
The American Colonies

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Early French Colonization

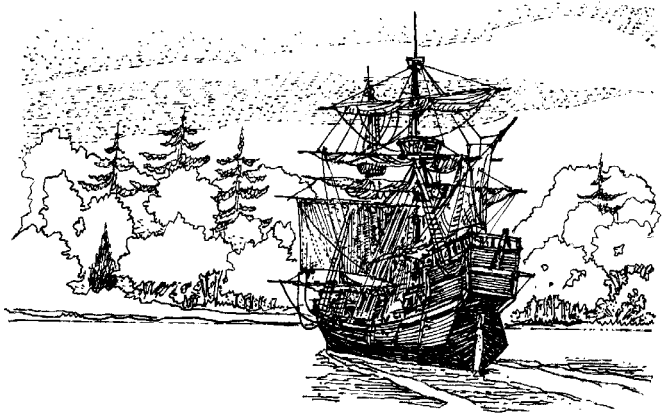
With the first voyage of the great Italian explorer Christopher Columbus to the Western Hemisphere in 1492, his sponsoring nation, Spain, became the first European power to stake a serious claim to the New World—its land, its riches, and its people.

Other nations, however, jealous of the success of Spain's colonizing efforts in the Americas, soon followed with voyages of their own to the lands west of the Atlantic Ocean. England challenged first, with the voyages of John Cabot. His first trip to America occurred in 1497. He landed at Newfoundland in modern-day Canada. He sailed again in 1498, but the English proved slow in following up on Cabot's discoveries.

The French followed next, sending another Italian explorer, Giovanni da Verrazano to the New World in 1524, where he landed along the coast of South Carolina and sailed north along the coast to Newfoundland. Verrazano was intent on discovering an all-water route through the Western Hemisphere to the Orient, but failed. (No such route exists.) Jacques Cartier, also sailing under French sponsorship, followed a decade later. On his second voyage, he tried to establish a colony in Canada, but this effort was unsuccessful.

Each of these explorers—Cabot, Verrazano, Cartier—failed to discover either of their two significant goals as explorers. They did not discover the “Northwest Passage” through the Western Hemisphere to the Far East, nor did they find gold in any significant amounts. For the time being, the treasures of the New World were in the hands of the Spanish. Extensive mines in Mexico and modern-day Peru were extracting literally tons of both gold and silver for the Spanish crown. Great treasure ships filled with both precious metals regularly sailed from New World Spanish colonies to Spain throughout most of the 1500s.

Having failed at colonizing in Canada and in finding gold in North America, the French turned to another approach to gaining riches in the New World. Spanish treasure ships, bound for Spain,



typically sailed through the Straits of Florida, south of the peninsula itself, then made their way through a narrow channel between the Florida mainland and the Bahama Islands. This route placed such ships on the Gulf Stream, a constant circuit of flowing water.

The French determined to gain New World gold by stealing it from the Spanish. To that end, they established a colony along the North American coast. The colony's sponsor was Gaspard de Coligny, a highly influential and wealthy French Protestant who was also an admiral in the French Navy. He employed a career naval officer, Jean Ribaut, to lead the colonizing effort.

Early in the spring of 1562, Ribaut sailed to America with three ships and approximately 150 colonists, mostly Huguenots (French Protestants). On May 1, the expedition reached the mouth of the St. John's River in Florida, and Ribaut claimed it for the French crown. (The Spanish would later establish a settlement there called St. Augustine.)

The party continued northward, looking for a more suitable spot for their colony. Ribaut selected a site on the southern portion of Port Royal Island, in modern-day South Carolina. The colonists began building a garrison, and were soon tantalized by Native Americans in the region who spoke of great cities of gold located just 20 days journey to the west. Perhaps great riches lay ahead for the first French colony in North America.

French Failure at Charlesfort

The French colonists in the New World named their settlement Charlesfort. Now they were intent on Indian stories about great, wealthy cities of gold to the west. But more important questions rose as the colony began to take shape.

For many of the colonists, the challenges they faced in the New World were no greater than those they faced back home in France. They were French Protestants, Huguenots, and they were regularly persecuted in France because of their beliefs. (Most of the people and the leaders in France were Catholics.) These Huguenots had signed on to come to America in search of a world where they could practice their religion without being imprisoned or killed.

At first, the colonists' efforts proceeded with success. They met with local Indians and made peaceful relations with them, trading regularly. Ribaut described the Native Americans in the region as "very gentle, courteous, and of good nature."

But the colony soon experienced problems. They had not brought adequate supplies, and soon began to run low on food and ammunition. The colonists had not even brought enough farming tools. Many had not considered they would become farmers, especially those who were, by trade, sailors.

With no choice, Ribaut determined to sail to France where he would get fresh provisions and return to Charlesfort. Many decided to return with him. Only about 30 agreed to stay in the New World wilderness. However, when he arrived home on July 20, 1562, he discovered France embroiled in a religious war. Ribaut was unable to return immediately. This only helped to spell doom for the French colony at Charlesfort.

For a while, the colonists were able to convince the local Indians to provide them with food. But, in time, they stopped feeding the Frenchmen. The situation became desperate for the colonists. Some of the men argued, and the disputes led some to kill their leader. Starving, many of them sick and weak, the Huguenot colonists made a desperate decision. They built a small boat, intent on sailing

back to France across the great open expanse of the Atlantic. Using their shirts and other clothing for sails, the colonists abandoned Charlesfort and began their adventure home. (One colonist, a youth of 16, decided to remain at Charlesfort. He was taken in by Indians and later rescued by the Spanish.) Having already experienced real hunger, the voyage only made circumstances worse. Emaciated and malnourished, the men ate their leather shoes. When one of the men died, the others practiced cannibalism, consuming their dead comrade's flesh. Finally, drifting aimless on open sea, the last of the party on the verge of death, they were spotted by an English ship and taken to London.

The French colonists were seen as great adventurers, and they were given an audience with Queen Elizabeth I. The men raved about the New World, speaking of its great wealth and beauty. They described a world abundant with gold, silver, and spices. The English were eager to hear such tales, which included a story of mining precious jewels at night because they glistened so brightly by day that they blinded the men.

As chance would have it, Ribaut also appeared in England, driven out of France by the religious war. He, too, met Elizabeth I and told of his experiences in the New World. In 1563, he published an account titled, *Whole and True Discovery of Terra Florida*. His book was widely read in England and convinced English adventurers to attempt their own colonies in the New World.

Review and Write

1. What problems plagued the French colonists at Charlesfort?
2. Describe the role Jean Ribaut played in the early French colony of Charlesfort. Include in your answers his relations with Native Americans.
3. Why did Ribaut leave the Charlesfort Colony in 1562 and sail to France?

New Spanish Settlements in Florida

While the colonizing efforts of the French Huguenots in the Americas failed, they did manage to inspire an entire generation of English explorers intent on establishing their own presence in the Western Hemisphere.

It was the end of Ribaut's efforts in the New World, however. In 1565, Admiral Cologny sent him back to America on a second voyage, this time with seven ships, to resupply a colony which had been established by another French adventurer, René de Laudonnière in 1564. The colony had been erected at Ribaut's original landing site on the St. John's River in Florida. (Today it is the site of Jacksonville, Florida.)

The colony, called Fort Caroline, was established as a base for menacing Spanish treasure ships that sailed in nearby waters. But the Spanish were determined not to allow the French settlement to remain a threat.

A Spanish naval commander, Pedro Menendez de Aviles (ah-VEE-lace) sailed from Spain in the summer of 1565 bound for the New World. Accompanying him were 1,500 Spanish colonists. They were to establish a colony in Florida to provide protection for Spanish ships sailing in the region. In addition, Menendez intended to destroy the French presence at Fort Caroline.

He established his colony just 50 miles south of the French settlement and named it St. Augustine. Wasting little time, Menendez marched north for three days, amid torrential rains, intending to destroy Fort Caroline. When the Spaniards attacked, the French were unprepared. The fight lasted less than an hour and ended with the massacre of most of the Huguenots. Some escaped, sailed to France and reported on the massacre they had suffered at the hands of the Spanish.

When the Spanish attacked Fort Caroline, Ribaut was not there. Just as Menendez intended to destroy the French colony, Ribaut organized a party to eliminate the Spanish settlement at St. Augustine. However, en route, a hurricane destroyed his ship, leaving Ribaut and his men

stranded on an island. In time, they were found by Menendez and his soldiers, who murdered the marooned Frenchmen. Only two French Catholics were allowed to live.

The destruction of Fort Caroline was a great blow to the French. Many in France were shocked at the massacres, for the French and Spanish were at peace at that time. The losses of both Charlesfort and Fort Caroline brought an end to any serious French colonial efforts in the New World for the remainder of the 1500s.

Having removed the French presence, the Spanish built a series of forts along the eastern seaboard from Florida to South Carolina. They erected Fort San Mateo on the former site of Fort Caroline. The Spanish even sent five priests to the region of the Chesapeake Bay to establish a mission settlement and convert the local Native Americans.

But Spain's sea-going treasure ships were not completely safe, nor were her Atlantic Coast colonies. While the French no longer posed a challenge, the English soon would.

Such English captains—often called “sea dogs”—began raiding Spanish ships and menacing their colonies. One English sea dog, Francis Drake, attacked the Spanish fort, Santa Elena, in 1586. (It had been built just south of the former French colony of Fort Caroline.) Soon the English found themselves ready to attempt permanent colonization in America. As with the French, their early efforts proved difficult.

Review and Write

1. While the French colony at Charlesfort ultimately failed, the French soon established another colony along the Atlantic coast, this time at Fort Caroline. What was the purpose of Fort Caroline?
2. How did the loss of the French colonies at Charlesfort and Fort Caroline impact French colonization in North America?