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Book Review: Florida Fiasco

Kathryn Abbey Hanna

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BOOK REVIEWS

Florida Fiasco: by Rembert W. Patrick. University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1954: (pp. x, 359, notes, bibliography, index, no maps or illustrations, \$5.)

Although the Fiasco took place in Florida, specifically East Florida, and along the Georgia-Florida boundary, its overtones possessed a wider radius. They were heard throughout the south and west of the United States, in Washington, new capitol of a new republic, and in London and Madrid. The reason for this lay in the fact that the Florida Fiasco attempted to use European turbulence and Spanish weakness, occasioned by the Napoleonic wars, to detach Florida from Spain and tuck it neatly into the American Union. The intrigue enjoyed singular freedom from ethics, as the author relentlessly points out, but only a few voices of protest arose, voices which might have stilled before brighter prospects of success.

That Florida would inevitably pass under the flag of the United States was a general conviction of Americans after their independence from Great Britain. The how and when of such an occurrence was less clearly foreseen, but the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 opened the path. Efforts to include Florida in the Purchase, to buy it outright, to acquire West Florida by insurrection and to cajole Governor Folch to cede his province have already been told but the author reviews them, pointing out their bearing on the East Florida situation.

The Fiasco in East Florida stemmed from January 1811 when General George Mathews and John McKee were sent to the border to fish in troubled waters and catch both the Florida provinces if possible. Governor Folch at Pensacola resisted the pressure and their mission in this direction terminated. Before the demise Mathews moved to the more fertile area along the St. Marys where, acting on instructions both written and oral from President Madison, he sounded out

settlers on Georgia and Florida soil concerning the feasibility of insurrection.

During the summer of 1811, General Mathews and his fellow conspirators spelled out the plan to revolutionize the region and create a local authority "willing to cede the province to the United States. . . . they never contemplated an independent republic or state of East Florida. From the inception of their plans the revolutionary government of Florida was to be a creature of the moment. Its only purpose was to transfer title from Spain to the United States." (p. 57) Leader of this scheme was John Houstoun McIntosh, owner of Refuge Plantation in Georgia and the Florida lands of John McQueen. Although he "resided mostly in Georgia" he had sworn allegiance to Spain and was considered a colonial subject. McIntosh became "Commissioner" of the Patriot revolt and later "Director" of the "Territory of East Florida".

Mathews reported regularly to James Monroe, Secretary of State, and also informed Senator William H. Crawford of Georgia concerning the details of his plot. Replies from the Madison Administration were noticeably scarce but the confidence of the General remained unshaken. He continued to accept volunteers and to solicit aid from the State of Georgia and United States forces in the vicinity. Despite the refusal of Major John Laval, commanding at Point Petre, to lend a portion of his troops, the Patriots declared their independence on March 13, 1812.

To attempt a review of the failures of the following three years would dim the curiosity of the reader in this book. Suffice it to state that the East Florida intrigue was caught up in the larger issue of war with Great Britain (1812-14) which Madison, pushed by the "War Hawks", as the aggressive party was called, promoted to further land expansion to the north and south of the United States. General Mathews's activities were repudiated as part of these manipulations and he died

brokenhearted and outraged. His successors were kept in Florida in the hope that something would turn up to overcome two rebuffs by the United States Senate, and enable the conquest to get started with official approval. Instructions to those in command were vague and devious. When the going became especially rough, the Madison Administration retreated into silence, which if it was not golden was certainly handy. At length, April 19, 1814, the revolution was turned down. This discussion of political machination is one of the most interesting and valuable portions of the book. The story is sordid but the evidence irrefutable. By their own words the authors of the turmoil condemn themselves.

Out of this intrigue emerged the gradual desolation of northern Florida. Property was ruined, lives lost, Indians incited to the warpath. Law was reduced to a shadow and violence rode the wind. The state of Georgia seriously considered making war on Spain by herself if the United States failed to take a hand. When Napoleon was defeated in Europe, Great Britain sent agents to tamper with the Seminole Indians, procedures from which the Spanish held aloof, although the anxiety thus caused the Georgians could not have been unwelcome. Shortly after the sorry episode drew to a close, Florida became part of the United States "from a negotiated treaty and not from trickery and force".

The author has done a thorough, careful piece of research. His writing is well documented and his bibliography ought to satisfy the most exacting. It will be hard to find more to say about the Fiasco in Florida. A regrettable fact is the absence of maps. These are not necessary for the political discussions but while raiding Indian villages and plunging along swampy trails, a good map would be helpful.

KATHRYN ABBEY HANNA