

New Land up for Grabs

European nations compete for the Carolinas

Great Britain was slow to get out of the gate. The empire had fallen behind Portugal and Spain, both of which were racing to establish new settlements in the Americas.

It all started in 1492, when explorer Christopher Columbus stumbled upon a large, undiscovered continent lying west of Europe. It made little difference that Columbus was never really looking for new land. Instead, he had been employed by Spanish King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to find a quicker trade route to Asia by sailing westward (*Columbus had originally approached Portugal with the idea, but he did not get any support*).

Columbus's discovery gave Spain a jump-start on settling the Americas. In 1521, explorer Francisco Gordillo came to the "Sea Islands" of South Carolina, located in the area now known as Beaufort County. By 1526, the Spanish felt that they were ready to build a settlement—they were wrong. About 600 Spaniards built a small town known as San Miguel de Gualdape on the Atlantic Coast (*it is uncertain whether the settlement was in present day South Carolina or Georgia*). By the end of twelve months, disease and hunger claimed the lives of nearly four out of five of the settlers. The rest returned home.



The Spanish had more success building settlements in South America and Mexico, but they didn't want to give up on the land further north. In the 1540s, veteran explorer Hernando de Soto journeyed up the coastline. De Soto made his first trip to America in his early twenties, and he eventually helped claim Florida for Spain. De Soto continued to track the coastline northward until he hit the lowcountry of South Carolina. Convinced that there was great treasure to be found, he traveled inland and became the first European to explore the Mississippi River. He never did find the treasure he was looking for, but his explorations proved valuable to future generations.

The Spanish rulers realized early on that colonies in the Americas provided land, resources, and prestige. Of course, the

Spanish weren't the only ones who wanted in on the action. All of the powers in Europe – Spain, Portugal, France, and England – wanted to get a foothold in the New World. The French were among the first to come up with a plan of their own.

In the mid 1520s, King Francis I employed Giovanni da Verrazano to explore the coastline from Florida to Canada. Verrazano landed at Cape Fear, near the outer banks, and traveled north. In 1562, Jean Ribault took it a step further. He led a group of French Huguenots (*Protestants who were continually being persecuted in France – read pages 26-27*) to start a settlement on Parris Island in South Carolina. The French immediately built Charlesfort, named in honor of their king, Charles IX.

Not surprisingly, the Spanish weren't happy that the French were trying to move into the Americas. For the next few years, the two nations battled one another for control of the new continent. In the end, neither was able to establish a permanent settlement.

Fast Fact

Over the past century, archaeologists have excavated the sites of Charlesfort and Fort San Felipe. Their location is near the present day Parris Island Golf Course!

Within a few years, the French abandoned Charlesfort after running short of supplies. Fort San Felipe (*built near the ruins of Charlesfort*) didn't fair much better. The Spanish fort was attacked and destroyed by Native Americans. Despite efforts to repair it, the fort was completely abandoned by the 1590s.

As the Spanish and French battled for control of the eastern coast of America, the British appeared to be sitting on the sidelines. History now shows that this was a good strategy. In the mid-1600s, the British decided to enter the game in full force. They claimed a huge piece of land on the eastern part of North America that the other European nations had been fighting over for years. The British settlements marked the beginning of the colonial period in South Carolina.