



# A preliminary exploration of Santa Elena's sixteenth century colonial landscape through shallow geophysics



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## ABSTRACT

Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the founder and first governor of *La Florida*, established several outposts in what is now the southeastern United States. One was at the now famed city of St. Augustine (1565) and another in 1566 at the former French outpost of Charlesfort, now known as Santa Elena, marking the first Spanish occupation of the locale that would become Spain's capital in the region. In total, the colony of Santa Elena lasted for little more than two decades, as the Spanish abandoned the town in 1587. In 2014, we began a shallow geophysical survey of the site to explore its broader landscape. Given that Santa Elena is one of the best-preserved sixteenth-century towns in the United States, it presented one of the best opportunities for shallow geophysics to aid in historic sites investigations of this time period. The results of our work indicate that there is still much to be learned at the site as our ground penetrating radar, magnetic, and resistance surveys include the discovery and potential identification of structures, Spanish wells and paths, and at least one lost sixteenth century fort. Our preliminary work at Santa Elena not only demonstrates the great potential of these techniques at this site, but at historic sites in general.

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## 1. Introduction

During the sixteenth century several European powers began their endeavor to establish footholds in the New World. Along the Atlantic Coast of the southeastern United States both the French and Spanish vied for dominance in what are now the states of Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina. One of the more significant places where this colonial drama played out was on Parris Island, South Carolina (Fig. 1).

In 1562, Jean Ribault established Charlesfort on Parris Island and left a garrison of 27 men, who eventually mutinied and returned to France (South 1982a; DePratter and South, 1995). This was not the end of France's incursion into the area, and just a year later another expedition was mounted, this time led by René Goulaine de Laudonnière to establish another fort (Fort Caroline), this time on the banks of the St. Johns River near modern day Jacksonville (Lyon, 1983:33–35). The efforts by the French posed a serious threat to Spanish interests in the region, and in 1565 Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the *Adelantado* of *La Florida*, arrived there and made short work of the French occupation, capturing or killing almost all of the soldiers (DePratter and South, 1995; Lyon, 1984; McGrath, 2000).

Menéndez established several outposts in the region at this time including: one at the now famed city of St. Augustine (1565) and another in 1566 at the former French outpost of Charlesfort, now known as Santa Elena, marking the first Spanish occupation of the locale (DePratter and South, 1995; Lyon, 1984). The first Santa Elena fort, San Salvador, whose location is unknown, was just one of a series of forts constructed there (DePratter and South, 1995). A succeeding fort, Fort San Felipe (I), was constructed over the previous French Charlesfort in 1566 (DePratter et al., 1996).

During this first Spanish occupation at Santa Elena, the site emerged as a burgeoning town with artisans, farmers, and Jesuit missionaries to convert the local Native Americans to Catholicism, among others (Lyon, 1984). By 1569 there were over 200 settlers and over 40 domestic structures (DePratter and South, 1995:8; Lyon, 1984:4). From 1570 to 1571, the colonists experienced extreme hardships suffering both from a shortage of food and several episodes of epidemic disease, forcing them to rely on the local Native American groups for supplies (DePratter and South, 1995:8).

Fort San Felipe (I) burned in 1570, and a new fort, also named San Felipe (II), was constructed at a new location closer to the landing. Menéndez arrived with his family in July of 1571 at Santa Elena now considered to be the capital of *La Florida*. As Lyon (1984:6) describes it, he arrived with all the goods and supplies necessary for a comfortable life in the colony. In 1574, Menéndez died while on a mission to Spain,

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Fig. 1. The location of Santa Elena along the South Carolina Coast of the United States.

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