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THE TRIBULATIONS OF DENYS ROLLE

by CHARLES L. MOWAT

In the brief and generally uneventful history of British East Florida greatest interest has, perhaps, attached to the two unusual experiments in colonization which were carried on in the province at New Smyrna and Rollestown. The history of both has been told by Carita Doggett Corse, ¹ and to her work there is little to add. It is, however, possible to give some new light on the early difficulties which Denys Rolle met with in his attempts to establish his colony.

It will be recalled that Rolle, evidently a man of some wealth and of broad but visionary ideas, came to Florida from England in September, 1764 and eventually established plantations at Rollestown, a bluff on the St. Johns river above the present town of Palatka. The place was sometimes referred to as Mount Pleasant, or Charlottenburgh or Charlotta. Rolle, who came from Bicton in Devonshire and was elected member of Parliament for Barnstaple in 1768 ², seems to have wished to make a settlement which would be an asylum for unfortunates, a place where the underprivileged might be rehabilitated and started on useful, self-supporting lives. Later tradition has referred to Rollestown as a settlement

1. Carita Doggett [Corse] "Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida." [Jacksonville] 1919.

Carita Doggett Corse, "Denys Rolle and Rollestown, a Pioneer for Utopia," *Florida Historical Society Quarterly*, VII, 115-134 (October, 1928). This article includes a reproduction of a contemporaneous plan of Rollestown.

2. *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. John Rolle, Baron Rolle (1750-1842); *Gentleman's Magazine*, XXXVIII, 273, XLV, 377 (June, 1768; August, 1775); Wilbur H. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida 1774 to 1785* (Publications of State Historical Society of Florida, No. 9; DeLand, Florida, 1929), II, 367-371.

for prostitutes,³ but there is no contemporaneous evidence for this, and the worst that was said of the settlers at the time was that they were vagrants, beggars and debtors gathered from the London streets.⁴ Rolle, whose original desire was for a palatinate of large extent in the interior of East Florida, where he would have "some proper inferior jurisdiction and judicature, county, hundred and manor courts with Court Leet and Courts Baron,"⁵ had been forced to be content with an Order of the Privy Council of the normal type, granting him a tract of 20,000 acres of land within the province. It was to locate such a tract and begin the settlement of it that he came to St. Augustine a few weeks after the arrival of Governor Grant.

Rolle spent almost a year in the infant colony, but met with nothing but misfortune in his attempts to establish his settlement, and was obstructed at every turn, according to his own account, by Grant and some of the other officials. He accordingly returned to England in the fall of 1765 to solicit the help of the government, and in pursuit of this drew up a lengthy petition to the Privy Council, accompanied by copies of letters passing between himself, Grant and others, in an appendix. This petition was unpublished, but a few copies of it were printed. One of them, in the John Carter Brown Library of Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island,⁶

3. Charles Vignoles, *Observations upon the Floridas* (New York, 1823), 73 ; John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837), 188.

4. Corse, *loc. cit.* 118, 120 and *passim*.

5. Corse, *loc. cit.*, 115-116; *Acts of the Privy Council of England : Colonial Series*, VI (London, 1912), 438-439.

6. [Denys Rolle], *To the Right HONOURABLE the LORDS of His MAJESTY'S Most Honourable Privy Council. The Humble Petition of Denys Rolle, Esq.; setting forth the Hardships, Inconveniences, and Grievances, which have attended him in his Attempts to make a Settlement in East Florida . . .* (n.p., [1766]). The petition has 85 pages of text, and the ap-

has already been cited by the present author in this *Quarterly*⁷ for the vivid details which it gives of the early life of the struggling colony. Its account of Rolle's tribulations, though rambling, repetitious, and necessarily one-sided, gives a valuable picture of the beginnings of Rollestown.

Rolle's difficulties began as soon as he left England, according to this petition. He embarked on 10 June 1764 with fourteen persons, "with some Imputation of Kidnaping People for his Settlement," and suffered on board from a shortage of water and provisions which he thought was more common on Atlantic passages than the public was aware of. At Charleston a family of five, whose father he had released from prison, was persuaded to desert him, though he was paid for their passage; another servant was lured away by a Justice of the Peace, but he gained two substitutes because the Lieutenant Governor "married one of his People."⁸ On his arrival at St. Augustine he was well received and entertained by Governor Grant. However, when he decided to abandon his original destination, St. Marks, Apalache, and to settle instead on the St. Johns, he was severely reprimanded by the Governor one day before dinner, for "*altering his Intention.*" He replied that his Order gave him permission to settle in any part of the province, and was then allowed to continue with his plans. Shortly afterwards, on 27 September, he left the capital for Picolata, where he decided to make his settle-

pendix, which is separately paged, 47. It is hereafter cited as Rolle, Petition. Cf. Lawrence C. Wroth, "Source Materials of Florida History in the John Carter Brown Library of Brown University," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XX, 3-46 (July, 1941) at 43.

7. *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XX, 139, 144-45 (October, 1941).

8. Rolle, Petition, 2-5.

ment on a bluff twenty-five miles further up the river.⁹

Here, in the course of about a year, he established a small community of hunters and backwoodsmen, numbering with their wives and families some twenty souls. John Bartram, the botanist, who, visited "squire Rolle's" place in January 1766 during Rolle's absence in England, described the town as half a mile long, with two streets intersecting, one sixty feet wide and the other one hundred feet wide ; all the land behind was covered with pines and scrub oaks. There were half a score of scattered houses, built of round logs,¹⁰ These, according to Grant, were simply put up to furnish Rolle's itinerant woodsmen with a claim to receive on family right grants of land which he would subsequently buy from them to increase his old holdings.¹¹

His difficulties, in fact, were in no small degree due to a conflict between his desires for an extensive and advantageous tract of land and the Governor's instructions regarding land grants. It was the rule that a tract must be continuous, one-third as broad as it was long, and that it must run back from a waterway and not have its sides communicating with water. As a result, it was difficult to lay out any tract without having a disproportionately large amount of poor soil or swamp. Rolle therefore delayed taking out his grant while he endeavored to obtain permission to have his 20,000 acres laid out on both sides of the river, treating the river as part of the acreage, on which he would pay quit

9. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

10. [William Stork], *A Description of East-Florida, with a Journal Kept by John Bartram of Philadelphia, Botanist to His Majesty for the Floridas; upon A Journey from St. Augustine up the River St. John's as far as the Lakes . . .* (Third edition ; London, 1769), John Bartram's Journal, 27.

11. Corse, *loc. cit.*, 117, 124.

rent. If this was denied, he asked that he might be permitted to purchase a tract to be additional to his 20,000 acres laid out in a continuous body, or alternatively that his settlers be permitted to acquire land on family right to supplement his tract. This proposal was of doubtful legality, even if his woodsmen were *bona fide* settlers. It was, in fact, rumored that their petitions for land had been thrown under the table at the Council meeting, Grant remarking that none of Rolle's people should ever obtain any land. Rolle taxed the Governor with this; the latter told him not to listen to such tales, but did not deny them. It was an additional grievance to Rolle that Grant had insisted that the petitions ought to be filed by the persons concerned, and not in a batch, and that the petitioners should attend in person the Council meeting at which their petitions were to be considered. Even when Rolle had decided upon his tract there was further delay because he objected, for reasons which will appear, to having Fairchild as the deputy surveyor to lay it out. Eventually it was surveyed by John Funk, but in Rolle's absence, which led to further objections that his specifications had not been met.¹²

All the while Grant had been urging Rolle to decide on his tract as soon as possible, before it was preempted by others, and even said that he ought to have prosecuted him and his settlers as squatters upon the King's lands, since no grant had been obtained.¹³ Rolle's reply was always that discrimination was shown against him. Other persons, he declared, had tracts with waterways both at front and side, and with a higher proportion of good land than his proposed tract would have. Though he was

12. Corse, *loc. cit.*, 117-18, 123-26, 129-30; Rolle, Petition, 12, 18-19, 21-22, 33-35, 37-41, 53, 61-73, 79-82.

13. Rolle, Petition, 28.

urged to hurry, and to apply for a grant in person, others were allowed to delay. The agent of one, Colonel Middleton, presenting a grant for land on the St. Johns made by Governor Boone of South Carolina, was given three months in which to apply for a confirmatory grant from the East Florida Council. This grant, which conflicted with the one which Rolle hoped to obtain, had been made a year or so earlier at the time when South Carolina was claiming jurisdiction over the 'neutral ground' south of the Altamaha, then the boundary of Georgia.¹⁴ It was in this disputed area, on Cumberland island at the mouth of St. Marys river, that Edmund Gray had established his squatter community of crackers from the Carolinas and Georgia in 1757 under the name of New Hanover—a settlement to which Rolle was to make bitter reference later on.¹⁵ Another grievance concerned a visit of two prominent planters from South Carolina, Francis Kinloch and John Moultrie, who were prospecting for good sites for plantations. After being entertained at Rollestown they left with the apparent intention of going further up the river to locate their tracts. Instead, they chose locations close at hand, which interfered with those for which Rolle, as he had already told them, had intended to apply. The fact that this was tolerated by Grant only made the seeming breach of hospitality more galling.¹⁶

In the midst of these difficulties a fresh batch of

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14. *Ibid.*, 37-43. On these South Carolina grants see (besides the lengthy discussion in these pages of Rolle's Petition) *American State Papers: Class VIII: Public Lands*, I (Gales and Seaton; Washington, 1832), 51-56; Lawrence H. Gipson, *Zones of International Friction: North America, South of the Great Lakes Region, 1748-1754 (The British Empire before the American Revolution)*, IV; New York, 1939), 25-47.
15. For New Hanover, see *Am. State Papers, Public Lands*, I, and Gipson, as cited above.
16. Rolle, Petition, 43-47; Corse, *loc. cit.*, 125.

settlers arrived in July 1765 to embarrass the empire-builder still further. Not having heard of Rolle's change of plans, they had gone to St. Marks, Apalache, and Rolle, hearing of their arrival, set off in hot pursuit on the hazardous journey across the peninsula. It proved a wild-goose chase, for the party had already left for Rollestown by water, traveling by way of Pensacola and Savannah. On his return, Rolle asked that the ship's captain might be permitted to take oath at St. Augustine of the arrival of the party, in order that he might prove his fulfillment of the terms of his Order regarding settlement of the land, before any of the people died or were enticed away from the plantation. This Grant refused, declaring that Rolle or his agent must make oath of their arrival before a Justice of the Peace.¹⁷

In this matter of settlement, as in other regards, Rolle claimed that the terms of his Order from the Privy Council put him at a considerable disadvantage compared with the planter who obtained grants of land from the East Florida Council. Rolle was granted a single continuous tract, which he must settle with white people. The other could obtain several small tracts chosen for their good soil and avoiding the poorer land which a 20,000-acre tract was sure to include, and could then clear them with negro labor and so gain title to them after three years' settlement. As likely as not these tracts were thereafter abandoned, and were soon covered with undergrowth far worse than that on areas which had never been cleared. Yet presumably the settlement of whites rather than this temporary

17. Rolle, Petition, 45, 48-53, 57-58.

occupation of land by negroes was what the British government desired.¹⁸

Nor was this the whole story. White settlers, Rolle's particularly, proved to be rather slippery customers. St. Augustine was a raw little garrison town, but it had many attractions compared with the desolation of Rollestown. The high wages prevailing there were alone an inducement to settlers to desert the plantation, and against this their indentures proved to be flimsy constraints. When Rolle complained to the Governor that his people were lured away to the capital, the latter protested that this was a legal matter in which he had no power. Rolle observed, however, that Grant's influence was such that a word at his dinner table would have effectually discouraged such practices.¹⁹

A few instances will suffice. A smith and his wife (the pair married at Charleston) were carried off from Rollestown by soldiers from Fort Picolata and kept on Anastasia island to tend victims of small pox. Rolle complained to Major Ogilvie, who offered to punish the men, but at Rolle's request, let them off with a reprimand. For applying to the Major rather than to the Governor, Rolle again found himself in the latter's bad graces.²⁰ Henry Fairchild, whom Rolle had brought to the province and employed at 20 a year, was persuaded to leave him for a deputy surveyorship though Grant declared, when Rolle raised the question with him, that his public and private employments were not incompatible. Fairchild's relations with Rolle were broken off, he fell into a career of profligacy and debt, which ended only by his flight to West Florida.²¹ Similar

18. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

19. *Ibid.*; 8⁹, 29.

21. *Ibid.*, 24-25 Cf. *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XX, 145.

was the case of Bullemore, Rolle's prospective agent in St. Augustine, whom Grant rejected as an exceptional person; disappointed of the public employment he had been led to expect, he came to a sad end soon afterwards.²²

Sometimes, however, attempts to entice away his settlers came to nothing. Greening, while his guest at Rollestown, vainly tried to persuade a boat builder, who had sought refuge from the life of extravagance and drinking at St. Augustine, to return with him to the capital. This same visitor seemed anxious to take off a young woman, but Rolle persuaded her to stay, and afterwards arranged a successful marriage for her. Conversely, Greening tried to add to the community at Rollestown by urging one of the families to undertake the care of their daughter's son. The girl was a prostitute in St. Augustine, and the child's transfer to Rollestown would simply give her greater leisure while adding a burden to a family to whose support Rolle was already contributing.²³

Another time Rolle was involved in difficulties with his former hunter, Upton, whom he had dismissed for secretly supplying persons in St. Augustine with venison at his expense. Upton had stayed around Rollestown afterward, and had procured a stock of rum with which a couple had been enabled to set up a public house, to the detriment of the good order of the settlement. Again Grant refused to intervene, since the law of England was open and covered all such matters. Then one evening, with what Rolle called the "Coupe D'Etat of the *New Hanover Law*," Upton, who was drunk at the time, shot one of Rolle's cows, and swore in the presence

22. Rolle, *Petition*, 8, 27; Cf. *F. H. Q.*, XX, 145.

23. Rolle, *Petition*, 19-21.

of two negroes that he would kill all the rest. Rolle thereupon got his agent, Henry Lloyd, who had been made a Justice of the Peace, to commission four people to arrest Upton. This was done and he was taken to St. Augustine. No jailer was to be found there, however, and the Sheriff "one of the Governors menial Servants," seemed at loss how to act. All wanted to free the prisoner; nevertheless he was eventually put in jail. Subsequently Davis, a deputy surveyor whom Rolle had entertained, wrote him a threatening letter on Upton's behalf, demanding payment for the use of his horses, which had been roaming round the plantation, breaking fences and being a great nuisance. When Rolle protested about this, Grant made the quibbling reply that Davis was not a deputy surveyor, though employed by De Brahm on the general survey. To all protests, in fact, the Governor had an unvarying reply: that he could not interfere; the law of England was open. Rolle's answer when his affidavit regarding his purchase from Bunkley was rejected was that the law was indeed open, "but he found it open only on one Side of a Question." Now he added that the law was too expensive for the infant settler, and seemed designed not to protect the inexperienced colonist but to scourge him for his unintentional mistakes.²⁴

To this catalogue of woes others were added. Rolle was shot at twice one evening by some unknown person while traveling in a canoe up the St. Johns.²⁵ Another time a boat freighted with his supplies was detained at St. Augustine by Lieutenant Swettenham, then in command at the Fort and high in Grant's favor, though another boat of

24. *Ibid.*, 15-17, 69-70, 73, 76-78; Rolle to Grant, 26 July 1765, in Appendix, 40.

25. Rolle, Petition, 55-56.

similar status had just been allowed to leave. Both were open boats bound on provincial voyages, and so not subject to delay; the other one was carrying goods for a store. The delay caused Rolle's boat to strike on the bar and overturn; its master was drowned, and its cargo became an almost total loss.²⁶

Then there was the matter of Rolle's dealings with the Indians. Grant charged him with keeping an Indian store without license.²⁷ Rolle claimed that he merely supplied the Indians with a few things for their convenience and to keep their friendship, and declared that the good personal relations which he had established with them were constantly jeopardized by the work of the Governor's rum.²⁸

These are only a few of the several troubles which Rolle experienced during a stay of barely a year. While some of his grievances were doubtless valid enough, he was clearly an eccentric and headstrong person who was the author of many of his own misfortunes. He came to regard the Governor as his personal enemy, and seems to have suffered from a persecution complex. Grant was an autocrat, intolerant of potential rivals and impatient with irregularities except when committed by or for his friends, but his criticisms of Rolle as quarrelsome, litigious and petty have much point. Moreover Rolle's ingenious schemes for obtaining unusual tracts of land and increasing his holdings were certainly of dubious legality; though Grant did not prevent other English grantees from obtaining huge estates whose settlement was never even begun.²⁹

On his return to England in 1765, Rolle renewed his plea to the Privy Council for a special grant of

26. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

27. Corse, *loc. cit.*, 131.

28. Rolle, *Petition*, 11-14, 27, 55-57, 60-61.

29. Corse, *loc. cit.*, 120, 122-134.

a huge area in which he would have undivided authority. "Thoroughly convinced of the inexpediency of the existing mode of settlement," he petitioned for a palatinate on the tenure of finding about a thousand men, ready to be called out on military service whenever the King in Council should direct.³⁰ To this modest plea the Privy Council again turned a deaf ear, though, the government, concerned lest his reports should discourage the settlement of East Florida, advised Grant to give every encouragement to "so bold and useful a Colonist."³¹

While his petition was pending, Rolle devoted himself to the task of obtaining some publicity for East Florida's attractions for settlers, particularly the advantages of Rollestown. He published a digest of Dr. Stork's *Account of East Florida*, to which he added some observations of his own, two letters, Grant's proclamation inviting settlers, and his own Order in Council. One of the letters was from "An eminent Planter in South Carolina to a noble Lord in England," and was written from Charleston on 27 August 1765; it described the land up the St. Johns in the most glowing terms, and declared that the tract of land from Rollestown to Lake George, a distance of fifty miles, was "I may say the best in the King's dominions" and capable alone of producing more rice than the whole of South Carolina had ever produced in a year. The second letter was from the Surveyor General, and described the variety of soil-rich and clayey on the high ground, more sandy at the lower levels-and the great natural growth of valuable trees and plants,

30. *Acts of the Privy Council, Colonial Series*, VI, 438-439.

31. Shelburne to Grant, 11 December 1766, in Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office papers, class 5, vol. 548, p. 243 (Library of Congress transcripts).

including sweet and sour oranges, lemons, papaw trees, cabbage-trees, arboreous grapevines, together with cypress, tupelo and mangrove trees on the low lands and swamps. Rolle's own observations began with the sweeping statement: "Every thing in nature seems to correspond towards the cultivation of the productions of the whole world, in some part or other of this happy province, the most precious jewel of his majesty's American dominions." He described his own plantation, countered objections to the heat (often made more unbearable, he alleged, from drinking much strong liquor or rum unmixed), and rebutted arguments concerning noxious beasts, insects and reptiles, and the hostility of the Indians. He sketched the opportunities for settlers with a little capital, either twelve or fifty guineas. Those without property were invited to indent themselves to him for four years and share in his plantation, and were told that they would hear of frequent opportunities for going thither at London, Bristol, Liverpool and the other great seaports, where ships would be freighted to the St. Johns river, or to St. Augustine. This manifesto was subscribed Denys Rolle, and dated at Tuderly, September 1, 1766.³²

At about the same time, by a strange coincidence, the *Scots Magazine* published a glowing account of Rollestown, telling of its plentiful crops of rice, corn, pulse and cotton, and its garden produce, live-stock, and its groves of oranges and grapes. One

32. [Denys Rolle], *An Extract from the Account of East Florida, Published by Dr. Stork, who resided a considerable Time in Augustine, the Metropolis of that Province, With the Observations of Denys Rolle, who formed a Settlement on St. John's river, in the same Province. With his Proposals to Such Persons as may be inclined to settle thereon* (London, 1766), *passim*, especially 13, 19. Cf. Wroth, *loc. cit.*, 43.

naturally suspects Rolle as the author of this piece also.³³

With renewed determination, Rolle returned to the St. Johns in January 1767 with a motley collection of forty-nine vagrants and debtors. His pioneering then, and on his later brief visits in 1769 and 1778, was no more successful than on his first sojourn in East Florida. By grants and purchases he increased his acreage to over 80,000; but his various contingents of shiftless settlers all melted away, dishonest agents sold his cattle for their own profit, and finally the cession of East Florida back to Spain robbed him of an estate which had never flourished save in his exuberant imagination.³⁴ He claimed 19,886 as compensation from the British government, but was probably lucky to get the 6,597 which the East Florida Claims Commission awarded him.³⁵ By 1823 not a vestige of Rollestown remained, except for a few pits which had been the foundations of large buildings, and a long avenue still traceable in the forest, the beginning of a grand highway to St. Augustine.³⁶ Like a more trodden and less innocent road, this had been paved only with good intentions.

33. *Scots Magazine*, XXVIII, 50 (January, 1766).

34. Corse, *loc. cit.*, 118-122, 134.

35. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, II, 307.

36. Vignoles, *Observations upon the Floridas*, 73.