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A New Letter of James Monroe on the Cession of Florida

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Monroe to
J. Q. Adams
June 26 -
1812

Proverb

Washington June 22 1812

I have the pleasure to send you a copy of
a project of a treaty which was proposed by the
American Envoy at Madrid in 1805 to
the minister of Spain, such ^{the object of} matters, East Florida
an object of negotiation by way of indemnity
to American claimants, it had ~~been~~ referred by ~~you~~
Spolunbra, from Spanish territory. The Spa-
nish govt. was willing to make the cession,
but asked more for the territory than our
Congress was willing to give. You will
also recollect that a convention had been
formed in 1802 providing for these Spolunbra,
which was never ratified.

I send you a copy of the instructions
to your ^{representative} matters, & after the revocation of

From the original in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.
(two-thirds size)

to Spain, to Govt. Mitchell of Georgia, and
 time to East Florida. I add a copy of the corres-
 pondence with the letter you will be so
 good as to return these documents as soon
 as they seem to be useful to you.

It seems to be a question whether we shall
 give up territory to a power which has so often
 by injury to, & so long refused to make repara-
 tion, & in possessing it, & where these persons,
 who have been so unjustly treated by one of our agents,
~~that the whole~~ ^{is being investigated} is the true from you to the
 honor & rights of the United States, to the disappearance
 of the Spanish authorities, or to keep the territory
 & protect these people from injury.

In great haste respectfully yours
 Jos. W. Barlow

A NEW LETTER OF JAMES MONROE
ON THE CESSION OF FLORIDA

by **REMBERT W. PATRICK**

In all the records of the negotiations at Madrid in 1805 between the Spanish government and the envoys of the United States there is not the least intimation that Spain was willing to cede the Floridas to this country. Yet, in a hitherto unpublished letter of June 22, 1812, Secretary of State James Monroe states that she was willing to; and Monroe himself with Charles Pinckney, United States Minister to Spain, were the two men who would know the facts.

The letter is reproduced on the opposite page and a transcript follows. It is undoubtedly in Monroe's handwriting and gives every evidence of having been written in haste. The person to whom it was addressed has not been ascertained, but since the endorsement was made only four days after the writing, the letter with its enclosures must have been sent to someone in or near Washington.

Four days before Monroe penned the letter the United States had declared war on Great Britain. It is quite possible that President James Madison, who was debating his course of action in regard to East Florida, desired a copy of the instructions to General George Mathews and Governor David Bradie Mitchell for study in the hope of ending the Florida venture as quickly and as gracefully as possible.¹ In the last paragraph of the letter Monroe appears to be writing to one who had the power of decision on the East Florida problem. There is, however, no letter in Madison's published correspondence that indicates the receipt of such a letter from Monroe. This is no proof that it was not addressed to Madison. Though the letter could have

1. See the account of East Florida events in Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812*, pp. 189-218.

been sent to a member of Congress or even to Thomas Jefferson, the most logical conclusion is that the recipient was Madison.

The contents of the letter are not startling but are thought-provoking. The efforts to acquire East Florida in 1812 are well known.² In 1802 Charles Pinckney and Don Pedro Cevallos signed a convention which provided for the creation of a board of commissioners to examine and judge the claims of citizens of both Spain and the United States for maritime property losses suffered during the undeclared war between France and the United States.³ The convention was ratified by the United States early in 1804, but Spain refused ratification then. In 1805 James Monroe joined Pinckney at Madrid in the hope of negotiating a treaty by which the United States would acquire the Floridas and a clear title to most of Texas in exchange for assumption of the spoliation claims of American citizens against Spain. Monroe and Pinckney made two proposals to Cevallos. The first suggested cession of the Floridas and the fixing of the Louisiana boundary at the Colorado with the district between the Bravo (Brazos) and the Colorado being left as a borderland subject to settlement by neither Spain nor the United States.⁴ Cevallos rejected this and the American commissioners later suggested a second and in some respects a more moderate basis for a treaty.⁵ This was also rejected and Monroe terminated the negotiations by requesting his passports and a farewell audience with the king.⁶

2. Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administration of James Madison*, VI, 237-243; Hubert Bruce Fuller, *The Purchase of Florida*, pp. 190-202.

3. *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, II, 475.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 638-39.

5. Pinckney and Monroe to Cevallos, May 12, 1805, *ibid.*, pp. 665-66.

6. Monroe to Cevallos, May 18, 1805, *ibid.*, p. 667.

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in the official records of the negotiations, which lasted from January 28 to May 18, there is no intimation on the part of Cevallos that Spain would consider the sale of Florida. Yet seven years later Monroe says in this letter: "The Spanish gov^t. was willing to make the cession but asked more for the territory than our Commiss^{rs} were willing to give." This is in strange contrast to Monroe's reports and statement in 1805. At his parting audience before the king of Spain in that year Monroe stated his regrets that the proposition of the United States had been rejected and no proposals were, ". . . ever offered on the part of your Majesty's Government, though often invited . . ." ⁷ In their report after the conclusion of negotiations Pinckney and Monroe again mentioned that Spain made no proposition in regard to the sale of the Floridas. ⁸

Could Monroe's memory have been so much at fault after so short a time? This is possible, for such lapses of memory are not uncommon. On the other hand, unofficial word, purposely omitted from the records, might have been sent Monroe in 1805 of Spain's willingness to sell the Floridas. The Spanish treasury was in need of funds and a large payment for territories that were neither economically profitable nor easily defensible would have been of advantage to Spain. It is also possible that by 1812 Monroe was confusing the suggestions he received in Paris with those in Madrid. After leaving Spain he went to Paris. There he ran into a mysterious note of corruption that probably stemmed from the intimate circle of Napoleon's minister, Talley-

7. Monroe's address to the king of Spain, May 21, 1805, *ibid.*, p. 667.

8. Pinckney and Monroe to Madison, May 23, 1805, *ibid.*, pp. 667-669.

rand.⁹ By the end of June Monroe was convinced that France had prevented a successful conclusion to the Madrid negotiations and that a payment of eight million dollars, most of which perhaps would go to France, would secure the Floridas.¹⁰

No matter the actual facts the statement of Monroe's opinion as expressed in the second sentence is important. But of more interest, if not of more importance, is the frank expression of Monroe's opinion on a question which might well have been weighing heavily on Madison's mind at this time : whether to withdraw from the semi-officially promoted invasion of Florida. This will be discussed in the next issue of the *Quarterly* with two hitherto unpublished letters of John McIntosh on the subject.

private

Washington June 22, 1812

Sir

I have the pleasure to send you a copy of a project of a treaty which was proposed by the American envoys at Madrid in 1805 to the minister of Spain which makes the cession of East Florida an object of negotiation by way of indemnity to American claimants who suffered by spoliations from Spanish cruisers. The Spanish gov^t. was willing to make the cession but asked more for the territory than our Commiss^{rs} were willing to give. You will also recollect that a convention had been form'd in 1802 providing for these spoliations which was never ratified.

I send you a copy of the instructions to Govr. Matthews, & after the revocation of his powers, to Govr. Mitchell of Georgia, relative to East Florida. I add

9. Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administration of Thomas Jefferson*, III, 41.

10. Monroe to Madison, June 30, 1805, MSS. State Department Archives: quoted in Adams, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

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a copy of the correspondence with the latter. You will be so good as to return these documents as soon as they cease to be useful to you.

It seems to be a question whether we shall give up territory to a power which has so greatly injur'd us, and so long refused to make reparation, & in surrendering it, deliver those persons who have been compromitted by our agent who cooperated with him from zeal to the honor & rights of the U States, to the vengeance of the Spanish authorities, or keep the territory & protect these people from injury.

In great haste respectfully yours

JAMES MONROE ¹¹

[endorsed:]

Monroe - Ansd. & papers returned-June 26-1812

11. The original of this letter is in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

Roscoe R. Hill, Chief, Division of State Department Archives, The National Archives, states (Feb. 5, 1945) : ". . . a careful examination of records in the National Archives has failed to disclose any reference to this letter The 1802 Convention referred to was ratified by Spain on July 9, 1818. Its text appears in Miller, *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, volume 2, pages 492-497. The instructions to Governors Matthews and Mitchell are printed in *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, volume III, pages 571-573, as is also a letter of Monroe to Mitchell dated May 27, 1812. It is not possible, from the available information, to determine how much of the correspondence with Mitchell was enclosed in Monroe's letter of June 22, 1812. The correspondence of Governor Mitchell, which includes letters from Mitchell to Monroe, copies of letters exchanged between Mitchell and the Governor of East Florida, and letters relating to Mitchell, is bound in volume 2 of the manuscript series of Florida Territorial Papers. This volume is among the Florida materials to be included in the file microcopy program of the National Archives"