

# Search for Old St. Augustine

By Chester B. DePratter

I have always had an interest in St. Augustine's early history, because its' history is directly connected to that of Santa Elena on Parris Island. St. Augustine was estab-



Figure 1: Portrait of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés. (Internet)

lished by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés in September 1565, as a military outpost for defense against a French presence at Fort Caroline located at the mouth of the St. John's River near present-day Jacksonville, Florida (Figure 1). Menéndez had been sent by Philip II to dislodge the French from Spanish-claimed *La Florida*, and he was accompanied by several hundred soldiers and sailors. Shortly after fortifying

St. Augustine, Menéndez marched north along inland trails in a major storm to attack Fort Caroline. The French defenders were caught off guard, and the Spanish force achieved an easy victory. In the following weeks, the majority of the French colonists in Florida were "put to the sword" while the survivors fled to France.

With the French threat eliminated, Menéndez strengthened his hastily constructed mainland fortification in St. Augustine. Dr. Kathleen Deagan, emerita Research Curator at the Florida Museum of Natural History, has spent more than 20 years working on that first settlement at what is today the Fountain of Youth Park just north of downtown St. Augustine.

Menéndez traveled north from St. Augustine in March and April 1566, and in about mid-April, he reached present-day Port Royal Sound near Beaufort. He chose a location on the southern tip of Parris Island to serve as his second settlement. This place, Santa Elena, was meant to become the capital of Spanish *La Florida*. After

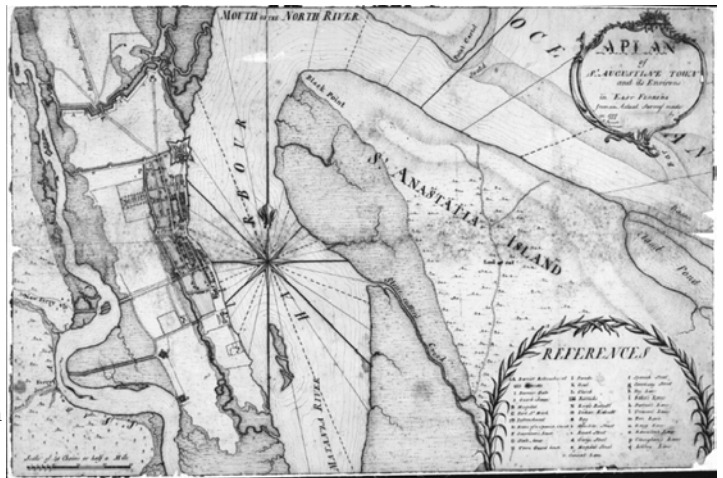


Figure 3: Joseph Purcell map, 1777, showing sand ridge just above words "St. Anastasia Island." (Internet)

building a fort at Santa Elena, Menéndez returned to St. Augustine.

In April 1566, the storehouse in the St. Augustine fort was set on fire by flaming arrows during an Indian attack. Menéndez, in consultation with his chief lieutenants, decided to relocate the community of St. Augustine and its defensive fortifications to Anastasia Island, a predominantly marshy area with limited high ground, across the Matanzas River from the original settlement (Figure 2). By late June 1566, a new, triangular fort had been constructed on Anastasia Island. Contemporary documents provide few details on the location of this new fort. Soon after the fort was completed, soil began to erode from the front side of the fort, and it was partially dismantled and rebuilt very close to the initial location but farther from the "sea." These two forts on Anastasia Island are counted as the second and third forts at St. Augustine.

In June 1566, approximately 1,500 reinforcements arrived at St. Augustine, and they would have been housed on Anastasia Island before they were sent to Santa Elena and other outposts in Florida and the Caribbean. This means that the resident population of St. Augustine on Anastasia Island could have been as high as 2,000 individuals, though once the soldiers were dispersed, there may only have been a few hundred.



Figure 2: View from above St. Augustine east to Matanzas River, Anastasia Island, and Conch Island farthest to the east. (Internet)





Figure 4: Close-up of north end of sand ridge on Joseph Purcell map. (Internet)

The third St. Augustine fort was damaged by fire in 1567, and it was burned again during a 1570 mutiny. Both times it was rebuilt, presumably at the same location. In 1572, the decision was made to relocate the town and fort to the mainland because “the sea had eaten a large part of the island where the fort and town were. The new mainland fort, St. Augustine’s fourth, was built on the bank of the Matanzas river just north of the newly established town.

So just where were the second and third forts on Anastasia Island? As it turns out, historians and archaeologists have speculated about their location, but no one has ever actually looked for these forts.

There are a great number of maps of St. Augustine and its environs with the earliest dating back to Francis Drake’s 1586 attack on the town. Many of these maps are currently available online, so I conducted a quick survey of these maps and what details they contained concerning Anastasia Island and potential locations for the missing forts.

Most of these early maps do not show details of the interior of Anastasia Island and its extensive marshes, but the Joseph Purcell map of 1777 was the exception (Figure 3). That map shows a north-south ridge running through the surrounding marsh that I thought might yield some evidence of St. Augustine’s former location on the island. The map appears to show entrenchments or earth embankments at its north end (Figure 4) and another set

farther to the south (not illustrated here). Part of the northern set may date to the summer of 1740 when Governor James Oglethorpe of Georgia laid siege to St. Augustine, but the more southerly embankment is of unknown origin.

Most of the original landforms and features of Anastasia Island were obscured when a developer, David P. Davis, bought the island for development. In 1925-26, he buried the island’s marshes beneath several feet of dredged fill for his Davis Shores subdivision (Figure 5).

With the preliminary work done, I contacted my friends and colleagues, Dr. J. Michael Francis of the University of South Florida and retired St. Augustine city ar-

chaeologist, Carl Halbirt, and invited them to join me in the search, and they both agreed.

The next step was to organize an expedition to St. Augustine to search for these two missing forts. I procured funding from a group of interested supporters to hire Stacy Young, head of SCIAA’s Applied Research Division, and a crew for two weeks of work in St. Augustine. Because the part of Anastasia Island where we wanted to work was located in Davis Shores subdivision, I sought and received permission from the St. Augustine City Commission to excavate shovel tests in the city right-of-way along residential streets and in Oglethorpe Battery Park (at the location of Oglethorpe’s 1740 artillery battery). I also retained a filmmaker, A. J. “Jamie” Koelker to come along and film the field work.

The St. Augustine field work took place in late March and early April 2019. The crew excavated approximately 75 shovel tests in Oglethorpe Battery Park (Figure 6) and another 180 along residential streets (Figure 7). Many of these tests were excavated to depths of three feet or more in dredged fill, while others were excavated into the sandridge I had seen on Purcell’s 1777 map. Nearly all of those along streets were in manicured lawns, so we were careful in filling our holes and replacing the sod (Figure 8).



Figure 5: View showing 1926 dredge fill operation on entire north end of Anastasia Island. (Internet)





Figure 6: Shovel testing around Oglethorpe monument in Oglethorpe Battery Park. (Photo by Chester B. DePratter)

We found only a few sherds of Spanish and Indian pottery in our excavations, but there were no concentrations of artifacts or evidence of the town or either of the forts. We were able to delineate the ridge shown on the Purcell map, though it is now surrounded by dredge fill pumped onto Anastasia Island in 1926 by Mr. Davis.

We did not solve the mystery of where St. Augustine and its forts were on Anastasia Island between 1566 and 1572. Archaeology is like fishing. Somedays you catch fish, and on other days you do not. Was the project worth the effort and cost? Yes, I believe it was. We ruled out a possible location for the town and forts, and now others can continue the search by looking elsewhere. At this point it seems likely that both the town and its forts have washed into the Atlantic Ocean, but some portion of it could remain along the eastern side of the island.



Figure 8: Location of all excavated shovel tests. Rectangular area at upper left is Oglethorpe Battery Park. (Map by Tamara S. Wilson)



Figure 7: Shovel testing in city right-of-way along North Matanzas Boulevard. (Photo by Chester B. DePratter)

I thank my crew, Stacy Young, Brandy Joy, John Fisher, Lalon Swaney, Evan Walker, and Tamara Wilson. Dr. Charles Cobb and graduate students from the University of Florida came up for a day and donated their time and effort. The project would not have been possible without the support of those who donated funds for the work. Thanks to all!