



Coligny Plaza

A FRENCHMAN REMEMBERED

by Reverend Robert E. H. Peeples

A Frenchman commemorated on Hilton Head Island?

Yes. And not a chef, either, though we have since had more than a few celebrated French chefs whose culinary art-istries have created the gastronomical delights for which our Island hostelrys are justly renowned.

But Coligny? Pronounced "Ko-lee-Knee," names of celebrated foreign personages may not properly be anglicized. And the celebrated Gaspard de Coligny was an Admiral of France, colonel-general of infantry, aristocrat, courtier, diplomat and a Huguenot. He began a movement which in the seventeenth century would enrich America, especially South Carolina, with French Huguenot blood, culture and economic ingenuity. The South Carolina Huguenot Society elegantly expounds those glories; our concern here is with the man.

Gaspard De Chatillon Coligny, born 15 Feb., 1519 at Chatillon-sur-Loing, was the second son of Gaspard de Coligny, who had been created Marshal of France in 1516 by King Francis I. His mother was Louise de Montmorency, sister of the celebrated Anne, Duke de Montmorency (1493-1567), who was given the female name in honor of his grandmother, Anne of Brittany and Queen of France, and who succeeded the elder Coligny at his death in 1522 as Marshal of France. Gaspard's elder

brother, Odet de Coligny (1517-1571) became a priest and was consecrated Cardinal of Chatillon in 1533 and Bishop-Count of Beauvais. Thus Gaspard succeeded his father as Count de Coligny and in 1541 joined the French court with his friend Francis of Lorraine (1519-1563), heir of the Duke de Guise.

At the siege of Montmedy and again at the seige of Bains in 1543 Coligny suffered minor wounds. In 1544 he recovered sufficiently to join the expedition to Italy, where he was knighted by Francis I on the field of Ceresole. At the age of 26 he was commissioned by King Henry II colonel-general of infantry in April 1547, becoming known as a military reformer. He drew up ordinances promulgated in 1551, regulating soldiers and protecting civilian rights. At the death of d'Annebaut in 1552 he was named Admiral of France. He arranged for a colony of Huguenots to be settled in Brazil in 1555; it flourished until massacred by the Portuguese.

In 1557, while the French army was in Italy, a Spanish-English army invaded Picardy to besiege St. Quentin, which Admiral Coligny held with only 700 men. His uncle Anne de Montmorency hurried to his relief, but, outnumbered two to one, they were overcome and captured. For two years both Coligny and Montmorency were imprisoned by the Spaniards in the stronghold of

L'Ecluse. While there Coligny began a correspondence with John Calvin, the reformer's first letter to him being dated 4 Sept. 1558. Coligny's younger brother Francis, Seigneur d'Andelot, by then a staunch Huguenot, influenced his conversion. Coligny finally was released in 1559 upon payment of 50,000 crowns in ransom. He joined Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conde, when in that year King Henry II was accidentally killed in a tournament by a Scottish officer, County Montgomery, in demanding that religious toleration be guaranteed by his successor. In this he was supported by his uncle Montmorency through the sixteen months reign of Francis II, whose beautiful queen was the ill-fated Mary Queen of Scots, niece of the Duke de Guise.

One of history's most notorious women, Catherine de Medici, widow of Henry II and mother of France's next three kings, effectively controlled France as regent. Personally irreligious, she was self-centered and ambitious, trusting nothing except her astrologers and the course of the stars. She imported from her native Italy the direful traditions of her race: philters, perfumes and powders — swift and deadly poisons. Her lethal stores included poisons for gloves, poisons for handkerchiefs, poisons for folds of royal robes, for flow-ers, for edges of bejewelled drinking cups, for rich and savory dishes. All who stood in her way were removed, one by one, by her secret agencies.

Coligny attended the Assembly at Fontainebleau when the ten-year-old boy-king Charles IX ascended the throne in 1560. The open hostility of his former friend, Francis Duke de Guise, was apparent to all, especially since Coligny's Uncle Anne had become reconciled to Guise. Nevertheless Coligny publicly announced his support of and adherence to the principles of reformed religion. He saw therein a vehicle for the main-tenance of public order, discipline and justice, all concepts dear to him. In this Coligny's conversion was more political than religious. But his conversion was irreversible, firm and unwavering.

Also in 1560 his elder brother, Cardinal Odet de Coligny, Bishop-Count of Beauvais, was further elevated to Grand Inquisitor of France. But he immediately declined to cooperate with the de-vious and unsavory designs of the theologians at the University of Paris, who wished to initiate in France the tortures and *auto-da-jés* of their Spanish counterparts. The grand sensation of 1561 was the public acceptance of the Hugue-not faith by France's Grand Inquisitor, Cardinal Coligny, who then topped that performance by publicly taking unto himself a wife. The fury of Catherine

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de Medici and the Guises was unbound-
ed!

Admiral Coligny's next venture touched Hilton Head, then cartographically known as *Punta da Santa Elena*. Huguenots who had become political *persona non grata* desperately needed a homeland and French claims in the new world needed bolstering. Jean Ribaut, a capable sea captain born in Dieppe in 1520 and himself a Huguenot, was commissioned by Coligny to gather a group of Huguenot colonists and establish them in North America. Early in 1562 his ship entered the mouth of the St. Johns River in Florida, where a stone column bearing the arms of France was erected. But, then as now, Florida was not Hilton Head. Therefore, Ribaut re-embarked and sailed to Hilton Head. Port Royal was the name he chose for the magnificent harbor he entered in May 1562. Charlesfort was built, a second stone column erected, the colony of thirty brave Huguenots was established, and on 11 June, 1562 Ribaut sailed for France for reinforcements and supplies. The story of the fate of the first European colony in North America is well known.

France's religious civil wars began with the massacre of the Huguenot congregation while at worship in Vassy in 1562, directed by Guise. Coligny detested war and repeatedly sought to negotiate peace. The assassination of Francis de Guise as he laid siege to the Huguenot stronghold of Orleans in 1563 fanned afresh the flames of war.

Cardinal Coligny was formally excommunicated and fled to London in 1568. There Queen Elizabeth warmly received him. She also created a crisis in European court circles by publicly embracing the Cardinal's wife, addressing her as "Madame la Cardinale," an unprecedented title. But even the Virgin Queen's protection could not save the Cardinal from the poisons of Catherine de Medici. That royal shrew bribed the Cardinal's valet, who administered the fatal dose in 1571. Queen Elizabeth buried Cardinal Odet with honors in Canterbury Cathedral.

Admiral Coligny was left as head of the Huguenots. Prudent and tenacious, he won the victory of Arnac-le-Duc in 1570 and pacified St. Germain. In 1571 he returned to court where he was warmly received by 21-year-old King Charles IX, who greeted him as he carelessly took the venerable Admiral by the hand:

"My father, we hold you now, and you shall never escape us again."

In order to remove Charles from the evil influence of his mother, Coligny diplomatically united both the Huguenot and Catholic armies of France for a successful attack on Flanders. Alarmed

by this Spanish defeat, the wicked Queen-mother hired an assassin, Maureval, who attacked Coligny on 22 August, 1572 but failed to kill him. King Charles immediately visited his Admiral and promised a thorough investigation.

Knowing that her plot would be discovered, Catherine falsely persuaded the young king that the Huguenots were conspiring to kill him shortly and the frightened Charles was heard to cry out:

"Then perish all Huguenots! Let not one remain to reproach me."

Lest the King should realize what he had said, Catherine immediately ordered the great bell of St. Germain l'Auxerrois to be tolled and Guise rushed to Coligny's residence. Unwilling to face his victim, Guise waited in the courtyard while villains burst into Coligny's bedroom. They found the wounded and sick Admiral kneeling at his morning prayers.

"Are you Coligny?" demanded Guise's servant Besme.

"I am" was the calm reply.

He was instantly murdered and Besme threw his body out the window to fall at the feet of Guise, that he might feast his eyes on the spectacle.

For three days the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1572, raged madly throughout the length and breadth of pitiable France. Thirty thousand of her fairest and most honorable citizens suffered martyrdom as hundreds of thousands fled to Switzerland, Germany and England. The agony will never be forgotten.

King Charles' health declined daily until his death in 1574, his dying hours haunted by the spectres of the murdered Huguenots. His brother-in-law and successor, Henry IV, finally brought peace to war-torn France with the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes in 1598, proclaiming freedom of religion to all.

Coligny's papers were seized by Catherine de Medici and burned. Among them was his *History of the Civil War*, "*tres-bien et tres-beau fait, et digne d'estre imprime,*" as contemporary scholars claimed.

Admiral Coligny was happily married to Charlotte de Laval, by whom he left several children. A daughter Louise married William the Silent, Prince of Orange. A son Francis was Admiral of Guienne under Henry IV; his son Gaspard de Coligny (1584-1646) was Marshal of France under Louis XIII.

In seeking to stop violence and evil by common sense and negotiation, Gaspard de Coligny, our farsighted colonizer of Port Royal, has been nostalgically known as "*le heros de la mauvais fortune.*"

On Hilton Head Island he remains our hero. □

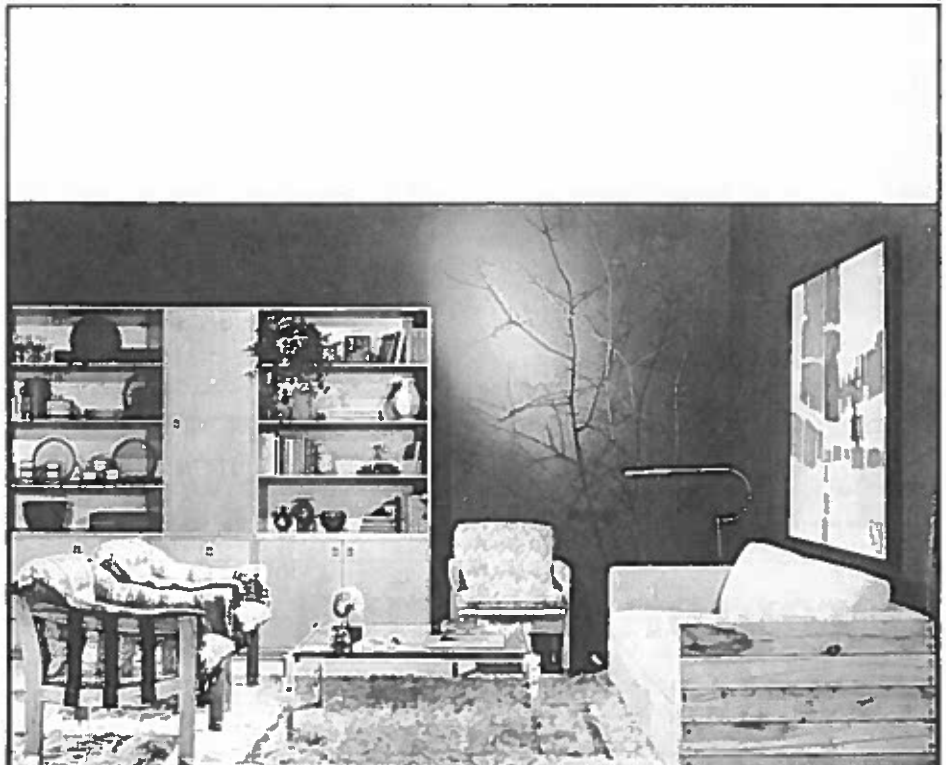


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