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GEORGE I. F. CLARKE

One of the most interesting characters in the early history of Florida was George I. F. Clarke, an Englishman. He was engineer for the British Government during its possession of Florida and continued this work throughout the succeeding Spanish period and for many years after Florida's cession to the United States. He is frequently referred to by name and reputation in American State Papers, Public Lands, especially Vol. IV containing the reports of the Land Commissioners appointed by the United States Government to pass upon land claims in Florida. Clarke made many of the surveys of royal grants, and was considered probably the highest authority on Florida lands during the territorial period.

Mr. M. A. Williams, the father of the president of this society, succeeded to Mr. Clarke's title as possessing such wide, accurate, and authoritative information on lands throughout the State.

C. SETON FLEMING;

¹ St. Augustine, 25th, July, 1821.

Capt. John R. Bell, Commanding the province of East Florida.

Sir,

The following is intended to comply with your desire of information on the northern division of this province ; and in order to your comprehending the true state of that section, and the character of its inhabitants, to whom, as the officer that presided

¹ The following letters of Clarke's are found in Charles Vignoles, *Observations Upon the Floridas*, New York, 1823, p p. 20 - 30.

over them for the last five years, I feel grateful for their confidence, their devotion, and their support, permit me to recapitulate a part of its history; and first to premise: that it is bounded on the north by Camden County, Georgia, the southernmost part of the Atlantic states ; the river St. Mary, the line of demarcation, and a very narrow one, has long been the "jumping place" of a large portion of the bad characters who gradually sift through the whole southwardly : warm climates are congenial to bad habits. Second, that, unfortunately for Florida, the laws of both governments had the effect of making each country the asylum of the bad men of the other; consequently, Florida must have received, we will suppose, twenty of those for one it returned to Georgia. This must be the result, on taking only a numerical view of the population of the two countries. And thirdly, that by the orders of the Spanish court, prohibiting citizens of the United States from being received as settlers in Florida, the only part from whence it was ever to expect a population sufficiently large to make it respectable, the good were prevented from coming in, while the bad must come. The result of an observation, perhaps inadvertent, made in congress long since, Florida must ultimately *be ours*, if only from emigration, and loudly commented on by the Spanish minister.

The revolution, commenced in March, 1812, had spread general desolation and ruin over the whole province; the dust of a siege had been thirteen months snuffed within the walls of St. Augustine. On the 6th of May, 1813, the assailants were withdrawn, and the town of Fernandina was restored to the Spanish authorities.

The Spanish government had published a general pardon to its subjects, but, unfortunately, had limited

it to three months, a time too short for the ebullitions of individual feelings to subside. Many, and those of the most energetic and influential character, would not trust themselves among the opposite party. The time expired, and those were consequently left out. And in August, of the same year, hostilities re-commenced ; more sanguinary scenes ensued ; and the insurgents aided by bands of idlers from Georgia, took and kept possession of all the territory lying to the west and north of St. Johns River. Fernandina having become too weak for offence, and St. Augustine not being willing to let out all its troops, to hunt "bush fighters", the newly styled *Republic of Florida*, over which the influence of order had not been felt since March, 1812, and having now no compulsive inducement to union among its members, soon fell into the most wretched state of anarchy and licentiousness ; even the honest were compelled to knavery in their own defense, and thus continued until August, 1816 - while the most rancorous feelings were banished between the "Pat-riots" of the main, and the "damn'd Spaniards" of Amelia Island.

At that period preparations were making on the main for a descent on Fernandina, then too weak to stand even on the defensive, and no succors were to be expected from our friends, nor was there any thing like good quarters to be looked for from our enemies. Governor Coppinger had lately received the command of the province. I knew his energetic and benevolent character; that his discretionary powers were very great, but his want of means, deplorable ; and I personally knew the people of the main, and had had in other days, influence among them. I proposed a plan of reconciliation and re-establishment of order. It was patronized by the governor, and I received orders to proceed according to circumstances. Messrs. Zephan-

iah Kingsley and Henry Yonge went with me up St. Mary's River to Mills' ferry, and met about forty of them, and after much debate an agreement for a general meeting at Waterman's Bluff in three weeks, was concluded on.

The day of meeting arrived, and none others but the gentlemen I have mentioned would leave Fernandina. We knew that nothing short of an election of officers would subdue those people, even should they be willing to submit to order at all ; and that was a course opposite to the principles of the Spanish government. However, extraordinary cases require extraordinary remedies ; and circumstances authorizing a long stride, I provided several copies of a set of laws adapted to their circumstances, blank commissions, instructions, etc. A gathering of several hundred, besides a crowd of spectators from Georgia, met us at the place appointed, a mere mob without head or leader. I tendered them a distribution into three districts of all the territory lying between St. John's river and St. Mary's with a magistrate's court and a company of militia in each ; and those to be called Nassau, Upper and Lower St. Mary's an election of officers from the mass of the people of each, without allowing the candidates to offer themselves ; that the officers to be elected should be immediately commissioned to enter on the functions of their offices; and that all the past should be buried in total oblivion. These were received by a general expression of satisfaction ; a table was brought out on the green, and in a few hours a territory containing about one-half of the population of East Florida was brought to order; three magistrates and nine officers of militia elected, commissioned, instructed and provided with laws. Every demonstration of satisfaction ensued ; they took up their officers on their shoulders, hailed by the

shouts of hundreds. A plentiful feast and many interesting scenes of friendship and mirth closed the important day.

His excellency approved of the proceedings, and tendered me a superintending jurisdiction on the whole, which I admitted, on his consenting to strike out Amelia Island: that had a commandant who had a plenty of leisure to attend to the complaints of Ferdinandina, and I have ever since allowed them the election of officers in filling up vacancies.

Such has been the confidence and resignation of those people, that all complaints and appeals that should have gone before the superior courts at St. Augustine, have been referred to me for an opinion and those opinions have ever been voluntarily conclusive, to any amount. And such their devotion to the government, that at the shortest notice, any part or the whole force of the three districts have met me at the place appointed, mounted, armed and victualled, each at his own expense.

Three facts speak volumes in favor of those inhabitants:- First, that in five years there has not been one appeal and but one complaint to the superior authorities, in St. Augustine, although the high road to both has all the while been open. Second, that Georgians prefer suing Floridians in that part of Florida to suing them in Georgia. Third, that the credit of Floridians stand higher in Georgia than ever it did before, from whence they get all their supplies. Such is the deplorable state of human nature, that a robbery or a murder will occur in the best regulated societies ; within a fortification ; but I can venture to assert, that in no part of the civilized world do fewer irregularities occur among so many inhabitants, than in the northern. division of this province.

I would caution, that when the people of Florida

are spoken of with censure, some regard would be paid to the person speaking, as to who he is, or from whence he gets his information ; to the period to which reference is had, and the part of Florida alluded to. I am aware that the time has been when these were censurable, for they were above four years in the state of anarchy; the broadside of their country open to the idle and vicious of Georgia ; and even after they were called to order, in 1816, some time was required for purification, by compelling many to decamp, and others to mend their manners. And on the other side of St. John's river, under another local jurisdiction, many who were hunted out from the northern division found toleration.

We knew that a practice called Lynch's law had done more good in Georgia in a few months, before Florida was found to be an asylum for the vicious, than the civil authority could have done in as many years in that part of the country ; and we were aware that some such energetic measure was indispensable to accelerate our purification. Fines, floggings and banishments, therefore, became the penalties for all wilful injury committed on the property of another, not as a law of Spain, but as a special compact of the people. A man who stole his neighbor's cow, was tried by a congress of from twenty to thirty persons of his district, summoned for the purpose, and on being clearly convicted, he was sentenced to receive, tied to a pine tree, from ten to thirty-nine lashes; and that was executed on the spot, by each giving him two lashes, to the amount of his sentence ; and the second offense of the same class was punished by flogging and banishment from those districts. A few such examples firmly managed, and executed under the rifles selected from a company, drawn up for the purpose, (and but few were required) did us more

good than a board of lawyers, and a whole wheelbarrow of law books could have done.

A mere remonstrance was sufficient to reduce to a small amount, on our side of St. Mary's river, the very grievous evil of parties of Floridians and Georgians combined, going frequently to the Indian country of Florida to plunder cattle ; a lucrative practice that had been going on for years, and was carried to such excess, that large gangs of cattle could be purchased along that river, at the low price of from two to three dollars per head. Efforts to suppress it altogether, we found to be in vain, without a suitable coincidence on the Georgia side ; and experience had shown that the civil authority was too heavily booted to make much impression on those "moggasin boys". I then wrote to General Floyd, who commanded a part of the Georgia militia, and his prompt and efficient aid soon enabled us to put a finishing stroke to a practice replete with the worst of evils.

When General M'Gregor got possession of Fernandina, he was in the belief that he had conquered Florida to the walls of St. Augustine, and that there was nothing more to be done, as related to these people, but display his standard, fill up his ranks, and march to the possession; and under that impression he brought several sets of officers. But neither the offers, threats nor intrigues of himself and his successors, Irvin Hubbard and Aury, and their many friends in many places, could bring one of them to his flag. Whereas, when a call was made for volunteers to commence in advance the expedition formed in St. Augustine, for the re-capture of Amelia Island, every man turned out, well equipped, not excepting the superannuated. We got possession of all Amelia Island to the very town of Fernandina, and kept it for several days awaiting the troops from St. Augustine.

During that time twenty-seven of these men sought for, gave battle to, drove from the field, and pursued to within the range of the guns of Fernandina, above one hundred of McGregor's men with the loss of seven killed and fourteen wounded, and without having lost one drop of blood on our side ; leaving us to bury their dead. The reverses that afterwards attended that expedition were wholly to be attributed to the conduct of the commanding officer who arrived from St. Augustine.

When the constitutional government was ordered in Florida, a few months since, some small alterations were made in the laws of those districts. They were but small, for the laws handed them in 1816 were principally bottomed on the same constitutional government, which had been in force in this province in 1813 and 14. But the administration of St. Augustine having been pleased to form the whole province, about fifty thousand square miles, into one parish, making that city the center, so far defalcated what those people conceived their constitutional rights, that they petitioned government; and not getting what they expected, they had in meditation to send a representative to the captain-general of Cuba, and further should it be necessary, when the near approach of the surrender of the province to the United States levelled all dissentions.

These three districts contain about one-half of the population of East Florida, say about fifteen hundred souls, and embrace three-fourths of the agricultural interest of the whole province. They are very thinly settled, and form one of the most inferior sections of Florida, as relates to good lands, and indeed many other natural advantages. The causes that have congregated so large a portion of the industrious part of the population into one of the least delectable sec-

tions, are these: Its vicinity to Georgia, a populous country, bordering on the river St. Mary, a near and ready market for their produce and their supplies, and the facility of avoiding duties of exports and imports ; the occupancy or neighborhood of Indians in better sections ; the want of protections ; the want of a population sufficient to protect itself; and revolutionary broils with government, forced upon us by foreigners in their over-strained assiduity for our welfare, gagging us with freedom, the most free, civilized people perhaps in the world, and would fain lately have put it down our throats with negroes' bayonets. (Vide the Jenett, the Mathews, and the McGregor invasions, in 1794, 1812 and 1817.)

East Florida was literally evacuated by the British, when delivered to the Spanish authorities in 1784. Perhaps no such other general emigration of the inhabitants of a country, amicably transferred to another government, ever occurred. Spain allowed it many extraordinary privileges, such as were not enjoyed by any other part of her dominions, and continuing augmenting them ever since. In 1792, Florida was open to a general emigration, without exception of country or creed ; and it was rapidly progressing to importance, when the report of the Spanish minister I have mentioned, closed the gates against American citizens, some time about 1804, and virtually shut us in from the world as to a large population.

The decline of this province must be dated from that period, in which a very large portion of the convulsions of Europe necessarily fell to the share of Spain, from her contiguity to imperial France, and which called her attentions and resources to objects of more consideration. But that decline was graduated by the nature of things to a slow progression,

and we had other fair prospects in our favour, notwithstanding the prohibition of a population from the United States, when the troubles of 1812 spread, in one year, universal ruin. The war between the United States and Great Britain, and the visit of McGregor, following in close succession, almost every one, who had the means of migrating, abandoned a country so much and so unmeritedly affected.

Your obedient servant,

GEO. I. F. CLARKE.

Circular to the officers and people of the northern division of East Florida.

St. Mary's, Florida, 13th August, 1821.

John Low, Esq. Magistrate of the lower district of St. Mary's.

Dear Sir,

I take the earliest opportunity afforded me since my return from St. Augustine, to communicate the following :

The authorities of the United States having received possession of this province, on the 10th of last month, my functions as superintending officer of the northern division of East Florida, and those of surveyor-general of the province, have ceased ; and my claims on the Spanish government do not permit my receiving, at present, official charges under the present government. I have not, however, taken my leave of you all, nor of my former residence ; a reciprocity of grateful feelings, happily experienced for the last five years, forbid my doing so. I have therefore promised captain Bell, who now commands this province, who has your welfare warmly at heart, and with whose amiable disposition you will be well pleased, that my every aid and assistance, ex-officio, shall be cheerfully employed for your good.

While in St. Augustine, I laid before captain Bell, a long and candid statement of these districts; a character of these people that I trust will insure them the consideration of their new government; copies of which will be transmitted to the executive of the United States, to General Jackson, and remain in Florida as a record of their merit.

It was to me a pleasing task; a tribute due to their devotion to their country, and to the confidences and support I have all along experienced from them. Where but in this division of Florida can it be said, that no part of half the population of a province have, in five years, made an appeal, or a complaint, to superior authority residing at hand, and the high road for both always open? Where but in the same division can it be said, that foreigners prefer suing the people of the country in their own courts, to suing them in theirs, where they have them frequently in their power? Where but in this meritorious division can it be said, that any part of, or the whole physical force of three districts, have never failed to meet, at the earliest notice, and that cheerfully, to execute any orders given, armed, mounted and victualled, each at his own expense, and without pay?

An active, brave, hardy and hospitable people. A people, who having been compromised and thrown into anarchy and confusion, by foreign bayonets, and remained afterwards above four years in a state of licentiousness, all came into order in one day; and which government they have steadily supported with their person and property ever since, now five years! A people, who not all the offers, threats, or intrigues of McGregor himself, nor those of his successors, Irvin Hubbard, and Aury, nor the craft and influence of many others at Fernandina and elsewhere, could bring over one of them from their fidelity to the

Spanish government. A people, seven and twenty of whom sought for, gave battle to, and drove from the field above one hundred of McGregor's men, in a body, commanded by Irvin, in sight of their own quarters, without losing one drop of blood!

The representation I have handed in, as a record in their favour, is too long for insertion here; but a copy remains in my hands, and I trust will be read with general satisfaction. All papers laying in my possession, and appertaining to individuals of these districts, will be carefully distributed to their owners, as soon as leisure will permit me to attend to them.

Captain Bell has authorized, according to the proclamation of General Jackson, a continuance of all your offices and former functions, until laws are formed by higher authority for the government of the province. He recommends that the judiciary should be confined to such cases and matters as do not admit of, or require appeals beyond the exclusive jurisdiction of these magistrate courts ; that all others should lay over until further orders. And he says, that all heinous invaders of the public peace will find safe keeping in the hands of the military at Fernandina if sent there.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) GEORGE I. F. CLARKE.

Note. A number of unpublished letters of G. I. F. Clarke's, of even greater historical interest than those above, now in the manuscript collection Of the Society, will appear in the next and the succeeding issues of the Quarterly.