

# Spanish had many reasons for Pardo expedition

By Geitner Simmons. Originally published in the Salisbury Post, Salisbury, N.C. 1999

What spurred the Spanish to set up a territorial capital on the South Carolina coast in the 1560s and launch Juan Pardo's expedition into the Southeastern interior?

The reasons range from the self-serving (protecting an enormously profitable silver mine) to the spiritual (converting the Indians to Christianity) to the anxious (reducing the capital's population to lower the demand for food).

Santa Elena, the capital the Spanish founded in 1566 on what's now Parris Island, was the latest in a long line of attempts by the Spanish to establish viable colonial settlements in the Southeast. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the Spanish governor in the Southeast, had founded St. Augustine in Florida in 1565. Spain's previous colonization efforts in Florida, Georgia and South Carolina had all proven failures, going back to the 1520s.

Yet, the Spanish remained interested in controlling North America, in part because they sought to protect the sea routes between the Americas and Europe. Spain used those routes to transport vast sums of silver mined from newly conquered areas in Mexico and Peru — silver that provided the Spanish empire with an extraordinary source of wealth. Pirates from Spain's main European rival, France, routinely robbed Spanish vessels of much of their cargo, however.

One way to solve the problem, the Spanish believed, was to establish a road linking Santa Elena to the primary Mexican silver mine, at Zacatecas. The silver could then be transported overland and shipped directly across the Atlantic, avoiding the pirate-plagued Caribbean.

Unfortunately for the Spanish, their knowledge of North American geography was quite limited, despite the fact that a Spanish navigator had accurately mapped the Gulf of Mexico as early as 1519.

Pardo "was supposed to build a road from Santa Elena to the Spanish silver mines at Zacatecas," says Robin Beck, a North Carolina native and graduate student in archaeology at Northwestern University studying the Pardo expedition. "The Spanish believed the mine was only a few days' travel over the Appalachian Mountains."

But while Menéndez and other officials thought that only 780 miles separated Santa Elena and Zacatecas, the actual distance was 1,800 miles.

Menéndez, renowned in the 1560s as Spain’s most experienced naval commander, hoped to establish a series of fortified coastal cities and build a strong naval presence along the Atlantic coast. He and other leading Spanish colonists hoped colonization would further additional goals:

- Finding precious metals and perhaps diamonds.
- Expanding the Spanish monarch’s domain.
- Gaining lands and noble titles for themselves.
- Finding the Strait of Anián, the legendary passageway to the Pacific.

In an age when religious questions often provoked heated argument and even war, the Spanish also sought to bring Catholicism to the Indians. Menéndez’ plans, says historian Paul Hoffman of Louisiana State University, amounted to “an extensive vision that he thought would make him wealthy as well as save many souls.”

After Menéndez had signed a contract with the Crown for his colonization effort, the Spanish discovered that Huguenots — Protestant settlers from France — had already set up a settlement on the Florida coast. In 1565 Menéndez, arriving with colonists and soldiers from Spain, oversaw an attack on the French settlement and coolly ordered the slaying of most of the male colonists, in part out of anti-Protestant zealotry.

Philip II, the Spanish monarch who also ruled the powerful Hapsburg empire, later voiced approval of the executions less because the Huguenots were colonial rivals than because they were, in Philip’s eyes, religious heretics.

A year earlier, the Spanish had captured a boy from the French colony, Guillaume Rouffi. The Spanish renamed him Guillermo Rufin and put him to work as a translator.

Rufin later served as Pardo’s translator with the Indians, including at Guatari.

One last goal for Menéndez was to relieve the food shortage in Santa Elena. Once Pardo arrived in Santa Elena as part of military reinforcements and received his orders to head into the interior, Menéndez directed him to take about half his men with him. As a result, the Pardo expedition reduced the pressure on the capital’s meager food supply.

Food shortages were a universal problem for virtually all the early European settlements on the Atlantic coast. The same scenes of colonists coping with hunger — and demanding food from nearby Indians — repeated themselves across the Southeast, the Middle Atlantic states and New England.

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