

Title:

Dauphin Island and the History of North America's Colonization in Miniature

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620

Summary:

The fascinating, uniquely American history of Dauphin Island in Alabama

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Article Body:

Dauphin Island, Alabama is a barrier island at the Mouth of Mobile Bay. It is a tourist attraction, the home of around 1,200 people, the site of the Estuarium marine sciences laboratory and a 164-acre Audubon Bird Sanctuary. It's a pleasant, pretty and useful place that receives most of its income from tourism. On the face of it one could hardly guess that Dauphin Island bore the name "Massacre Island" for 8 years, or that it was occupied by every major European power in American history at one time or another.

The earliest records of human activity on Dauphin Island are the burial sites of the Native Americans known as the Mound Builders. The Serpentine shell middens on Dauphin's northern shore suggest that this culture had been using the island for 1,000 years before the 1st Europeans arrived in the Americas, possibly occupying it on a seasonal basis, and definitely using it as sacred ground for the honored dead.

Spain got the jump on the rest of the Old World when it came to the America's. Since we attribute the continent's "discovery" to that country (even if Columbus is to be taken at his word that he was, in fact, Italian) it is only fitting that Spanish explorer Alonzo Pineda was the 1st European to map the Dauphin Island in 1519. By standards of the time his work is considered incredibly detailed and accurate.

It wasn't until 80 years after Pineda made his map that the next great European colonial power arrived on Dauphin's shores. In 1699 French explorer Pierre Le Moyne, sieur d'Iberville, future architect of French Louisiana, was beginning his exploration of the mouth of the Mississippi. He and his men anchored on Dauphin

Island and, in a text-book European misreading of Native American culture, mistook the human remains he found there as the aftermath of some savage (or savages') battle or atrocity. Thus the Island received the name "Massacre Island".

Bones or no bones, d'Iberville liked what he saw. Under the French Massacre Island became a settlement, trading-post and, for a time, the capitol of the Louisiana Territory, a.k.a. 2/3rd's of the continental United States. As such, "Massacre Island" began to seem an inappropriate name. In 1707 the island was renamed Dauphin Island in honor of the "Dauphin" of France, the title given to the prince who is the heir to the French throne.

Latter events would suggest "Massacre Island" was a more appropriate name after all. In 1711 pirates raided Dauphin Island, with all the attendant murder, rape and pillage one might expect. In 1717 a massive Hurricane very nearly leveled every structure on the island. Then, horror of horrors, the British arrived.

For the better part of 100 years Dauphin Island was a microcosm of colonial European conflict in the Gulf of Mexico. Great Britain took it from France. Spain took it back from Great Britain. Virtually the only players on the North American field who didn't reclaim it were the Indians. Back and forth it went until 1813, when a still green United States acquired the entirety of Mobile Bay, Dauphin included. The British took the Island one last time, for old times sake, during the War of 1812 (or actually a few month after; communications were very slow in the early 19th century), but after that Dauphin Island has remained thoroughly Alabaman until the present.

Dauphin has seen a great deal of American history unfold, from cultures of the 1st immigrants who came via the Bering Straight, to the earliest efforts of the conquistadors, to the western European scrum over valuable New World real estate. All in all, that's not too shabby for a little strip of land off the edge of Alabama.