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DeBRAHM'S REPORT ON EAST FLORIDA, 1773  
BY CARITA DOGGETT CORSE

The most detailed of the early reports on the Florida peninsula is that of John Gerard William DeBrahm, Surveyor General of the southern district of North America for George III of England. His observations on Florida are contained in a work entitled "History of the Three Provinces, South Carolina, Georgia and East Florida," in manuscript in the British Museum, with a copy in Harvard University Library. The South Carolina and Georgia sections of this report have been printed but the Florida material is still only in manuscript. A great benefit would be conferred upon students of Colonial Florida if this part were printed also.

DeBrahm saw Florida while evidences of the first Spanish period were still discernable and, unlike the usual English observer, he noted these things with interest. For DeBrahm was a Dutchman, and before coming to America, had been an engineer in the service of the Emperor Charles V, ruler of the combined realms of Austria and Spain.<sup>1</sup> It is natural that his report, bidding for the favor of an English king, should be biased in favor of England, but he did not suppress his knowledge of the Spanish background of the regions he surveyed.

DeBrahm was appointed to his position on June 25, 1764 at a salary of one hundred fifty pounds a year, with an allowance of fifty pounds for an assistant; his appointee being another Dutchman, Bernard Romans.<sup>2</sup> Thirty-six other men were employed, including twelve mariners, one ship-builder,

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1. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*. (DeLand, Florida, 1929) vol. II, p. 337.

2. Phillips, *Notes on the Life and Works of Bernard Romans*. (DeLand, Florida, 1924) p. 103.

three navigators, four mathematicians, one Indian interpreter, one pack-horseman, and one man without rating, designated as a "liver in town."<sup>3</sup> Also noteworthy was the fifteen year old apprentice, Joseph Purcell, who obtained his position through the intercession of Dr. Andrew Turnbull. Both Romans and Purcell were excellent draughtsmen and turned out some of the most accurate of the early maps of Florida.

Of the three hundred twenty-eight pages in the report, one hundred sixty-one deal with that portion of the present state of Florida east of the Apalachicola River which under English administration was called East Florida. West Florida whose area under English rule extended from the Apalachicola westward to the Mississippi was not included in the report, probably because the survey was interrupted by disturbances attending the American Revolution. Florida remained loyal to England, but an English surveying party would have been liable to capture by American privateers on the coast or by Georgia raiders in the interior. It is indeed a great loss to Florida history that the careful work of the survey did not continue into West Florida. However, this lack is in a measure made up by Joseph Purcell who mapped West Florida<sup>5</sup> and Bernard Romans who wrote an interesting account of that area.<sup>6</sup>

The Florida text is divided into six chapters, with twelve maps and many survey charts and hydro-

3. DeBrahm MS. p. 190.

4. Phillips p. 109.

5. Purcell Maps 1778. The Road from Pensacola in West Florida to St. Augustine in East Florida. Reproduced in Fla. Hist. Quarterly, XVII, 15-25.

1788. A Map of the States of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia comprehending the Spanish Provinces of East and West Florida. Published by Vint & Anderson.

6. Phillips p. 35.

graphical tables to enforce the report. In a three page preface of salutation and transmittal we learn that DeBrahm was ordered to survey both inland and coast, and to give detailed descriptions of the country, and that he began his work at the southern extremity of Florida and worked north. In June 1772 he delivered a map twenty-five feet long to illustrate his work on Florida <sup>7</sup> and on April 2, 1773 he delivered the first volume of his report, but the second volume was not delivered until 1798, having laid "unrequested" in his possession during and after the American Revolution. Presentation of the report to Phineas Bond, Consul-General of Great Britain for the United States, was made with the hint that the eighty-one year old surveyor, then living in Philadelphia, had been unprovided for from 1783 to 1795. <sup>8</sup>

Of chapter one, ten pages deal with the history of Florida from 1513 to 1763 and eight pages with a list of English citizens of Florida 1763-1771 with their occupations. Notations up to 1771 state whether they left the province or died or were still there. Since most of the English came to Florida during the Revolution, this list, though interesting, is tantalizingly incomplete. It is even more so because the fifteen hundred colonists brought to Florida by Dr. Turnbull in 1767, who might have been listed, are only mentioned as a group.

DeBrahm puts an arresting lead to his chapter on history in showing that Florida was the Spanish name for most of North America. This fact is mentioned but not emphasized by English and American historians who were not interested in featuring the Spanish claims to this region. Pursuing this point, DeBrahm takes note of the vast extent of Spanish

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7. DeBrahms MS. p. 191.

8. DeBrahm MS. p. 170.

Florida, including most of the continent with the exception of old Mexico and New Foundland.

The purpose of DeBrahm's survey of Florida was to encourage English settlers to come to the peninsula. Every possible inducement was offered by the English government to fill this new province almost vacated by Spanish settlers, and to this end bounties on crops, grants of land, and even subsidies were made.

DeBrahm pictures East Florida as an irregular figure representing a tongue or peninsula containing near 62,718 square miles, and describes the soil and climate in various sections. He said that the constant winds fanning the lands kept the climate at an agreeable and gentle warmth, and that among the three thousand Spaniards who had recently evacuated St. Augustine many were over one hundred years old.<sup>9</sup> He recorded the rise and fall of the quicksilver in the thermoscope for a period of near thirty-five months from June 1767 to April 1770 and observed that during this period it never became hotter than ninety-one degrees in the shade in summer or colder than thirty-two degrees in winter. This is one of the earliest weather reports for Florida. During the years that he and his employees worked on the survey, exposed to all kinds of weather, they remained quite healthy.

In describing the northern boundary of East Florida along the St. Marys, DeBrahm mentions that "from the Indian boundary line, the south side of the river is entirely laid out in Tracts of Land unto private persons, among which is a reserve of 10,000 acres for a town which was, according to turnings of the river, thirteen miles distant from the Bar of the Inlet." This town was intended for a number

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9. DeBrahm MS. p. 192.

of emigrants from the Island of Bermudas though they did not settle here. <sup>10</sup> He adds, "The jealousy of the Indians has not as yet permitted me to make a survey of it (St. Mary's Stream) for its source lay in Okefinokee Swamp and its contiguous country which is contained within the Hunting Ground reserved by the Indians at the Congress held at Picolata in November 1765 between James Grant and John Stuart Esqrs, the former at that time being Governor of East Florida, and the latter Superintendent of Indian Affairs, with the head men of the Indians, at which time the latter tied the above described line between the land deeded to His Majesty and the Hunting Ground reserved for themselves. "<sup>11</sup> This line was to begin at a pine stump upon the St. Mary's where the Georgia boundary line stops, and to continue as far as Oklywaha River. From there south the St. Johns River was the boundary. Thus most of the interior of Florida was given by the English to the Indians. Interesting mention of this meeting between Grant and the Indians is also found in Bartram's Travels.

There follows four maps with descriptions of their salient features :-

St. Mary's Inlet, guarded by Fort William on the South end of Cumberland Island [where Dungeness stands now.]

Nassau Inlet including an opening between Fort George and Nassau [which is now closed] and settlers houses located-Loftin's, Edmund Gray's and Andrew Way's along the Inland Waterway.

America, [Which he says is to be known as Egmont Island, with a town laid out and called Egmont Town where Old Town in Fernandina stands.]

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10. DeBrahm MS. p. 247.

11. DeBrahm MS. p. 247.

St. Juan [St. Johns] Inlet. [Shows only 4 ft. of water at low tide and 9 ft. at high on the St. Johns bar.]

Twenty-six tables of land surveys made in various directions follow. Most of the surveys started from the barrier gates of St. Augustine. Since this is still a landmark, many old locations can be identified from these records, including the site of forts Picolata and San Francisco de Pupa on the St. Johns River guarding the Indian trail crossing. *St. Augustine Inlet* and town, shows many plantations in the vicinity, including Governor Grant's farm north of the gates, Lieut., Governor Moultrie's *Bella Vista* plantation and others. *Mukoso Inlet and Environs* - New Smyrna was not yet founded when the surveying party passed but the place intended for the settlement was marked, for Dr. Turnbull had already inspected it and received his grant.<sup>12</sup> Hillsborough, alias Indian, alias Ays Inlet, is the modern Indian River. The old Ays Inlet which was then the only entrance to the sea has since closed up. On one map he explains how the present Carysford Reef received its name-a British ship of that name having run aground there in 1770. *Dartmouth Inlet, Cape of Florida and Sandwich Gulf*. Here the north end of Biscayne Bay was called Dartmouth stream, the south end of Biscayne Bay was called Sandwich Gulf, and Elliott's Key was called Biskaine Island. Old and new names for the Florida Keys are recorded.

In this portion of his text DeBrahm clears up the story of how and when New River at Fort Lauderdale was formed. Hitherto it was usually regarded as local legend from Indian sources that the river broke through in one night, though Forbes mentions

12. Doggett, Dr. Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida. (1919) p. 27.

the incident.<sup>13</sup> DeBrahm confirms this, saying that between May 25-30, 1765, great rains fell here and the rock, weakened by the weight of water within and by the surf piled up by winds outside, gave way and the river broke through.<sup>14</sup>

DeBrahm describes the climate, soil, vegetation, and possible crops ; lists the various streams, rivers, and rivulets; and states that the manufacture of turpentine, pitch, tar and lumber is so common that details need not be given. He said that he had not seen olives bearing here but that "China oranges, Seville oranges, lemons and citrons are better in Florida than in Europe, or in fact than in any other American province." He recommended laying oyster shells in trenches in the fields to enrich the soil, and many fields so treated are still to be found in northeastern Florida.

He recommends the use of mosquito nets over each bed and says night air outdoors is harmless if one is behind such a net. He describes the "tabby" construction of houses, built with floors made of shells burnt into lime and mixed with twice the quantity of unburnt shell, placed in a mortar, rammed into place with heavy pestiles and finally brushed with linseed oil and polished to a surface very near equal to marble. This was the floor of the St. Augustine house in Spanish times-as pleasing and easy to clean as tile. Some houses in the old town still retain their tabby floors.

He gives advice to new settlers as to how to get along with the Indians-never to give them liquor, but small presents of rice and salt. He did not anticipate any trouble with the Indians, provided their head men were placated with presents, and

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13. Forbes, *Sketches Historical and Topographical, of the Floridas* (New York, 1821) p. 99.

this proved to be correct so far as the English were concerned.

DeBrahm lists the natural products of East Florida, including pearls, and mentions that experiments had been made in the culture of coffee, cotton, sugarcane, and indigo. He ends with giving advice to the Europeans as to how to succeed in this new province. Strangely, he felt that the vicinity of the present Miami was the most promising location of any on the whole east coast of America, because of South American trade.

On November 17, 1798 at the age of eighty-one DeBrahm, then living in Philadelphia, delivered the second and third volumes of his report, of which the second contained his description of East Florida. He was reimbursed by the British Government for losses in East Florida to the amount of 1,138 pounds.

The fourth volume of his work, mentioned in his report, is not found among these papers. It is possible that some of it is contained in the description of West Florida published by Bernard Romans.

This brief resume does not pretend to treat all the material to be found in the DeBrahm manuscript. Only by reading the complete report can one appreciate the thorough work of this colonial engineer.