. Menendez Marques asks the King to hurry using as urgent language as was diplomatically advisable.

By 1580 Santa Elena had grown to eighty houses and a population of 350 or more. They now raised crops such as squash, watermelon, corn and persimmons as well as cattle. The soil was not fertile and the rain and droughts unpredictable, but they persevered for ten years. Today with better seeds, fertilizer and irrigation, a few acres of the same soil produce enough to support the entire population of Santa Elena and the nearby native villages.

The available records indicate a fairly peaceful existence. There was constant harassment by the French-influenced Indians, but not any large scale attacks. Pedro Menendez Marques brutally punished some Villages and the Indians kept peace more out of fear than peaceful desires. There is a very detailed report of inspections of the fort in 1577 and 1578 and records of government functions but not much more. Santa Elena was capital of all "la Florida" at that time.

The Spanish were feeling more and more pressure from the English and French. They thought Roanoke was a successful colony and would be followed by further expansion to the south. Drake attacked St. Augustine starting June 6, 1586 and burned it a few days later after looting the town. They also cut down all the fruit trees and ruined the fields.

Drake's fleet of twenty-three large ships and nineteen smaller ones and a force of over 2000 men sailed for Santa Elena or St. Helena as the English called it. Some accounts say he passed Port Royal Sound at night on June 20th and never saw it. Another says a storm kept them off shore and Hakluyt's account says: "When we came athwart of St. Helena, the sholds appearing dangerous, and we having no Pilot to undertake the entrie, it was thought meetest to go hence alongst". Here again is a discrepancy. Hakluyt says Drake was beyond Santa Elena and near Roanoke on June 6 and back at Portsmouth on July 28, 1586, where others put him off Santa Elena on June 20.

Following Drake's attack the Spanish decided to change from fixed bases to a more mobile force. Menendez Marques recommended to the King on July 17, 1586, that all Spanish forces be concentrated farther south. Captain Juan de Posada who brought reinforcements from Cuba that summer agreed with the consolidation of their forces. In August 1587, Fort San Marcos was dismantled and the timbers, artillery, soldiers and settlers with all their supplies were moved to St. Augustine.

There ends twenty years of occupation at Santa Elena. It would be nearly 100 years before what we call civilization returned to the Port Royal/Santa Elena area.

Why was Santa Elena able to survive for twenty years when other early attempts failed? The early attempts by the French were:

Quebec	1541-1542	(Cartier)
Charlesfort	1562-1563	(Ribaut)
Fort Caroline	1565	(Laudonierre)
Quebec	1608-1629(?)	(Champlain)

The English tried to settle:

Newfoundland	1500	Early fishing villages not intended as colonies.
Roanoke	1587	
Sagadahoc	1607-1608	
Jamestown	1607-1610(?)	

The early failures were caused by problems of purpose and preparation. The purpose of most of the expeditions was to find the supposed great wealth of the West Indies. They went in search of gold mines and diamonds and rubies. They expected cities and people like the Europeans living in a semi-paradise of lush vegetation and balmy climes. As we now know, even in the Caribbean Islands that is not entirely true. What the early English and French explorers found was a harsh forested land populated with primitive hunters and gatherers with no resemblance to Europeans. In eastern North America, there was no great treasure of gold or jewels. There was some gold in the streams and pearls in the oysters but not much else. The European arrogance soon turned the most friendly natives into wary and restive adversaries. This coupled with a preparation for exploiting and plundering the natural resources instead of living off the land and failure was almost assured.

The companies that were formed to finance these expeditions expected a return on their investments. As a result, the personnel were military and mainly male laborers, both skilled and unskilled. Not too surprisingly, they were recruited from less than successful backgrounds. Their needs were to be supplied by ships from home. When anything happened to break the flow of supplies, there was nothing to keep the people from demanding to go home.

Among the settlers were shipwrights and skilled carpenters. At Charlesfort, they built a craft that finally reached France, and at Sagadahoc they built a pinnace of 30 tons that not only took the company back to England, but served the Virginia Company for many years.

Another preparation problem was the selection of leaders. Too often the historical notes cite poor or inept leaders, both civil and military. Often leaders were men of means or social status unskilled in the qualities required to lead long, dangerous, expeditions into the unknown. Even Santa Elena faltered under the incompetent leadership of General Hernando de Miranda.

When the purpose of an expedition was to settle permanently and be self-sufficient, then the success rate rose. Plymouth led the charge, not without difficulty, but with ultimate success. Jamestown was caught in the transition but eventually prevailed. Santa Elena had the proper ingredients to succeed, but was the victim of the Spanish governmental and military policy. They were relocated at the height of their progress. They were a complete community with farmers, commerce, skilled artisans, complete families, and an effective local government. It seems as though the first non-native child born on North American soil was most certainly born in Santa Elena.

POSTSCRIPT

I became interested in the history of the area around Beaufort, SC, while spending time in the Low Country. While touring Parris Island Marine Recruit Depot, we found the site of Fort San Marcos on the edge of the base golf course. At the time there was an archaeological dig going on. They were excavating the site of Santa Elena in an area extending 300 yards from the fort. I was hooked.

Marine Major Osterhuit began excavations in 1923 of what he thought was Charlesfort. Much was made of this discovery, and the U.S. Congress and the Huguenot Society of South Carolina erected a monument on the site. It was mistakenly erected on the site of Fort San Marcos. In recent excavations, it has been discovered that Fort San Felipe was built over the ruins of the French Charlesfort.

Archaeological digs were started again in 1979 by Stanley South and Chester DePratter of the University of South Carolina and the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. They were also financed by a number of organizations, including the Spanish government.

The exploration has properly identified the forts, determined the approximate size and location of the town and revealed the life style of the inhabitants. The artifacts recovered have confirmed the approximate dates of occupancy and that it was a Spanish community. This all fits neatly with the documents of those times.

Santa Elena was nineteen years old when Roanoke became lost in 1585. It was settled 41 years before Jamestown and 54 years before Plymouth. I do believe it was only Spain's self perceived weakness that kept Santa Elena from being the oldest continuously occupied community in North America.

*“Man is like to vanity; his days are as a
shadow that passeth away. “
Psalm 144;4*

February 8, 2000

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