

Chapter 9

Spanish East Florida, 1783-1821

The history of Spanish East Florida, 1783-1821, is dominated by plots, counterplots, insurrections and invasions conducted largely by Anglo-American banditti, filibusterers, freebooters and frontiersmen. Such problems made the Floridas virtually impossible to govern. When combined with inadequate economic support and a constant need for military troops and supplies, it is a wonder that the Spanish Floridas survived as long as they did. The Spanish governors deserve much credit for maintaining law and order in East Florida under such conditions.

East Florida Characterized

When Spain regained East Florida in 1783, the boundaries were the same as those of British East Florida. Basically, it included the entire Florida peninsula, but not the Panhandle. The Apalachicola River marked the western boundary. San Agustín de la Florida continued as the capital of the colony. San Marcos de Apalache on the Gulf of Mexico was still included in the territory of East Florida, but it was largely supported, supplied and manned from Pensacola in West Florida. Fernandina on Amelia Island became important as a commercial center where goods and slaves were smuggled into Georgia. Indian towns and the villages of black maroons and runaway slaves were located west and south of the St. Johns River. Plantations and a few trading posts stretched along that river and north to the St. Marys. The Spaniards erected several forts, more properly outposts, on the St. Johns and St. Marys rivers and at Fernandina.

To begin with, a number of Anglo-Americans, other non-Spaniards, and their slaves formed the bulk of the population. St. Augustine was the center of the Spanish-speaking population with a few soldiers stationed at the various outposts. Of course, the Minorcans, Italians and Greeks from New Smyrna constituted an important and large part of St. Augustine's population.

The Transition from British to Spanish Rule

Brigadier General Don Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes y Velasco stepped ashore at St. Augustine on June 27, 1784. Gov. Patrick Tonyn met him and received the orders signed by George III for the formal transfer of East Florida

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from British to Spanish rule. Zéspedes was not impressed with what he saw. Storms and bad weather dashed his plans for a big celebration for the change of flags ceremony. The formal transfer finally took place on July 12, but Tonyn remained in East Florida until November 1785. Thus, for the first sixteen months of his governorship, Zéspedes had Tonyn underfoot. Tonyn was responsible for the departure of thousands of British subjects, and he spent much of his time arguing with Zéspedes about how to run things.

The 'Banditti'

Dan McGirtt (also McGirt) and his followers had been a real pain in the side of Governor Tonyn. Among other things, they were involved in stealing livestock and slaves. Tonyn had McGirtt arrested, but he managed to escape. Hoping to rid the colony of such problems, Zéspedes offered people like McGirtt clemency and permission to leave the colony. McGirtt accepted Zéspedes' offer, but rather than leave the colony, he continued his old ways. Zéspedes finally had enough and ordered McGirtt's arrest and transfer to Havana for trial. Although that ended Zéspedes' immediate problems with McGirtt and his banditti, McGirtt was only one in a long series of problems that confronted the governors of Spanish East Florida.

Population of East Florida

For a while at least, it seemed as if Spanish life and culture in Florida would flourish. Governor Zéspedes supported greater trade with the United States. "Our vessels are welcomed with the greatest cordiality by the Spaniards," wrote an American visitor. "Governor Zéspedes pays the greatest attention to every American who comes properly recommended." Town itself saw a vibrant mix of people. For a while, Irish soldiers fighting for Spain garrisoned the Castillo. The Minorcans were busy as farmers, carpenters, masons, sailors, and merchants. French and English settlers came into the province, and free people of color again established a presence there. Although Fort Mose was never revived, a black general from Haiti, Jorge Biassou, arrived in town, and trained free men of color in the use of arms. They became one of the colony's five militia units and served with distinction during the War of 1812 in Florida.

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Jorge Biassou. From *Vida de J.J. Dessalines, jefe de los negros de Santo Domingo (traducida del Frances)*.

Printed for Juan López Cancelada, México, 1806.

The use of slave labor continued for the British Period, however. Runaway slaves from the United States still fled into Florida, and some achieved freedom. But there were only about 200 to 300 free people of color there, and more than 2000 people in slavery on the plantations. So only about 1 out of every 11 people gained their freedom. The slave trade was also a big business in Florida, and most colonists living in the town of Fernandina, on Amelia Island, made part of their fortunes by buying and selling slaves.

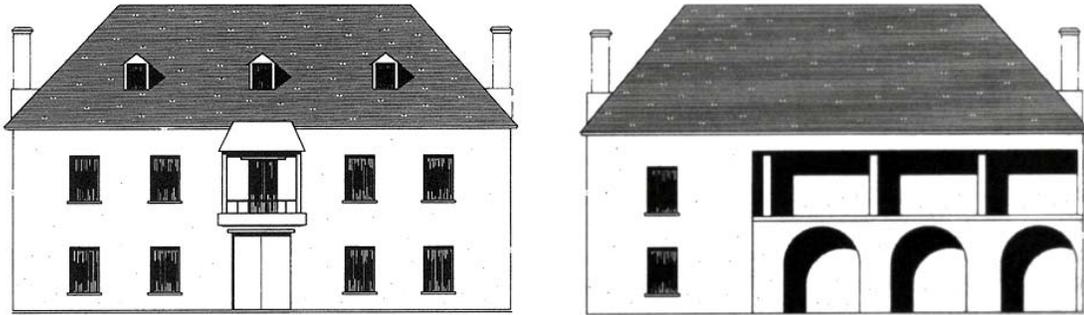
Life in St. Augustine

St. Augustine once again became a lively Spanish town. Feast days were celebrated with masquerades and wandering minstrels. The night watch had to patrol the noisy taverns, where men gambled at cards and billiards. In 1789, residents paid tribute to the coronation of King Charles IV of Spain with processions, plays, music, illuminations, and dances. The town also underwent a building spree, as merchants and planters constructed new two story houses of coquina stone with balconies and arcaded open-air loggias.

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The Seguí House, St. Augustine, built around 1800 (now the St. Augustine Historical Society Library). It was the home of a wealthy Minorcan merchant. Note the large double door, the central balcony, and (at the back of the house) the open-air lower and upper loggias.

Art and literature came to Florida as well. Military officers read *Don Quixote* and the *Commentaries* of Julius Caesar. Without a local press, people waited eagerly for the mails to bring newspapers from Charleston and Havana, and took great interest in following events in Europe or the deliberations in the U.S. Congress. Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* and the *Letters of the Count Chesterfield* were popular works of morality. Soon the town had a boy's school, a military hospital, and a new parish church (now the Basilica Cathedral of St. Augustine). But the wars of Europe and the ambitions of Americans cast their shadows over Florida once again.

The French Revolution and Intrigues in Florida

The French Revolution, and especially the execution of King Louis XVI in 1793, had a profound effect on Spain and its colonies. The French Republic and the Spanish monarchy abandoned nearly 100 years of alliance and went to war. So when the Frenchman Edmond Genet arrived in South Carolina in April 1793 as the minister of the new French Republic to the United States, he brought with him some very ambitious plans. Since France and Spain were now enemies, Genet planned to raise an army in the U.S. and, with the assistance of the French navy, capture Spanish East, Spanish West Florida, and Spanish Louisiana. His plans were too grandiose, however, and soon he focused on East Florida alone.

Genet recruited an American, Col. Samuel Hammond of Georgia, to command the "Revolutionary Forces of the Floridas," as he called the army he was setting up. Hammond quickly encouraged friends, relatives and others to join in the conspiracy. Among the more prominent recruits was a veteran of the American Revolution named John McIntosh. McIntosh came from a

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leading Georgia family, but had moved his family into East Florida to gain new lands. He and Hammond spent the fall of 1793 preparing to overthrow the government of Florida. But Gov. Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada learned of their plans early on and moved to counter the threat.

Quesada appealed to the U.S. Congress, and to the states of Georgia and South Carolina, to end the menace. Then he prepared to defend the province. He ordered the forts strengthened, recruited a large band of Indian warriors and received some reinforcements from Cuba. In January 1794, Quesada had the East Florida ringleaders arrested. Meanwhile, President George Washington insisted that Minister Genet be recalled to France because of all the trouble he was stirring up.

Invasion of 1795

The Genet episode had been over about a year when in June 1795, a force of about 170 Georgians and East Floridians attacked Forts Juana and San Nicolas on the St. Johns River, and threatened St. Augustine. Governor Quesada sent a military force north to the St. Johns and recaptured Fort San Nicolas without opposition. He also reinforced Fernandina on Amelia Island and chased the rebels back across the Georgia border. This ended any real threat to East Florida for a few years. However, Quesada used every soldier he could find, including a militia made up of free men of color, many of them former slaves. A regiment from Mexico also contained black soldiers. The white residents of Georgia hated the idea of black troops operating near their border, and later accused the Spaniards in Florida of trying to start a slave rebellion. Quesada also confiscated the property of people who aided the rebellion. Many of these moved to Camden County, Georgia, where they bitterly waited for a chance to get even.

The War of 1812 and the “Patriots” of East Florida

In 1810 and 1811 another attempt to seize Florida got underway. President James Madison sent George Mathews, a former governor of Georgia, to talk to the governors of East and West Florida about surrendering their territories to the United States. The United States would compensate Spain, Mathews was to say, in return for a peaceful transfer of lands. Neither governor accepted the offer and soon Mathews was engaged in a plot to take East Florida by force. His plan was simple. He would create a group of rebels

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called the "Patriots of East Florida." They would declare independence, then seek help from the United States to drive out the Spanish military.

On March 12, 1812, Mathews' "Patriots" proclaimed their independence and extended an invitation for all people in East Florida to join them. The Patriot flag displayed a soldier in blue with a white background. Their motto was *Vox populi, lex suprema* — the voice of the people is the supreme law.

On March 17, some 180 Patriots seized the town of Fernandina on Amelia Island. The Spanish officer, Col. Justo López, tried to repel them. But the U.S. Navy got involved, sending gunboats down the Amelia River to threaten the town. The next day, American infantry, marines, and riflemen from Georgia occupied Fernandina, and Mathews sent word to the president and Congress that Florida was about to become American territory.

The Patriots, joined by American soldiers, then headed for St. Augustine. Again they demanded surrender, but Gov. Juan de Estrada, a Cuban-born officer in the Spanish army, stubbornly defied them. Soon news arrived that President Madison was not going to support the actions of Mathews and the Patriots. Even so, the president could not easily withdraw the U.S. troops inside Florida. On June 18th, 1812, the United States declared war on Great Britain. The president and his advisors decided American soldiers needed to stay in Florida in order to protect Georgia from attack. For months, Spanish and American soldiers—not even officially at war—faced each other in a long standoff. By late summer, the Seminoles entered the fight and began ambushing American camps. The free black militia of St. Augustine also went into action. In September, they ambushed an American supply train near St. Augustine, and forced American troops to pull back several miles to the St. Johns River. Lieut. Prince Whitten, a former slave from South Carolina, was the officer leading the attack.

Ultimately, the Patriots were not successful in their efforts to take over East Florida. In May of 1813, American troops returned to Georgia, more worried about threats from the British than problems with the Spanish. But this was only the beginning of troubles that would end Spanish rule in Florida.

The Green Cross of Florida

The next attempt to wrest East Florida from Spain came in the summer of 1817. Gen. Gregor MacGregor, a Scottish soldier of fortune who had gained a reputation as a revolutionary in South America, landed on Amelia Island. As

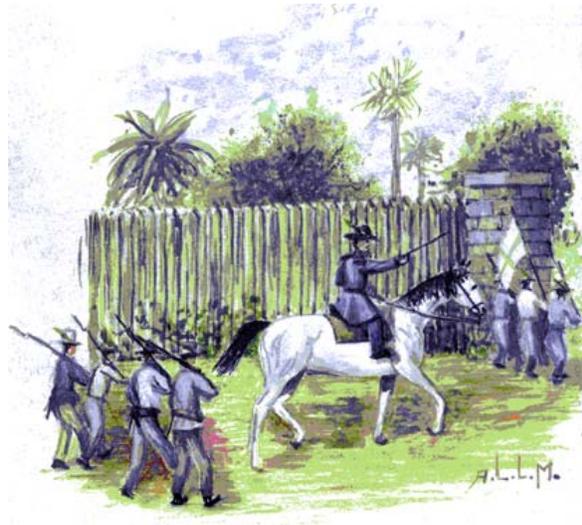
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it turned out, MacGregor had only 78 men, while the officer in charge on the island, Capt. Francisco Morales, had a total of 84 men and 12 cannon. Nevertheless, Morales surrendered without firing a shot. After Morales signed the terms of capitulation, MacGregor's men raised their flag on the island, the "Green Cross of Florida."

However, things did not go well on Amelia Island for MacGregor. Desertion, mutiny and yellow fever seriously reduced his force. Desperately short of funds and supplies, and obviously discouraged, he turned command of the island over to Jared Irwin on September 4, 1817.



Gregor McGregor and his men, with green feathers in their hats, take over Amelia Island, 1817.

From the files of the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

Luis Aury

Now another revolutionary tried to take over the island. Luis Aury, a French pirate, became leader of Amelia Island on September 21, 1817. He immediately turned to privateering and slave trading. By capturing ships and selling slaves, Aury's men made more than \$500,000. Not only the Spanish but the United States government decided that the situation on Amelia Island was out of control

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The United States Acts

In late November 1817, news spread that people on Amelia Island were about to declare independence. They elected representatives to prepare a constitution for their new country. The U.S. had looked for a reason to occupy Amelia Island, and President James Monroe decided to send in troops. On Christmas Eve of 1817 American forces took over Amelia Island and dislodged Luis Aury and his supporters.

The First Seminole War (1817-1818)

Meanwhile, American troops were entering other parts of East Florida. A dispute with the Creek and Miccosukee Indians living between the Apalachicola and Suwannee rivers had erupted into war. General Andrew Jackson, who had led troops in Florida during the War of 1812, brought soldiers from Tennessee on a search and destroy mission against the Indian towns. In a matter of weeks, he pushed most of the Indians living near the Georgia border deep into the Florida interior, and put their towns to the torch. One young Indian who probably saw this destruction and remembered it was Osceola, who would become a great leader of the Second Seminole War. But for the moment, both Seminole and Spanish power in Florida was on the retreat. (The First Seminole War is covered in more detail in the next chapter).

The Adams-Onís Treaty

The constant fighting inside Florida was wearing down Spanish will power to keep the territory. On February 22, 1819, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and the Spanish minister, Luis de Onís, signed a treaty that transferred both East and West Florida to the United States. It took another two years for both Spain and the United States to ratify the treaty. On July 10, 1821, in ceremonies in Pensacola and St. Augustine, East and West Florida officially became American territory.