## The Trials Of Jean Ribaut By Margaret Green

The Epic Saga Of The Lowcountry's First Tourist

Conventional wisdom holds that the earliest European settlements in America were in Florida. That's true, but not in the way you might think.

In February of 1562 explorer Jean Ribaut sailed from France to found a French Huguenot colony in America. At that time the Spanish laid claim to Florida, which, according to them, stretched all the way north to what is now Chesapeake Bay, Maryland. Interestingly, Ribaut's life in the New World began and ended close to the same place where he made his first landing near today's Jacksonville, but his most notable accomplishment to this area was the founding of the French settlement on what is today known as Parris Island.

The saga of Ribaut's adventures were the most widely read and sensational accounts of the New World in the latter half of the 16th century. These accounts were published in four different northern European countries in English, French, Latin and German, and enjoyed acclaim similar to the current John Jakes novels.

On the first day of May, 1562, Ribaut and about 150 men landed near the

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mouth of the St. John's River, near what is today Jacksonville, Fla. They worked their way up the coast, naming many inlets and rivers after the rivers of France — Ribaut called the St. Mary's River the Seine, and the Savannah River was dubbed the Gironde.

By the second week of May they entered a harbor, a "Mightie river ... which

because of the fairness and largenesse thereof wee named Port Royall." The band of colonists had reached Port Royal Sound, the deepest and most accessible body of water on the southeastern coast. The large island on their port side with high bluffs they named Ile de la Riviere Grande.: a small island separated from the larger one by marsh, Ribaut named after himself.

By the time of modern development, oral history had corrupted the name to Bobb's Island. The developers of Hilton Head Plantation found

old maps showing the original name and rechristened it Ribaut Island.

The storms of the south Atlantic Ocean were well known and respected by mariners of the day. Jean Ribaut's pilots advised him to bring his ships farther into the magnificent bay for protection from these unpredictable events.

For a long time there had been speculation that there was a French settlement nearby, but the site was not found until 1996. Speculation placed the site on Dawes Island

or near the town of Port Royal. For 17 years University of South Carolina archaeologists Stanley South and Chester DePratter had been excavating a site adjacent to the golf course on the Parris Island Marine Corps Recruit Depot, believing it to be the remains of the Spanish settlement of Santa Elena and its fort, San Felipe.



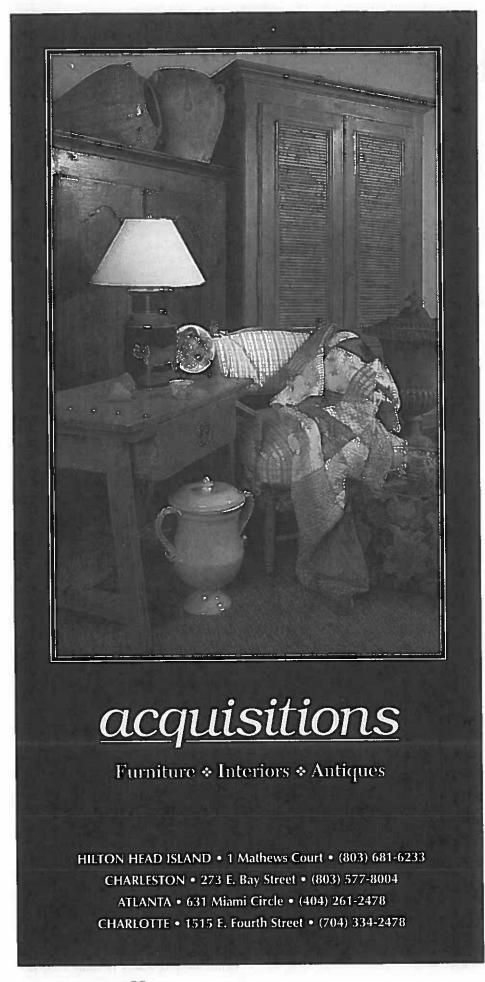
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In this engraving, an Indian shows a later French voyager the marker column set up by Ribaut most likely on Dawes Island. Conquering Spaniards later moved the marker to Cuba.

As they dug deeper, they found French ceramics concentrated in one area. They then concluded that the Spanish had built their capital on top of the French settlement.

Before his own expedition, Ribaut served under French Admiral Gaspard de Coligny. (This is the source of the name for today's Coligny Plaza, and for many years carried the French pronunciation "Coe-leen-yee." Persistent Anglicizing by radio announcers to "Coe-lig-ny" changed the pronunciation among newcomers.)

Admiral de Coligny was a Protestant Huguenot in the Roman Catholic court of Catherine de Medici who, as the widow of France's King Henry II, was the power behind the throne of her sons, Francis II, Charles IX and later Henry II. She was the daughter of the Renaissance Man, Lorenzo de Medici, so artistic and extroverted characteristics were in her genes. Her Catholic background led her to persecute the Protestants violently. A settle-



ment in the New World would provide a safe haven for Coligny and his fellow persecuted Huguenots. Also, a successful colony would place France in the enviable position of what would be known today as "trading in emerging countries."

Meanwhile Jean Ribaut had risen through the ranks to become one of Coligny's most dependable officers, having captured Calais from the English and supervising French interests in Scotland. So it was natural that Coligny would entrust this important mission to his valued captain.

Jean Ribaut planned his expedition well. He was well provisioned with guns and supplies. He knew how to appease any Indians he encountered with gifts and friendship. He brought along several stone monuments, or markers, to establish

Someone decided that one of their lot should be killed and those remaing could eat his flesh.

French claims along the coast. Equally careful was he in choosing the site for the French settlement, and wasted no time in having his men construct an impressive fort measuring 160 by 130 feet and surrounded by a moat.

By mid-June Ribaut was off again for France with the promise that he would return in six months with supplies and more colonists, presumably some of them women. He asked for volunteers to stay behind at the new fort which he had named Charlesfort (for the young French king). All the men wished to stay, but Ribaut chose 28 to remain.

Those chosen to stay turned out to be the least fortunate ones. Whether through weak leadership, dependency on the friendly Indians or confidence that their captain would return as promised, the men at Charlesfort did not plant crops to see them through the winter. Game and fish were abundant, but not sufficient for a complete diet. By winter, the nearby Indians had already given them all the corn

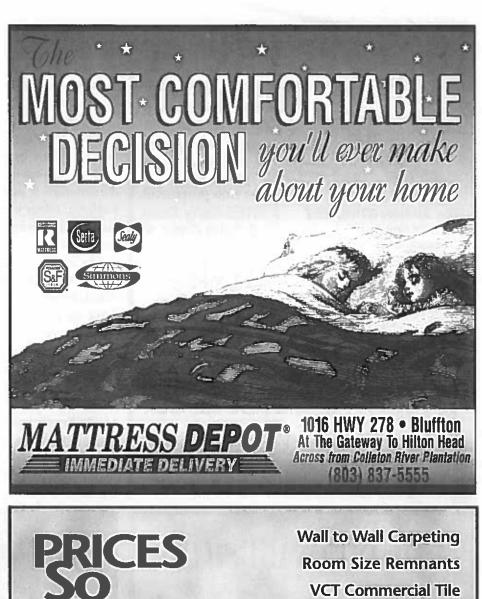
and grains they could spare. A delegation was selected to explore farther up the river and seek food from other Indians who, it turned out, were generous indeed, offering two canoes full of food. Unfortunately, fire broke out in the colony shortly thereafter, destroying most of those supplies.

Morale and discipline soon broke down. Captain Pierria, the leader selected by Ribaut, responded by hanging one man and marooning another, named La Chere, on a neighboring island without supplies.

This was too much, and the soldiers mutinied. They murdered Captain Pierria and rescued the hapless La Chere. Nicholas Barre was selected as the new leader and immediately the men set to work building a boat that could take them home to France. The Indians, who probably wanted to be free of these men who were a drain on their resources, helped build the 20-ton sloop from available material. The combined efforts used moss hanging in abundance from trees as caulking, and the Frenchmen contributed their own shirts and bedding as sails. Provisions came from the local Indians. Hopes were high as they set sail in April 1563.

One young man remained behind. Guillaume Rouffi may have been psychic as he watched his comrades prepare for the long voyage across the Atlantic. He elected to stay with the Indians. His ingenuity at saving his own skin under several circumstances is recorded as he changed names and religion to suit the occasion. When last heard of, he was an Indian interpreter for the Spanish.

The high hopes of the homewardbound Frenchmen were soon dashed as the winds died on the open ocean long enough for all their food and water to be used up. The men ate their leather shoes and belts. As they lay helplessly on the ship, certain that nothing worse could happen and that death was near, someone decided that one of their lot should be killed and that those remaining would eat his flesh to stay alive. Lots were cast and it fell to the unfortunate La Chere, who had been rescued by his comrades from banishment on an island, to be killed and eaten. Winds drove the half-crazed survivors to within sight of Europe, where







they were picked up by a passing English vessel. The sickest were put ashore, but the rest were taken to England where the saga of the first French colony in the New World was told, although the English court already knew about Charlesfort from another firsthand account.

What had happened to Ribaut? When he successfully reached

France, his country was torn apart by a civil war between the Protestants and Catholies. Ribaut was forced to seek refuge in England, where in return for aid to the colonists Oueen

The very colonists he was asked to betray were in dire misery on the high seas.

Elizabeth the First asked him to deliver Florida to English claim. Little did Ribaut know that while this interview was held in May 1563, the very colonists he was asked to betray were in dire misery on the high seas. A loyal Frenchman, Ribaut could not agree with the queen's proposal, tried to escape to France and was thrown into prison. More than likely, while in prison he wrote his memoirs, which were published in England.

As France took a temporary respite from internal conflict, Admiral de Coligny mounted another expedition to Florida. With Ribaut in prison, he chose Rene de Laudonniere, Ribaut's second in command on the voyage to Port Royal, as leader. Their mission





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was to build Fort Caroline on the Riviere de Mai (the St. John's River). The expedition arrived at its destination almost a year before Jean Ribaut, since released from prison, was able to leave from Dieppe with supplies and reinforcements in 1565. At almost the same time, King Philip of Spain sent his own expedition, under Pedro Menendez de Aviles, to destroy Charlesfort (which they did not know was abandoned) and obliterate the French in the New World. But Ribaut won the race to Fort Caroline, so the Spaniards went ashore near St. Augustine. Ribaut left a small garrison to protect Fort Caroline, and set sail down the Florida coast to meet the Spanish. Bad weather caused him to miss the Spanish ships, and Ribaut's ships were struck and wrecked by what was probably a hurricane, stranding Ribaut's forces on the beaches south of Menendez's soldiers. Menendez used this opportunity to move north and strike Fort Caroline. Women and children were spared, but all the Frenchmen were killed, except those who escaped into the woods. Among those who survived were Laudonniere, the cartographer Le Moyne, and Jean Ribaut's son,

Menendez then turned south to meet the remaining French forces. The outnumbered Frenchmen surrendered, and all those who would not renounce Protestantism were killed. Jean Ribaut was with a second group which, not knowing the fate of the first, surrendered to Menendez's mercy, of which there was none. Jean Ribaut was executed not far from the place where he had first set foot on Florida sand.

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