

1949

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Recommended Citation

Patrick, Rembert W. (1949) "Letters of the Invaders of East Florida, 1812," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 28 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol28/iss1/7>

LETTERS OF THE INVADERS OF EAST
FLORIDA, 1812

edited by REMBERT W. PATRICK

In September, 1812, a small detachment of the United States Army, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas A. Smith, was camped near Moosa Old Fort. Not more than five hundred yards from the American forces was the unkempt and open quarters of a small band of men who called themselves the "Patriots of East Florida." Just across the San Sebastian river from these camps lay the town of St. Augustine with its formidable fort, Castillo de San Marcos, manned by Spanish regulars and colored militia from the Spanish West Indian possessions.

Notwithstanding the warlike atmosphere in and near St. Augustine, the United States and Spain were at peace. For more than four months, however, Colonel Smith's detachment of approximately two hundred men had faced the beleaguered Spanish citizens and troops in St. Augustine. All during that long, hot summer of 1812 there had been no fighting, but the Spanish had received reinforcements by sea and the Indians had joined forces with them to destroy prosperous plantations and scalp those quandom Americans who had not fled to Amelia Island, or St. Mary's, Georgia. The Indian depredations had sent most of the Patriots fleeing north to find their families and to protect their property, and scarcely forty men were left of a force which had once neared four hundred in number.

Thus the position of the American army detachment had grown increasingly precarious during the last weeks of August and the early days of September. The often reinforced Spanish garrison was now far stronger than Colonel Smith's detachment, and the Indians were threatening to cut his supply lines to the St. Johns river. The small remaining band of Patriots were useful only for rounding up stray cattle from the interior, and they could not be depended upon even for this service. Fever, dysentery, and other diseases confined more than one-

third of Smith's forces to their crude huts which offered some protection from the summer sun and rain. By a quick sally from St. Augustine, the Spanish could have captured the small American force.

Although the Spanish had every right to defend their colonial possession, East Florida, they were merely standing on the defensive except for certain encouragements and munitions which they supplied their more aggressive Indian allies. The American force near St. Augustine was a part of a long-planned step to acquire East Florida, and Spain was avoiding any acts or actions which would lead to a declaration of war by the United States. For thus far the Congress of the United States had refused to sanction the administration's attempt to acquire the territory of a nation with which they were at peace. Aggressive Spanish action might lead to war, and Spain, which was allied with England against Napoleon in Europe, could not afford war with the United States.

The United States had long wanted the Floridas. Because of the conflict in Europe and the preoccupation of England and Spain in the battle with France, President James Madison, with the knowledge and aid of Secretary of State James Monroe and the sanction of ex-President Thomas Jefferson, had laid plans for the acquisition of East Florida early in January 1812. In that month President Madison had selected and directed George Mathews, a fiery veteran of the Revolutionary War and a one-time governor of Georgia, to acquire East Florida. Mathews had been given a wide latitude in the exercise of powers which included the right to command the services of the American army and naval forces in accomplishing his secret mission. And Mathews had acted with energy. With the aid of the young and wealthy John Hustoun McIntosh,¹ he had

1. Although a native of Georgia, John Hustoun McIntosh had been a resident of East Florida for seven years. At this time he was thirty-nine years of age and an enthusiastic supporter of Mathews' plan for the annexation of East Florida. While McIntosh was no military leader, he backed the Patriot cause with thousands of dollars, most of which eventually was a total loss to him.

John Hustoun McIntosh has often been mistakenly identified as his more famous cousin, General John McIntosh, who won military fame in the Revolutionary War. John Hustoun was a child of ten when that War ended.

organized a revolution in East Florida, and these revolutionists, or "Patriots" as they called themselves, had captured Fernandina and Amelia Island in March of 1812. These "revolutionized" and "independent" areas of Florida had been delivered to the United States, and the Patriot army, closely followed by Mathews and Colonel Smith's army detachment had proceeded on as far as Moosa Old Fort. As these forces had progressed from point to point, the Patriots took possession of the country, declared it independent, and delivered it to the care of Colonel Smith to hold for formal annexation to the United States. Only the steadfast refusal of the Spanish to surrender St. Augustine and the fear that the strong fort there could not be taken by assault, had prevented the capture of all the settled areas of East Florida.

George Mathews had been disappointed by the partial failure of his scheme, but an even greater blow was soon to befall him. To save his own face, President Madison repudiated the act of Mathews and dismissed him. But Madison was not ready to abandon his Florida project. Governor David Mitchell of Georgia had been appointed to Mathews' place, and the American troops continued to occupy East Florida "to the walls of St. Augustine." In spite of a declaration of war against Great Britain in June 1812, and the strenuous efforts of the administration, the United States Congress had refused to sanction the acquisition of Florida. Notwithstanding the refusal of Congress to adhere to his plan, Madison had allowed the American troops to remain in East Florida.

Thus it was that on September 11, 1812, a small, tired and hungry force of the United States Army was camped on Spanish territory near St. Augustine. On the following day a wagon train, under the protection of forty men, was to move west through the Twelve Mile Swamp to Picolata on the St. Johns. There the wagons were to be loaded with provisions and sent back to the American camp. Since the wagon train was to leave early

on the morning of the twelfth, those who wanted to write letters to officials, members of their family, or friends, wrote or completed their letters on September tenth. Only eight letters were posted on the following morning and these were written by five men. Of these Colonel Smith's letter was devoted to the problem of securing supplies for his camp, and Private Robert T. Brown's was only a brief note. Lieutenant James Ryan gave some information in his two letters; Captain Fielder Ridgeway wrote three individuals to reveal something of his personal affairs and the condition of the army detachment; and William Kinnear penned the longest and the most informative letter.

Although the wagon train departed on the twelfth, these letters never reached their destination. Late in the afternoon of that day the wagons and their protective convoy of forty men were attacked by a much larger band of Indian-led colored troops. The wagons and the eight letters fell as spoils to the attackers. These letters were taken to St. Augustine and eventually were added to the Spanish archives of Florida. When the United States acquired Florida in 1821, the Spanish East Florida Papers by the terms of the treaty of acquisition were to be delivered to the United States. This delivery was made and the East Florida Papers, which contain approximately 65,000 documents, are now in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress.²

The following letters were copied directly from the eight original captured letters which were written in September 1812.

2, The United States seized the East Florida Papers in October, 1821, to prevent their being sent to Cuba. For an excellent account of this seizure, see Irene A. Wright's, "The Odyssey of the Spanish Archives of Florida" in A. Curtis Wilgus (ed.), *Hispanic American Essays* (Chapel Hill, 1942).

Camp before St. Augustine
11th Sept. 1812

Sir: ³

I wish to be informed by the return of Capt. Williams, ⁴ whether you expect a supply of salt Provisions and a wagon or waggons to transport it soon. From the frequent depredations committed by the Indians there can be no longer any reliance placed on the Patriots for a supply of beef; indeed the Troops have been compelled to perform all the labour of butchering and bringing what has been furnished to camp. From the manner in which the Contractor has complied with his contract I am left to dread everything and hope for nothing, every movement thus far having been defeated by his defalcation. If you cannot supply the rations agreeably to the Contract I wish to be notified of it as soon as possible that I may appoint some person to purchase and supply on public account, we have been without spirits ⁵ for some time. The Contractor must furnish drivers to his teams.

I am respectfully Sir
Your Obt Servt
T. A. Smith
Lt. Col.
Riflemen

-
- 3, This letter was addressed to George Ruddle, who had general supervision of the contractors which supplied Colonel Thomas A. Smith's forces. Colonel Smith was a Virginian and the commander of the post at Point Petre near St. Mary's, Georgia, when the revolution began in East Florida. On July 6, 1812, he was promoted from lieutenant-colonel to colonel.
 - 4, Captain John Williams served in the Marine Corps and had previously been stationed on Cumberland Island. Because of the critical need for officers, he was temporarily attached to Colonel Smith's command and commanded the escort which protected the supply route from the St. Johns river to Smith's camp. In the attack on the supply train on September 12, Captain Williams was mortally wounded.
 - 5, Whiskey and other alcoholic drinks were believed essential for medicinal purposes as well as necessary for the well-being of the men. Drinking was almost the sole diversion of the officer and enlisted man in Florida. Without "spirits" Colonel Smith knew he could not keep up the morale of his men.

Camp before St. Augustine
11th Sept., 1812

Dear Ash ⁶
Sir

The *dons* ⁷ still quiet tho as we understand many threats.

We have a man who came into camp a few days ago, who deserted from the Matanzas about three months ago. he stated he went to the nation and was made prisoner by the Indians, who was carrying him to St. Augustine. Between this and Picolatti ⁸ he gave them the dodge and came into camp, he also afirmed that thare was about forty Indians on this side the St. Johns. that the houses at Picolatti was burnt and the Blockhouse knocked down to the ground. Colo Smith dispatched an express to Colo Newnan ⁹ who was at Fatios ¹⁰ on the St. Johns. he had but a few moments returned from Picolatti when the express arrived. it has this moment returned. the Indians about 25 in number did attact Picolatti, but was repulsed by our boys. the Corporal who commands thare says he could get to fire on them but seldom. that they got fire to the Skinn and Store houses before he could get to fire on them at all (which was both entirely consumed) he says he is certain he killed one of them (the corpl had five men).

Colo Newnan sets out this day or tomorrow for the nation with his detachment.

On the morning of the 9th a Mr. Armstrong of the patriots who had been employed for some time in driv-

6, This letter was addressed to John Ash of Savannah, Georgia, a friend of the writer, Lieutenant James Ryan, who was a Georgian.

7, The United States soldiers often referred to the Spanish as "Dons".

8, Picolata, one of the supply bases for the Army was on the St. Johns river, was almost due west from St. Augustine. The authors of these letters often misspelled Picolata.

9, Colonel Daniel Newnan, who was a native of North Carolina and a former United States army officer, was at this time commanding a detachment of Georgia volunteers which had been ordered to Florida by Governor Mitchell of Georgia.

10, Francisco Fatio operated a plantation on the St. Johns. Although he was not a "Patriot" his plantation house and buildings were used by the Patriots and the army.

ing cattle for us was shot and sculped about three miles from our camp.

the deserter mentioned above we consider a suspicious character, therefore take care of him.

I am Respectfully
Sir Yr Obt Servt
J. Ryan

Camp Before St. Augustine
11th Sept. 1812.

Dear Sir ¹¹

The Dons continues quite peaceable. The Indians continues their hostilities; on the morning of the 9th a Mr. Armstrong of the patriots who has been employed driving Cattle for sometime, was Shot and Sculped about three miles from camp. A few days ago the Indians made an attack on picolati about 25 in number, after burning the Skin and Store house, they was beat off with the loss of one of their fellows.

Colo Newnan sets out this day or tomorrow for the Nation.

Our camp continues very sickly Generally from forty five to sixty on the Sick Report of a day. Capt. Williams has lost two of his men since you left us. viz Sergt Porter and Beard I will thank you to examine the post office for Letters for me.

Please to write and give us the news if any. at least if you have Recovered your Letter of Appointment yet. Let me know how Massias ¹² comes out.

I am Respectfully
Sir Yr Obt Servt
J. Ryan

11, This letter was written to Lieutenant James Barton of the First Regiment of Dragoons, stationed at Point Petre.

12, New York born, Captain Abraham A. Massias of the riflemen was the military commander of Amelia Island. Because he had been accused of being sympathetic toward the pro-British and pro-Spanish groups in Fernandina, an investigation of his conduct was ordered by Colonel Smith. Massias, however, successfully defended himself and his conduct received the approval of Smith.

Camp before St. Augustine
East Florida
Sept 11th 1812

Dear Brother, ¹³

After being in this Country near two years and have frequently wrote you, I must Say I am not a little Surprised in not receiving but one letter from you or any other friend in that Quarter; that one dated in Augt. 1811 - in that time many changes and occurances may have taken place which I should be happy to here, let me know how the people stands the War with you, how is the sale of Produce, who is dead who is married and who is not, we have been encamped in this Province for about 6 months-about 21/2 miles North of the Fort of St. Augustine our station is about 90 miles South of the U. States, we suffer much with the warm climate and bad water and from the want of Supplies of provisions. We have a Small force, the Indians west of this province has become hostile agt us, has sculped Several of our men, (two of my comp'y) the Spaniards in our front and the Indians in our rear who has it in their Power to Cut off our Supplies and retreat to the U. States, our Supplies as to Hospital Supplies as well as provision are bad. we are now become sickly. our aim is at Fort St. Augustine; five times the force we have will not be able to take by storme, its the best and most Secure Fortified Fort I ever See if we take it we must hem them in and starve them out but even our present force will not do that, for the Spanish have the Indians to Sculp us when they can find us.

I have not time or room to give you a full sketch of all our movements at present in this province, I have had some little Domestic disputes, tried by a Genl Court Martial and acquitted with honour. ¹⁴ lately my health has been bad in this Climate, I have a wound in my right

13, Captain Fielder Ridgeway of Maryland addressed this letter to Thomas N. Ridgeway, Lower Marlboro, Colbert County, Maryland.

14, Ridgeway had a poor record in the army. Although he escaped punishment in this instance, he was found guilty by another court martial in 1814 and was dismissed from the service.

leg I am afraid will not get well in this Climate, the five years of the most of the men will be out in a few months then I shall return for the benefits of my health and that Shortly. I have a greater wish to return to Maryland once more than ever and nothing but bad health or dishonor will keep me from there-and that in a short time. I now Say pray write me on the receipt of this-let me Know if Miss Elizabeth Weems is married or Miss Mary Parran, and all the Young ladies my respects to Mr. and Mrs. Weels and Walter Doctr. Parrans family and all my friends etc etc.

I am Sir, very respectfully
Yr obt Servt
Fielder Ridgeway
Capt R. Rig

P. S. direct your letters
to me at Saint Marys Ga.
where I shall get them.

East Florida
Camp before St. Augustine

Dear Mother and Brother¹⁵

If your anxiety equals that of mine I anticipate your agreeable suprise on the receipt of this after a variety of incidents to tedious to enumerate Fortune has at length directed me to this place a place which previous to my knowledge of it could form no Idea it is in fact but a fit receptacle for savages and wild beasts the scenery of the country exhibiting nothing except a desart-pine barren and vast regions of untrackless swamps where nothing can be heard by the lonely traveller save the screeching of the owl or howling of the wolf his fears anticipating an attack from the more dreadful lurking Indian. yet this is the place of which we hold possession and for which we stand in daily fear of our lives. We lie encamped two miles from the strong fortress of St. Augustine in East Florida situated on a

15. This letter was addressed to "John Kinnear, Sheppards Town, Jefferson County, Virginia, to the care of James Brown".

point of land open to the sea the land upon which it is situated is entirely level as a plain and exceedingly open as far as any object is distinguishable upon its surface to the naked eye. The atmosphere is likewise coeval with the imperfections of the country pregnant with sickness and death. the small detachment of two Hundred men and Colonel Smith is scarcely sufficient to maintain its ground against a numerous enemy consisting chiefly of west india Blacks strangers to fear renders our situation extremely critical we have already experienced the loss of ten brave men murdered by the Indians and Negroes one of them a Mr. Maxwell charged with dispatches for Colonel Smith from the Blockhouse (where a number of our troops are stationed and where our provisions are stored) was way laid and dreadfully tortured and murdered having his nose ears and privities cut off scalped and otherwise barbarously used. two more of our men likewise charged with dispatches to Piccallatti a fort in our possession on the river St. Johns were served in the same manner. Five more of our men induced by the intreaties of some Minorcan women (who resided two miles from the fort) and who from a pretended fear of the Indians wished to be taken to the fort ventured down the river in an open boat to deliver them when upon approaching the beach where they stood received a volley of fire arms which proved fatal to them all three of them were scalped one missing supposed to have been drowned and one not scalped. but I will stop here for the present and proceed to inform you that doct McCormick 1st Surgeon in the United States army discovering in me talents sufficient for a second mate in the surgical capacity received me as such which I have faithfully performed ever since. We left Cumberland ¹⁶ 25th April 1812 and arrived in Amelia Island the 26th when after continuing there some time were ordered on here where we have been encamped two months in which place my time is fully occupied by

16, Cumberland Island, located off the Georgia coast just north of the mouth of the St. Marys river, was a temporary supply point for naval vessels and transports.

attending the sick of which there are many having 33 sicknesses on my charge in one day some of which are very dangerous and contagious the typhus fever being very dangerous having lost numbers of our men very suddenly by the same but to proceed to my former narrative I stop to inform you that we experienced a very rough tempestuous passage from Norfolk to Cumberland in so much that we were in danger of our lives I have nothing more to Communicate at present but, must beg you to remember me to all enquiring friends and I earnestly conjure you to write me as quick as possible as I ardently desire to here from you all When you direct your letter lett the superscription be directed to Capt. John Williams St. Marys' State of Georgia If ever I should live I shall come home by way of N. Carolina from your silence I should suppose you had not received my letter I wrote a letter likewise to my uncle John and I should be very much satisfied if you would inform me whether he received it or not.

No more at present from

Your affectionate
an Dutifull Son,
Wm Kinnear¹⁷

Camp before St. Augustine
East Florida
Sept. 11th 1812

Dear Sir,¹⁸

Hearewith you will find enclosed a letter to my brother of some importance to me, I enclose this letter to you because I think you will be carefull in putting it in the Post office yourself and not trust to others, any letters that may be in the office for me be please to send them. I should say more to you but Ryan wrote you lengthy. My respects to Capt Miller and family

¹⁷, The captors of these letters wrote "Till Death" immediately after Kinnear's signature.

¹⁸, This letter was addressed to Lieutenant James Barton at Point Petre.

Write me respecting my Boy ¹⁹ Massias wrote me he has been very sick Ask Capt M. if he should be sick if he will tooke care of him he shall be paid. dont fail to write me.

I am Sir Respectfully
Yr obt Servt
F. Ridgeway

Camp before St. Augustine
August 11th 1812

Sergt John A. Tally, ²⁰

I have not had one pound of butter for many days (I am sick) I have request Lieut Stallings and Mr. Ruddle to procure me some I suppose its Scarce and they have not taken the pains that I hope you will to procure me 4, 5 or 10 pounds Also chickings, ducks, I prefer the Mascovey Duck if they can be had. I will be glad if you can Send me a Small Roast Pigg if you cannot procure any of those things by the return of the Carts, you can Speak for them and send the next time, give them to Scroggins or any one of the men who may drive the Carts, as they will water feed and keep them from dying. I write this to you because I think you will do your best to procure them for me. If your official duties should prevent your attention to this-Show this to Sergt T. Davis and ask him to procure those articles for me I think he will take the Same pains to get them for me he knows I would do the Same for him. between you bouth I think you may get those articles.

Tell poor Thomas my feet is in such a state I cannot walk there at present, name to him any thing I can

19, Ridgeway's boy was a slave whom he had acquired and hoped to train for use as a personal servant. Captain John Miller of Maryland was in command of the skeleton force at Point Petre.

20, Sergeant John A. Tally, one of Ridgeway's men, was stationed at Fort Stallings, a blockhouse at Davis' Creek on the St. Johns. This post was under the command of Lieutenant Elias Stallings, a Georgian, who built the blockhouse.

do for him, shall be done, tell Bonds ²¹ his case shall be attended too.

Yr &
Fielder Ridgeway
Capt Rifle Regt

Tell Sergt. Davis
and your
Self to use your
own money and it shall
be returned directly. I
have no change neither
can I get a bill changed here.

Camp Before Augustine
Sept 11: 1812

Sir ²²

After my best complements I wish to inform you that I am well hoping these lines may find you and your lady in good health. I received your letter by Segt Kagsby and have sent you the articles that you Requested by Scroggan I have nothing important to inform you so remain very Respectfully your friend

Robert T. Brown

21, Thomas and Bonds were men of Ridgeway's command: Thomas was ill and Bonds had evidently broken some military law.

22, This letter was addressed to William C. Terrill, "Davis Creak or by Scroggan". Scroggan or Scroggins, as Ridgeway wrote in the preceding letter, either drove a supply wagon or was a courier.