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BRITISH AND SPANISH FORTIFICATIONS OF PENSACOLA, 1781-1821

by STANLEY FAYE

Late in the war for the independence of the United States, Spain joined France and this country in their contest with British power. The Spanish commandant of St. Louis sent a company across the Illinois prairies to attack a British post beyond Lake Michigan; a larger force from New Orleans occupied the district of Baton Rouge and other western regions of British West Florida, and in March 1781 the governor of Spanish Louisiana came by land and sea and laid siege to British Pensacola.

A small fort and adjacent buildings made the height of Barrancas appear like a small town.¹ A blockhouse overlooked the sands of Aguero, which the British called Tartar Point,² and which is the present-day site of the Naval Air Station. Officers and men to a total of 139 garrisoned Barrancas and served its eleven guns, including five 32-pounders.³ Another British detachment of sufficient size could not be spared to defend the old Spanish blockhouse on Santa Rosa island,⁴ whose artillery, despite its distant position, had held the entrance channel within range. The Spanish invader was later to assert in retrospect that the British had not appreciated the value of cross-fire between Barrancas and Point Siguenza.⁵

1. Bernard Romans, *A concise natural history of East and West Florida* (New York, 1775), appendix, lxxiii.
2. Vicente Davila, ed., *Archivo del General Miranda* (Caracas, 15 v. to 1938), I, 180-181.
3. Bernardo de Galvez, *Diario de las operaciones de la expedicion contra la Plaza de Panzacola* . . . [Havana, 1781], 33.
4. Cf. Romans, *op. cit.*, appendix, lxxii.
5. "una bateria . . . que con poco conocimiento de su utilidad, habian abandonado los enemigos :” Galvez, *op. cit.*, 4; cf. *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* where there is a translation of the work. I (1917-1918), 48.

With astonishment the officers aboard armed Spanish transports found no British force to contest their landing on Santa Rosa, but only three dismounted gun barrels and the half-demolished stockade that had been a blockhouse. Eight Spanish guns soon commanded the anchorage behind Santa Rosa and six 24-pounders formed a battery on Siguenza.⁶ With continued astonishment the Spaniards took their vessels almost uninjured into the bay through a spray of gunfire from atop Barrancas. When small boats laden with troops left Santa Rosa for the landing place east of Barrancas, British soldiers set fire to the blockhouse of Tartar Point and retired to the height.

Now the Spaniards abandoned their projected attack against Barrancas.⁷ This British defence for the channel was a stockade smaller than the former San Carlos crowning the crest nearly three hundred yards east of the mound that the Spaniards had chosen as a cemetery, and, unlike San Carlos, it stood within a ditch.⁸ Left alone it could do little harm, as the Spaniards had proved; but its ditch, its walls, its heavy artillery would offer resistance to attack by land; so the Spanish army hastened up the bay to besiege the defences of the town.

Some 1200 yards north of the old Spanish plaza in Pensacola. Gage Hill rises 300 yards in width and extends northwestward. On the southeast end of the hill, commanding the town, the British had built Fort George with a hornwork descending

6. Galvez, *op. cit.*, 4-5 ; *Archivo del General Miranda*, I, 141-144, 179-180.

7. *Archivo del General Miranda*, I, 145.

8. There is a contemporaneous manuscript detailed plan of this battery and stockade in the library of J. C. Yonge, Pensacola; cf. Folch to Perchet, Oct. 5, in Perchet to Salcedo, Oct 11, under Hasset to Salcedo and Casa Calvo, June 23, 1803; *Archivo General de Indias*, Papeles de Cuba, legajo 2368. All legajos (parcels) cited below are also among the. Papeles de Cuba.

southward to two blockhouses on the road that led westward to Mobile.⁹ Northwestward from Fort George, Gage Hill slopes upward twenty-two feet¹⁰ in 900 yards to a point that was too far distant for defence of the town but that dominated the southeastward trend of the hill.

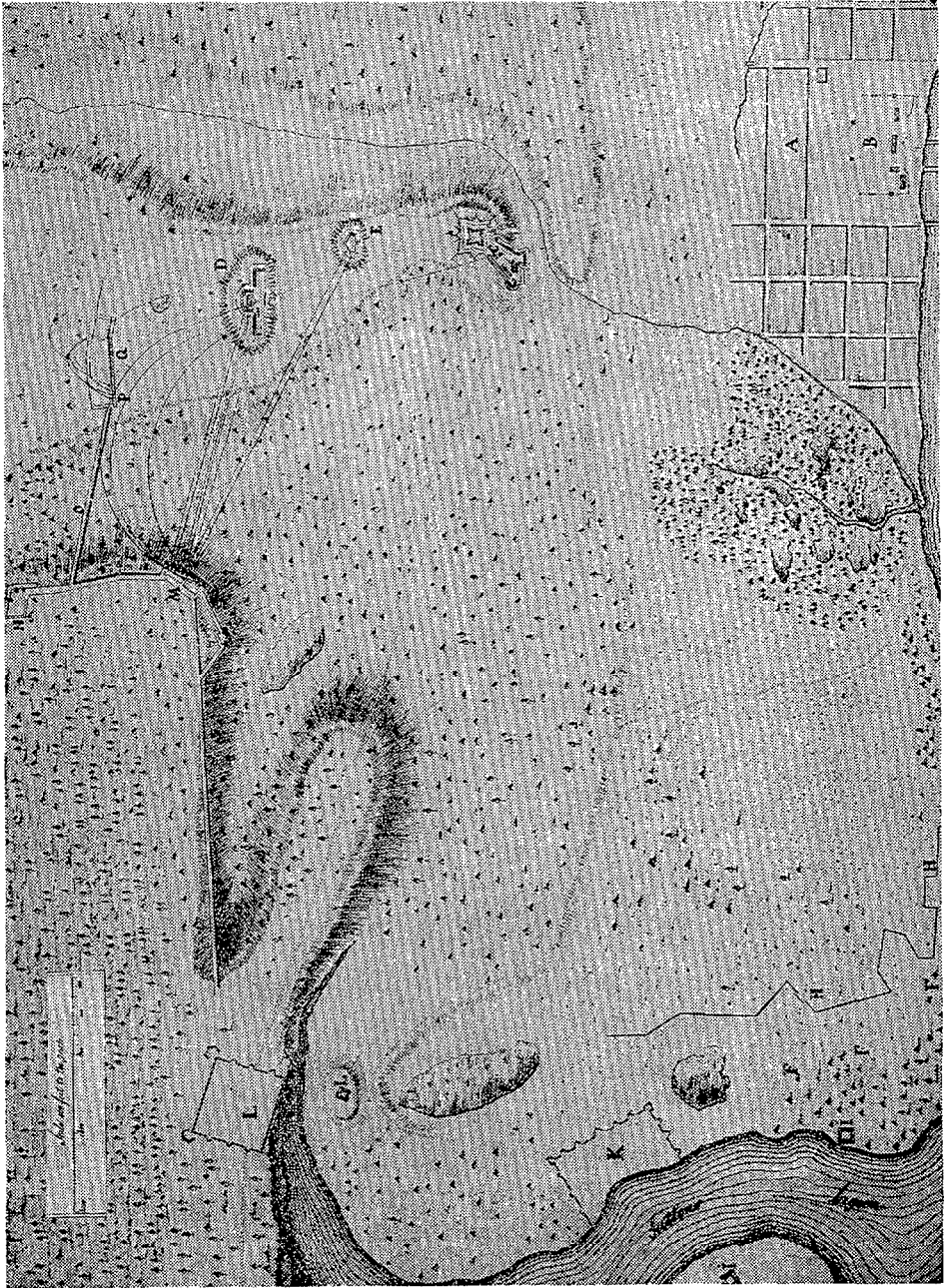
Fort George defended the town. To defend Fort George there stood on that upper height, looking over low land toward the west, the redoubt of the Queen, (D of Plan . . .) a circular battery flanked on north and south by far recurving wings of parapet that made it a crescent redan advanced. Three hundred yards below the Queen,¹¹ 600 yards above Fort George, the oblate, almost circular redoubt of the Prince of Wales (E of *Plan* . . .) functioned as a less advanced redan without wings. Spanish engineers would have built an outwork such as either of these two in the form of a *medialuna* or halfmoon with rearward diameter wall extending a little way beyond as wings, as if to counterfeit a gigantic hat with the brim turned up at one side. Both these redans the Spaniards recognized as *medialunas*.

Thirteen hundred English, Irish, Anglo-American and Hessian or Waldeck troops defended the outworks and Fort George, and during six weeks a Spanish force increasing to more than 6,000 men besieged them without avail. Then a Spanish shell, dropping into the powder magazine, made the Queen's redoubt untenable and while surviving defenders retired to the Prince of Wales the Spaniards possessed themselves of the dominating height. Thus Fort George on the lower slope was untenable,

9. Cf. *Plan of the Siege of Fort George*, following. (C)

10. Masot's report of Jan. 27 annexed to Masot to Cienfuegos, Feb. 1, 1817, legajo 1874.

11. *Archivo del General Miranda*, I, 174.



[Legend on PLAN . . .]*

PLAN of the Siege of Fort GEORGE
and works adjacent at Pensacola
in West Florida, 1781

REFERENCES

- A The Town of Pensacola,
B old Garrison stockaded,
C Fort GEORGE and Lines, &c, &c, &c.
D Advanced Redout
E Middle Redout
F Ground on which the Spaniards first appeared (!) the 30
March, but being that day repulsd by the Indians sup-
ported by regular troops, they coverd themselves the
night following,
H erected the redouts I and entrenched their camp K from
which they removed the 13 Aprill to L ; from, whence,
after having secured their camp they opened the Trenches
the 28', and the 2' May opened the Batterie M of Six
24 pdrs. and three thirteen yuch Mortars, the gun Batterie
being directed towards the Redouts D and E, the Mortar
Batteries towards Fort George and lines.
N Redout, with 3 nine pds to clear the low and opposite ground
from yndians, and to cover the approaches U.
P A Batterie of 2 Howitz and 2 Mortar, opened by the Ennemy
the 6th of May, and incessantly throwing shells in the
Redout,
Q a Batterie of nine 24 prs ready to be opened, when the
redout D blow up the 8 of May.
by Henry Heldring
Capit: Lieut: in the 3rd Regmt.
of Waldeck, & acting Engineer at
Pensacola

* The original of this plan is in the General Clinton Papers, the
William L. Clements Library of Americana, the University
of Michigan, to whom grateful acknowledgment is made.

and the British were compelled to surrender it and Pensacola.¹²

By a treaty effected in Europe later the British transferred East Florida and West Florida to Spain again in 1783. West Florida received no governor or commandant-general of its own but was administered as if it were a part of Louisiana, which was a dependency of Havana except during a brief time. Unlike the Mexican commandants of old Pensacola, Governor de Galvez from New Orleans beheld an embarrassment of riches now in the fortifications he had won for his king. The fort of Barrancas was permitted to stand as long as it could within its protective ditch. The Spaniards who knew Gage Hill as Mount San Miguel gave to Fort George the name Fort San Miguel. The Prince of Wales battery became Fort Sombrero, and what remained of the Queen's redoubt took the name Fort San Bernardo to honor Bernardo de Galvez.¹³

This latter fort can have gained its new name only after the Spaniards had made an important decision. The king could not afford to keep up three forts on Mount San Miguel, so what one of the works on the hill should be preserved in service? The ditch-encircled, double stockade with terreplein¹⁴ that had been Fort George and its hornwork defended the town but could not defend itself. The upper, or crescent, battery, likewise a double stockade of wood and sand,¹⁵ could not defend the town; since it could defend itself and also the more im-

12. Galvez, *op. cit.*, *passim*; *Archivo del General Miranda*, I, 160-191.

13. There is a contemporaneous manuscript map, of unknown origin, of the bay, the town, and all of these forts during the second Spanish period in the library of J. C. Yonge, Pensacola.

14. *Archivo del General Miranda*, I, 166, 184; Galvez, *op. cit.*, 32; Masot's report of Jan. 27, 1817, legajo 1874.

16. **Relacion del estado de las Plazas Fuertes**, April 18, 1793, legajo 178.

portant honor of His Catholic Majesty it enjoyed at least political value. Fort George in its quality of Fort San Miguel was left to its own devices. The middle battery became a memory. The crescent redoubt, repaired to be Fort San Bernardo, decayed less quickly than San Miguel while it blocked approach from the northwest.

Protected on the north by a swamp but commanded on the east by an unfortified hill the well-built frame houses¹⁶ of Pensacola, nearly two hundred in number,¹⁷ occupied a space about one mile along the bayside and about a quarter-mile back from the water front, made narrow at both ends by curving arroyos that defined it on east and west. Within a central esplanade some thirty acres in area the old pine stockade of the presidio, patched with pickets of the cypress called cedar,¹⁸ had lasted until the year 1775; to take its place, and more than its place, the British had built then a larger but similar stockade of "cedar" pickets with demi-bastions for musketry to add at least an appearance of strength to the circuit.¹⁹ (B on *Plan* . . .) Within the stockade three of the four batteries on the water front now needed rebuilding; the fourth and most westerly had risen anew on the ruins caused by a recent storm.²⁰

The prospect of 1781 included no storm of warfare for the moment to threaten Pensacola. San Bernardo seemed to suffice as the only bulwark of a town much reduced in population. In 1788 a

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16. Juan Jose Elixio de la Puente, *Plano de la Principal Parte del Puerto de S. Maria de Galves de Panzacola*, Nov. 22, 1768, Madrid, Guerra, L. M. 8a 1a, a, 20.
 17. Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia, 1812), 118.
 18. Elixio de la Puente, *Plano*.
 19. Thomas Hutchins, *An Historical Narrative and Topographical Description of Louisiana and West Florida* (Philadelphia, 1784), 77.
 20. B. Plan of the Siege of Pensacola.

veteran of 1781 who had succeeded Galvez as governor in New Orleans recommended abandoning Pensacola and establishing at the entrance to the bay such fortifications as would prevent the establishment there of a foreign naval base or invasion by enemy privateers.²¹ The royal government approved this proposal but took no practical action. In March 1793 Spain entered into a European war that might perhaps test the worth of Gulf coast defences. Within a year the population of Pensacola had dwindled to four hundred.²²

Before news of war reached New Orleans another governor of Louisiana considered preparations for such an event. He estimated at half a million dollars the cost of fortifications already proposed for Barrancas. He himself thought it preferable to spend one-fifth of that sum in repairing the old British Fort George, rather than the almost equally ruinous San Bernardo, and in building for a garrison of forty men a brick redoubt atop Barrancas with a battery at water level. A double stockade on Santa Rosa for eighty men and ten 18-pounder guns would cost perhaps \$24,000 extra, if fully enclosed and equipped, and another \$6,000 or more would repair the town wall and the government houses of Pensacola ; Pensacola bay thus improved could withstand a siege, the governor thought, until help should come from Havana.²³

European warfare ceased so quickly that this colonial project resulted in no more than a mount of guns on Siguenza with a parapet on the water side only (founded, perhaps, on piles driven into the sand.) When in October 1796 Spain declared

21. Morales to Gomez Rumbaud, June 1, 1807, citing Miro to Indias, Aug. 8, 1788, legajo 2356.

22. Stoddard, *op. cit.*, 118.

23. **Relacion del estado de las Plazas Fuertes**, April 18, 1793, legajo 178.

war against Great Britain the governor's 18-pounders had not yet reached Pensacola. In New Orleans in the following February the governor called a council of war. For Pensacola bay it was decided to enclose completely the 7-gun stockade on Siguenza and to begin work below Barrancas on the masonry and the stockade wings of the projected 7-gun low battery or medialuna, already named San Antonio.²⁴

Thus the governor acknowledged a fact perceived in 1781 when the vessels of Bernardo de Galvez had passed through a harmless spray of gunfire. The British cannon of Barrancas had gained additional range from their dominating height, but that same height made inaccurate the gunners' aim against any point on the water level of the channel. A battery below Barrancas, with complementary guns on Siguenza, would perform such a task as that in which the British artillery atop Barrancas had failed.²⁵

Though the battery of San Antonio should be authorized, as soon it was, by the king of Spain, a problem still existed. San Antonio, defending the harbor entrance, could not defend itself from the rear. Therefore on the height of Barrancas a double stockade like old San Carlos must be built. For this purpose a site must be chosen near what remained of the British stockade on the crest. It would cost much in labor and in money to fill up the British ditch and dig another ditch behind San Antonio. Don Vicente Folch, commandant of Pensacola, chose the British site for a new San Carlos with exterior parapet in addition. Unfortunately the British site was small and a fort for only 150 men could be built within its ditch.²⁶

24. Minutes, Junta de Guerra, Feb. 7, 1797, legajo 178.

25. *Archivo del General Miranda*, I, 159-160, 177; Galvez, *op. cit.*, 4.

26. Cf. minutes, Junta de Guerra, Feb. 7, 1797, legajo 178; Folch to Perchet, Oct. 5, 1803, legajo 2368.

Construction of a new and small San Carlos would create a further problem. Just as the height of the Queen's battery had commanded the British Fort George behind the town, so atop Barrancas the cemetery hill, some 300 yards to the westward of the British ditch, and other mounds to the northward would dominate the castillo that would defend the medialuna. The commandant of Pensacola was the person most intimately concerned with plans for Barrancas and, sitting in the February's council of New Orleans, Folch gave his consent to construction of San Antonio and the castillo, but only with the understanding that later a hornwork at the north should defend the castillo and that an advanced redoubt should occupy the cemetery hill.²⁷

A British blockading squadron appeared off the Gulf coast early next month and captured the artillery and supplies that New Orleans at last was shipping to Pensacola for the project at the entrance to the bay.²⁸ Within the entrance construction progressed and the medialuna of San Antonio assumed the form that in great part it preserves today. The battery of Santa Rosa held its place beyond the channel in spite of high tides and a hurriedly raised stockade²⁹ topped Barrancas.³⁰

Blockading British squadrons withdrew themselves from the Gulf, war came more or less to an end, and Spain ceded Louisiana to France—all in about a twelve-month within the years 1800-1801. Soon France ceded Louisiana to the United States. Don Vicente Folch did not know that the king had

27. Folch to Perchet, Oct. 5, Perchet to Salcedo, Oct. 11, 1803, legajo 2368.

28. Carondelet to Alvarez, March 20, 1797, legajo 178.

29. Perchet to Salcedo, Oct. 11, 1803, legajo 2368.

30. Both Santa Rosa and Barrancas are mentioned as being garrisoned as of June, 1798, in *Testimonio de las diligencias de informacion formada de oficio sobre averiguar los motores de un complot celebrado contra la providencia decoro y Autoridad del Gobierno*, Pensacola, May 14, 1798, legajo 168.

just appointed him to command all of West Florida³¹ when in October 1803 he asked his engineer officer to draw plans for the ambitious defences that in February 1797 he had urged upon a council of war. Haste seemed needful, for the republic to the northward-now to the westward also-stood upon the doorstep of West Florida and already was seeking to enter; but work continued slowly and only in strengthening the stockade of Barrancas.

Establishment of Pensacola as a provincial capital reestablished the prosperity of the town, which in 1813 attained to a population of more than 3000³² and a total of more than 500 houses.³³ Previously the forest had invaded the part of the British village that lay beyond the town wall; in places it even overhung the pickets. That wall (a simple vertical stockade that soon disappeared from part of the water front) had extended to a circuit of 3200 yards. An inspector found in the year 1806 that the rotting stakes had fallen at various points, while at other points gateways and wagon ports had opened through this fortification. Stakes and demibastions for musketry could not defend Pensacola against attack by the Americanos and only in the fortifications of Barrancas might the garrison preserve the royal honor³⁴ and create an argument against the United States for presentation to European statesmen.

Early in April 1813 the American advance toward Mobile³⁵ caused Pensacola to consider its own safety, and on the ninth one of the garrison's

31. Cf. Someruelos to Salcedo, Dec. 10, 1803, legajo 2368.

32. Masot to Cienfuegos, May 7, 1818, legajo 1877.

33. *Papel para presentar en la Junta Económica de Cuerpos*, fourth annex to minutes, Junta de Guerra, Pensacola, Oct. 9, 1817, legajo 2369.

34. Martínez y Orosca to Howard, Sept. 22, 1806, legajo 2356.

35. Isaac Joslin Cox, *The West Florida Controversy, 1798-1813* (Baltimore, 1918), 617.

successive councils of war determined to concentrate all the town's forces at Barrancas.³⁶ After occupation of Mobile on the fifteenth the Americanos brought President Madison's adventure to a halt at the Perdido river; and in what remained of West Florida life flowed again through less narrow channels. On August 23 of the next year reinforcement came to Pensacola bay aboard a British squadron. A new commandant of Pensacola permitted officers and soldiers of Spain's British ally and President Madison's enemy to occupy the ruinous Fort San Miguel, which he repaired (as well as might be done, he said) while other repairs were making to the castillo San Carlos de Barrancas³⁷

News of an approaching American force caused the British officers to demand on November 2 that the command of San Miguel and Barrancas be surrendered to them and the Spanish soldiers put under their orders.³⁸ Despite refusal, the British held San Miguel until, on the sixth, the American advance guard appeared beyond the height of San Bernardo. After a short defence the British troops left Pensacola to be occupied by General Andrew Jackson. Aboard waiting vessels they dropped down the bay and on the seventh they destroyed by fire the battery of Santa Rosa. On the eighth they invaded and destroyed likewise the castillo of San Carlos and the adjoining hamlet, and spiked the guns of San Antonio before sailing eastward along the coast.³⁹

36. Arrango to Gonzales Manrique, June 26, 1813, legajo 2356.

37. Gonzales Manrique to Apodaca, Aug. 29, Oct. 29, 1814, legajo 1795.

38. Gonzales Manrique to Apodaca, Oct. 29, Nov. 15, Gordon and Nichols to Gonzales Manrique, Nov. 2, Gonzales Manrique to Gordon and Nichols, Nov. 3, 1814, legajo 1795.

39. Serra to Borela, Nov. 11, 1814, legajo 1796; Villiers to Gonzales Manrique, Nov. 14, Gonzales Manrique to Apodaca, Nov. 17, 1814, legajo 1795.

The United States returned Pensacola to Spanish domination. The Spanish governor-general in Havana appointed a new commandant who, two weeks after his arrival in November 1816, decided to guard the harbor entrance by a floating battery of two 12-pounders to lie off Point Siguenza with two row boats for manoeuvring it.⁴⁰ As to the battery of Santa Rosa, one masonry fireplace and chimney arose out of ruins. On mounts of wooden piles driven into the sand of the ditch the barrels of the battery's eleven cannon (rating from 12 to 24 pounds, nine of them still spiked) told of its former power. San Carlos was no more; the barrels of its thirty guns, (rating up to 30 pounds with ten of them spiked) lay upon their sunken pilings. San Antonio possessed two 12-inch mortars, both unserviceable, and six serviceable 24-pounders, two of which were brass culverins. Nothing now stood on Gage Hill in the form of a wall. San Bernardo was an ancient ruin. San Miguel's timbers had all rotted away. Its terreplein had washed down into its ditch. The reinforced mounts of its artillery survived as mounds within a devastated line; atop these mounds the guns occupied their proper places, but every one was unserviceable.⁴¹

The visit that a Mexican privateersman paid to Pensacola bay in December⁴² and subsequent rumors of an attack intended by General Mina with all the pirates of Galveston reduced the town's civilian population to less than 500.⁴³ The rumors rather than the visit alarmed the commandant. He

40. Masot to Cieufuegos, Dec. 12, 1816, legajo 1873.

41. Masot's report of Jan. 27 annexed to Masot to Cienfuegos, Feb. 1, 1817, legajo 1874.

42. Harris Gaylord Warren, *Pensacola and the Filibusters, 1816-1817*, in *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXI (1938), 806-822; cf. same, XXII, 1056-1059.

43. Masot to Cienfuegos, Feb. 5, 1817, legajo 1874; same to same, May 7, 1818, legajo 1877.

decided that Pensacola must trust to its town wall, its makeshift batteries on the water front and its four advanced batteries or blockhouses, one in the cemetery at the northeast, one at the mouth of San Miguel Creek and two in between.⁴⁴ To preserve the honor of the king he chose that his garrison should make its last stand on Barrancas.⁴⁵

In January 1817, even before the bridges of Fernandina and Carlota were quite finished across Bayou Chico and Bayou Grande respectively,⁴⁶ the commandant sent building materials (including bark for roofs) to Barrancas. Here on the crest, some 100 yards east of the ruined fort and nearly 400 yards east of the cemetery hill,⁴⁷ he built a new castillo. Here no pirates of Galveston came to attack him in 1817. San Carlos waited ready for battle when the commandant received a letter dated May 23, 1818, demanding that Pensacola should surrender again to General Jackson, whose troops again occupied "the ruined fort of St. Michael, which commands Pensacola."⁴⁸

At Barrancas the commandant held his twenty-two artillerymen and his 153 infantrymen through the night of the twenty-sixth while the Americanos justified the old plan of Don Vicente Folch by building a counterwork on the cemetery hill. On the twenty-seventh the iron guns of the castillo and the two long-range brass guns of San Antonio directed their fire against American batteries at west and north. Then, having preserved the honor of his king, the Spanish commandant surrendered.⁴⁹

44. Masot's report of Jan. 27, 1817, legajo 1874.

45. Masot to Cienfuegos, Jan. 10, 1817, legajo 1874.

46. Masot to Cienfuegos, Jan. 27, 1817, legajo 1874.

47. Cf. Perchet to Salcedo, Oct. 11, 1803, legajo 2368; Masot to Cienfuegos, June 6, annexed to Ramirez to Indias, July 3, 1818, legajo 2356.

48. Jackson to Masot, May 23, annexed to Ramirez to Indias, July 3, 1818, legajo 2356. For the complete correspondence of Jackson and Masot Feb.-May, 1818, see *Message of the President* Dec. 28, 1818. H. Doc. 65 (Washington 1819).

49. Masot to Cienfuegos, June 6, 1818, legajo 2356.

The Americanos decided again to substitute diplomatic methods for military force in asserting title to Spanish provinces. An expedition from Havana coming to Pensacola on February 4, 1819, received the transfer of the place four days later. Barracks and blockhouses of the town were uninhabitable, so the Spanish officers leased unoccupied dwellings as lodgings for their soldiers.⁵⁰ If the blockhouses merited only a mention in the new commandant's first report, the ruined works on Gage Hill were worth not even so much as that. In the spring a thorough survey revealed Barrancas still as the only place where a garrison might make a stand.

The battery of Santa Rosa did not exist. Trowel and mortar and a few bricks would repair San Antonio. Two years' time had not destroyed the huts of Barrancas, but bark roofs two years old could not shed the rain that would fall upon arms and ammunition, rations and men. As to the castillo on the crest the commandant could do no more than deplore.

This so-called fort he found to be a work constructed of pine stakes set in two parallel lines. Filled with sand the walls formed a thickness of six English feet. Not even demibastions projected from the stockade. No ditch surrounded this castillo. The sand that had sifted out and the sand that winds had swept in from the esplanade banked up toward the top of the landward walls; thus an attacking force would have no need of scaling ladders.

So steep was the slope of the revetment, built thus to compensate for lack of a ditch, that the loss of sand had reduced the terreplein to a height of eight feet. Many of the stakes were rotten, others had dropped out of place ; a stockade in such state could not protect its defenders from the

⁵⁰. Callava to Cienfuegos, Feb. 19, 1819, legajo 1876.

impact even of 4-pound shot from field guns. Instead of the thirty cannon that had armed San Carlos until 1814, ten gun barrels rating from 4 to 12 pounds were mounted within the newer castillo, and two lay unmounted. Such damage had befallen eight carriages as to render their pieces useless. If the serviceable pieces should fire again much more of the revetment would fall and much more of the sand seek its natural level. The fort was so small that even in its prime it had offered not enough space for serving more than eight guns at once.⁵¹

Spaniards would not again defend the royal honor by serving the guns of Barrancas in castillo or medialuna. The commandant considered military force, but he considered diplomatic methods also and therefore wasted no royal funds on repairs. Already as he made his survey he knew that a treaty had been signed in Washington ceding the two Floridas to the United States. In the course of time the treaty came to ratification. On July 17, 1821, the commandant delivered to General Jackson the fortifications and the town that Jackson twice had captured.

⁵¹. Callava to Cienfuegos, May 22, 1819, legajo 1876.