Chapter 10

Spanish West Florida, 1781-1821

Spain re-conquered West Florida from the British in three military campaigns between August 1779 and May 1781. In 1783, Britain officially returned the colony to Spanish by Treaty. From the outset, Spanish governors faced a new problem: a young and aggressive nation, the United States, intent upon expanding its horizons. The history of Spanish West Florida from 1783 until 1821 is a series of conquests — some diplomatic, a few military — that ultimately resulted in Spain’s loss of Florida.

West Florida Characterized

In 1783 West Florida was the largest of the two Floridas in area. The Mississippi River and the chain of lakes north of the Isle of Orleans formed the western boundary of the colony. The northern border was set at 32 degrees 28 minutes north latitude. The Chattahoochee and Apalachicola rivers set the eastern limits, and the Gulf of Mexico the boundary on the south. The northern boundary was disputed by the United States. The young American republic claimed all of the lands north of 31 degrees north latitude.

There were only four towns or villages of any consequence in West Florida in 1783: Pensacola, the capital; Mobile, Baton Rouge and Natchez. Besides the forts at these towns, there were Fort Toulouse and Fort Choiseul (York) in the interior.

Population

A very general estimate of the population of Spanish West Florida (French, Spanish and American) would be approximately 3,660 in 1785 and about 8,393 in 1795. This count did not include the Indian population.

The religious censuses of Pensacola, 1796-1801, indicate that about 25 per-cent of the population of Pensacola during those years was Protestant. Figures for all of West Florida in 1795 suggest that perhaps 15 percent of the population was Protestant.
Substantial territorial losses to the U.S. between 1795 and 1813 reduced the area of Spanish West Florida by more than 50 percent and the overall population decline was significant.

**Panton, Leslie and Company**

In 1785, Gov. Arturo O'Neill was fortunate to have William Panton and John Forbes come to Pensacola. Together with their friend Robert Leslie, they ran a British Indian trade company (Panton, Leslie & Co.), and were so influential among the southern Indians that Spain granted them a license to stay in the Floridas and continue their business. Leslie ran the company in East Florida, while Panton came to West Florida to secure as much of the Indian trade there as possible. He was a long-time friend of Alexander McGillivray, an influential Upper Creek chief (and also a silent partner in the company). With McGillivray’s assistance Panton won a virtual monopoly of the Indian trade of West Florida. Eventually, this included the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Upper and Lower Creeks and the Seminoles.

The company traded European-made goods — mostly guns, powder, and flints, but other goods also — to the Indians in exchange for furs. Deerskins were the most common Indian trade item. It was not unusual for a quarter of a million deerskins to be processed through Pensacola each year. They were sent to London for manufacture into clothing and leather goods. The company extended credit to the Indians. This gave the tribes buying power, but it also put them in debt. Eventually, they owed the company nearly $300,000.

To regain some of this money, the company sometimes brokered land deals with the Indians. The company would pressure the Indians into making huge land grants to the United States. The American Treasury would pay the Indians in cash, then the Indians would have to pay back their debts to the company. The United States acquired nearly nine million acres of land in present-day Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee in this fashion.

At its peak, the Indian trade company ran trading posts extending from St. Augustine to New Orleans, and north to Chickasaw Bluffs (Memphis).
Manifest Destiny

Beginning in 1783 and continuing until 1821, the United States began to acquire West Florida a piece at a time. Sometimes it persuaded Spain to give up claims to lands; sometimes it bought land through Spain or France; and later the United States simply took land, using soldiers to occupy places like Baton Rouge and Mobile. By 1821, the only bit of West Florida left to Spain was the area of today’s Florida Panhandle.

Treaty of 1795 (Pinckney's Treaty)

The U.S. and Spain negotiated about the territory north of the 31st parallel for a dozen years until 1795. Then Spain finally agreed to recognize U.S. claims north of 31 degrees north latitude. In the Treaty of 1795 (Pinckney's Treaty), the U.S. gained sovereignty over all of the land north to the Great Lakes and from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. This included the Natchez district and its great agricultural lands, which were on the threshold of the cotton boom.

The Louisiana Purchase

In 1800, Spain ceded its colony of Louisiana to France. Napoleon Bonaparte planned to use Louisiana as a breadbasket for the French sugar-producing islands of the Caribbean. When a great slave uprising shook the French island of Saint Dominique (Haiti), Napoleon needed money to send troops there, and so in 1803 he sold Louisiana to the United States. Spain protested, saying France could not sell the colony. It either had to keep it or give it back to Spain. Napoleon paid no attention, and neither did President Thomas Jefferson, who knew he had just doubled the size of the United States by buying Louisiana.

What did the U.S. purchase? The Louisiana territory was much bigger at that time than the present state of Louisiana. It included virtually all the lands south of Canada, from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. Thomas Jefferson and others argued that Louisiana also included parts of Spanish Texas and parts of Spanish West Florida. Spanish officials were furious at this claim, and nearly went to war with the United States over them. But there was no armed trouble in West Florida until about 1810.
John Forbes Describes the Spanish Floridas (1804)

In order to substantiate its claim to all of West Florida after the Louisiana Purchase, Spain commissioned the writing of a number of histories of the area. Among those who contributed to the project was John Forbes, head of John Forbes & Co., the successor firm to Panton, Leslie & Co.

Forbes recommended that the boundaries of West Florida be expanded. East Florida, he said, should be reduced to roughly the eastern half of the Florida peninsula. A captaincy general with its capital at Pensacola should be created to govern the enlarged province of West Florida. The colony then should be divided into two lesser political subdivisions with the governors located at Tampa and Baton Rouge.

Forbes also suggested three things that Spain should do: reestablish Spanish influence among the Indians; take over rights to Indian land; and attract immigrants to occupy and make profitable the land obtained from the Indians. To accomplish these objectives, the Spanish government should provide $15 million, the same amount of money that the U.S. had just paid for Louisiana. With this expenditure, the Floridas would flourish, he said. Unfortunately, Spain had too many problems after 1804 to implement any of Forbes' recommendations, even if they had been seriously considered.

The Republic of West Florida

As the year 1810 arrived, the country of Spain was in great trouble. French troops had moved into much of Spain and deposed the king. Colonies like Venezuela and Mexico were starting to call for their
independence. There were armed uprisings against Spanish rule. Some of this was felt even in Texas and the Floridas. In West Florida, people called for a break with Spain. On September 23, 1810, a rebel force of 80 men attacked the Spanish fort at Baton Rouge and quickly occupied it. Two days later, the rebels declared their independence and created the Republic of West Florida. They soon adopted a constitution based on the U.S. Constitution and elected an American resident, Fulwar Skipwith, as governor. Their flag, a white star on a blue field, made West Florida the first lone star republic. On October 27, 1810, President James Madison decided to annex this “republic” to the United States. He issued a proclamation that incorporated all of the territory between the Perdido and Mississippi rivers into the U.S. and authorized the governors of Mississippi and Louisiana to occupy the area. As a result, the U.S. occupied the Republic of West Florida in December 1810.

The Florida Parishes of Louisiana

In 1812, the U.S. added the former Republic of West Florida to the Territory of Orleans and it later became a part of the state of Louisiana. The four new parishes of Louisiana were: East Baton Rouge, New Feliciana, St. Helena and St. Tammany. Even today, they are known as Louisiana’s “Florida” parishes.

Growth of the Mississippi Territory at Spanish Expense

The U.S. had created the Mississippi Territory in 1798. It included much of the present-day states of Alabama and Mississippi. In 1811 the U.S. extended its military and civil jurisdiction over the Spanish lands along the Gulf of Mexico. Another chunk of West Florida disappeared into the United States. In 1812, this coastal area was incorporated into the Mississippi Territory.

The Mobile Area

The port of Mobile was the next section to go. Americans had been unhappy with Spanish officials at Mobile. They felt the customs duties were too high. The outbreak of the War of 1812 gave U.S. military officers in New Orleans the excuse they needed to end Spanish rule in Mobile. On April 15, 1813, Gen. James Wilkinson took Mobile without firing a shot. In 1817, this area of the gulf coast was incorporated into Alabama Territory and in 1819, it
became a part of the state of Alabama. Again Spain protested, but to no avail. Spanish West Florida was now reduced to less than 50 percent of its size in 1783.

**The War of 1812**

Although Spain was not at war with the United States in 1812, the Spanish Floridas felt the impact of war between America and Great Britain. American troops moved into East Florida before the war even began. The war came to Spanish West Florida a bit later. In 1814, British troops began to set up forts along the Apalachicola River. They hoped to gather slaves and Indians, and lead an invasion into the southern states of the U.S. They also wanted to use the harbor at Pensacola for their navy, and planned to occupy Mobile as well. All of this would lead up to an attack on New Orleans, one of the United States’ most important ports, and the one that controlled the Mississippi River.

**Andrew Jackson Invades West Florida**

General Jackson decided to hit the British forces at Pensacola and in November led an army out of Mobile for that purpose. The British called upon the Spanish to help in the defense of Pensacola, but since Spain was not at war with the U.S., they refused. When Jackson reached Pensacola, the
British evacuated the town, but they destroyed most of the forts and defenses as they left. The British boarded their ships and went to the Apalachicola area for their final preparations to attack New Orleans.

**New Orleans and the Second Battle for Fort Bowyer**

The story of the Battle of New Orleans has often been told. Suffice it to say that General Jackson was well prepared to defend the “Crescent City” and the British were defeated on January 8, 1815. After the battle, the British returned to the Mobile area and established their headquarters on Dauphin Island. Nearby Fort Bowyer was a tempting target and in February, the British decided to take out their frustration by attacking the fort. With forces far superior to anything the Americans had in the area, the British surrounded Fort Bowyer with some 38 warships and several thousand soldiers. They met with the fort's American commander, Lt. Col. William Lawrence. They warned him that they would utterly destroy the fort and everyone in it if he did not surrender. Lawrence had no alternative but to give up. Two days later, the British received word that the war was over. They abandoned Fort Bowyer and quickly departed Mobile Bay. Thus the British won the last battle of the War of 1812.

**The Negro Fort on the Apalachicola River**

After the War of 1812, a large number of blacks — including some slaves from Pensacola — established themselves in an old British fort located at Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River. A group of Creek Indians joined them there. The fort's leader, a man named Garcon, began organizing more than 300 people to defend the area against slave hunters and raiders. For a while, the community of runaways on the Apalachicola was the largest group of maroons and escaped slaves to live in Florida since the days of Fort Mose. Plantation owners in the South, however, were determined to wipe out the fort. As with Fort Mose, they feared the runaways at the fort would encourage more slaves to flee from their masters or take up arms and rebel. U.S. gunboats began to patrol the Apalachicola River, and in April 1816, a group of blacks and Indians opened fire on one of the boat crews. Soon after, American troops moved against Prospect Bluff. On April 27, Lt. Col. Duncan L. Clinch and sailing master Jairus Loomis put their boats and soldiers into position to attack the fort. A hot shot from one of Loomis’ gunboats hit the powder magazine in the fort. It exploded, killing 270 men, women, and children. Few escaped. Garcon was captured by Indian allies of the
Americans and tortured to death. Others fled south and disappeared into the territory of the Seminoles.

This image of Gopher John shows a black maroon who lived among the Seminoles in the 1830s. Slaves, runaways, and free men of color may have dressed like this in the early 1800s if they were living in Indian territory.

From J.T. Sprague’s *Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, D. Appleton Co., New York, 1848.

**General Jackson and the First Seminole War (1817-1818)**

Only a year after the destruction of the Negro Fort, the Apalachicola area erupted into war again. This time the fight was between American troops and the Creek and Miccosukee Indians who lived in the area. A Miccosukee leader named Neamathla warned American settlers and soldiers to stay out of Indian lands. When an American force came to arrest Neamathla, fighting broke out. American troops burned down Neamathla’s village of Fowltown, and a few days later the Miccosukees retaliated by ambushing an American supply boat as it traveled on the Apalachicola. The First Seminole War had begun.

Gen. Andrew Jackson took charge of American troops and swept into Florida in March 1818. He moved first against the Miccosukee towns at Lake Miccosukee, burning 300 houses and taking away 1000 head of cattle. Then he went south and captured the Spanish fort at San Marcos de Apalache.
Inside the fort he found a Scottish trader named Alexander Arbuthnot and took him prisoner, saying he was agitating the Indians against the United States. Two Creek chiefs, Hillis Haya (also Hadjo) and Homathle Mico, were also discovered in the fort and Jackson had them executed.

Jackson next marched to the Suwannee River against the town of the leader Bowlegs, but the Indians and blacks living in that area abandoned it and escaped. However, Jackson did discover and arrest two more British subjects, Robert Ambrister and Peter Cook. He shocked his officers and caused an international scandal by executing Arbuthnot and Ambrister as spies and enemies of the American republic. Arbuthnot was hanged from the yardarm of his own ship, The Last Chance, and Ambrister was shot by a firing squad.

Probably Jackson's most daring action, however, was to move against the city of Pensacola. The Spanish governor, José Masot, had no means to fight off an American army. He abandoned Pensacola and took refuge in Fort San Carlos de Barrancas. Jackson's forces attacked the fort, and a brief skirmish ensued. Outmanned, outgunned, and threatened with mutiny from within, Masot soon surrendered. Jackson ordered the Spaniards to leave Pensacola, and an American ship took them to Havana. From May 1818 until February 1819, U.S. forces occupied Pensacola.

Jackson was already an American hero for defeating the British at New Orleans. Now everyone knew who he was, and although many people accused him of acting unfairly in Florida, he would eventually become the state's first governor, and then president of the United States.

The United States Acquires the Floridas

Like East Florida, West Florida was ceded to the United States by the provisions of the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819. At the time of the transfer in 1821, there was very little left of West Florida — just Pensacola and the areas immediately around it. Andrew Jackson came back to Florida to take possession from Col. José Callava on July 17, 1821. The American era of Florida history had begun.