

Forging a Trail Toward

History

Parris Island Clears the Way to National Historic Landmark

The natural and cultural resources staff at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, SC has developed an interpretive trail system around the Charlesfort-Santa Elena National Historic Landmark.

Parris Island has been providing newly trained Marines to the Corps for nearly a century. The island's historical roots, however, extend much deeper than the Marine's presence. This small island was once at the heart of global struggles for control of the New World.

Parris Island, in Beaufort County, SC, was chosen as the site to set a foothold in North America by two European nations—France and Spain. Situated at the mouths of the Broad and Beaufort Rivers, the island overlooks Port Royal Sound, described in 1562 as one of the “fairest and greatest havens in the world.” The geography offered a strategic advantage. Ships returning to Europe from South and Central America, as well as the Caribbean, passed by the Sound before turning east into the Atlantic. Port Royal Sound was a perfect vantage point to place a base to protect, or harass, rival vessels laden with New World wealth.

Intent on securing the route of the treasure fleets, a Spanish expedition entered Port Royal Sound in 1561 to colonize La Punta de Santa Elena. Before establishing their settlement, a hurricane hit, causing the loss of three ships. The survivors returned to Havana, abandoning the attempt. Before Spain could organize another expedition, in 1562, two French ships sailed into Port Royal Sound, also

determined to secure a foothold in the region. Within a few weeks they constructed Charlesfort, claiming the land for France.

Not only were Spain and France at odds over political control of the New World, but there was also a battle raging for religious dominance, pitting Spanish Roman Catholics against French Protestants. Jean Ribaut, the French expedition's leader, wished not only to expand his king's claim in

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The Basics About PARRIS ISLAND

marine Recruit Depot Parris Island's primary mission is to recruit, train, and support the “making” of basic U.S. Marines for follow-on training and service in the Corps. The Depot processes all enlisted females recruited nationwide, and all males recruited from east of the Mississippi River. Since 1915, well over one million men and women have begun their Marine service at Parris Island. Today, nearly 17,000 recruits graduate each year after successfully completing an intensive 12-week training cycle. Broken into three phases, each portion of training is designed to prepare recruits mentally, physically, and emotionally for service in the Corps. After graduation, each new Marine receives specialized training elsewhere which is tailored to his or her occupational path.



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North America, but also to establish a refuge in America for the Huguenots fleeing religious wars in Europe. Spain, conversely, was strenuously working to ensure the Americas was firmly rooted in Catholicism.

Leaving a small garrison at Charlesfort, Ribaut returned to Europe for reinforcements and supplies. Delayed in Europe by the ongoing warfare, nearly a year passed with no sign of his return. Fearing they had been abandoned, the starving men of the isolated French outpost took fate into their own hands. Building a twenty-ton sloop on Parris Island, they set sail for France in April 1563. Reduced to cannibalism before reaching home, the survivors were finally rescued in the English Channel.

Spain had not taken this French intrusion into La Florida lightly. After decimating Fort Caroline in 1566, a second French colonial attempt further south, the Spanish landed on Parris Island determined to ensure no further French incursions. Erecting their fort over the ruins of Charlesfort, the Spanish colony of Santa Elena was born.

For the next two decades Santa Elena was one of Spain's most important towns in North America. For a period, it was even the capital of La Florida. Explorations from Santa Elena

secured Spain's dominance in much of the southeast, and built a system of economic, political, and religious alliances with Native Americans which would ultimately effect the development of the United States for centuries.

England emerged in the race for control of the Americas during the period of Santa Elena, settling a colony at Roanoke, VA (now North Carolina) in 1585. Sir Francis Drake was then actively seeking out and attacking Spanish settlements along the North American coast. Fearing these English raids, Santa Elena was abandoned in 1587 in favor of



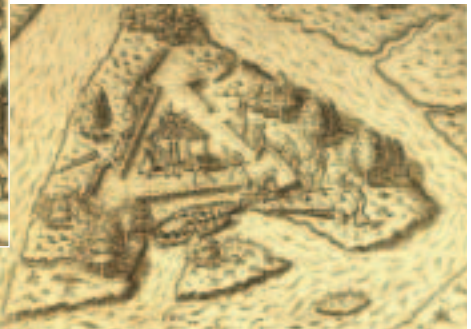
Major European settlements in North America in the 1560s.

Spanish settlements in San Augustine and the Caribbean.

In the late 19th-century, the United States established a military installation on Parris Island where the French and Spanish had placed their military outposts centuries before.



ABOVE: Ribaut erected carved stone monuments to proclaim the French claim in North America. The Spanish soon removed them.



BELOW: Period engraving possibly depicting the construction of Charlesfort in 1562.

Interpretive trails allow visitors to explore the Charlesfort-Santa Elena National Historic Landmark.
Photo by Bryan Howard, Parris Island Museum



The National Historic Landmark designation has boosted support within the Marine Corps for developing interpretive programs to share this exciting and important part of the American past with the general public.

This act would help spare the archaeological remains of Charlesfort and Santa Elena, which was named a National Historic Landmark in 2001. This designation has not only increased the level of protection afforded the site, but it has also boosted support within the Marine Corps for developing interpretive programs to share this exciting and important part of the American past with the general public.

As part of the Marine Corps' educational efforts, the natural and cultural resources staff at Parris Island has worked closely with archaeologists from the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA) and other researchers to develop an interpretive trail system around the site. Because the path and the interpretive signage needed to cross through sensitive archaeological areas, the trail was designed so there would be no adverse effect on any resources. SCIAA archaeologists, who best know the site's subsurface features, were consulted to ensure that the path would take visitors through

the most important areas within the site and that the trail would not interfere with archaeological features. As the site was once on the edge of a golf course, one section of the trail uses a preexisting cart path, and no further work was needed there aside from placing appropriate interpretive signage along the route.

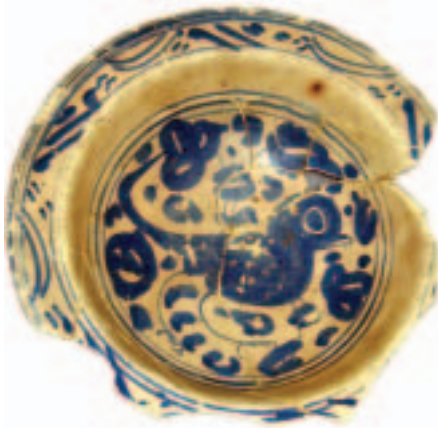
The method chosen for both the trail and signage allowed for all elements to be placed entirely on the ground surface. For the trail, this entailed laying out the path with wood forms to make a border, similar to techniques used when pouring concrete. A liner was placed under this to discourage plant growth, and then filled with gravel and packed. While economical, this method does have its drawbacks. The gravel material packs well but results in a rough surface for visitors in wheelchairs. If designing a similar trail system, the Parris Island natural and cultural resources staff would recommend securing the additional funds needed to install a more expensive, wheelchair friendly synthetic path

material. Typically made with recycled tires, synthetic paths can be rolled out like carpet or poured in place. Many playgrounds now use this material, but the added cost is a consideration if planning on a tight budget.



Trail signs offer background on the rich history of Parris Island. Brochures are available in English and Spanish.

Photo by Bryan Howard, Parris Island Museum



Spanish majolica bowl, now on display at the Parris Island Museum.

Photo by Bryan Howard, Parris Island Museum



Redware vessel made at Santa Elena in the 1580s. The kiln where this was fired is the earliest known European kiln in the United States.

Photo from South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

Getting a Site Listed as a Landmark

The process of getting a site listed as a National Historic Landmark can be a rather lengthy affair. It requires thorough documentation covering a range of topics related to the site. Landmark status is a designation bestowed by the Secretary of the Interior, and is limited to nationally significant historic places. Presently, about 2,500 sites have been judged to possess the exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States that is the basis of receiving National Historic Landmark status. Coordination for consideration of a site goes through the National Park Service. Nomination packages are reviewed by the National Park System Advisory Board, and if deemed eligible, are forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for approval. The Charlesfort-Santa Elena nomination process spanned almost a decade with final approval being granted in January 2001.

The interpretive signs along the trail were constructed by securing a large square steel plate to the bottom of a treated 4-by-4 post. Concrete was poured into a temporary wooden form to create the base of the pad. The post was placed on this and leveled, and then the remainder of the concrete poured over the plate and around the post. Each pad, about three feet square, supports one sign. The pad lays entirely on the ground's surface, no subsurface preparation was required beyond the removal of some vegetation. This method was chosen to ensure no archaeological resources would be disturbed. Should the need ever arise, the entire pad with post can be moved.

Signage along the route highlights topics concerning the site's history, including not only life in 16th-century French and Spanish South Carolina, but also Native American occupations, and later plantation and post-plantation era components of the site. Brochures in English and Spanish are available, and a newly constructed exhibit featuring artifacts from excavations at the site is on display at the Parris Island Museum.

To expand outreach opportunities, in conjunction with the Parris Island Historical and Museum Society, a website (www.SantaElena.us) has been established for the Charlesfort-Santa Elena National Landmark. Still in its infancy, the website allows online visitors to explore the Landmark by viewing the trail signs, following links to primary documents pertaining to the site, and offering a selection of artifacts in an online exhibit.

Interpretive programs focusing on the Charlesfort-Santa Elena National Historic Landmark are ever expanding. When sufficient funding is secured, in addition to final scholarly publications, a comprehensive guidebook will be published for the general public's enjoyment. Geared towards the layman, this work, incorporating over a quarter of a century of archaeological research at the site, will serve as a bridge between the past and the present, and help give renewed life to an often overlooked period of American history. ⚓

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