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PHILIP FRENEAU ON THE CESSION OF
FLORIDA

by LEWIS LEARY

Among American men of letters who have paid tribute to Florida-and perhaps, with the exception of William Bartram, the earliest of them-we may now number Philip Freneau, the "Poet of the American Revolution". Unlike many others, Freneau apparently never saw Florida, though for a period of years between 1785 and 1790 he was master of a coastal vessel which occasionally called as far south as Savannah. His poem on Florida was written when he was an old man, almost seventy. Living in retirement on his farm in New Jersey, he nevertheless still watched with interest the development and expansion of the new country for which he had fought with sword and pen as a younger man. On September 28, 1821, the Trenton *True American* announced the "Surrender of Florida" with this dispatch :

Charleston, July 17. By the arrival last evening of the sloop *Wasp*, Capt. Chester, from St. Augustine, we learn that the American flag was hoisted at that place on the 10th inst.-At 5 o'clock in the morning, a salute was fired from the fort by the Spanish troops and the Spanish flag displayed-At 3 P. M. the American colors were hoisted with the Spanish, and the American troops landed at the South Battery, and marched directly to the fort-At 4, the Spanish troops marched out, and the Spanish flag was lowered under a salute of 21 guns from the fort, which was answered by the United States schooners *Tartar* and *Revenge*, at anchor in the harbor.

NOTE-Professor Leary, late of Miami University, whom our readers will recall as the founding editor of *Tequesta*, the publication of the Historical Association of Southern Florida, is an authority on early United States literature and has made an intensive study of the work of Freneau. He has now gone to Duke University to continue these studies, but we shall not forget that he did more than his bit for Florida's history with that first issue of *Tequesta*. Ed.

On the same day in the same newspaper a poem by Philip Freneau¹ appeared, perhaps the first literary celebration of the occasion by an established American man of letters.

ON THE CESSION OF EAST AND WEST FLORIDA, FROM
SPAIN TO THE UNITED STATES

At length, we see by prudence gained
What jealous Spaniards long retained;
And Florida's secluded waste
Is in one lengthening chain embraced.

Monarchs would force their slaves to war
For *that* our Congress bargained for,
Would fight, like dogs, to win the soil,
And nations in their feuds embroil.

Honor to those who first designed
This chain of *States*, to bless mankind:
Our *Franklin*, with a patriot band,
And *him*, who near *Potomac's* strand,
Now sleeps, unconscious, in the grave,
Of what *we* gain, or what *he* gave.

He bade a new creation rise,
Nor seized the *Sceptre* from the skies;²
His wisdom, and his sword acquired
What few could hope and all desired.

Immortal be his growing fame,
The just reward he now may claim—
When *Britain* fixed *Columbia's* doom
He raised our hopes, and cheered our gloom,
Dispelled the clouds that dimmed the day,
And saw the *Event* his toils repay.

This great Event, among the rest,
Should swell with joy each patriot breast,
A region won from selfish *Spain*,
A golden link in freedom's chain—
The Spanish guards no longer seen
To rear their flag at *Augustine*.

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1. In *That Rascal Freneau* (Rutgers, 1941), p. 405, I made a tentative identification of the poem as by Philip Freneau. Since then I have been strongly convinced, through a comparison of its phraseology with that of other works by Freneau at this period, that it is without question his production.
 2. Alluding of the pretended divine right, or legitimacy, of kings (*Freneau's note*).

They, slothful, leave that verdant shore,
 And other soils and coasts explore,
 In royal climes select a place
 To act their drama of disgrace.

Long since arrived-full many a year-
De Soto's and *de Leon's* here;³
 And, 'midst these solitudes profound,
 Paused, and admired the flowery ground.

And here they sought, but did not find,
 (The whimsy of some crazy mind)
 They searched for what they took for truth,
 The *fountain of perpetual youth*.⁴

Stern Winter here asserts no sway,
 And frosts and snows are far away;
 The Northern Tropic bounding near,
 Unfading verdure clothes the year.

Thou, Florida! who once has strayed
 Along thy shores or through thy shade,
 Will own at least, with skies so fair,
 A modern *Eden* planted there.

Her charming landscapes yield to none,
 Her Capes approach the torrid zone;
 In Cancer's Sign from heaven displayed,
 Meridian suns project no shade.

What prospects, here, kind Nature drew !-
 Lo! *Cuba's* heights almost in view;⁵
Bahama's isles approaching nigh,
 As 'cross the *Gulph* they meet the eye;-
Amelia near the coast is seen,
 With *Anastasia*, dress'd in green.

Presiding here, a *chief* we see
 All hearts commanding, bold and free,
 A chief of chiefs, almost adored,-
 At *Orleans* gleamed his conquering sword,⁶
 His lightning flashed o'er *Pontchartraine*,
 And sent proud *Britain* home again.

3. Ponce De Leon and Ferdinand De Soto; the one, a military adventurer, the other, one of the first Spanish explorers of this part of the North American coast (*Freneau's note*).

4. An infatuation once prevalent in Europe, that such a fountain existed in Florida (*Freneau's note*).

5. From Cape Florida, on a meridian line to Cuba, the distance is 150 geometrical miles (*Freneau's note*).

6. A Lake of considerable extent, to the south-east of New Orleans (*Freneau's note*).

He called his thunders from afar-
The thunders answered, *Here we are!*
Prepared to act what you require
With tempest, sulphur, lightning fire!

No wonder that the foe retired
When Jove's artillery on them fired,
When every blast in crowds dismiss'd
Who dared remain, or dared resist.

Thus fell the brave, and failed the wise,
Who marched to seize the *golden prize*;
Disabled by his deadly shot,
Booty and *Beauty* met them not,
But made their vanquished thousands groan
Who sought in war for *these* alone.

With such a *Chief* to such a *State*,
It must be powerful, must be great:
And long may such a Chief preside
Whose valor tops a nation's pride,
Ennobles man, wherever found,
On Christian, or on savage ground.