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THE SETTLEMENT OF CHARLOTIA (ROLLES TOWN), 1765

In the year 1763 George the Third, King of Great Britain and Ireland, secured from his Catholic Majesty of Spain the province of Florida in exchange for certain territory lately taken by the English, including the City of Havana.

The territory was divided into two parts, East and West Florida, governments were established, and settlers and investors soon invaded the new country. Also extensive and valuable land grants were awarded to many gentlemen of wealth and gentlemen with fortune hunting or philanthropic motives.

Lords Grenville, Egmont, Hawke, Templeton, the Marquis of Hastings, and Sir William Duncan, and Dr. Turnbull were among those securing land grants. A genuine "land rush" was made toward Florida. The Annual Register states: "His Majesty this day passed twenty grants of land in East Florida upon petitions of gentlemen of rank and fortune, who intended settling them immediately; and it is said that St. Augustine will certainly be made a free port."¹

During the English occupation the two most remarkable attempts, both more or less abortive, at colonization were those of Dr. Turnbull and Denys Rolle, Esq., of the County of Devonshire.

Denys Rolle was born either in Devon or Hampshire, the former the more probable, in the year 1725. However even the date of his birth is uncertain, some historians placing it in 1729. His was the line of Rolles of Stevenstone; among his forbears he numbered the famous Lord Chief Justice Rolle, who had

¹ *Annual Register*, June 18, 1766. This group of grants included the famous Turnbull land grant.

refused to sit at the trial of King Charles. Denys Rolle married, in 1748, Ann Chichester, daughter of Arthur Chichester of Devon.² Two years later the famous John Rolle, afterwards Lord Rolle of "Rolliad" fame, was born. There exists considerable confusion among historians concerning the identity of the father and son. John Lee Williams gives the son credit for the Florida settlement by calling the colonizer simply "Lord Rolle", whereas Denys Rolle never bore the title and John Rolle did not secure the title until later.³ Stevens states that Denys Rolle was the brother of Lord Rolle!⁴

Of Denys Rolle himself little has been learned. That he was wealthy, of an adventurous and philanthropic temperament, and played the part of country gentleman with city leanings, is evident. He was M. P. for his county but seemingly made little effort to secure political fame.

His first efforts toward colonization began in Georgia in 1764. With Colonel George Bach, Captain Buch, William Reynolds, an elder of Trinity House, and Dr. Robert Willan, he addressed himself to the Board of Trade for a tract of land "from the Georgia line on the north to another line southward, to be drawn parallel with the equator from two miles below the forks of the Apalachicola River to the Altamaha, to be bounded on the west by the first, and on the east by the last of these rivers".

Rolle and his associates proposed to build a town on the south side of the Altamaha, and to erect a larger town, to serve the purpose of a capital, on the Apalachicola. Their intentions were to cultivate cotton, silk, and indigo and to collect ship timbers and

² Burke's Landed Gentry. The name appears variously as Denys, Dennys, Denison Rolle or Rolles.

³ *Territory of Florida* New York, 1837.

⁴ Stevens, *History of Georgia*.

knees of liveoaks. Another scheme proposed to open a more accessible route of communication with the Creeks than by way of Augusta, and a freer access to the Gulf of Mexico than by the long and dangerous route around the Florida keys. Denys Rolle himself was to come over and superintend the planting of the new colony. A regular government was requested, with the proper courts of justice, at first to be supported by the State. But the petitioners were to be vested with full proprietorship.

The Board of Trade however, wisely foreseeing failure in such a proposition, refused the petition. Rolle and his associates then asked for the grant of Cumberland Island, "for the purpose", they said, "of raising cotton, oil and wine and other such commodities as may be hoped for in a warm climate". But this also was refused.⁵

Then Rolle began to look toward the newly acquired province on the south. In his own name this time, for there is no record that he continued in association with his former company, he acquired a grant of forty thousand acres in any part of East Florida where the land was unlocated. He embarked with his colonists in 1765. Bartram says that Rolle's plan was "to take up his grant near St. Marks in the Bay of Apalatchi. And he set sail from England with about one hundred families, for that place ; but by contrary winds and stress of weather, he missed his aim and being obliged to put in St. Juan's, he with some of the principal of his adherents, ascended the river in a boat and being struck by its majesty, the grand situations of its banks, and the fertility of its lands, and at the same time, considering the extensive navigation of the river and its near vicinity to St. Augustine, the capital and seat of government, he

⁵ Jones' and Stevens' histories of Georgia.

altered his views on St. Mark's, and suddenly determined on this place, where he landed his first little colony."⁶

Rolle's colony consisted of a motley collection of persons, assembled from the gutters of London. He must have been an optimist of the first degree. His intention was to reform these people and create new citizens out of them. About three hundred such persons, mostly women, composed the colony. His expedition bears many points of resemblance to that of de la Hantou in Canada.

Rolle named the place Charlotta after Queen Charlotte, wife of George the Third. It is now known as Rollston, and was known by the name of the founder very shortly after the settlement was abandoned, for Jefferys' map, 1775, names it "Rollston" and locates it accurately, just above the present Palatka. Bartram however calls the place Charlotta. Later maps commit many errors in the spelling and location of the settlement. Drew's map of 1874 spelling it "Rollstown," and Colton's map, 1885, gives it "Rallstown". But the most singular mistake occurs when Brinton locates the place at Volusia, a former town on the St. Johns River above Lake George and names Denys Rolle's settlement "Rawles Town."⁷ He places it correctly on his map however. Charlotta was located on the east side of the St. Johns between Palatka and Dunn's Lake. Bartram makes it clear that this was the true location, and later investigation tends to confirm him.⁸

Denys Rolle and his colonists at once went to work. The woods were cleared, a frame mansion house was

⁶ Wm. Bartram, *Travels in North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida*, London, 1792, p. 91.

⁷ Brinton, *Guide Book of Florida*, p. 74.

⁸ Wyman, *Fresh Water Shell Mounds of Florida*.

erected and a handsome avenue was laid out which was to reach to St. Augustine.

Bartram describes the place: “. . . I came here to anchor. This town was founded by Denys Rolle, Esq., and is situated on a high bluff, on the east coast, fifteen or twenty feet perpendicular from the river, and is of length half a mile, or more upon its banks The old habitations. are mouldering to earth, except the mansion house, which is a large frame building, of Cypress wood, yet in tolerable repair, and inhabited by an overseer and his family. There is also a blacksmith with his shop and family, at a small distance from it. The most valuable district belonging to Mr. Rolle’s grant, lies on Dun’s Lake and on a little river which runs from it into St. Juan [probably Dunn’s Creek]. This district consists of a vast body of rich swamp land, fit for the growth of rice The Aborigines of America had a very great town at this place, as appears from the great tumulti, and the conical mounts of earth and shells, and other traces of a settlement which yet remains”.⁹

The attempted settlement was a failure. Discontent, disease, and the hardships that confront pioneers, all combined to wreck Rolle’s philanthropic scheme. Also it is apparent that there were many complaints concerning the parsimony of the benefactor. Fever ate its way through the colony and it gradually fell to pieces.

A dark and distressing picture of the settlement is given by Bernard Romans in his *Natural History of East and West Florida* published in 1775. Perhaps he exaggerates the mortality there, but his known ability in other directions gives authority to his words. We probably passed the place on his way

⁹ Bartram, *Travels*

across the country from Tampa Bay to St. Augustine. He says: "The river [St. Johns] is from one and a half to three miles wide, except at the house of Mr. Rolle, who has here made an odd attempt toward settling and making an estate in as complete a sandy desert as can be found."

After recounting some of the trials and sufferings of the colonists at New Smyrna he says: "O Florida! were this the only instance of similar barbarity which thou has seen, we might draw a veil over these scenes of horror; but Rolles Town, Mount Royal, and three or four others of less note have seen too many wretches fall victims to hunger and ill usage. Rolles Town in particular has been the sepulchre of above four hundred such victims."

The survivors fled to Georgia and the Carolinas and in all probability some of them went for refuge to St. Augustine. Bartram visited Charlotta less than ten years after its settlement, but he found there only ruins and a handful of inhabitants.

Denys Rolle returned to England, and the last page in the story of this singular gentleman is contained in a brief paragraph from the Annual Register :

"In the course of his usual walk between his seats of Stevenstone and Mudscott, in the County of Devon in a fit of Angina pectoris (a disorder he had long been subject to) aged, 72, (died) Denys Rolle, esq., late of East-Titherly in Hampshire, father of Lord Rolle, and descended from a very ancient and honorable family in the county."¹⁰

In *Report of the Land Commissioners*, 29th of March, 1824, among other claims refused, was one of peculiar interest : "Lord John Rolle, twenty thousand acres on the east side of the St. John's River".¹¹ Whether this was a claim placed by the distinguished

son for the land once settled by his father or whether it was a former land claim of his own is uncertain, but with the refusal of this claim the name of Rolle passes from active participation into the pages of Florida history.

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¹⁰ *Annual Register, 1798.*

¹¹ Abstract No. 16, Claim No. 31.