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PUBLIC EDUCATION IN SPANISH ST. AUGUSTINE

By JOSEPH B. LOCKEY

A school for white children existed in St. Augustine as early as 1606¹. Whether it continued to function during the rest of this first period of Spanish dominion is a question that cannot now be answered. But if it did survive, it must have come to a close on the cession of the province to the British in 1763; for the change of sovereignty was followed by a general abandonment of the territory by the Spanish inhabitants. When the Spanish came back twenty years later the British in turn departed. With the restoration of sovereignty went the restoration of the school.

It is not known whether the first school was public and free, but the second, it seems clear, answers to this description. That is, it was supported by funds of the royal treasury and it was open without charge to all the children of St. Augustine, including negroes. If, however, any of these latter attended the school they were to sit apart near the door. One gains the impression from the regulations and instructions, which have been translated and reproduced below, that the colored children, though they were under no obligation to attend, were not to be denied if they had a yearning for knowledge. With the white children the case was different. It was the duty of their parents to see that they went to school, and if any played truant or were absent for other cause, some of the older boys were sent to bring them in. The penalties for non-attendance were not severe, yet it seems fair to say that the "new" education in St. Augustine was not only

¹ F. B. Steck, "The First School in the United States", in *Fortnightly Review* (St. Louis), XXXVIII (January, 1931), 3-4.

public and free, but, in a measure at least, compulsory for all except the negroes and mulattoes.

Preliminary measures looking to the reestablishment of schools in Florida were adopted in Spain soon after the conclusion of the treaty of cession in 1783. First, the newly appointed Governor, Vicente Manuel de Zepedes, was instructed to promote education throughout the province²; and second, Thomas Hasset, an Irish cleric who had been educated at Salamanca³ was appointed Parish Priest of St. Augustine⁴ and charged with the additional duty of organizing and directing the schools of that jurisdiction. St. Augustine was fortunate in this arrangement. Zepedes was present to watch developments; and Hasset, who was at the time of his appointment in charge of the Catholic schools of Philadelphia, had qualifications beyond the ordinary for the performance of his part of the undertaking.

It would be flattering to our national vanity to infer that, since Hasset was drawn from Philadelphia, the young republic to the north was thus early being looked to for educational guidance. Such an inference would hardly be justified. In effect, Hasset was chosen on the ground of an earlier connection with Florida. In December, 1778, the Spanish Government had appointed him, together with Michael O'Reilly, a fellow countryman, to minister to

² The instructions to Zepedes were in accordance with a fixed policy of the Spanish government as set forth in *cedulas* of May 10, 1770, November 28, 1772, and November 24, 1774. See Charles III to Zepedes, December 13, 1783, East Florida Papers, Library of Congress, Box 44, E4.

³ P. W. Browne, "Salamanca and the Beginnings of the Church in Florida" in *The Review*, Vol. LXXXIV (June, 1931), pp. 581-587.

⁴ Zepedes to Jose de Galvez, March 3, 1784, E.F., Box 40. From this communication it appears that Hasset was appointed on, or shortly before, November 25, 1783.

the Minorcans, Italians, and Greeks, whom the British had introduced into the province as colonists. The priests were to be transported to the field of their labors at government expense, and each was to be paid an annual stipend of three hundred and sixty-five pesos. Before setting out, the appointees were to present themselves to the Bishop of Cadiz to receive the credentials and instructions under which they were to exercise their ministry⁵. The available records do not show whether they entered upon their duties at that time. If they did, they must have been promptly expelled, for within a few months from the date of their appointment Spain was at war with England⁶. Agents as these priests were of the Spanish government, they would hardly have been welcome in any British territory, much less in Florida where the contest was in part to be waged. Hasset, therefore, and O'Reilly as well, had to wait for a more auspicious time to enter the field of labor for which they had been designated.

Yet, as for Hasset, he still encountered difficulties. On the way south from Philadelphia, the vessel on which he took passage was wrecked in a storm. The unfortunate traveller escaped bodily harm but lost his clothing and books. Despite his misadventure, however, he reached Havana without great delay. There he found the authorities disposed to indemnify him for his losses⁷ and equally

⁵ Galvez to Urriza, December 16, 1778 (inclosure in Urriza to Zespedes, September 4, 1784), E.F., Box 54, B5. When Hasset received his new appointment, his salary remained the same as that stipulated in 1778. See Urriza to Zespedes, September 4, 1784, E.F., Box 54, B5.

⁶ The war was precipitated by the conclusion of a treaty of alliance at Aranjuez on April 12, 1779. See *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy*, Vol. I, p. 294.

⁷ Hasset formally sought reimbursement in a memorial dated at St. Augustine, October 13, 1784. A copy of this memorial is found in Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba, Legajo 150. He was finally (December 22, 1787) awarded 300 pesos. See Liquidacion de la Plaza de Florida, May 12, 1790, A.G.I.: Santo Domingo, Leg. 2643.

accommodating in providing him prompt passage to St. Augustine. Consequently he arrived, in September, 1784, only a matter of some two months after the formal ceremony of transfer had taken place⁸.

Hasset did not find conditions favorable to the immediate opening of schools. The town was crowded beyond its capacity by the overlapping of incoming Spanish and outgoing British. Before life could become normal the British had to be evacuated. Here as in the United States they were notoriously slow in going⁹. When the period of eighteen months allowed by the treaty for their departure, counting from the date of signature (September 3, 1783), proved insufficient, the time was extended for four months¹⁰. By the expiration of this second period, they were out of St. Augustine, but they lingered at the mouth of the St. Mary's River nearly six months longer. It was the end of December, 1785, before Governor Tonyn sailed away with the last laggard contingent¹¹. In the meanwhile the attention of the Spanish Governor had been occupied with the innumerable questions that arose from the presence and departure of the British. The resulting correspondence was long and vexatious¹².

There were other reasons why the schools had to wait. St. Augustine was in a state of dilapidation

⁸ The exact date of Hasset's arrival is not known. He left Havana on or about September 4, 1784, according to the letter of Urriza to Zespedes cited above. Another document found in A.G.I.:P.C., Leg. 150, shows he was in St. Augustine on October 7, 1784.

⁹ Zespedes to Jose de Galvez, June 6, 1785, A.G.I.:S.D., Leg. 2660.

¹⁰ The Count of Floridablanca to Jose de Galvez, February 5, 1785, A.G.I.:S.D., Leg. 2660.

¹¹ Vicente Manuel de Zespedes to Bernardo de Galvez, December 24, 1785, E.F., Box 43.

¹² Copies of most of Tonyn's letters to Zespedes are found in Public Record Office, Colonial Office, 5/561. The correspondence of Zespedes is scattered, some of it being found in draft in the East Florida Papers, and much more in the various Legajos of Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba.

beyond belief. For some years past the British had been uncertain of their tenure, and consequently had done nothing to overcome the ravages of time. The fort, though a substantial structure, was so badly in need of repairs that scarcely a place in it could be found to keep the powder dry. The church was in a state of ruin. The Governor's house leaked in every room. The hospital was badly housed. The soldiery were without barracks¹³. And there were other, more distant troubles. On the northern frontier banditry was rife. Renegade British and disreputable Americans from Georgia and the Carolinas preyed upon the country, robbing and destroying¹⁴. Finally, the Indians, whom the British were loath to commend to the new sovereign, were growing restless, and numbers of them were beginning to appear at St. Augustine to present their demands to the confused and apprehensive Spanish Governor¹⁵.

To these difficulties must be added others of a different sort. Further correspondence with the higher authorities had to be carried on, and enabling decrees had to be obtained. Every important step indeed had to await royal assent, and the funds required had to come from Mexico or be disbursed by the Captain-General at Havana on the order of the Mexican Viceroy¹⁶. Communication with distant capitals was slow. But even the things near at hand

¹³ Vicente Manuel de Zespedes to Juan Igancio de Urriza, September 16, 1784, in E.F., Box 55 C5.

¹⁴ Vicente Manuel de Zespedes to Bernardo de Galvez, August 9, 1784, in E.F., Box 40; Patrick Tonyn to Lord Sydney, December 6, 1784 and inclosures in P.R.O.:C.O., 5/561.

¹⁵ Zespedes to Urriza, September 16, 1784, in E.F., Box 55 C5.

¹⁶ The Floridas and Louisiana were a constant drain on the viceregal treasury of Mexico. Between April 24, 1784 and May 12, 1790 East Florida alone received subventions amounting to 159,432 pesos, 7 reales, 11 maravedies. See Liquidación de la Plaza de Florida, May 12, 1790, A.G.I. :S.D., Leg. 2643

could not all be promptly done. Preparation of schoolrooms and the acquisition of the paraphernalia of instruction must have required time, though definite information on these points is lacking. One of the desirable, if not absolutely essential, preliminaries was the taking of a census. This, like so many other things, had to wait. It was necessary first to have the British out of the way and the remaining population settled in fixed habitations. When those conditions were established, Hasset had the enumeration made. It was completed toward the end of 1786¹⁷.

Father Hasset's census is an interesting document. It contains the names of all the white inhabitants of the city. It professes to include also lists of the inhabitants of the surrounding country for a distance of five leagues; but these lists have not been found. The census of 1793 in a measure supplies the missing information. On the banks of the Matanzas River there were 110 inhabitants, 62 of whom were slaves; on the North River 126, 83 of whom were slaves; and on the Camino de la Feria 10, presumably all whites. The enumeration of 1786 proceeds by families, the place of residence, nationality, religion, occupation, and ownership of property in lands, houses, and slaves being indicated. An enlightening feature of the census is a summary of the population under four separate heads.

Under the first head were the foreigners. They were for the most part British subjects. A few were Americans, some of whom at least had quit the United States because of their Loyalist sympathies. A still smaller number were neither British nor American. Francisco Felipe Fatio, for example,

¹⁷ A copy of this census is found in a box of East Florida Papers, marked "Census Returns 1784-1814". In the same box there are copies of general censuses of East Florida for 1793 and 1814.

was a Swiss by birth, though he was described as a British subject. Nearly all were Catholics. The total of the group was 85. They owned 126 slaves.

The next group was usually described as the Minorcans, though it included a few Greeks and Italians. These people were the remnants of Turnbull's New Smyrna Colony. On the transfer of flags, they chose as a body to remain. They were by far the most numerous group, the total being 469. Attached to them were 70 negroes, most of whom doubtless were slaves.

The third group consisted of the *Floridanos*, so called because they had been residents of the province under the former Spanish regime. A few of them had remained throughout the period of British control, and the rest, after residing in Cuba for twenty years, had returned to the old home. The number was small, a total of 50 only. To them were attached 82 negroes, some of whom were slaves and the others free.

The fourth division, designated as Spaniards, totaled 46. The number of slaves in this division, a round dozen, was correspondingly small. The number of Spaniards would have been greatly increased if the garrison had been enumerated; but the addition would have been almost altogether of men. To list them would not have been to Hasset's purpose. His principal aim was to count the children.

The sum total of the enumerated population was 940. Of this number 650 were whites and 290 colored. If the unenumerated inhabitants had been counted, the population of St. Augustine and the immediate vicinity would have been, perhaps, not less than 1200 nor more than 1300. The census of 1.793 shows an increase in the civil population of about 350. After that, if it is fair to judge from the

census of 1814, there was little change at the Capital. Elsewhere, particularly in the north, increase was noticeable.

The present interest is to determine as accurately as possible what the school population of St. Augustine was in 1786. To arrive at an estimate, the 650 enumerated whites alone need be considered. In the absence of a stated school age in the regulations, let seven to fifteen, both inclusive, be assumed. By actual count, 69 boys and 74 girls in Hasset's enumeration fall within these limits. But the girls must be eliminated. The school was not for them, though it must be confessed that the language of the regulations in the original Spanish admits of a different interpretation. That is, the words employed, *ninos*, *muchachos*, and *discipulos*, may mean both boys and girls as well as boys alone. But the regulations as a whole suggest boys. Moreover the Spanish did not look with favor on co-education.

How many of the 69 eligible boys actually enrolled in the school is not known. A few, fourteen and fifteen years of age were already bound out as apprentices or were employed in some other capacity. It is not likely that they left their jobs to attend school; and the children of many of the foreigners, as well as of the more prosperous of the other groups, were probably educated at home. The enrollment, therefore, must have been considerably below the number designated as of school age. How much below it is impossible to say. The only thing that can be asserted with confidence is that not two schools, as contemplated by the regulations, were set up, but one only; and that not two or more teachers, as likewise contemplated by the regulations, were employed, but one only.

The available records do not show exactly when the school opened. The first master, Francisco Tro-

conis, Chaplain of the Royal Hospital in St. Augustine, was appointed by Zespedes, it appears, early in 1786. In April of that year, the appointment was approved by Royal Order. Knowledge of the approval reached St. Augustine a few months later¹⁸. Whether Troconis had been conducting the school in the meantime is uncertain. He would have run no great risk in proceeding without royal consent, for his salary was only eight pesos a month. Since he had a living at the Hospital, it is hard to imagine him presiding daily, from eight o'clock in the morning till noon and from two o'clock in the afternoon till sunset, over the droning studies of his charges. It is not rash to conjecture that the endless drudgery of hearing lessons must have been evaded. Could it have been that some likely young man among the pupils, a little older than the rest, perhaps, assumed that burden under the direction of the chaplain-master? The practice is not unknown today in certain parts of Spanish America.

The gaps in the story are exasperating. Not only do we not know how Troconis managed, but we do not know how long he continued at his post. One of his reasons for accepting the position was to win merit in the eyes of his superiors, who had it in their power to give him some day what he really wanted --a sinecure in the cathedral of Havana, his native city. When he made his ambition known, he was told to go ahead for five or six years sowing the seeds of true religion in the ignorant youth of the province, and his reward no doubt would be the coveted place¹⁹. We cannot say whether he achieved his heart's desire. All we know is that his connection with the school came to an end-whether five or six

¹⁸ Zespedes to Bernardo de Galvez, August 12, 1786, E.F., Box 41, B4.

¹⁹ Zespedes to Bernardo de Galvez, August 12, 1786, E.F., Box 41, B4.

years later or eight or ten, is uncertain. Perhaps it was the longer period, for, in 1797, we find the Governor at St. Augustine requesting the authorities in Spain to send out a teacher. The reply was discouraging. No one there would think of migrating to a wilderness for the salary offered. Florida itself, perhaps, could provide the man, and if not Cuba and Puerto Rico were to be tried. An increase in salary, if necessary, could be held out as a special inducement²⁰. The result of these negotiations we do not know.

The next master of whom we have any knowledge was Juan Nepomuceno Gomez. But we learn of him only through his resignation, which he tendered in 1816. Curate of the parish as he was, he relinquished the duties of teacher to devote his time more fully to his religious obligations. He was succeeded by an individual of the same surname, a certain Eusebio Maria Gomez. In applying for the position this Gomez, who apparently was not a priest, demanded a monthly salary of fifty pesos and a daily ration besides²¹. Whether he was promised the recompense he asked for, or whether he continued at his post until the cession five years later does not appear. We only know that in 1818 there was litigation over his salary²².

Other scraps of information may be set down to piece out the story. Hasset played a part for four or five years only. He then quit the province and

²⁰ Laguno to the Governor of Florida, July 9, 1797, inclosure in Coppinger to Cienfuegos, October 15, 1816, A.G.I.: P.C., Leg. 1873.

²¹ Coppinger to Cienfuegos, October 15, 1816, with the application of Gomez inclosed, A.G.I.: P.C., Leg. 1873.

²² R. R. Hill, *Descriptive the Documents relating to the History the United States in the Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, Archivo General de Indias* (Carnegie Institution, Washington, 1916), p. 212.

we hear of him next in New Orleans²³. At St. Augustine his influence and the memory of his sojourn survived. The singular regulations and instructions which he drew up with so much care in 1786 would have been sufficient alone to keep his memory green. Thirty years after they were written, Eusebio Gomez promised to abide by them, and doubtless they continued in force until the province finally passed into the hands of the United States. But the perpetuation of Hasset's influence is not to be attributed entirely to his charting the course to be pursued. He was fortunate in his successor. His old friend, Michael O'Reilly, with whom he had been associated since their student days in the Irish College of the famous University of Salamanca, took over the pastoral duties and the direction of education in the parish²⁴. Thus was assured a continuity of policy and of practice.

The regulations must be read to be appreciated. No summary could do them justice, nor could any reconstruction of the scene to which they applied be accurate. Yet the writer, whose experience as an inspector of schools in a Spanish speaking country, where the old customs persist to an extraordinary degree, cannot refrain from a slight indulgence of his fancy. The school probably functioned in a single room in some public building or perhaps, in a modest dwelling obtained for the purpose. The equipment must have been meagre. Benches arranged around the walls for the beginners., and a large table or two with benches for the more advanced who were learning to write; a desk, a little less plain than the rest of the furniture, with a chair for the master, and in front of it a bench for recita-

²³ P. W. Browne, "Salamanca and the Beginnings of the Church in Florida" in *The Ecclesiastical Review*, Vol. LXXXIV (June, 1931), pp. 581-587.

²⁴ P. W. Browne, loc. cit.

tions; nails in the walls for the boys' hats, a simple pendulum swinging from the ceiling, a ruler, the school register, and a copy of Hasset's regulations on the teacher's desk—these doubtless constituted the paraphernalia of the school. There were, almost certainly, no charts or maps on the walls, no globe in a corner, and most likely no blackboard anywhere in the room. It is doubtful even whether the pupils had slates. For their writing exercises they probably used paper and pencils sparingly provided by the government. Of books there were few and among these no doubt the Catechism was most prominent.

The school was to be open in the morning at seven o'clock; but note that the roll was to be called at eight. Did Father Troconis arrive daily at seven to unlock the door and receive his charges? Hardly, after the first few days. There must have been for a while, however, an approximation to observance of this and all the other rules. The whole undertaking was novel. Few of the boys and not many of their parents had ever seen a school. The opening must have caused a sensation in the town, and the interest aroused must have remained at a high pitch for a while. Moreover there was Father Hasset looking on. The school with its ritual was a creature of his imagination and of his enthusiasm. In the circumstances, it would have been strange if everybody concerned, from the Governor down, had not been moved by an earnest desire to carry out the plan to its minutest detail.

It is pleasant to picture the school in its early moments of enthusiasm. The pupil left home, as the rules required, with the blessings of his parents, with his face and hands washed—and his feet also, if he went barefoot—with his hair combed, and, though the regulations did not specify, with a hat

on his head. On the street he saluted his elders with due respect. When he reached the school he uncovered, entered quietly, and after greeting first the teacher and then his fellow pupils with all politeness and ceremony common to his race, he hung up his hat in its proper place. Now it may be seen why though barefoot, he left home with his head covered. There was no exception to the rule: he had to hang up his hat in its proper place. Having done that, it was his duty to take his seat in all modesty; and that no doubt he did.

Now the pupil occupied himself the livelong day is not hard to imagine. Without the facilities for study and without sufficient guidance in the use of such facilities as he had, he must have spent a good part of his time in complete idleness. A total of two or three hours he may have spent mumbling in an undertone letters, syllables, words, or sentences in pretense of study; once or twice a day he joined in answering in concert questions from the Catechism; and a few minutes, morning and afternoon, he stood at the teacher's desk receiving criticisms of his written work, or reciting his syllabary, his reading lesson, or his tables of Arithmetic. Or, if there was any semblance of classes, he may have been called once or twice a day with a group of his fellows to recite before the teacher on a common subject.

As much of his time as possible he spent outside the schoolroom. The ceremony of being "excused" was too fascinating to be resisted, and besides, going out was a high privilege that could be granted to one only at a time. The boy must have spent not a little of his day watching for the opportunity, which always seemed imminent as the one previously granted the boon reentered the room. At such moments the aspirant dashed for the teacher's desk

to see, perhaps, the coveted permission given to another. If he persisted, and we may be sure he did, his turn was bound to come. Then the ruler, the badge of his temporary distinction, was handed to him, and he hastened toward the door, giving the pendulum a vigorous swing as he passed²⁵. If he knew the ways of the pendulum-let the reader learn if he doubts-and the ways of the master as well, he was back in ten or twelve minutes to return the ruler and take his seat, as on other occasions, with the unobtrusiveness appropriate to good breeding. If he was lucky he went through this ritual at least twice a day.

In whatever way the pupil may have spent his time, his day in school at last came to an end-at sunset in winter and a half hour before in the spring and fall. After the long hours of repression, the boys must have leaped forth at dismissal with a strong inclination to give vent to their animal spirits in the divers ways known to their breed. But Father Hasset provided for that contingency also. One of his rules required the pupils at the end of the day, to go directly home without loitering, or shouting, or committing mischievous pranks in the streets. With the author of the rule on guard it is not likely that mischief found vent in the streets. Moreover hunger, a more powerful instinct, sent the youngsters scurrying home.

If the reader wishes to reconstruct the scene more fully let him read the document which follows.

²⁵ The ruler device it is said, is still in vogue in certain rural areas in Spanish America. But what of the pendulum? Was its use, for the purpose indicated in Hasset's rules, unique?