

## Interview with Barbara A. Purdy

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In her two books, *West of the Papal Line* and “*The Precise & True Story of ‘Terra Florida’ in 1564-1565*,” Barbara A. Purdy focuses on one brutal episode in Florida’s history: the deadly territorial conflict between France and Spain leading up to Pedro Menéndez’s destruction of Fort Caroline and later his deliberate and calculated execution of over 100 French Huguenots at Matanzas Inlet in 1565. Purdy, professor emerita in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Florida, brings to life this story of ill-fated European colonies, questionable leadership, game-changing hurricanes, and human slaughter.

Here’s the scene at Fort Caroline from her second book: “Menéndez, knowing [the Spanish] were found out, immediately shouted his battle cry, ‘*Santiago! Santiago! At them! Do as I do for God is on our side!*’ The main gate was opened to allow the French laborers living outside the fort to enter. The assault force poured *en masse* and slaughtered all who came within their reach. As the frightened colonists ran out of their lodgings, they were hacked apart. One hundred thirty-two people were slain within minutes.”

I asked her to unpack these events for the themed issue, “Contact.”

JFS: In “*The Precise & True Story*” you relate a conversation between the monarchs of France and England. Why did you choose to focus on these two women in a separate book? Do they bear any responsibility for the ultimate slaughter of the French by Menéndez?

PURDY: The years 2014 and 2015 are coming up shortly marking the 450th anniversaries of the settlement at Fort Caroline and the massacres at the fort and at Matanzas. My book *West of the Papal Line* described these events, but it also included extensive information about the native people of Florida, the political scenes in Spain and France, and more. The imagined *tête-à-tête* between Elizabeth and Catherine seemed a good way to concentrate specifically on the massacres. Catherine Medici certainly was indirectly responsible for the deaths of the Huguenots since she sanctioned the settlement at Fort Caroline proposed by Admiral Gaspard de Coligny. English settlements in America had not materialized yet, but Elizabeth I was very aware of what was going on there.

JFS: *I don’t know what’s worse about this story—the horror of the events at Fort Caroline and Matanzas or the cruelty of the players. I’d like you to help us first understand the phrase that says so much about European intentions in the New World: “west of the papal line.”*

PURDY: Spanish born Pope Alexander VI was head of the Catholic Church in 1492 when Columbus discovered America. Since the pope represented Jesus Christ, he had the power to dispose of newly discovered lands

to whomever he wished. Technically, he did this through papal bulls, particularly the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, which restricted navigation west of the papal line to Spain. This line of demarcation was located 370 leagues (1362 statute miles, 2,193 km, or 1,184 nautical miles) west of the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa. But these figures are not as accurate as they appear. The length used for the league has always been confusing, and the treaty did not specify the line of demarcation in degrees or identify the specific island from which measurements began. In addition, very little of the restricted area had actually been seen by Spaniards or any other Europeans. Nevertheless, the Treaty of Tordesillas gave all newly discovered lands west of the papal line to Spain in exclusion of other European nations. Other nations—most notably France in this case—faced Spain’s wrath when they crossed the line.

*JFS: The sailors who were sent off to enforce Spain’s Papal Line were a rough bunch—as you say, “Peace was not profitable.” Even before Matanzas there were constant skirmishes between French and Spanish for control of Florida’s coast. Let’s take the French colonists and their leaders first. Who were the Huguenots?*

PURDY: The Huguenots were French Protestants, but from what I understand they also were rich and influential compared to most French Catholics. Gaspard de Coligny, for example, was the Admiral of France but also a wealthy Huguenot. Nevertheless, the Huguenots were persecuted because France was primarily a Catholic country.

*JFS: Why did the French choose South Carolina and Florida as areas for settlement?*

PURDY: Jean Ribault, the Huguenot leader, was seeking the site in present-day South Carolina of the 1526 failed Spanish colony called Santa Elena. He had heard that the harbor there (Port Royal) was large enough for ships to enter. A settlement in this location—but not further north along the east coast—would permit the French to waylay homebound Spanish treasure ships coming through the strategic Bahama Channel before they sailed east toward Europe. Fort Caroline near the mouth of the River May (St. Johns River) in present-day Florida had the same advantage. It’s important to remember that Ribault’s motivation was not colonization; it was piracy. The organizers of this expedition did want to establish a persecution-free Huguenot environment, but that was only secondary to placing France in a position to waylay Spanish treasure ships coming through the Bahama Channel.

*JFS: So Ribault was not completely honest with the Huguenot colonists in his choice of Florida. What kind of a leader was he?*

PURDY: Jean Ribault was a loyal Frenchman and a devout Huguenot. But he was also a stubborn, ruthless leader. He gave what we call “pep talks” encouraging his soldiers and sailors to do things they probably would prefer not to do, telling them that their status in society would rise by these actions. He manipulated people in other ways to get what he wanted. He was recognized as the “most experienced seaman

and corsair known and very skillful in this navigation of the Indies and the coast of Florida” (a tribute written by Pedro Menéndez, Ribault’s executioner).

JFS: *What about the other French leader, René Laudonnière?*

PURDY: René Laudonnière, like Ribault, was a loyal Frenchman and a devoted Huguenot. He was also an aristocrat. As a naval officer, he must have experienced hardships at sea sometimes, but he comes across as an individual who likes and expects his creature comforts even if there is not enough to share with others. There is little question that he made enemies as the governor of Fort Caroline, partly, I believe, because he did not consider the feelings of others. I also concluded that Laudonnière was jealous or resentful of Ribault beginning in 1562 during their first voyage that established Charlesfort, but especially in 1565 when Ribault arrived at Fort Caroline to replace Laudonnière as governor.

JFS: *The French Huguenots seemed fairly inept at colony building at Charlesfort and at Fort Caroline. Can you suggest some reasons for their critical mistakes?*

PURDY: Both settlements ended miserably. The reasons for the failure at Fort Caroline are fairly clear: (1) the French settlers at Fort Caroline were aristocrats and not used to hardships; (2) they were sold a bill of goods by their leaders about what conditions would be like in this new land; (3) the colonists at Fort Caroline were not farmers and builders, so they lacked the basic skills necessary for survival; (4) a large group who came to Fort

Caroline were soldiers and sailors; they were nominally Huguenots, but most were not interested in colonizing. They were more intent on gaining the riches they were told would be available; and finally (5) there is Laudonnière’s complete incompetence.

JFS: *And the Spanish: Don Pedro Menéndez de Avilés seems particularly unhinged. Can you account for his motives for hounding the French up and down the Florida coast? Was it religious? Political? Personal? Or is this a story of a rogue Galician bent on killing?*

PURDY: His motives were religious, political, and personal. Menéndez was a religious fanatic who could not stand the thought that the French would introduce their heretical beliefs to the native people of La Florida. Politically, he could not believe that France would cross the Papal Line and violate Spain’s rule about establishing settlements in lands governed by Philip II, especially since Spain and France were related by kinship and shared the Catholic religion. Personally, he was not an innocent player, striving always to become wealthier and more important and often engaging in the transport of contraband goods for his own profit, despite his loyalty to Philip and Spain.

JFS: *The indigenous people of Florida play a large part in this tale. The settlers and soldiers depend on native support, but ultimately take advantage of them. We even know some of their names: Saturiba and Seloy. How familiar, by 1562-5, were the Timucua with Europeans?*

PURDY: There may not have been any actual interaction with Europeans in this area of Florida before 1562, but Saturiba and some of his people already had gold and silver ornaments indicating that they were aware of the existence of these strangers. The fact that Seloy begged the French to settle near his village also indicates that the natives in this area did not fear the Europeans. Encounters with the Native Americans are known mostly from records written by Europeans; the reactions of the Indians are rarely noted. The experience must have been like coming face to face with beings from outer space, a situation that probably never will be repeated. There is little doubt that the technologically superior Europeans with their firepower and other accoutrements would overcome the Timucua and other tribes in the long run, but the natives here initially did not feel threatened. They desired the exotic trade goods offered them and hoped the guns might be used against their eternal enemies—the neighboring tribes. They could not envision the total world of the strangers, a world that had developed in isolation from their own for thousands of years. Because of the linguistic barrier, the natives often gave their land away without even knowing they had done it. Protests against the newcomers came too little and too late.

*JFS: As an anthropologist, you must be very familiar with the Timucuan material culture and their lives. Can you describe what life was like for these people when Ribault and Menéndez arrived?*

PURDY: These native groups seem to have reached a steady state. Free time was directed toward monument building, artistic creations, social hierarchies, and warfare. The indigenous people of Florida did not capture energy from animal power, sails, the wheel, or fossil fuels, and the pyrotechniques they used for ceramics and metals were primitive. There evidently was no stimulus or perceived need for these methods, but their absence contributed to the Indians' inability to adapt to the rapid changes inflicted upon them after 1564. In the long run, they could not fight the invisible enemy—disease—transmitted to them by the Europeans. We will never know what the Timucua and other Florida tribes would be doing today if their way of life had not been disrupted in the middle 16th century.

*JFS: And finally, the massacre at Fort Caroline and Matanzas. Can you take us through the rather complicated web of deception and betrayal that culminated in the deaths of so many French?*

PURDY: After Laudonnière's failures at colony-making, Ribault is sent to replace him at Fort Caroline. Menéndez is then dispatched from Spain expressly to destroy this French outpost. Upon arrival, his and Ribault's ships engage in a fierce battle, requiring Menéndez to retreat 30 miles south where he establishes a settlement that he names St. Augustine. When Ribault follows with more ships and men, he is blown off course by a hurricane. This stroke of luck allows Menéndez and his troops to walk north and attack the undefended Fort

Caroline by surprise—brutally and without mercy, killing 200 people. Laudonnière, second in command, abandons his post and escapes. Meanwhile, Ribault’s men have been cast up on shore after losing their ships in the storm and make their way north on foot—until they reach Matanzas Inlet which they cannot cross. Menéndez is waiting, and with promises of food and shelter, lures the weakened French colonists into his supply boats. In groups of ten, they are executed in the sand dunes on the far shore of the inlet.

*JFS: Do we learn anything from this sordid event?*

PURDY: There were other ways it could have ended. Perhaps if France had not been engaged in her Wars of Religion, she could have replenished the colony at Fort Caroline with sufficient supplies and craftsmen to allow time for the Huguenots to adjust to their new environment and fend off the Spanish. Perhaps if Philip II of Spain had not chosen a religious fanatic like Pedro Menéndez to “drive out” the Huguenots, so many French lives would not have been lost. Perhaps if there had not been a hurricane at the precise moment that Jean Ribault was about to capture Menendez’s flagship, the French would have been the victor, not Spain. So many deaths at Fort Caroline may not have been intended. Menéndez and his men had marched for days through the unbelievably stormy conditions that had wrecked Ribault’s boats. They were half-crazed from the hardships and were so worked up by Menéndez over-zealous commands that they simply slashed away at the colonists.

Matanzas, however, was a different story. Menéndez had every intention of killing all of the shipwrecked French soldiers and sailors, including Jean Ribault, who arrived at the impassable inlet south of St. Augustine. There were practical as well as religious reasons. There was no way that Menéndez could feed so many captives had he spared them. There was danger that the captives might overcome the Spanish soldiers because of their superior numbers and better training. There were no ships available to send the French forces back home even if friendly negotiations could be reached. So Menéndez saved a few individuals who would be useful and killed the rest, seemingly without remorse.

*JFS: What interested you about this particular incident? Why were you drawn to it?*

PURDY: I taught a course in Florida archaeology at the University of Florida. I was fascinated with this last phase in the turn from prehistory to history. I was particularly drawn to the struggle over possession, but not the obvious struggle between the Indians and the French, or the Indians and the Spanish, but the French versus the Spanish. I was struck by the brutality of these two European countries. In *The Precise and True Story*, I imagine the two civilized and refined monarchs telling this story:

“What happened to Ribault?”

“They thrust a dagger deep into his heart and cut off his grand red beard to send to Philip

II. Then they cut off his head and placed it on the end of a pike to carry back to St. Augustine.”

Barbara A. Purdy. *The Precise & True Story of 'Terra Florida' in 1564-1565*. West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2012.

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