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Rene Goulaine de Laudonniere

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Laudonniere, Rene Goulaine de, "L'Histoire notable de la Floride" (1586). *Early Visions Bucket*. 19.
https://digital.usfsp.edu/early_visions_bucket/19

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

René Goulaine de Laudonnière, L'Histoire notable de la Floride

Posted on [November 26, 2014](#)

It was a torrid September in 1565. René Goulaine de Laudonnière lay sweating with



— Fort Matanzas (State Archives of Florida)

fever in his hut at Fort Caroline, somewhere south of present-day Jacksonville. He had led two earlier voyages of discovery for the French king, but now was chafing under the command of Jean Ribault, appointed over him by Admiral de Coligny. Since the preceding year, Laudonnière had built Fort Caroline into a burgeoning French colony with the intent of challenging the Spanish dominance in this part of the New World. However, Ribault had arrived with sealed orders to repulse the expected attack by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés who had been ordered to evict the French Huguenots (Protestants) from the Spanish Catholic lands of la Florida. Ribault blithely proceeded to strip him of ships, men and armaments to reinforce his command for the attack on the Spanish. It was the middle of hurricane season, but Ribault ignored Laudonnière's warnings and set sail in pursuit of the Spanish, only to have his fleet decimated by a devastating storm.

Meanwhile, Laudonnière was making the best of the resources left to him to reinforce Fort Caroline to withstand the anticipated Spanish attack which came in the midst of a torrential rainstorm. The French force was routed, but Laudonnière escaped in his nightshirt and lived to write the history. Ribault, on the other hand, was defeated, captured and executed by Menéndez at Matanzas, thus rendering him unable to defend his actions to the French court. Laudonnière's account of his three voyages to America, published as *L'Histoire notable de la Florida* appeared in 1586, twelve years after his death.

This translated excerpt, from Richard Hakluyt's Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, puts the reader into the time, place and atmosphere of the sixteenth-century in a way that a modern translation can not. Minor changes in spelling have been made although the flavor of the text is retained; Hakluyt's subheadings and page numbers (in brackets) have also been retained.

Edited by Hugh Tulloch, Senior Auditor, University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

Further Reading

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McGrath, John T. "Admiral Coligny, Jean Ribault, and the East Coast of North America." *French Colonial History* 1 (2002) 63-76.

Hakluyt, Richard, *A notable historie containing foure voyages made by certaine French Captaines into Florida: Wherein the great riches and fruitfulnessse of the Countrey with the maners of the people hitherto concealed are brought to light, written all, sauing the last, by Monsieur Laudonniere, who remained there himselfe as the French Kings Lieutenant a yeere and a quarter*. London : Imprinted by Thomas Dawson, 1587.

The Spaniards undermining and surprizing of the French.

They asked how the chiefe captaines of the enterprise did, and called them by all their names and surnames. I report me to you if it could be otherwise but these men before they went out of Spaine must needs be informed of the enterprise and of those that were to execute the same. About the breake of day they began to make toward our men: but our men which trusted them never a deale, had hoysted their sayles by night, being ready to cut the strings that tyed them. Wherefore perceiving that this making toward our men of the Spaniards was not to doe them any pleasure and knowing wel that their furniture was too smal to make head against them, because that the

most part of their men were on shore, they cut their cables, left their ankers, and set saile. The Spaniards seeing themselves discovered, lent them certaine volleys of their great ordinance, made saile after them, and chased them all day long: but our men got way of them still toward the sea. And the Spaniards seeing they could not reach them, by reason that the French ships were better of saile then theirs, and also because they would not leave the coast, turned backe and went on shore in the river Seloy,[1] which we cal the river of Dolphines 8 or 10 leagues distant from the place where we were. Our men therefore finding themselves better of saile then they, followed them to discry what they did, which after they had done, they returned vnto the river of May, where Captaine Ribault having descried them, embarked himselfe in a great boat to know what newes they had. Being at the entry of the river he met with the boat of captaine Cousets ship, wherein there was a good number of men which made relation unto him of all the Spaniards doings: and how the great ship named the Trinitie had kept the sea, and that she was not returned with them. They told him moreover that they had seen three Spanish ships enter into the river of Dolphins, and the other three remained in the rode; farther that they had put their souldiers, their victuals and munition on land. After he vnderstood these newes hee returned to the fortresse, and came to my chamber where I was sick, and there in the presence of the Captaines, La Grange, S. Marie, Ottigny, Visty, Yonuille, and other gentlemen, he propounded, that it was necessary for the kings seruice, to embarke himselfe with all his forces, and with the three ships that were in the rode to seeke the Spanish fleete, whereupon he asked our advise.

Dangerous flawes of wind on the coast of Florida in September.

I first replied, and shewed vnto him the consequence of such an enterprise, advertising him among other things of the perilous flawes of windes that rise on this coast, and that if it chanced that hee were driven from the shore, it would be very hard for him to recover it againe, that in the meane while they which should stay in the Forte should be in feare and danger. The Captaines, Saint Marie, and La Grange declared vnto him farther, that they thought it not good to put any such enterprise in execution, that it was farre better to keepe the land, and do their best endeavour to fortifie themselves: And that after that the Trinitie (which was the principall ship) were returned, there would be much more likelihood to enterprise this voyage.

A village and river both of that name.

This notwithstanding he resolved to vndertake it, and that which more is, after he vnderstoode by king Emola,[2] one of our neighbours which arrived vpon the handling of these matters, that the Spaniards in great numbers were gone on shore, which had taken possession of the houses of Seloy, in the most part whereof they had placed their Negroes, which they had brought to labour, and also lodged themselves and had cast divers trenches about them. Thus for the considerations which he had, and doubting (as he might well doe) that the Spaniards would encampe themselves there to molest vs, and in the ende to chase vs out of the Countrey, he resolved and continued in his embarkment, [pg 516] caused a Proclamation to be made, that all souldiers that were vnder his charge should presently with their weapons embarke them, and that his two ensignes should march: which was put in execution. He came into my chamber, and prayed me to lend him my Lieuteuant, mine ensigne, and my sergeant, and to let all my good souldiers, which I had, goe with him, which I denied him, because my selfe being sicke, there was no man to stay in the fort. Thereupon he answered me that I needed not to doubt at all, and that he would returne the

morrow after, that in the meane space Monsieur de Lys should stay behind to looke to all things. Then I shewed vnto him that he was chiefe in this Countrey, and that I for my part had no further authoritie: that therefore hee would take good advisement what hee did, for feare least some inconvenience might ensue. Then he tolde me that he could doe no lesse, then to continue this enterprise, and that in the letter which he had received from my Lord Admirall, there was a postscript, which hee shewed mee written in these wordes:

An aduertisement of my Lord Admirall to Captaine Ribault.

Captain Iohn Ribault, as I was enclosing vp this letter, I received a certaine aduice, that Don Pedro Melendes departeth from Spaine to goe to the coast of Newe France: see you that you suffer him not to encroch vpon you, no more then he would that you should encroch vpon him. You see (quoth he) the charge that I have, and I leave it vnto your selfe to iudge, if you could do any lesse in this case, considering the certaine advertisement that we have, that they are already on lande, and will invade vs. This stopped my mouth. Thus therefore confirmed or rather obstinate in this enterprise, and having regard rather vnto his particular opinion then vnto the advertisements which I had given him, and the inconveniences of the time whereof I had forewarned him, he embarked himselfe the eight of September, and tooke mine ensigne and eight and thirtie of my men away with him. I report mee to those that know what warres meane, if when an ensigne marcheth, any souldier that hath any courage in him will stay behind, to forsake his ensigne: Thus no man of commandement stayed behind with mee, for each one followed him as chiefe, in whose name straight after his arrivall, all cries and proclamations were made. Captaine Grange, which liked not very well of this enterprise, was vnto the tenth of the month with mee and would not have gone aborde, if it had not beene for the instant requestes that Captaine Ribault made vnto him, which staid two dayes in the rode attending vntill La Grange was come vnto him; who being come abord, they set sayle altogether, and from that time forward I never saw them more.

A mighty tempest the 10 of September.

The very day that he departed, which was the tenth of September, there arose so great a tempest accompanied with such stormes, that the Indians themselves assured me that it was the worst weather that ever was seene on the coast: wherevpon two or three dayes after, fearing least our shippes might be in some distresse, I sent for Monsieur du Lys vnto mee, to take order to assemble the rest of our people to declare vnto them what neede wee had to fortifie our selves: which was done accordingly: and then I gave them to vnderstand the necessity and inconveniences whereinto we were like to fall, as wel by the absence of our ships, as by the neernesse of the Spanyards, at whose hand we could looke for no lesse then an open and sufficient proclaimed war, seeing that they had taken land and fortified themselves so neere vnto us. And if any misfortune were fallen vnto our men which were at Sea, we ought to make a full account with ourselves that wee were to endure many great miseries, being in so small number, and so many wayes afflicted as we were.

Landonniere hardly vsed by Ribault.

Thus every one promised mee to take paines: and therefore considering that their proportion of victuals was small and that so continuing, they would not be able to doe any great worke, I

augmented their allowance: although that after the arrivall of Captaine Ribault my portion of victuals was allotted vnto mee as vnto a common souldier, neither was I able to give so much as part of a bottell of wine to any man which deserved it: for I was so farre from having meanes to doe so, that the Captaine himselfe tooke two of my boates, wherein the rest of the meale was, which was left me of the biscuits which I caused to bee made to returne into France: so that if I should say that I received more favour at the handes of the Englishmen, beeing Strangers vnto mee, I should say but a trueth.

Landonniere and his company begin to fortifie themselues.

Wee beganne therefore to fortifie our selves and to reaire that which was broken downe, principally toward the water side, where I caused three score foote of trees to be planted, to reaire the Palissado with the plankes which I caused to bee taken of the ship that I had builded. Neverthelesse notwithstanding all our diligence and travaille, wee were never able fully to reaire it by reason of the stormes [pg 518] which commonly did vs so great annoy, that wee could not finish our inclosure.

A muster of men left in the fort by Ribault.

Perceiving myselfe in such extremitie I tooke a muster of the men, which captaine Ribault had left me, to see if there were any that wanted weapon: I found nine or tenne whereof not past two or three had ever drawen sword out of the scabbard, as I thinke. Let them which have bene bold to say, that I had men ynough left me, so that I had meanes to defend my selfe, give eare a little vnto mee, and if they haue eyes in their heads, let them see what men I had. Of the nine there were foure but yong striplings, which served Captaine Ribault and kept his dogs, the fifth was a cooke: among those that were without the fort, and which were of the foresaid company of Captaine Ribault, there was a Carpenter of threescore yeeres olde, one a Beere brewer, one olde Crosse-bowe maker, two Shoomakers, and foure or five men that had their wives, a player on the virginals, two servants of Monsieur du Lys, one of Monsieur de Beauhaire, one of Monsieur de la Grange, and about fourescore and five or sixe in all, counting as wel Lackeys as women and children. Behold the goodly troupe so sufficient to defend themselves, and so couragious as they have esteemed them to be: and for my part I leave it to others consideration to imagine whether Captaine Ribault woulde have left them with me to have borrowed my men, if they had bene such. Those that were left me of mine owne company were about sixeteene or seuteene that coulde beare armes, and all of them poore and leane: the rest were sicke and maymed in the conflict which my Lieutenant had against Vtina.[3] This view being taken, wee set our watches, whereof wee made two Centinels, that the Souldiers might have one night free. Then wee bethought our selves of those which might bee most sufficient, among whome wee choose two, one of whom was named Monsieur Saint Cler, and the other Monsieur de la Vigne, to whom we delivered candles and Lanterns to goe round about the fort to viewe the watch because of the foule and foggie weather. I delivered them also a sandglasse or clocke, that the Centinels might not be troubled more one then another. In the meane while I ceased not, for all the foule weather nor my sicknesse which I had, to oversee the Corps de garde. The night betweene the nineteenth and twentieth of September La Vigne kept watch with his company, wherein he vsed all endeavour, although it rayned without ceasing. When the [pg 519] day was therefore come, and that he saw that it rayned still worse then it did before, hee pitied the Centinels so too moyled and wette: and

thinking the Spanyardes would not have come in such a strange time, hee let them depart, and to say the trueth, he went himselfe vnto his lodging.

The Spanyards discryed the 20 of September.

In the meane while one which had something to doe without the fort, and my trumpet which went vp vnto the rampart perceived a troupe of Spanyards which came downe from a little knappe. Where incontinently they beganne to cry alarme, and the Trumpetter also: Which as soone as ever I vnderstoode, forthwith I issued out, with my target and sword in my hand, and gatte mee into the middest of the Court, where I beganne to crie vpon my souldiers. Some of them which were of the forward sort went toward the breach, which was on the Southside, and where the munitions of the artillerie lay, where they were repulsed and slaine.

The Spaniards enter the fort.

By the selfe same place two ensignes entred, which immediately were planted on the wals. Two other ensignes also entred on the other side toward the West, where there was another breach: and those which were lodged in this quarter, and which shewed themselves, were likewise defeated.

Francis lean a traitour to his nation.

And as I went to succour them which were defending the breach on the southwest side, I encountred by chance a great company of Spaniards, which had already repulsed our men and were now entred, which drove me backe vnto the court of the fort: being there I espied with them one called Francis Jean, which was one of the Mariners which stole away my barks, and had guided and conducted the Spanyards thither. As soone as he sawe me, he began to say, This is the Captaine.

Don Pedro Melendes captaine of the Spaniards.

This troupe was led by a captaine whose name as I thinke, was Don Pedro Melendes: these made certain pushes at me with their pikes which lighted on my target. But perceiving that I was not able to withstand so great a company, and that the court was already wonne, and their ensignes planted on the ramparts, and that I had never a man about me, saving one only whose name was Bartholomew, I entred into the yard of my lodging, into which they followed me, and had it not bene for a tent that was set vp, I had bin taken: but the Spanyards which followed me were occupied in cutting of the cordes of the tent, and in the meane while I saved my selfe by the

Laudonniere escape.

breach which was on the West side neere vnto my Lieutenants lodging, and gate away into the woods: where I found certain of my men which were escaped, of which number there were three or foure which were sore hurt. Then spake I thus vnto them: Sirs, since it hath pleased God that this mischance is happened vnto vs, we must needs take the paines to get over the marshes vnto the ships which are at the mouth of the river. Some would needs go to a little village which was in

the woods, the rest followed me through the reedes in the water, where being able to go no farther by reason of my sicknesse which I had, I sent two of my men which were with me, which could swim well, vnto the ships to advertise them of that which had happened, and to send them word to come and helpe me. They were not able that day to get vnto the ships to certifie them thereof: so I was constrained to stand in the water vp to the shoulders all that night long, with one of my men which would never forsake me.

Iohn du Chemin a faithful servant.

The next morning, being scarcely able to draw my breath any more, I betooke me to my prayers with the souldier which was with mee, whose name was Iohn du Chemin: for I felt my selfe so feeble, that I was afraid I should die suddenly: and in trueth if he had not imbraced me in both his armes, and so held me vp, it had not bene possible to save me. After we had made an ende of our prayers, I heard a voyce, which in my judgement was one of theirs which I had sent, which were over against the ships and called for the ship boat, which was so in deed: and because those of the ships had vnderstanding of the taking of the fort by one called Iohn de Hais, master Carpenter, which fled vnto them in a shallop;

The diligence of the Mariners to save them that escaped out of the fort.

they had set saile to run along the coast to see if they might save any: wherein doubtlesse they did very well their endeavour. They went straight to the place where the two men were which I had sent, and which called them. As soone as they had received them in and vnderstood where I was, they came and found me in a pitifull case. Five or sixe of them tooke me and caried me into the shallop: for I was not able by any means to go on foot. After I was brought into the shallop some of the Mariners took their clothes from their backs to lend them me, and would have caried me presently to their ships to give me a little Aqua vitae. Howbeit I would not goe thither, vntill I had first gone with the boat along the reeds, [pg 521] to seeke out the poore soules which were scattered abroad, where we gathered vp 18 or 20 of them.

Among these was Iaques Morgues painter sometime living in the Blackfryers in London.

The last that I took in was the nephew of the Treasurer le Beau. After we were al come to the ship, I comforted them as well as I could, and sent back the boat againe with speed to see if they could find yet any more.

Francis Iean cause of this enterprise.

Vpon her returne, the Mariners told mee how that captaine Iames Ribault which was in his ship about two muskets shot distant from the fort, had parled with the Spaniards, and that Francis Iean came vnto his ship, where hee staid a long space, whereat they greatly marveiled, considering hee was the cause of this enterprise, how hee would let him escape. After I was come into the ship called the Greyhound, captaine Iames Ribault and captaine Valuot came to see me: and there we concluded to returne into France.

[1] Seloy, name given to both the village of the Timucan chief Seloy and a nearby river. It appears that Menéndez built St. Augustine on the ruins of Seloy's village. The river has been variously reported in numerous locations, from the Satilla River in Georgia to the Matanzas River south of St. Augustine.

[2] Emola (also Emolua or Molua), the *cacique* or chief, reported to be a subordinate of the Utina; the village was also Emola, named after the Chief.

[3] Utina, one of the 15 Timucua groups sharing a common language. They made contact with the French in 1562 and were immortalized in the drawings of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues. The Saturiwa (another local tribe) used the name Timucua (spelled Thimogna) to designate specifically the Utina living between the St. Johns and the Suwannee rivers.

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