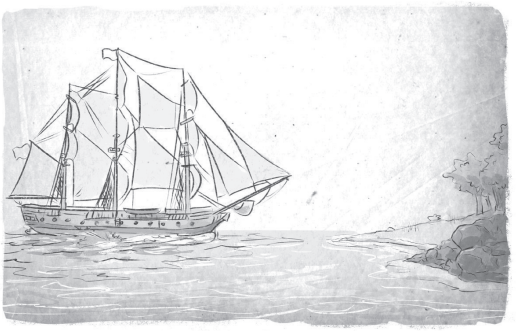
Adventures on the American Frontier

The First American Colonists

Revised Edition



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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

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The First Colony in America

The flags of France on two little ships were spots of color on the Atlantic Ocean. They moved toward America, the land of mystery and shadow.

Seventy years had passed since Columbus had chanced upon islands not far from the land the ships were sailing toward. In those seventy years, many ships had crossed the sea, but most of them had gone farther south than where the two little French ships were heading.

People had come to live in the New World, but there wasn't yet one white settlement in all of the land that is now the United States of America. The settlements that had sprung up were farther to the south, in what is now Mexico.

On the last day of April, 1562, a great shout arose from the deck of the leading French ship. High in the crow's nest atop the mainmast, a man pointed toward the west. "Land ho!" he cried.

Soon every man could see what the watchman's long spyglass had shown him. The faint dark ridge between the sea and the sky became a strong line through the morning mist.

As the ships drew nearer, the men could see that the dark line was a forest beyond a white beach. To the men who watched, weary from ten weeks on the open sea, it promised adventure and riches and an interesting new life.

The ships turned northward as they drew near enough to the shore to see it clearly. Jean Ribault, commander of the two ships, watched for an opening in the shoreline that could mean a harbor for the ships.

The next day was May 1st. Dawn promised a clear, pleasant day, and it found Ribault back on deck. His fingers closed tightly on the heavy wooden rail as he thought of what this new month could bring to him and his men: a new life or sudden death. Seven years earlier, a French ship had sailed to Brazil in South America with the same hopes that he and his men held now. The colony they had built there had not lasted a year. Did the soldiers and the young adventurers in Ribault's company have the strength to live in the new land?

The soldiers were used to a rough life, but the young adventurers had always had servants to wait on them. They called themselves gentlemen, and a gentleman never did any hard work with his hands.

Ribault lifted his spyglass to his eye again. There, just ahead, was the mouth of a great river—a river that would be marked on later maps as the St. Johns River. The Spanish called this land Florida and claimed that they owned it because some of their explorers had been there.

Ribault checked his charts and maps. The river he was looking at was not on the Spanish maps. His own country's ships had explored the St. Lawrence River in what is now Canada, and they had traveled south along the coastline almost as far as Florida. The French had as much right in Florida as the Spanish did, Ribault thought, for no one had settled the matter by starting a colony. That was what he planned to do.

He rolled up his maps and called the first mate. The ship was near the mouth of the wide river. "Drop anchor here," he ordered. "See that sand bar across the river's mouth? Lower the small boats, and we'll use them to find a way for the ships to go."

The next hour was an exciting one for the men who had been so long on the little wooden ships. They lost no time in obeying the mate's orders and happily scrambled into the small boats. They pulled hard on the oars to hurry the boats into the wide, sheltered basin of water beyond the sand bar.

"It's alive with fish!" they cried. Their mouths watered at the thought of the good meals they would have after weeks of ship's food. Only moldy hard biscuits were left.

But they did not stop at this time for fishing. They pulled for shore, eager to feel solid earth beneath their feet. They could see white sand beaches, waving palms, and moss-hung cedar trees.

When the boats were only a few yards from shore, Ribault held up his hand. "Wait!" he cried, and the rowing stopped.

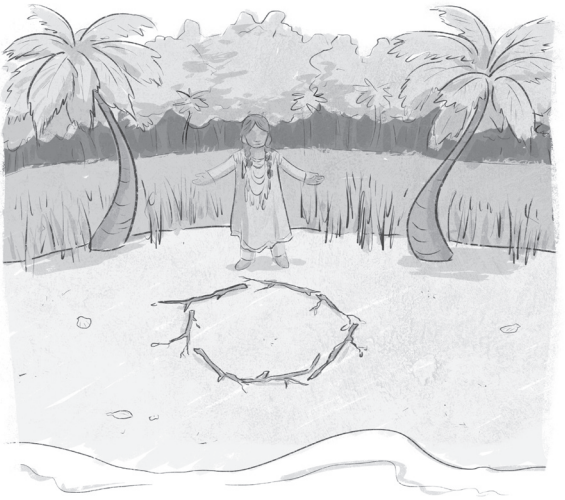
The beaches had suddenly come alive with men, their bodies bright with blue, red, and black paint. The soldiers raised their guns.

"Hold your fire!" cried Ribault. He saw that the men on shore were waving their arms in welcome. They carried no weapons. He waved in return and ordered the men to put down their guns. "Row for shore," he told the sailors.

Soon the boats touched the sandy bottom. The Frenchmen, with great shouts, jumped from the boats and splashed through the shallow water to the beach. The Native Americans drew back near the trees to see what the men from the white-winged birds of the sea would do. To them, it seemed that the white men must be "children of the sun," for they had come from the edge of the sea where the sun came up each morning.

The chief gave an order. Several braves hurried to the woods to cut boughs of the laurel trees. They arranged them in a circle. Then the chief stepped forward and, with his hands, made signs that he would like the visitors to sit down for a council.

Ribault nodded. But before he sat down, he asked two of his sailors to bring a chest from one of the small boats. He had expected to meet Native Americans and knew from stories he had heard what he should do. He had the men place the chest before him in the council circle. From it he took a robe of blue cloth. The French lily was embroidered all over it in gold thread.



Ribault held the robe out to the chief, using his hands to show that he meant it as a gift. He opened it up and put it around the chief's shoulders.

Chief Saturiwa was clearly pleased. He and Ribault spoke together then, neither understanding the language of the other but both knowing that the talk was of friendship.

For the next few days, the men explored the area. Ribault found no way to move his ships over the sand bar, so he didn't feel that this was the place to build his fort and begin a colony.

Before they went on board the ships again to look further, Ribault and his men met once more with the Native Americans, who were called the Saturiwas. There was one thing Ribault needed to learn before he left.

"The Golden Cities," he said to Chief Saturiwa. "Where are they?" It took some time to make the chief understand what he meant.

There had been a story for years that somewhere in America there were seven golden cities. Each newcomer to the New World dreamed of finding these cities or of finding a river that could be a shortcut from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

At last Chief Saturiwa understood what Ribault was asking, and he smiled and nodded.

"Where?" Ribault asked him.

Chief Saturiwa pointed to a boat and made paddling motions.

"You can get there by boat," Ribault interpreted. "But which way, and how far?"

Chief Saturiwa seemed to understand. He pointed west. Then he made arm movements to show the rising and setting of the sun. The men counted as the chief's arm swung around twenty times.

"Twenty days' journey to the west by water," Ribault said. "We'll move along until we find a river flowing from the west."

Before they left, Ribault and his men gave more gifts to the Saturiwas. They named the river the River May, for the month in which they had found it. Then they brought from the ship a stone column on which were carved the arms of the King of France. They set the column firmly on the south bank of the river as a sign that the land belonged to France.

They said goodbye to their new friends and sailed northward slowly. Ribault had decided that the new fort should be built at the mouth of a river from the west. Perhaps

the river would be a passage to the Pacific Ocean. Ribault's dreams grew stronger and brighter.

As they traveled north, the men explored the shore from time to time. At last the ships arrived at the mouth of a wide river that seemed to come from the west. It was Broad River in what is now South Carolina.

"This looks promising," Ribault told his men. "This is where we will build our fort and begin a colony. But our supplies are low, and I must go back to France for more. Will thirty men of good will come forward? Those thirty will stay here to build a fort and hold the land for France. Those who stay are sure to gain fame and riches!"

Almost all of the men wanted to stay, so Ribault chose the thirty that he believed to be strongest in body and spirit.

A few days later, on the 11th of June, the thirty men watched the ships disappear against the eastern sky. Ribault had appointed a man named Captain Albert de la Pierria to be their leader, and under Captain de la Pierria's direction, they began to build the fort, which they called Charlesfort.

When it was almost finished, Captain de la Pierria gathered the men together. "We'll need more food long before the ships return," he said. "How should we get it?"

The thirty men looked at one another. A gentleman always had food set before him. These men had never done the work of a farmer or a fisherman. But some Native Americans had been to visit them at their new fort, and the Frenchmen had learned that the native people not only hunted and fished but also grew corn, beans, and squash.

Ribault had left some trading goods, so the men decided to trade some of the goods for food.

Several times the Native Americans near the fort shared with the settlers. But their new crops were not yet ripe, and they didn't have much to trade.

"To the south there are two chiefs who are rich in yellow corn," the Native Americans told the Frenchmen. "Go to them, and they will have food for you." The Native Americans even offered to guide the men to the villages. In small boats, the men followed the guides' canoe through streams and lakes that lay not far from the ocean. Sometimes they had to carry the boats over land, but not far or often. The journey ended at a village on the Savannah River in what is now Georgia.

The Frenchmen gave the members of this new tribe beads and other small gifts, and in exchange, the Native Americans loaded one of the boats with corn and vegetables. The Frenchmen went back to the fort and put the food into their storehouse. But a day or two later, the storehouse caught fire, and the settlers lost all of their food. Again they went to the village on the Savannah River, and again they went home with a loaded boat.

There was nothing to do, then, but wait for Ribault to return. The gentlemen settlers gave no thought to clearing fields where they would plant in the spring, or to doing any other work. They ate and slept, and soon they quarreled.

Weeks turned into months. Each day seemed hotter than the one before. Tempers grew short. The woods no longer

seemed to hold adventure, and the river was no longer a roadway to riches. And still Ribault did not return.

Captain de la Pierria gave orders, but no one obeyed. One day he hanged a man for not obeying. Later he banished a soldier to a nearby deserted island. The men became angry with Captain de la Pierria's strict rules, and one night they murdered him and rescued the banished man.

A man named Nicholas Barré became the new leader. "We're leaving here," he said. "Ribault left us tools, iron, and a forge. We can cut trees to get wood and build ourselves a ship."

The work gave the men new spirit. At last their patchwork ship, made watertight with Spanish moss and pine pitch stuffed into its cracks, sailed eastward, only to sit for many days in the middle of the ocean, waiting for wind to fill the sails. Finally an English ship found the men, starving and half mad by that time, and carried them home.

Two years and a month passed, and still Ribault had not been able to get back to America. A civil war had broken out in his country, and he'd had to flee to England. The fort in the wilderness rotted away.

Chief Saturiwa's beautiful blue robe wore thin, and the gold threads were broken, but still he talked of his friends, the "children of the sun."

Then, in June of 1564, a runner came into the chief's lodge. "The ships have returned!" he cried. "The men from the land where the sun lives are coming again!"

Chief Saturiwa hurried to the beach to meet his old friends. All of the people of the village went with him. This time there were three French ships riding on the waves.

As he saw the newcomers lowering boats to come ashore, Chief Saturiwa set out with his two sons in a canoe to meet them while his people performed a dance of welcome on the beach.

When Chief Saturiwa was near the French leader's boat, he saw that it was not his old friend Ribault. But his disappointment turned to happiness when he saw that this leader was dressed as Ribault had been. This man was probably his brother, he decided, come to see his old friend in Ribault's place. He called out a greeting.

The French leader, whose name was René de Goulaine de Laudonnière, had been with Ribault on the first expedition to the New World, and he was pleased at the friendly welcome.

He called out a greeting in return, and the French boat and the Saturiwa canoe went to the beach side by side.

"Come!" Chief Saturiwa waved happily. He took Laudonnière to the top of a small rise of land. There stood the stone column Ribault's men had erected two years before. Then he invited the white men to a feast.

Laudonnière took gifts with him when he went to the feast. But Chief Saturiwa wanted to give a gift as well. He held out a shiny stone to his new friend.

"It's silver!" remarked Laudonnière. Chief Saturiwa was pleased to see his friend's eyes light with joy. He happily told Laudonnière where it came from in answer to the French leader's question.

"Thimogona!" he said and pointed south. He made Laudonnière understand that the Thimogonas were the Saturiwas' enemies. The silver and some bits of gold he showed Laudonnière were prizes of war.

"We'll go together to see the Thimogonas," Laudonnière told him. "My men will help your men fight your enemies. Together, we'll win all of their gold and silver."

Chief Saturiwa wasn't sure why Laudonnière was so interested in the gold and silver, but he was glad that the man liked his gifts. Most of all, he was glad to have Laudonnière's promise to help him fight the Thimogonas.

Laudonnière was anxious to learn more about the precious metals, but he knew that his first business was the colony.

"I see no better place to build a fort than right here," he decided. He was standing on a bluff not far from the stone column. In his bright silk clothes and his hat with a great feather on it, he looked strange against the wilderness of forest and marsh behind him. But with the Native Americans as his friends, he gave little thought to the dangers of the land. He stroked his pointed beard and looked toward the ocean on his right and the River May on his left. Yes, this was the perfect spot for a colony.

And so the men built Fort Caroline. It was three-sided like a triangle, with one side set along the riverbank. There the men set logs on end to build a wall. On the other two sides, they dug a deep ditch, which filled with water from the river. The earth from the ditches helped form the fort walls. At the corners, they built large earth platforms, and they brought cannons to shore from the ships and placed them on the platforms. They stored ammunition in a room under one of them.

Along the sides of the fort, the men built houses and storerooms. They left the center open for a parade ground. Laudonnière and his officers had a house two stories high, with balconies, on the side of the fort toward the river. In his mind, Laudonnière could already see the houses that would be built outside the fort as the settlement grew and women and children came to join the men.

Chief Saturiwa came by often to try to find out when Laudonnière would be ready to go fight the Thimogonas.

"As soon as our houses have roofs," Laudonnière told him one day. An hour later, most of the Saturiwa men were