Menendez ousted French from Florida

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JACKSONVILLE --- Florida’s rich early heritage is dominated by the Spanish, so much so it is difficult to remember that the French actually were here and getting along very well prior to the arrival of Pedro Menendez at St. Augustine in 1565.

When Fort Caroline was founded at the mouth of the St. Johns River on May Day, 1562, there was no other European colony on the North American continent this side of Mexico. Frenchman Jean Ribaut brought an expedition of over 300 French Huguenots who were seeking religious freedom. The Indians were friendly and welcomed the French to these shores.

The first group remained only a short time, then moved up the coast to the Carolinas and come of them made it back home. Two years later, the second group of Huguenots, this group led by Rene Laudonniere, who had been on the first trip, came to Florida and back to Fort Caroline. A column which had been planted by Ribaut (who also spelled his name Ribault) was still standing, the Indians were still friendly, and the French set up housekeeping. They raised a triangular fort of earth and wood which enclosed several palm-thatched buildings. Other houses were built in the meadow outside the fort.

Spain had the first claim to Florida, what with Ponce de Leon and Tristan de Lunda and other conquistadores having explored the peninsula. When word of the French “invading” their territory reached the King of Spain, he was moved to do something about it. He had failed up to that point to seriously exploit their new land.

So it was Pedro Menendez came to St. Augustine and established the oldest permanent settlement in the United States. His first task was to rid the area of the French. He sent some troops up to the Fort to rout the Huguenots. Meanwhile, a fleet of the French had sailed toward St. Augustine to attack the Spanish. The fleet was sunk in a hurricane. Menendez mopped up those French left at Caroline and then wiped out the survivors wrecked along shore near St. Augustine.