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NAMES OF THE ST. JOHNS RIVER

by HERBERT M. CORSE

Four centuries of history are reflected in the changing names of the St. Johns river. From earliest times the leaping surf on the bar which marked the entrance was noticed by coastal explorers. The great volume of water coming from the river was obstructed by a shallow bar which caused a turbulent appearance and earned the river its first name, Rio de Corrientes (River of Currents). This name appears on the earliest known map of the De Soto expedition.¹ Here the southern region and its coast from Cape Hatteras around Florida and beyond the Rio Grande is remarkably accurate in general outline.

It was the currents and surf on the bar which attracted the French explorer Jean Ribaut as he was sailing along the coast in 1562. In his account, of which there is a contemporaneous translation in manuscript in the British Museum, he says:²

Then perceving towardes the northe a leaping and breking of the water, as a streame falling owt of the lande unto the sea, forthewith we sett agayn up saile to duple the same while it was yet daye. And as we had so don, and passed byonde yt, there apered unto us a faire enter of a great river, which caused us to cast ancre agen and tary there nere the lande, to the ende that the next mornyng we myght see what it was.

The next daye in the morninge, being the first of Maye we assaied to enter this porte with two rowe barges and a boate well trymed,

1. Map in Mississippi Historical Society, Special Bulletin, No. 1.
2. Connor, *Jean Ribaut, The Whole & True Discouerye of Terra Florida*. (The Florida State Historical Society, DeLand, 1927), p. 65.

finding littell watter at the entrye and many surges and brekinges of the water which might have astuned and caused us to retourn backe to shippbord, if God had not speedely brought us in, where fynding fourthwith 5 or 6 fadom water, entered into a goodly and great river which as we went we found to increse still in depth and lardgnes, boylling and roring through the multytute of all sortes of fishes which river we have called by the name of the river of Maye, for that we discovered the same the ffirst day of that mounthe. . . .

Two years later Laudonniere who had been with Ribaut established a fort near the mouth of the St. Johns which he named Caroline in honor of King Charles of France. In Laudonniere's company was a hydrographer, Jacques Le Moyne, who had been sent by the king to make maps of the country and sketches of the natives. He prepared a map of Florida on which the St. Johns river "is very well laid down as coming out from a southern lake," writes Woodbury Lowery.³ Besides the map Le Moyne made a series of pictures showing the customs and dress of the Indians.

Though it is not known who named the river Corrientes, the name was used in Spanish documents for over a hundred years. In 1564 when a Spanish vessel commanded by Rojas was sent from Cuba to search for the first colony established by Jean Ribaut on the Atlantic coast it is recorded that on May 26 Rojas entered Rio de las Corrientes.³ Here he failed to find any French and the Indians concealed the stone column which Ribaut had erected at the mouth of the river. The name Corrientes

3. Lowery, *Spanish Settlements within the Present Limits of the United States, Florida, 1562-1574*. (New York, 1905), p. 46.

is found on Spanish maps of 1570 and 1595,⁴ and is positively identified with the St. Johns river in the letter of Bishop Calderon of Cuba who visited Florida in 1675.⁵ He landed at St. Augustine and went west to the St. Johns which he referred to as Corrientes. Another visiting church official, Father Ore in 1616, noted it as river Tocoy, the name of an early Indian mission town on its bank.⁶

When Menendez captured Fort Caroline he re-named it San Mateo, and this name in turn became identified with the river. In 1580 Menendez Marquez, his nephew, arrived at the "bar of San Mateo" with two vessels and engaged another French intruder, Captain Gil. After an all day engagement Gil was killed by a shot through the visor of his armor.⁷

Between 1595 and 1609 the river is mentioned in several reports of missions of Rio Dulce, (fresh water) a term used by the missionaries to distinguish the missions of the St. Johns river from those of the coast.⁸

Alonso Mercado, while at San Pedro (Cumberland island) in 1595 spoke to Governor Avendano of the number of Christian Indians at Agua Dulce,⁹ and in 1602 Fray Pedro Bermejo visited churches at Antonico San Julian and Tocoy on Rio Dulce.¹⁰ Chief Antonio of Rio Dulce, a Christian, ruled over

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4. **Lowery Collection, A Description of Maps of the Spanish Possessions within the Present Limits of the United States, 1502-1820.** (Washington, D. C., 1912) 80.
 5. Wenhold, **A 17th Century Letter of Gabriel Diaz Vara Calderon.** Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, vol. 95, no. 16 (Washington, D. C. 1936).
 6. Geiger, **The Franciscan Conquest of Florida (1573-1618).** (The Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C. 1937) p. 257.
 7. Connor, **Colonial Records of Spanish Florida.** (The Florida State Historical Society, DeLand, 1930) pp. 319-323.
 8. Lanning, **The Spanish Missions of Georgia.** (Chapel Hill, N. C. 1935) p. 239.
 9. Geiger, *op. cit.* p. 65.
 10. **Ibid.** p. 142-146.

seven towns on the river, including Utine, Filoche, Una, and Rio Dulce de San Mateo.

Though the Spaniards ignored Le Moyne's map, its influence extended into the 18th century, when the French map maker, Guillaume de l'Isle, drew a series of maps applying French names over a wide region. In his map of 1701, *Carte des environs du Mississippi*, he shows part of the Atlantic coast with the name R. de May. This time, however, the name is erroneously applied to a river too far north and the St. Johns bears the Spanish name San Mateo. The old French name was revived just prior to the Civil war when the name Mayport Mills was applied to the village at the mouth of the river, now known as Mayport.

The name San Mateo was applied to the river by the English. In 1630 Dudley's map of Florida shows R. S. Mateo.¹¹ French maps fell in line, and a map of 1718 by N. de Fer, *L'Amerique Septentrional*, shows E. de Matheo.

In 1755 the English map of John Mitchell, entitled *British Colonies in North America* carried two names for the St. Johns: R. de St. Matheo or St. Juan.¹² The latter name was derived from the fact that San Juan del Puerto, a Spanish mission had been established on Fort George island at the mouth of the river by 1587.¹³ In 1602 the church at San Juan was described as being very ornate and having bells. At that time the mission was administered by Fray Francisco Pareja who learned the language of the Timuquan Indians and published a dictionary of it.

The mission San Juan del Puerto was visited in 1696 by Jonathan Dickinson, a Quaker castaway who was being escorted back to the English colonies

11. *Lowery Collection* (ante) 108.

12. *Ibid.* 426.

13. Geiger. *op. cit.* p. 54.

by order of the Spanish governor of Florida. In his published account he tells of crossing a body of water to the town of San Wan which was in the middle of an island.¹⁴ This English version of the Spanish name San Juan appears as St. Whan's river on a map by H. Moll in 1720. St. Wan's was also mentioned in Kimber, *Relation or Journal to the Gates of St. Augustine*, the Oglethorpe expedition of 1740.

The name San Juan was used on a Spanish war office map of 1724, *Mappa de la Costa de la Florida des d'el Cabo Canaveral*. The river was also called Rio de Picolata further up the stream where stood Fort Picolata. Yemassee Indians of the Georgia coast who had at first been allies of the English in 1715 had rebelled against practices of the Carolina traders and fled to St. Augustine. Montiano, the Spanish governor, had welcomed them as allies, and from then on raids and counter raids increased between Charleston and St. Augustine. Montiano called the river Picolata in his reports.¹⁵ The English too were concerned about defense and harbor entrances along the coast and in 1727 prepared a map of the English and French possessions on the continent of North America.¹⁶ About this time England was drawing her southern boundary south of St. Augustine, so the "St. Juan's R." lay within their claims.

A period of overlapping names for the St. Johns began with Oglethorpe's invasion of Florida in 1740. In his correspondence he referred to the river by the Spanish names San Mateo and San Juan. He also used an early Indian name which he said was Alata or Olata.¹⁷ English confidence in the

14. Dickenson, *God's Protecting Providence*.

15. *Georgia Historical Society Collection*, vol. 7, part 1, p. 180.

16. British Museum, manuscript, no. 23615, f. 74.

17. Colonial Records Correspondence, Georgia State Library, pp. 312-313.

Florida campaigns was indicated when the name Oglethorpe's lake was applied to the broad upper reaches of the river where Oglethorpe destroyed Fort Picolata and occupied Fort Pupa.¹⁸ Oglethorpe's mount at the mouth of the river was another memento of his Florida ventures.

As Oglethorpe failed to capture St. Augustine, the English names for the river at this time did not survive. A Spanish map of 1765, by F. Munoz, shows "Barra de San Juan." Another 1765 map of Florida from the Karpinsky collection calls the river Rio St. Juan, alias de Salamatoto. The latter was the Indian name of a Spanish mission mentioned by Bishop Calderon in 1675 as the place where he crossed the river.

In 1766 the phenomenal surf on the St. Johns bar was described in detail by William Gerard de Brahm. He wrote that the bar has "only four feet at low water mark on which the sea rises five feet at full [tide]. The Bar of the Stream is so very shallow, and the Stream all at once seven times deeper, obliges the Sea Water at Flood Tides to precipitate itself over the Bar into the Stream, and runs on the Bottom of it, so that the Stream gradually swelling continues its Ebb as long, until the Sea Water underneath is almost half Flood when, and not sooner, the Stream reverses its natural Course to run Flood with the Sea."¹⁹

After the English acquired Florida in 1763 the name San Juan was used and the English version St. John's also began to appear. Denys Rolle in a news item in the *Charleston Gazette*, September 21, 1769, was reported as sailing for his settlement on the St. Juan's river. Again in 1778 the same

18. Kimber, *Relation, or Journal of an Expedition to the Gates of St. Augustine*. p. 13.

19. De Brahm, *History of the Three Provinces of South Carolina, Georgia and East Florida*. Manuscript in Harvard University Library. p. 259.

paper referred to Captain Mowbray's ship which lay in the St. Juan's river with a large galley and three floating batteries, to protect the river from American rebels. In 1767, however, the *South Carolina Gazette* gave an account of Governor Grant's voyage up the "St. John's River". After this St. John's was sometimes spelled with the apostrophe, sometimes without. Two of the British surveyors, De Brahm and Purcell, used the apostrophe, a third, Romans, did not. Romans said the early Indians called the river Ylacco, a word whose meaning was obscure. Many years later Daniel G. Brinton in his *Notes on the Floridian Peninsula* stated that Ylacco, or Welaka, as applied to the river meant river of many lakes, a very true description. In 1816 another Englishman, John Melish, avoided this issue on the apostrophe by calling the river St. John on his map *Southern Region of United States including Florida*.

After the American Revolution, Florida reverted to Spain and the river was again known as San Juan. Correspondence in 1795 refers to Cowford (Jacksonville's first name) as on the San Juan river.

With the acquisition of Florida by the United States the English name St. Johns was again used for the river. The apostrophe in the name was used about as often as not. The first American surveyor, Charles Vignoles, used the apostrophe in his map of 1823. John Lee Williams followed him on his map of 1837. During the Seminole war the United States topographical engineers, McKay and Blake, also spelled the name with an apostrophe on their *Map of the Seat of War in Florida*, (1839). A. D. Bache, of the U. S. Coast Survey office still used the apostrophe in 1864 on his map "*Northern Part of Florida*."

On the other hand maps prepared by authorities not closely associated with the region, used the name

St. Johns without the apostrophe. It appears without the apostrophe on H. S. Tanner's *Traveler's Guide Map of the United States*, published in 1825. This map is remembered in that it shows distances between points as well as the roads, canals, and steamboat routes of the United States, in the manner of modern road maps. John Westcott dropped the apostrophe on his Florida map of 1857 and Rand McNally followed the same policy on their map of Florida of 1881.

Finally the United States Board on Geographic Names adopted a general policy of dropping apostrophes, and the present spelling of St. Johns follows this rule.²⁰

It is apparent from a review of these names that two are derived from physical characteristics of the river-Corrientes for its currents and Welaka for its lakes. Most of the others refer to towns which have flourished along its banks, such as San Juan, San Mateo, Tocoy, Salamatoto, Picolata. One only refers to the time of an explorer's landing-May, and one to a would-be conqueror of its shores-Oglethorpe. But regardless of names, the St. Johns maintains its individuality through the many changes in its history. A wide, slow-moving stream flowing northward for over a hundred miles between densely wooded shores, then within a short twenty miles of its mouth it swings suddenly eastward to pour its clear coffee colored waters into the sea.

20. United States Board on Geographic Names. *Report 1890-1899*. (Washington, D. C. 1901) p. 110. : "Saint Johns: river in Florida. (Not Saint John's.)"