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THE SECOND SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

*[In the January number last there appeared an article by A. H. Phinney relating to the attempted seizure of St. Augustine in the year 1812 by United States troops and gunboats. The article was entitled **THE FIRST SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR**. The following paper is a resume by the same author of an analogous incident in Florida history - the raid into Florida in the year 1818 by General Andrew Jackson.]*

Andrew Jackson's Presbyterian parents emigrated to the United States from the north of Ireland two years previous to his birth. To the courage, honesty, and industry of his forbears he added a hatred of the British fostered by the occurrences of his boyhood, and as Spain was an ally of England and had allowed a British force to land in Florida, that country was to him also an enemy.

Spain in its weakness had remained quiescent while a nest of outlaws possessed themselves of Amelia Island upon which the town of Fernandina is located. The people of that vicinity appealed to the United States for assistance in driving out the usurpers and on December 13th, 1817, the forces of the United States entered the town, lowered the Mexican flag which had replaced the green cross of Gregor MacGregor and raised the United States ensign.¹ In October, a boatload of people and supplies going up the Apalachicola, river was ambushed by Indians and thirty-three Americans slain. The War Department ordered General Gaines, who had built Fort Scott at the junction of the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers about fifteen miles above the Florida line and who was at that time using Fernandina as one of his supply bases, to see that the guilty parties were punished.

¹ *American State Papers*. Vol. XII, p. 397.

General Gaines, acting upon the peremptory command, sent word to the chief of the Indian tribe inhabiting Fowletown, a settlement five or ten miles from Fort Scott, to report to him immediately. Upon the chief's refusal to do so, a force of two hundred and fifty troops was sent to the town, the Indians driven out with the loss of several Indian lives, and in November of 1817 the town itself was reduced to ashes by order of General Gaines. The War Department, determined that justice should be meted out to the Indians responsible for the molestation of American lives and property, authorized Gaines to cross, if necessary, the Florida line in pursuit.²

General Gaines, besieged in Fort Scott, was obliged to call for assistance, and on December 26 orders were sent to General Andrew Jackson to raise a force of volunteers and to take charge of Fort Scott. On January 6, 1818, before leaving his home in Tennessee, General Jackson wrote President Monroe, saying "Let it be signified to me in some way (as by Johnny Rhea) that possession of Florida is desired and it shall be accomplished in sixty days."³ No reply was received to this letter but when only a day's march from Fort Scott, Jackson received word of the President's approval of his suggestion.

On March 9, with a force of a thousand Tennesseans and eight hundred Georgia militia, General Jackson reached Fort Scott; on the 16th he reached the site of the negro fort on Florida soil which had been destroyed some months previously while flying a British flag. As this site was a strategic point on the river he rebuilt the fort and named it Fort Gadsden in honor of one of his captains. Here he was joined by fifteen hundred friendly Creeks from northern

² *General Jackson's Conduct in the Seminole War*, by Samuel Parkins. Brooklyn, 1828.

³ Rhea was a Louisiana Congressman.

Georgia under the leadership of their chief, McIntosh, who was a half-breed. But little resistance was encountered as this large force moved southward to St. Marks although it was estimated that there were twenty-five hundred Indians under arms.

In an Indian village at Lake Miccasuckie, fifty scalps were discovered hanging from poles in flaunting and ghastly display, and a large number of cattle, stolen from Georgia, were found secreted within the confines of the village. Upon the arrival of Jackson's forces, the Indians fled from the town and the entire village with its three hundred huts was burned to the ground. The pursuit of the fleeing Indians was given over to McIntosh, the half-breed Creek.

At St. Marks, Alexander Arbuthnot, a Scotchman of about seventy years of age, was captured as he attempted to flee from the avenging troops. Arbuthnot was lucratively engaged in selling British goods to the Indians and, as their agent by power of attorney signed by fourteen hostile chiefs, he had requested the British Government to aid the Indians in their warfare upon the United States. When in St. Marks he basked in the lime-light of authority as a member of the Spanish commander's family. At Swaneytown, a settlement of Indians and negroes on the Suwannee river, he conducted a thriving but questionable business in the form of a supply store which he placed in charge of his son. The supplies with which this store was plentifully stocked were conveyed from Nassau to Swaneytown and St. Marks by a sloop of Arbuthnot's ownership.

In view of the above discovery, General Jackson was satisfied that the Spanish commander was friendly to the hostiles and he, therefore, demanded possession of the fort. Protesting innocence of the charge, the commander asked for time, but when General Jackson made preparations to assault the fort it was

surrendered without resistance and the commander and his troops were sent to Pensacola.

On April 9, the American troops started for Swaneytown and reaching there on the 16th engaged the inhabitants in a skirmish in which eleven Indians and three negroes were killed. Many others were drowned in swimming the river in a futile effort to escape. It was during this skirmish that Robert C. Ambrister, an ex-lieutenant in the British service, was captured. Ambrister had broken into Arbuthnot's store at Swaneytown, furnished the Indians and negroes with ammunition and had attempted to lead his well equipped force in opposition to the American troops.

On the 26th, Jackson returned to St. Marks and convened a court-martial to try Arbuthnot and Ambrister. General Gaines presided over the court which was composed of fourteen officers.⁴ On April 27, Arbuthnot was found guilty of having incited the Creeks to war against the United States and of aiding the enemy. He was sentenced to be hung. Ambrister plead guilty to having led a force of Indians and negroes with the purpose of attacking American troops. He was sentenced to be shot. Both sentences were executed the following day.

Jackson now prepared to return home. On May 5, he wrote from Fort Gadsden to the Secretary of War, saying "I shall leave strong garrisons at Fort St. Marks, at Fort Gadsden, at Fort Scott, and at Pensacola if it shall be necessary to possess it." Learning that some of the hostiles had fled to Pensacola, he turned aside from his course to investigate the rumour. The Spanish commander met him with a message, the defiant language of which determined

⁴ The proceedings of the court-martial with the testimony in full is given in Waldo's *Memoir of Jackson*, Hartford, Conn., 1818.

Jackson to take possession of the city. Upon his arrival the commander and his troops fled to Fort Barrancas. On May 25, an artillery duel commenced, and on the 27th the fort was surrendered, whereupon the Spanish commander and his troops were sent to Havana. General King was placed in charge of the civil and military activities of the city of Pensacola, Captain Gadsden was appointed as collector of customs, and United States laws were put in force.⁵

On June 2, Jackson wrote the War Department giving a final report of his military operations in Florida and added, as a conclusion; "As long as a cordon of military posts is maintained along the Gulf of Mexico, America has nothing to fear from foreigners or hostile Indians. Indeed, Sir, to attempt to fortify or protect an imaginary line or to suppose that the frontier can be secured by a cordon of military posts is visionary in the extreme if the Floridas remain open to the enemy. The immutable principles of self defense justified the occupation of Florida and the same principles warrant the American government in holding it until such time as Spain can guarantee, by maintaining an adequate force, the preservation of her authority in the country."

Jackson's acts produced amazement in the United States and anger in Great Britain and Spain. The British press demanded that the execution of two of Great Britain's subjects be avenged ; however, when the British Secretary received a full report of the testimony recorded during the court-martial, he declared that the conduct of the two condemned was unjustifiable and that no action by the British government was deemed necessary.⁶ A parliamentary inquiry followed, but the ministry sustained the Secretary and no action was taken.

⁵ *Niles Register*, July 11, 1818, p. 344.

⁶ Parton's *Life of Jackson*, Vol. II, p. 486.

On January 24, 1817, the Spanish king pronounced himself in favor of ceding Florida to the United States, but when Jackson's actions were reported to him, all negotiations were immediately broken off. The Court of Madrid addressed a communication to President Monroe asking if he were responsible for the violation of Spanish sovereignty and, if not, requesting him to punish the offending person, or persons, without delay. An indemnity to be paid to Spain in compensation for the loss of her citizens was also requested. Secretary of State Adams replied in a vigorous letter, condemning Spain for failure to restrain her Indian inhabitants and, in turn, requesting payment for the cost, to the United States, of the war.⁷

President Monroe wrote Jackson on July 19, saying, "Should we hold these posts it is impossible to calculate all the consequences. It is not improbable that war would immediately follow." He referred to Jackson's letter of June 2, saying that there ought to be some changes made therein which would lay the blame more distinctly upon the Spanish officers, adding, "If you authorize the Secretary or myself to correct these passages it will be done with care." On August 19, General Jackson replied, making no mention of any corrections and stating that he had followed the instructions given to General Gaines and himself and denying that he had acted on his own responsibility, adding fearlessly, however, "Allow me to repeat that responsibility is not feared by me if the general good requires its assumption."⁸

The President replied on October 20: "The best course to be pursued seems to me for you to write a letter to the Department in which you will state that

⁷ See *John Quincy Adams and Florida* in this number.

⁸ *Correspondence between Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun*, Washington, 1831, p. 52.

a difference of opinion exists relative to the extent of your powers." Further correspondence followed, but Jackson would not admit that he had exceeded his orders.

The administration was in a quandary and the course of General Jackson was considered in a cabinet meeting. It was reported that the questions to be decided were as follows: First—May Pensacola be retained, risking all consequences at home and abroad? Second—Shall the captured posts be returned and General Jackson be put on trial for a breach of orders and unofficerlike conduct? Third—Shall the posts be surrendered and the acts of General Jackson be disavowed, at the same time approving his motives? Answer to the first question: No, it would be an act of war. To the second: It does not appear that General Jackson violated his instructions nor will it be proved that his conduct was unofficerlike. To the third: Yes, and require the Spanish government to fulfill their treaty obligations.⁹

In 1831, twelve years subsequent to this cabinet meeting, when Jackson was President and Calhoun, Vice-President, Jackson heard that Calhoun, who had been Secretary of War in Monroe's cabinet, had been in favor of a vote of censure. This knowledge aroused Jackson's ire and a number of letters passed between the two, Jackson's short and bitter, Calhoun's long and evasive?¹⁰ They were never again friends. In all probability, this quarrel had its effect upon South Carolina which threatened to secede during Jackson's second term.

Jackson had ordered Gaines to seize St. Augustine if any of the hostiles were harbored therein, but the

⁹ *Niles Register*. Vol. XIV, p. 416.

¹⁰ Correspondence. Note 8, ante.

President countermanded this order and the captured posts were restored to Spain.¹¹ Appeased, Spain again took up the matter of ceding Florida, and on October 24, 1818, the New York Gazette contained the following announcement: "We have it from authority which we deem next to official that our differences with the Court of Madrid have been settled, that the Floridas are ours and that our Government is to pay the Spanish claims."

On November 17, with President Monroe's annual message to Congress, all letters and documents were turned over to that body and ordered to be printed. The Military Committee, to whom was referred such portions of the message as concerned the acts of General Jackson, made a divided report January 11, 1819. By a majority of one, the following resolution was presented: "Resolved, that the House of Representatives disapproves of the proceedings in the trial and execution of Alexander Arbuthnot and Robert C. Ambrister." The minority report opposed the resolution and stated "that General Jackson, his officers and his men, are entitled to the thanks of the country."

This resolution launched one of the most vigorous debates in the history of the nation. Thirty-two members of the House, in fiery eloquence, voiced their opinions. The verbatim report of the speeches fills six hundred and fifty closely printed pages of the Annals of Congress (15th Congress, Second Session).¹² The vote in the Committee of the Whole for adopting the resolution was as follows: Ayes 54, Noes 90. On February 8th, when the Committee of the Whole was discharged, the official report was sustained by a vote of 108 to 62. Congressman Cobb of Georgia, the state Jackson had delivered from savage

¹¹ *Niles Register*. Vol. XVI, p. 55.

¹² This was published as *Debate on the Seminole War*, Washington, 1819, p. 591.

warfare, had introduced the following resolution : "Resolved, that the late seizure of the Spanish posts of Pensacola and Fort Barrancas was contrary to the constitution of the United States." The vote, taken on February 8, was Ayes 70, Noes 100.

Thus was General Jackson vindicated in the House. In the Senate he was not so fortunate. On February 24, a committee to which the matter had been referred moved a vote of censure. Congress adjourned on March 4 and the resolution never came to vote, but the *fact* that General Jackson was made the first governor of the Territory of Florida proves that the administration fully approved his acts.

After many years, weighing our knowledge of the circumstances which provoked these rigorous measures, and viewing with just pride the courageous figure of Andrew Jackson as it stands out in bold relief from the pages of history as a citizen, as a soldier and as President of the United States, perhaps one may be permitted to sit in judgment upon his attempt to seize and hold the Floridas ; if so, the decision must be that in view of the man's resolute and intrepid character he would not have been true to himself had he acted otherwise.

A. H. PHINNEY .