

1955

Florida in 1643, As Seen by its Governor

Charles W. Arnade



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Arnade, Charles W. (1955) "Florida in 1643, As Seen by its Governor," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 34 : No. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol34/iss2/7>

FLORIDA IN 1643
AS SEEN BY ITS GOVERNOR
Introduction and Translation
by CHARLES W. ARNADE

Throughout much of the Spanish era Florida was a poor colony and a recurrent headache for Spain. To be stationed or live in this land was to be far from any civilization. For example: on August 29, 1644, Governor Damian de Vega Castro y Pardo wrote the King that for eight long years no subsidy or financial help [situado] ¹ had reached the province, and that for more than twenty months not a bit of food had entered through Saint Augustine. Vega warned the King that the city would soon perish of starvation if aid was not forthcoming. ²

More than a year earlier the same governor had dispatched a pleading letter to the Crown, which is representative of many similar letters in the Spanish Archives written by other governors and administrators from Florida. It portrays in accurate summary the hardships in Florida's history under the Spanish banner. The letter is quite indicative and typical; it is not written by one of the great governors such as Menendez Marques, Mendez de Canco Marques Cabrera, or Zuniga y Cerda. Little is known about Vega Castro y Pardo. He was an average faithful servant of the Spanish Crown with long tenure. His letter of July 9, 1643 is unpolished, undiplomatic, but frank and candid.

Not many Florida documents of the first years of the 1640's are available, for these were sparse years in the records. This might well have been a golden age of Spanish Florida. The initial struggle for successful beachheads had passed; the proposed dismantling of Saint Augustine had been defeated; the effects of the great Guale revolt had faded; foreign intrusion

1. For *situado* see Chatelain, *The Defenses of Spanish Florida* (1941) 21-24.

2. Archivo General de Indias; 54-5-9: 10, 6 folios.

was at a low ebb; the impact of Drake's raid was past; English aggression from sea and land was yet to come; and the region of Apalache was becoming a great new missionary frontier. This letter by Governor Vega was written during this era of peace and calm, but what did it tell!

The stark document shows the eternal problems of Florida: continuous shipwrecks in the Bahama Channel; the impossibility of receiving the subsidy assigned to the province, the very life-blood of Florida; the long delays in getting supplies and consequently the lack of foodstuffs which became aggravated when there were failures of crops in the few cultivated patches. And there was the eternal conflict between the laity and religious authorities which exasperated practically all governors. It portrays the beginning of the boom in the lands of Apalache and the immediate insistence of the administration to tax severely whenever progress was in sight.

Even in this age, Saint Augustine, the heart of Spanish Florida, was starving. Certainly it was a wretched colony, as so many governors called it. The scrivener at the Council of Indies summarized [folio 1] "The Governor represents the wretched conditions [Saint Augustine], lacking aid and subsidy for several years, but he also says that the religious state of the province has improved."

Governor Damian de Vega Castro y Pardo's letter reads: ³

[Saint Augustine]

Sir, the twenty-second of September of last year [1642] I was informed that a boat from New Spain, sent by Viceroy

3. A.G.I., 54-5-9:105 (4 folios). The above letter was translated from a photostat at the University of Florida, of the original document in *Archivo General de Indias* (Seville). The collection of these photostats was described in the last issue of this *Quarterly* (xxxiv, pp. 36-50). A microfilm copy of a calendar of the entire collection (more than 7,000 documents) may be obtained by any library from the Library of Congress, where the calendar was compiled and filmed. The collection itself is available to scholars at the University of Florida Library.

Don Juan de Palafox y Mendoca, with sealed envelopes for Your Majesty, after having arrived safely in Havana and then entered the Channel [of Bahama] was overtaken by a severe storm which unmasted and unriggered it. [The boat] ran aground at the beach and sandbank of San Pedro Atuluteca in this Province. Captain Antonio de Orueta, who was its commander, came to report this accident to me. He solicited help in order to endeavor the freeing of the boat from there. I gave it to him although at this time we are most needy and everything is lacking. Never has the *presidio* witnessed such [conditions]. Only with the help of God this ship left soon, although it was a difficult job, as it was the first one of those which had run aground on this coast to depart.

Considering all the attention that one could give this commission it was [nearly] impossible because there was absolutely nothing in the royal deposits that would have been helpful for this duty (*misterio*) [*sic* for *ministerio*]. The ship was brought to this port on October 17, [1642] and continued its journey on January 10, [1643], equipped with all necessities. But it was necessary to take away from the poor soldiers of this *presidio* their sparse belongings for their maintenance.

[Folio 3] Sir, not only this happened but besides there is the lack of the subsidy (*situado*) for so many years. Besides, many other tasks had to be undertaken this and last year due to the sterile crops of corn. And then there is the everlasting lack of hope of aid from Mexico [referring to the *situado*]. I do not know if this is because the Viceroy has not dispatched the commissioners in charge of collecting the overdue subsidy, as Your Majesty has ordered in your two royal cédulas, or because the boats that carry [the *situado*] have been detained by the commander of the fleet (*flota*). I can not explain this.

Up to this date we are all perishing. It has been necessary, as I have said on other occasions, to bring down the flag [which means to give furlough to the troop] and let the soldiers go for

many days in order that they might search for roots never used to obtain nourishment. Because of this many have become sick and I fear a terrible consequence. Out of such an omen one really cannot expect anything else. To fight, Sir, and to die is nothing new [for us] but to lack completely nourishment for more than eight months is something no one would tolerate in any place of the world. This is the wretched state in which this [place] is because of the above mentioned [reasons]. I have done my utmost and now I find myself like this, without forces (due to the lack of inhabitants), or nourishment, after forty-three years of service to Your Majesty. And there are continuous murmurs among the garrison. [Therefore] if the enemy would intend an invasion I would be intensely worried.

For long time the natives of this province have lacked the support (*socorro*) which Your Majesty orders to give them. [Because of this] their minds are very languid. Seeing the little support they get they depart for the forest to join the infidels, ignoring their duties. I am unable to remedy this because this land is very spacious. This is so serious that the missionaries (*religiosos*), not showing much consideration and attention for my administration, kill me with petitions. They tell me they will close their missions (*conventos*), if they do not receive what Your Majesty has ordered, and they will look for their support in the *Doctrinas* [*sic* for *Doctrinas*, parishes]. Really it is the poor infantry that suffers the most.

I recommend all this strongly since if in a few days no help arrives, I fear great injury. Such a great delay is not due to negligence on my part. [Folio 4] I have done in every way all that was humanly possible. But the remission has been greatly [word missing, delayed?]. For more than one year no aid has arrived. I repeat that I do not know if this is due to the lack of collecting [the subsidy] or because of certain obstacles to letting the ships depart [for Saint Augustine], as Your Majesty has informed me you had ordered that these impediments be

removed. I ask Your Majesty to please order again speedily to remedy this at the present as well as in the future. If God does not help us that some aid might come from New Spain we are forced to perish.

The conversion, Sir, of the province of Apalache, thanks God, is going ahead fast. Commerce in those parts [Apalache] has begun with Havana under the pretext of sending aid to the missionaries stationed there. But really the ships carry away the produce of those lands without any accounting or supervision. Therefore I decided to place persons there [in the region of Apalache] to stop such illicit trade and place this province under Your Majesty and under the jurisdiction of this government [of Saint Augustine]. This is so that they might pay the royal duties that belong to Your Majesty and watch what comes in and goes out and also to know what kind of people come in these ships. If they are not trustworthy they might do damage. [It is necessary] to be familiar with such important commerce.

May God give Your Majesty many happy days as all Christianity desires.

Saint Augustine of Florida on July 9, 1643

Damian de Vega Castro y Pardo
(rubric)