

Fort Frederica

NATIONAL MONUMENT • GEORGIA

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National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

HISTORY OF FREDERICA

Established on St. Simons Island in 1736, the fortified settlement of Frederica became Gen. James Oglethorpe's military headquarters for operations against the Spanish in Florida during the Anglo-Spanish conflict of 1739-48. At its peak, Frederica contained a population of about 1,500, and the fort claimed the distinction of being "the largest, most regular, and perhaps most costly" British fortification in North America.

The first group of Frederica settlers—116 men, women, and children—arrived in February and March 1736. Quickly they built a fort on the bluff overlooking a sharp bend in the inland waterway. Within a month the guns of Fort Frederica commanded all water approaches to the site.

Behind the fort the settlers laid out a town of 84 lots, each 60 by 90 feet. Permanent homes soon replaced the rude huts in which the people first lived, and Frederica began to resemble a healthy, growing settlement, largely English in appearance. Still, the town's architecture reflected the use of native American materials. The homes ranged from log cabins to sturdy two- and three-story houses of wood, brick, and tabby. The people, primarily artisans, soon opened shops offering goods and services that made frontier life easier.

As Frederica grew, so did Oglethorpe's concern for its safety. The town stood on land claimed by Britain, France, and Spain; should war come it would be in a dangerous position. Consequently, Oglethorpe returned to England and secured command of a 650-man regiment of British regular troops. These soldiers manned the defenses of Frederica and several other British posts in coastal Georgia.

The arrival of Oglethorpe's Regiment assured the immediate survival of Frederica, and, at the same time, changed its nature. The military payroll provided a new source of income for the artisans and craftsmen of the town; Frederica quickly became a martial community. Even then, with Anglo-Spanish relations in turmoil, it was no place for the fainthearted.

The problems between Great Britain and Spain erupted in 1739 in the War of Jenkins' Ear. Spain now saw her opportunity to regain both Georgia and South Carolina. Military operations in the Georgia-Florida area culminated in the Battle of Bloody Marsh on St. Simon's Island, where Oglethorpe's outnumbered troops defeated a Spanish invasion force on July 7, 1742. Never again was Spain a major threat to Georgia.

The War of Jenkins' Ear ended in 1748. No longer needed, Oglethorpe's Regiment was disbanded the following year, destroying the town's economy. The shopkeepers and tradesmen of Frederica, lacking the support of a military payroll, moved elsewhere. The town could not survive the loss.

The "Great Fire" of 1758, which destroyed most of Frederica's buildings, proved to be the town's death blow. The few remaining soldiers withdrew from the fort in 1763, and Frederica—born of need and nurtured by war—no longer existed as a living place.

NATURAL FEATURES

The sprawling live oaks, festooned with Spanish moss, are the most prominent features of Frederica's landscape. The live oak is native to the coastal area and, although the most ancient of Frederica's oaks is probably no more than 200 years old, these trees have always been a part of the Frederica scene. Oglethorpe, visiting the site for the first time in 1734, sought shelter beneath an oak tree during a driving rainstorm. The moss, despite its appearance, is neither a parasite nor a true moss—it is an air plant, feeding off the air and not the tree. Strangely enough, it is related to the pineapple. The Indians made clothing, bedding, and rope from the moss.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The monument, located 12 miles from Brunswick, Ga., on St. Simons Island, can be reached by automobile by taking the Brunswick-St. Simons toll causeway which connects with U.S. 17 at Brunswick. The park is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. In summer, the hours may be extended. For information contact the superintendent.

The visitor center houses an information desk and museum exhibits. The exhibits tell the story of Frederica, and objects recovered from the site are displayed. Uniformed National Park Service employees are on duty to answer your questions and help you. At the information desk you will find post cards and other sales items.

Tours and Living History demonstrations are regularly scheduled in the summer. During the remainder of the year, groups may request one of these programs by making special arrangements through the division of interpretation (912/638-3639).

Camping and picnicking facilities are not available at Frederica, but there are picnicking facilities at several points on St. Simons Island.

Bloody Marsh Battle Site, a detached unit of the monument, is 6 miles south of Frederica. There on July 7, 1742, an outnumbered force of British troops ambushed and defeated a Spanish column, halting an attack aimed at Frederica. The engagement proved to be the turning point in the Spanish invasion of Georgia. The site is open daily.

ADMINISTRATION

Fort Frederica National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Route 4, Box 286-C, St. Simons Island, GA 31522, is in immediate charge.

YOU ARE ENTERING AN HISTORIC AREA

The ruins are old and fragile and can easily be destroyed. Touch them only with your eyes. The water is deep and the banks are slippery at the fort. Do not take shelter under the trees during high winds and thunderstorms. Visitors must remain alert and be careful to ensure their own safety.

Ruins of the town and fort may be seen by taking the following self-guided walk through the historic area. These were exposed when the National Park Service excavated the sites in the 1950's. Signs and exhibits relate the story of each ruin.

The town moat and wall which the settlers built in 1739 to protect Frederica from a land attack was described by General Oglethorpe as a "wet Ditch 10 foot wide." It was 6 or 8 feet deep. Beyond the moat, the wall—a rampart raised to protect the town against the fire of an enemy—was nearly 15 feet wide at the base and 6 feet high. The moat and wall could not alone stop an enemy—no obstacle an engineer could build would do that—but it would so slow him that he would become a fair mark for British muskets.

Broad Street. Frederica's main thoroughfare, running from the town gate to the fort, was 75 feet wide. It divided the town into two "tything wards." Six other narrower streets ran parallel to Broad; Barracks Street intersected them all. The settlers planted orange trees along the streets, thus

improving the town's appearance and providing shade, but yielding little fruit.

John Calwell's house was acclaimed the "best in town." Notice Mrs. Calwell's oven, the circular indentation atop the brick fireplace against the wall to your right. Originally, the oven was probably oval in shape with an iron door on the opposite side. To bake her bread, Mrs. Calwell built a fire in the oven, let it burn down, raked out the ashes, and put in the pans of dough. The heated bricks baked the bread.

The Hawkins-Davidson House, a double house, sheltered Samuel Davidson's tavern, to your left, and the office of Dr. Thomas Hawkins, to your right. John Wesley, the noted clergyman, nearly met with foul play in the town doctor's quarters. Mrs. Hawkins, despising Mr. Wesley for reasons of her own, once demanded that he call upon her at home. Upon Mr. Wesley's arrival, Mrs. Hawkins confronted him, pistol in one hand, a pair of scissors in the other, offering either to cut his hair or to shoot him. Mr. Wesley, understandably desiring neither to be shorn in the manner of the biblical Samson, nor to be shot, seized her wrists. In the ensuing struggle, Mrs. Hawkins, a resourceful, somewhat aggressive woman, lashed out with her teeth, shredding Mr. Wesley's clerical garb. Next door, Mr. Davidson heard the commotion. He and two of his patrons hastened to the scene and laid hands upon Mrs. Hawkins, loosing the shaken Mr. Wesley. In Frederica's heyday, Mrs.

Hawkins became the subject of considerable conversation and correspondence.

Fort Frederica, though reduced in size by time and erosion, was once the main fortification of British North America's southern frontier. Pause here, beneath the great oaks, and imagine the tread of a British sentry walking his post, waiting in turn for the sound of creaking boards and the rustle of the water that might announce the approach of Spanish periguas.

The barracks tower is the sole remnant of the quarters for some 200 soldiers of Oglethorpe's Regiment. Mark well that the tower, the only mode of entrance to the barracks, faces outward from the town, providing, in case of alarm, speedier access to the town's defenses. Also, following a time-hallowed custom, it was important in military posts of that period to separate troops from townspeople, with whom they did not always agree. Though not strictly necessary at Frederica, this positioning was perhaps intended to provide a maximum of such segregation.

The burying grounds (lying just behind the visitor center) provide the last resting place for many who died in Frederica. They remain numberless and anonymous. Today, beneath the gloom of the trees and the moss, there stand only four raised tombs and a vault. While many Georgia legends speak of ghostly beings, no apparitions have been seen in the burying grounds.

