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EARLY SETTLERS IN BRITISH WEST FLORIDA

by CLINTON N. HOWARD

The land grant records of the British colony of West Florida comprise a fairly complete census of the population of the colony in the early years.¹

Land was granted by the king-in-council and the governor and council. Grants by the former were presented to the latter for *execution in a mandamus*. The governor and council in West Florida usually set aside certain days in each month for consideration of petitions for grants of land, so the land grant records of the colony comprise a part of the minutes of the council.

The proclamation of 1763 forbade settlement west of the watershed of the Appalachian mountains until the plan for the gradual extinction of the Indian title by purchase could be put into operation. Study has shown that the limitation was intended to pacify the Indians who had revolted under Pontiac and the plan for extinction of the Indian title was intended to please the colonists.

Why the colony of West Florida was established at all and why it was established with its given boundaries, are questions which are deserving of an answer. Aside from reasons of capital and commercial investments, part of the answers to these questions bear directly upon the matter of immigration to the colony. Who came to West Florida is as important to the student of social history as what they did after they got there.

1. An analysis of these records for the early years of the colony will appear in the writer's forthcoming study of British development of West Florida. All of the material discussed here, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn from the Minutes of the Council of West Florida or other documents in the colony's archives. These are now deposited in the Public Record Office of Great Britain, Colonial Office Division, Class Five.

The British frontier in North America was redefined in 1763. The need for that redefinition was forced on the imperial government by the cession in the treaty of Paris (1763) of all the land east of the Mississippi river. The proclamation of 1763 had its genesis in Pontiac's revolt, and is best understood in terms of the evolution of an imperial policy toward native peoples. It was hoped that the establishment of Quebec and the two Floridas would relieve the pressure along the line of settlement for the time being. This incidental calculation resulted in putting the westward push of the Americans in the South about twenty-five years ahead of that to the north. The ultimate result was to bring the territory of West Florida into the United States perhaps rather earlier than might have been expected, because few of the English settlers in West Florida evacuated the territory when it was ceded to Spain in 1783.²

The imperial government was suffering from an embarrassment of free land in 1763. But the attempts of the Indian officials and the furtrading interests to maintain the eastern Mississippi valley as a closed preserve failed by 1768, and the thought that any such attempt could be successful was fully

2. It should be kept in mind that British West Florida extended westward to the Mississippi river. At its establishment in 1763 its northern boundary was the 31st degree of latitude, but by proclamation the next year its area was greatly increased by pushing this boundary up to the mouth of "the Yazoo, whence it extended eastwards to the Chattahoochee. The capital throughout the British period was Pensacola, far southeast of its geographical center; and the first settlers, as Dr. Howard indicates through the land grants, came to the Pensacola region. But finding the soil in this district comparatively sterile they, and the later immigrants, went westwards; and within five years the Natchez region was claiming most of them. Hence it must be remembered that this article relates in large part to territory which is no longer Florida, and the author's statement on evacuation does not apply to the Pensacola region. - *Ed.*

answered by Edmund Burke in his speech on conciliation with America on March 22, 1775:

As the growing population of the colonies is evidently one cause of their resistance, it was last session mentioned in both Houses, by men of weight, and received not without applause, that, in order to check this evil, it would be proper for the crown to make no further grants of land. But to this scheme there are two objections. The first, that there is already so much unsettled land in private hands as to afford room for an immense future population, although the crown not only withheld its grants, but annihilated its soil. If this be the case, then the only effect . . . would be to raise the value of the possessions in the hands of the great private monopolists, without any adequate check on the growing and alarming mischief of population.

But if you stopped your grants, what would be the consequence? The people would occupy without grants. They have already so occupied in many places. You cannot station garrisons in every part of these deserts. If you drive the people from one place, they will carry on their annual tillage, and remove with their flocks and herds to another. Many of the people in the back settlements are already little attached to particular situations. Already they have topped the Appalachian Mountains. From thence they behold before them an immense plain, one vast, rich, level meadow; a square of five hundred miles. Over this they would wander without a possibility of restraint; they would change their manners with the habits of their life; would soon forget a government by which they were disowned; would become hordes of

English Tartars, and, pouring down upon your unfortified frontiers a fierce and irresistible cavalry, become masters of your governors and your counsellors, your collectors and comptrollers, and of all the slaves that adhere to them. Such would, and, in no long time, must be, the effect of attempting to forbid as a crime, and to suppress as an evil, the command and blessing of Providence, "Increase and multiply." Such would be the happy result of an endeavor to keep as a lair of wild beasts that earth which God by an express charter has given to the children of men. Far different, and surely much wiser, has been our policy hitherto. Hitherto, we have invited our people, by every kind of bounty, to fixed establishments. We have invited the husbandman to look to authority for his title. We have taught him piously to believe in the mysterious virtue of wax and parchment. We have thrown each tract of land, as it was peopled, into districts, that the ruling power should never be wholly out of sight. We have settled all we could ; and we have carefully attended every settlement with government.

As Burke implies, the topography of the country is of importance in giving a clue to the lines of migration. The British military expedition for the reoccupation of the Mississippi valley followed the route obvious in the country and its rivers. The later routes of immigration were the same. The Tennessee, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers brought many settlers to West Florida, especially to the western parts of the province around Natchez, after about 1768. It seems probable that both the old English road around the southern tip of the Appalachian mountains and Natchez trace were put to use.

Possibly some of the settlers came to Pensacola by sea from New York and Charleston as well as across the Atlantic.

In some cases the Minutes of the Council show that the immigrants came in a party and in some cases the better circumstanced sent an agent ahead. The outstanding case is that of Phineas Lyman and his Company of Adventurers who were granted land on the Mississippi river. Because the distances were shorter by far in most cases than those of the Oregon trail and other trails of the trans-Mississippi West, the probability appears to be that a large number of immigrants came in single, two, or three family groups. More typical than Lyman's venture is that of John Smith whose petition for six hundred acres on the Mississippi river set forth that he had been encouraged by a number of inhabitants of Pennsylvania to view lands on the Mississippi; that so he had left and come down the Ohio river and the Mississippi river to West Florida; that he had found the land was exceeding good and that he proposed to bring his wife and family of five to West Florida the next spring. This John Smith presented his case to the council on December 17, 1768.

Both the imperial and the provincial governments made some effort to prevent the creation of a class of large landholders in the province. This is not to say that there were no large grants; for instance, Patrick, fifth earl of Elibank, received twenty thousand acres in one continuous strip. Exceptions achieved by influence, "connection" and patronage were, perhaps, still the rule in Whig England, but the general policy of the home and colonial government in West Florida seems to have been to grant lands to all proprietors who could and would develop it and pay the fees and quit-rents. For

financial as well as political reasons this was a logical policy for a government which was trying to economize at the same time that it was trying to break up the monopolistic Whig oligarchy. It was in line with the new policy of the imperial government which, in spite of exceptions it was forced to make for political reasons, did with surprising energy conduct spasmodic campaigns to reduce absentee office-holders, charter ownership of colonies, and all other factors which rendered less efficient and less direct the royal administration of the colony.

It should be remembered that large numbers of recent immigrants to the colonies especially, probably, the Scotch-Irish, who came in such numbers to West Florida, had been driven from home by the enclosure movement in the British Isles which resulted from the agricultural revolution in England, the transfer of wool-growing to Scotland after 1707 and the subjection of Ireland after the treaty of Limerick in 1691. The industrial system in England was not yet prepared to absorb large numbers of workers, and room had to be found somewhere in the empire for the large numbers of small farmers and agricultural workers.

It should be added that West Florida was fortunate in this matter in that it had originally received bad publicity, notably in the *North Briton* (number 45) which at its cession had referred to it as "that barren swamp of Florida." Although this last description was largely directed against the Spanish cession, most of which became East Florida, yet Pensacola, at one time a penal station, was made the capital of West Florida which was partly formed from the former French colony of Louisiana. This fact doubtless confused the two colonies in the minds of most people who knew noth-

ing of the country. The early reports from Pensacola and even Mobile were not encouraging to dreams of quick tropical wealth. It was only the discovery of the rich farming land near Natchez which began a boom which had its effect upon the country, even in spite of the retrocession to Spain in 1783.

Whatever the reason for it, the apparent attempt of the imperial and the provincial government to develop a small farming and artisan class rather than a plantation class is interesting in the light of the earlier history of the Atlantic coast and West Indian colonies. There was a small and perhaps growing trade in negro slaves in West Florida during the British period, but slavery does not seem to have taken a deep root in the province by the end of the British period. There was a beginning of the growing of cotton in West Florida as early as 1767, but half a century was to pass before "King Cotton" reversed the agricultural pattern of the country and made it the plantation area of the South par excellence.

All of the Spaniards evacuated Pensacola and its environs upon its surrender to the British.³ A great many of the French around Mobile preferred to remain where they were, and later this immigration was increased by the announcement of the cession of New Orleans to Spain. The British imperial government made a policy of encouraging foreign-born emigrants to settle in the province, and frequently went to considerable length in subsidizing them. The most notable instance of this in West Florida was the case of Campbelltown. The French Huguenot settlers of this town were brought to the colony under the leadership of Lieutenant-governor

5. See Wilbur F. Siebert, "How the Spaniards Evacuated Pensacola in 1763" in *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XI, 48-57.

Montfort Browne and at the expense of the Board of Trade. The experiment was far from being a success, however, and the governor and council were called upon time and time again to come to the aid of these settlers. The town was finally abandoned. The imperial and provincial officials did what they could to encourage the immigration to the province of Acadians, both from Louisiana and from the seaboard colonies where they had been scattered a few years previously. The older French settlers around Mobile appear to have been more deeply rooted and to have continued their life, in most ways, undisturbed by the change of rulers.⁴ Some Germans settled along the coast west of Mobile and gave to that region the name Cote D'Allemand.⁵ The imperial government tried to encourage the immigration of Palatine Germans, presumably for the purposes of viniculture.

Aside from these, foreign settlements it is evident that in these early years about nine-tenths of the settlers were of the official class, that is, of the army, the navy and the government "civil" service - provincial or imperial - or contractors, merchants and followers of these groups. These persons mostly petitioned for grants around Pensacola bay, which thus gave promise of being the center of population in these early years. Smaller groups received grants along the coast and far above the fall-line of the Mobile and Escambe rivers. Throughout the first two years these centers grew in the number of grants, with the population slowly spreading along the coast through the present West Florida parishes of Louisiana toward Fort Bute and the Mississippi river. In 1766 numerous re-

4. See Peter Joseph Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile*, New York, 1897.

5. See J. H. Deiler, "Settlement of The German Coast of Louisiana and The Creoles of German Descent," *German-American Annals*, XI, 34-63, 67-102, 123-163, 179-207

quests begin to appear for grants on the Mississippi near Natchez, and by the close of 1767 the westward movement of the population toward Natchez was in full swing. Many persons petitioned to be allowed to give up their grants along the coast because the soil was sandy and barren. These petitioners asked for a fresh grant, usually in the neighborhood of Natchez, although occasionally land above the fall-line of the Mobile or Escambe rivers was asked for. The withdrawal of the troops from the western part of the province appears to have only temporarily hampered settlement in the neighborhood of Natchez, but it seems seriously to have diminished the authority of the government in these parts.

Of all the groups of immigrants who went to West Florida the ones most difficult to trace are those from the other British colonies. Predominantly these were, in the early years, it would seem safe to say, English or Scotch-Irish by descent, if not birth. The records bear testimony to considerable migration from Virginia, Pennsylvania and New England. The Scotch-Irish group seems to have come in large part from North Carolina. The increasing amount of emigration from the older colonies is interesting. The colonists were in the restless beginnings of the movement which carried them westward across the continent.

Governor Johnstone writing in 1766 to John Pownall, secretary of the Board of Trade, on the effect of the Stamp Act said: "As the Establishment of the Stamp Duty in this Province has been the Occasion of much Discontent among the Lower Class of People, and most of whom are Irish Emigrants who have resided some time in North America, I think it proper to relate the whole respecting that Subject from the beginning . . . Our principle

Communications being with North America, the Spirit of what is there called Liberty begun to infuse itself here, and many Arguments were handed about, to show why the Act should not take Place.”

An estimate of the number of settlers in West Florida in these early years must at present rest upon the same basis of fragmentary evidence of the description of their character estate and places of origin. Governor Johnstone once estimated that the population of the province numbered eighteen hundred to two thousand during his administration. We have no authority for his figures, but it is likely that they were what he intended—a fairly close approximation of the truth. The names of the land grantees in the period 1764-1769 numbered over five hundred. This number excludes grantees who are known to have been non-resident, usually English merchants. The number also includes officials of the province and of the customs and Indian service, and army and navy officers and men. In most cases these officials were in residence in the province over an extended period of years, and in most instances they took out land grants. They were sufficiently well established so that in every way they deserve to be classed as residents. Deputy Indian superintendent Charles Stuart owned land in West Florida. Brigadier-General Frederick Haldimand is a particularly interesting example of an owner of land in many of the provinces in North America.

The average grantee was the head of a household. Most of the petitioners simply asked for so many acres, in addition to the allowance of land for their “family right,” but some of them specified a wife, so many children, other relatives, indentured servants and slaves. Francis du Planey, grantee of a plantation near Lake Pontchartrain, was probably

one of the old French settlers. He declared that he had fifty slaves in addition to white servants. A Patrick Morgan declared that he expected fifteen slaves from the West Indies in two weeks.

Many of the grantees declared anywhere between four and ten children. By omitting, however, the slaves and servants, and by averaging each grantee as possessed of a wife and two children, the total number of settlers approximates that given by Governor Johnstone. This may be even more likely when servants and extra children and non-land owners are allowed to make up for the undoubtedly large number of single men who were in the province in the army.

Because the land grant records in these early years are largely, if not wholly, the record of the better circumstanced of the settlers, a rough analysis of the record yields interesting results. Of some five hundred odd names in the record, approximately four hundred seem to be of English, Scottish, or Irish descent. Of these a little less than one hundred clearly occupy official positions. This probably accounts for their presence in the colony. Some seventy odd French are entered as grantees. Seven grantees seem to be without doubt Hebrews, three seem to be Germans from Pennsylvania, two Germans from the Cote D'Allemand, and three other grantees might be either Italian or Spanish.

These figures can only be taken as indicative rather than literal. They show a number of settlers of British descent and may indicate that during the brief twenty years of the colony's existence the imperial government's policy of encouragement of alien immigration was not as successful as it might have been.