

# PENON INLET AND THE MASSACRE OF THE FRENCH

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After examining the changing land forms as well as documentary evidence, the late John W. Griffin came to the tentative conclusion that the slaughter of the French troops by the Spanish forces in Florida in 1565 took place at Penon Inlet rather than at Matanzas Inlet. Additional materials have now come to light, supporting this hypothesis.

Penon Inlet (usually translated as Rock Inlet) although no longer open, was at that time one half league (1.72616917 miles) of what became known as Matanzas (slaughters) Intel. It is transitory in nature. Severe storms from time to time allowed the surge of water to break through the dunes, carving a channel from ocean to river. Then in time the inlet gradually silted up, closing the gap, as it has in recent times. According to one eyewitness report this southern inlet was open for some time in the second half of the nineteenth century. Whether both inlets were open at the time of the massacres is problematical. The low spot just north of Whitney Lab at Marineland is the probable location of the former Penon Inlet. The distance today between Matanzas Inlet and the site of Penon Inlet is 3.6 miles.

The story of the massacres is well known. The French, occupying parts of a land already claimed by Spain on the North American coast, established a foothold by building Fort Caroline in an area near present-day Jacksonville. The Spanish king dispatched Pedro Menendez de Aviles with settlers and soldiers to reclaim the territory. Menendez as *adelantado* (governor) established St. Augustine as a base. After an initial altercation with the French at sea, Menendez later took advantage of a hurricane to lead a detachment of Spanish soldiers overland from St. Augustine to For Caroline where the first slaughter of the French took place. After his return to St. Augustine he heard that some French ships had been wrecked down the coast and that the survivors were marching northward. Consequently, a party of Spanish soldiers under the leadership of Menendez headed south to intercept the shipwreck survivors.

The French forces by that time had reached an impassable inlet where they faced the Spanish soldiers across the watery expanse. As a result of ambiguous promises, Menendez convinced the exhausted and starving Frenchmen to cross the inlet in small boats. Ten at a time they were

marched into the sand dunes and “put to the sword.” A second group including the French leader, Jean Ribault, was dispatched several days later in the same manner.

The French and Spanish in years subsequent to the massacre report the events quite differently. As for the French, one authority (McGrath 2000:176) concludes, “To say the least, the source of each [French] writer’s information is quite suspect.” The best and most complete of the Spanish accounts is that of Gonzalo Solis de Meras, a brother-in-law of Pedro Menendez, who is believed, took part in the second massacre at the inlet. Although he gives a full account of the sequence of events, his description of the inlet in question is conflicting. He tells of some Indians bringing the information to Menendez that “four leagues [13.8093534 miles] away [from St. Augustine] there were many Christians who could not pass an arm of the sea, even though it was narrow, which is a river inside a bar, that they were compelled of necessity to cross in order to reach St. Augustine.” At a later point in the narrative the river is described as “narrow and easy to cross.” Still later he notes that the Frenchmen were standing on the shore of the river “two arquebus [early muzzle-loaded firearm- range was 328 feet so two arquebus shots would be 656 feet or about 1/10<sup>th</sup> of mile] shots away.” (Solis de Meras 1922:109-116).

While such a measure may have had an exact meaning at the time, by now the range of this early form of musket developed by the Spanish is illusive. Most authorities do not hazard a guess, but Brown (1980-42) says that “On a clear, calm day the effective range of the early matchlock arquebus was approximately 125 yards though the ball carried much farther ... accuracy and penetration beyond effective range was dismal even with quality gunpowder and a reasonably straight barrel.” Likewise another researcher (MacDonald, personal communication: 2001) concludes that the range was somewhere between 200-400 feet. Using this information and doubling the numbers, the inlet was anywhere from 400 to 750, or possibly 800 feet, across. Thus, we are left with a vague understanding of the width of the inlet, and not able to guess what *estrecho* (narrow) might have meant to a sixteenth century man. Furthermore, this description could perhaps be applied with equal correctness to either Matanzas or Pinon Inlet. Solis de Meras is vague in his description of other geographical features as well, intent as he was on telling the story of what happened between the Spanish and the French.

One account a year after the massacres throws into doubt whether Matanzas was even open in 1565. Menendez was aware that not all of the Frenchmen had been vanquished. He particularly had information that a number of the French were staying with the Indians north of Mosquito Inlet (near present day New Smyrna). He dispatched the pilot, Gonzalo Gayon, to investigate. Gayon was no ordinary pilot or seaman but one of the very best. Hailing from Asturias and having already made his reputation in the Mediterranean, he later became an expert pilot in the waters of the Americas. He served with the expedition to explore and take possession of Santa Elena (now Parris Island, South Carolina) in 1559, and it was he who was hired as chief pilot for Menendez’s initial expedition to Florida in 1565.

As Gayon sailed southward in 1566 to search for the Frenchmen still in hiding, he noted, as a good pilot would, various geographical features. After finding the Indians who were harboring the French, he set sail northward to give his report. His narrative discloses that “At the last point with the Indians (it was then) five leagues to Rio de Matanzas and when I reached there another inlet (boca) was found to the north. (Lyon 1976:17,17n39, 33, 976, 125; Gayon 1556). This statement implies, but does not directly state that the northerly inlet is a new one and therefore an inlet that he did not notice on his way south.

This raises several interesting questions. Was there only one inlet entering the Matanzas River when the massacres took place? If so, it was probably Pinon, since the new inlet noticed by Gayon was to the north of the inlet that he already knew about. Or is it possible, although it seems unlikely, that Matanzas was the inlet in 1565 and another inlet opened up north of there? There are several narrow spots on the south section of Anastasia Island where such an inlet could have been.

It was thirty-nine years later, in 1605, that another explorer, Alvero de Mesia, traveled the coast and, fortunately for our purposes, drew a map (see the pertinent section of the map in Figure 1 – not shown in this transcription – sorry). Here we see two entrances to the island waterway area. The first is labeled *Laguas S mananca*, the most likely translation being Matanzas Lagoon, implying a sluggish, Lakelike configuration. It is centered by a long narrow island, perhaps the beginning of Rattlesnake Island that exists today. The inlet to the south is designated as *bar Reta a Risboa*, translated by Eugene Lyon as the bar of Ribault (Lyon, personal communication 2001).

While this map is helpful in indicating the southernmost inlet as the one associated with Jean Ribault, it is necessary to be cautious in drawing any conclusions. Inlets shift with the sculpting of the tides and periodic storms, and on the Atlantic coast of North America show a downward drifting pattern.

It seems unlikely that Mexia was the one who named the bar and inlet, but more probably used the customary and already existing designation. It may be that his area is known as the place where the French faced the Spanish from the time of the massacres or possibly that Gayon was the first to name the waterway entrance. In any case, the assignment of Ribault’s name to the inlet forty years later is significant in terms of oral tradition.

More than a century after the Mexia map was drafted, another cartographer, Antonio de Arredondo, mapped the coast of Florida to Cape Canaveral (see figure 2). Arredondo’s map is generally considered more accurate than that of Mexia’s (Cusick 2001, personal communication). In this section under question two inlets are shown, the northern one named as *Barra de Matanzas* and the southern one referred to as *Barra del Pinon*. In the years intervening between Mexia’s trip and Arredondo’s mapping of the coastline, the Bar of Ribault had thus been named Pinon. On the Arredondo map the widths of the two inlets appear to be identical.

However, Arredondo gives the other inlet along the coast a similar schematic representation, so that the size of the waterway entrances shown are somewhat uniform.

Returning now to the location of the dramatic “*Guerra a sangre y fuego*” [Other authors have translated this literally as “by fire and blood” but the expression should be “with fire and sword,” mor apt in any case for the death by sword and knife that took place – Cassell’s Spanish Dictionary 1978, 323] massacre in 1565 – as the coastal forms looked at the time, the French marching overland from the south would have encountered the first impassable body of water at the southernmost inlet. Thus the killing fields can be located in the coastal sand dunes between the two inlets, or, alternately, to the north of the only inlet existing in 1565 if that was the case. Needless to say, to the hapless Frenchmen it matters little which inlet that crossed before they were put to death.

AUTHORS NOTE: The Spanish spelling, “penon” is used in the present context. In later documents the English, “Pinon,” appears.

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