New shipwreck discoveries
By Thom Parham

It has just been announced that several significant shipwreck sites, possibly dating from the 16th century have been found near Cape Canaveral. Some of the artifacts— including a marble column with the Coat of Arms of France— have archaeologists really excited. Could this be the lost fleet of Jean Ribault? The debris trails of the wrecks (from at least 3, but perhaps as many as 5 ships), have many large anchors, iron and bronze cannons, and other remarkable features rarely seen. It’s an important discovery, from an obscure but significant time in Florida’s history. It involves the French, Spanish, English, Indians, Pirates and an infamous massacre.

Those of us who attended school in Florida probably remember the basic storyline of Fort Caroline and the French Huguenots. But just who were the Huguenots, and why did they come to Florida? The Huguenots were French Protestants being persecuted in France. The King of France did not want them in staunchly Catholic France, but he thought they could be useful in establishing colonies in America.

Jean Ribault, a Huguenot Navigator and Naval officer, was chosen to lead the first expedition of exploration for a French colony in America. Ribault first landed near Cape Canaveral, and explored north to the Spanish named “Rio San Juan” in the early summer of 1562. The French renamed the St Johns as “River May”, and erected a Marble Column with a plaque honoring French Queen Catherine, who was actually a pretty staunch opponent of the Huguenot mission. Then Ribault left the area to explore further north, and built a small fort on Parris Island, which was named Charles Fort.

Then, he left to return to France to gather more supplies for his mission. At this point, things become more interesting. When Ribault returned to France, the Religious wars had broken out, and Ribault turned to Protestant Queen Elizabeth of England for help. Instead, she had him arrested and imprisoned for violating Spanish territory. Then someone at the English court let the Spanish ambassador know about Charles Fort. Their time was numbered from that point; this was the era of the Spanish Inquisition, after all. They could be burned at the stake if they were captured by the Spanish.

But when the Spanish Forces arrived at Parris Island (then called Santa Elena) to annihilate Charles Fort, surprise, no one was there. The tiny French garrison of around 30 people had revolted against their leader, built a boat, and sailed for Protestant England. But most of them died of starvation before they were rescued by an English fishing. Luck was turning against the French.

Now another French Huguenot would take over responsibility from Ribault. Rene Laudonnière was chosen to be the leader of the next expedition. Returning to the “River May” (the St Johns River) in summer of 1564, he brought with him more than 300 people on 3 ships. The colonists included rich and poor, noblemen and craftsmen, Huguenots of course, a few Catholics and even Muslim Moors.

They established a fort on an island in the St Johns River they called Fort Caroline, and began their search for the easy riches they had heard about from the Spanish expedition of Hernan Cortez. The first contact between the French and the Timucua Indians was very positive, with gifts exchanged and good relations established. Saturiwa, the local Chief,
immediately grasped the concept that having an ally with obviously superior weapons technology would give him an advantage over his neighbors, rival tribes which actually spoke the same language and practiced the same religion—but competed for resources. The French would play this to their advantage more than once.

The French noblemen soon began to grow weary of searching for gold and riches, with nothing to be found except occasional trinkets either salvaged from Spanish shipwrecks or traded from Central America. Being nobles, they were not accustomed to real labor, and made very poor farmers. They traded what they could while the Indians remained friendly, but the French had consumed a lot of the corn that Saturiwa’s people had cached for the winter, and relations were now strained.

Luckily for the French Protestants, English Pirate John Hawkins (a fellow protestant, but also a slave trader) decided to pay the small colony a visit on August 3rd, 1565. Laudonnière traded some of his cannons for food and a small ship. The French soon decided to try a little piracy of their own, sailing a longboat out to attack Spanish Treasure ships sailing up the Gulf Stream back to Spain. Phillip II of Spain was not going to tolerate this. Not only was Florida mandated to the Spanish by the Catholic Church, the French Huguenot colonists were considered heretics, and Phillip was sworn to uphold the faith.

In August, 1565, Pedro Menendez de Aviles left Spain with a fleet of ships carrying 1000 soldiers to eliminate this threat to Spain and Catholicism. But the overall situation was still rather desperate for the French, not having planted any crops, and the Timucua Indians refusing to trade any more of their already depleted grain stockpile. To make matters worse for Laudonnière, when Hawkins the Pirate had a chance, he reported the miserable state of Fort Caroline to Leader of the Huguenots, Gaspard de Coligny, who decided to give Jean Ribault, recently released from prison another chance at reorganizing the colony. He left France in June of 1565 with more than 600 new colonists in a small fleet of five ships.

Menendez made the first move, sailing north towards Fort Caroline, prepared to wipe it off the face of the earth. But when Menendez’ fleet reached the mouth of the St. Johns River, they encountered Ribault's five ships which were blocking the mouth of the river. Menendez moved his ships south to a harbor he had first charted on August 28, 1565, St. Augustine’s day. He established a fortified camp at the Timucua village of Seloy, and named the small settlement "San Augustin", which was the original site of Saint Augustine, now on the grounds of the Fountain of Youth attraction. He left some men behind to guard the newly established base of operations, and began marching through the swamps of northern Florida to attack Fort Caroline.

Jean Ribault realized he had to be daring to confront the Spanish, so he quickly set sail to attack the Spanish while they unloaded supplies at their newly established base in St Augustine. As Menendez and his men trudged north through the swamps and sloughs towards Fort Caroline, Ribault’s small fleet headed south. Unfortunately for the daring Frenchman, a sudden hurricane came long and wrecked the French Ships, with only about 200 survivors who began the long walk north towards Fort Caroline.

Rene Laudonnière was left in charge at Fort Caroline. Around 200 French colonists, most of them newly arrived from France, had been left to guard the small fort. Menendez also had a French traitor and informant who assisted him in his bloody mission. When they finally arrived at Fort Caroline in the early morning, the fort was virtually unguarded. The Spanish rushed the fort on three sides, and captured most of the garrison with only one Spaniard killed in the skirmish.
Laudonnière and the artist Jacques LeMoyne were able to escape by hiding in the St Johns River using cut cane tubes as snorkels to breathe as they hid underwater. They would round up an additional 50 French survivors, and escaped to the coast. Ribault's son was anchored with three ships near present-day Mayport, and took the surviving Huguenots on board. Eventually, Laudonnière would take a ship west and arrive in Protestant Wales. From there, he would eventually make his way back to France, arriving in Paris in December, 1566. The 140 or so Huguenots who were captured at Fort Caroline were executed there and buried in a mass grave. But the bloody business wasn’t finished yet.

When the French shipwreck survivors, about 360 in number including Jean Ribault, could not cross Matanzas Inlet, they were stopped cold. As they debated what to do next (and began to starve), the local Indian allies of the Spanish informed Menendez of the shipwrecks and French survivors. Menendez made his move quickly, crossing the inlet and speaking with some of the French. Eventually, they were all brought across the inlet under Spanish control. Menendez had already determined to execute all of the French, and began to do so, putting 10 to the sword at a time.

Father Francisco Grajales, a Catholic priest, begged to be allowed to determine if any of the prisoners were actually Catholics. “About 10 or 12 were Christians” Grajales wrote in a legal deposition of the events of September 29, 1565. The remaining Huguenots, about 340 in number, including Jean Ribault, were executed at or near the Inlet now named Matanzas –from the Spanish word Matanza, meaning massacre or slaughter.

The aftermath of these events of 1565 would result in Spain being firmly in control of Florida for the next 200 years, until the British Period which began in 1763. Menendez destroyed Fort Caroline, but the Spanish built another fort at or near the same site. In April 1568 a French nobleman assaulted and destroyed the fort, and killed all the Spanish prisoners in revenge for the 1565 massacre. Although the Spanish returned and built another fort there, it was abandoned after a year.

The exact location of the original Fort Caroline has long eluded archaeologists, although intriguing artifacts have been found throughout the area. Various organizations, such as NOAA, Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program (LAMP) based in St Augustine, and individuals with a background in history, such as State Representative Lake Ray, have all searched diligently for the fort site. So far, conclusive archaeological evidence has not come to light, and the search continues, as far afield as Georgia (although the distances which Ribault, Laudonnière and Menendez record fall far short of Georgia). But now a very intriguing wreck site has been discovered, complete with French-made bronze cannon and a marble column affixed with the Coat of Arms of France.

The column alone has archaeologist’s eyes bugging out of their heads in excitement, as they view video released by Global Marine Explorations, Inc. (GME). GME is backing off claiming the wreck site as Ribault’s or, for that matter, even French. James Sinclair, marine archaeologist who has been analyzing the finds, expressed his doubts. “Some features of the wreck site seem much more Spanish, such as the anchors. There are a number of anchors in the debris trail, and none exhibit traits that would indicate a French origin.

There is a possibility that the wreck was actually a Spanish ship, sent by the Governor of Havana to retrieve the French Column from Fort Caroline, and bring it back.” Essentially, the column itself was like a property marker, and the Spanish would not leave such a thing in place, especially after Pedro Menendez captured the fort and executed the French Huguenots.
The origin of the ship or ships (if they are related) may never be determined, without an artifact like a coin that has a visible date. And some French coins have been showing up— but a long way from where the new wreckage has been discovered. Mark Anthony, proprietor of Spanish Main Antiques on Ponce de Leon Boulevard has had some very intriguing French coins come into his shop. He showed me one of the gold French coins.

“They are dated right for the Ribault expedition, and they pop up on local beaches once in a while. One gentleman has had a lot of luck finding French Coins, many of them gold, and every now and then, he comes in to sell one.” Anthony explained further “If these coins are from one of Ribault’s ships from 1565—and all evidence seems to point to that origin—then the site of those wrecks must be closer to Matanzas Inlet than where the new wrecks are.”

But that does not mean that the new sites are not associated with the French Huguenots, the cannon and the marble column make it obvious that they are associated strongly. But the story of the French massacre at Matanzas seems to be a bit too far from the new wreck site location. Perhaps, Ribault’s ships did wreck south of Anastasia Island near Matanzas Inlet, because of the number of French coins from the correct time period that are being found at intervals. And, perhaps, the Spanish did remove the monument and cannons from Fort Caroline.

But written documentation has yet to be found to indicate this scenario, and the French and Spanish kept pretty good records. However the mystery unravels, at least part of the mystery of this intriguing tale has come to light, after 451 years under water.