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A FRENCH DOCUMENT RELATING TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FRENCH COLONY IN FLORIDA AT THE HANDS OF THE SPANISH, 1565

*translated and edited*  
by A. E. HAMMOND

ONE OF THE BLOODIEST and most publicized chapters in the early history of Florida was written by Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles, intrepid and unscrupulous agent of Philip II of Spain. On three occasions in the months of September and October, 1565, this Spanish gentleman, fired with true inquisitorial fervor, ordered and supervised the systematic slaughter of remnants of the third French expedition to the Florida coast, thus ending the French attempt to colonize this disputed territory. Neither the events leading up to the massacres nor the details of the savage butchery requires retelling here. They are the subjects of numerous narratives, both secondary and primary. A brief word on the European reaction to these events is essential, however.

The recorded reactions in Spain were almost uniformly expressions of satisfaction. Spanish chroniclers, some of whom doubtless witnessed the affairs, spared no word of praise for the *adelantado* who in their opinion had acted justly, even generously, by dispatching his victims with the sword when he might quite properly have burned them alive. One elated writer exclaimed, "He killed them, I am convinced, more from divine inspiration than from any prompting of human intelligence." <sup>1</sup> Then as the full details of the massacres were gradually made known in Madrid during the early months of 1566, joy was uncontained. If we may rely on the report of M. de Fourquevaux, French ambassador in Madrid, to his sovereign, Charles IX, the Spanish court evinced much more happiness over the Florida success than it would have shown for a victory over the Turks. <sup>2</sup>

1. Bartolome Barrientos, "Vida y hechos de Pero Menendez de Auiles, Cauallero de la Hordem de Sanetiago, Adalentado de la Florida," in Genaro Garcia, *Dos Antiguas Relaciones de la Florida* (Mexico [City], 1902), p. 72.
2. Ramond de Becarrie de Pavre Fourquevaux, *Depeches de M. de Fourquevaux, ambassadeur de roi Charles IX en Espagne, 1565-1572* (Publiees par M. l'abbe Douais, Paris, 1896-1904 T. I et III [Publie par la Societe d'histoire Diplomatique] I, 56.

Philip II, who had authorized the extermination of the predominantly Protestant expedition, completely exculpated Menendez, even troubling himself to write in the margin of a dispatch received in St. Augustine, "Tell him [Menendez], that with regard to those he has killed, it is fine; as for those he has spared, that they should be sent to the galleys."<sup>3</sup> Upon his return to Spain in July, 1567, Menendez was accorded the welcome of a national as well as a Christian hero.

In France the reaction was varied. Against the background of religious conflict-France was at the time resting uneasily between its first and second religious wars-public opinion appeared to regard the French humiliation as a factional rather than a national matter. Some Catholics were openly delighted that the hated Admiral Coligny had been thwarted in his colonial designs, while others were simply pleased that "Menendez had accomplished in a small way what the Guises and their other fanatical leaders would like to achieve throughout France."<sup>4</sup>

Catherine de Medicis was enraged, perhaps as much for personal reasons (she had always found her son-in-law, Philip II, distasteful) as for any moral principle involved. She dared not proceed beyond the normal recourse to diplomatic protest and appeal,<sup>5</sup> however, and in her subsequent encounter with Philip's ambassador, Don Frances d'Alava, she found herself more often than not trying to defend the French position when she might well have been demanding reparations. Charles IX was even less vigorous in pressing the French claims. Thus it was only Protestant areas that registered any genuine concern.

The document translated and edited below typifies the Protestant protest concerning the Florida tragedy. Its form is that of an open letter to the French king, Charles IX, presumably prepared by a group of widows, orphans, relatives and friends of the French victims of Menendez. In all probability, however, it was prepared by a clever and well-informed person, motivated by religious and political considerations. At any rate, it was printed

3. Francis Parkman, *Pioneers of France in the New World* (Boston, 1865), p. 138.

4. Ch.-Andre Julien, *Les Voyages de Decouverte et les Premiers Etablissements* ([Colonies et Empires III: Histoire de l'Expansion et de la Colonisation Francaises], Paris, 1948), p. 251.

5. Paul Gaffarel, *Histoire de la Florida Francaise* (Paris, 1875), pp. 477-481; A. W. Whitehead, *Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France* (London, 1904), p. 331.

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and distributed at court and elsewhere. Although the letter eloquently drew the attention of Charles to the sad fate of the massacred French and of their survivors, and although it attempted to arouse the wounded pride of the king, there is no indication that it was greeted with anything more than a casual indifference.

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Request <sup>6</sup> to the King, made in the form of a complaint, by the widows, little orphans, friends and blood and marriage relations of those that have been cruelly invaded by the Spaniards, in Antarctic France, <sup>7</sup> which goes by the name of Florida.

To the King.

Sire, there is an endless number of poor and miserable people, widows and orphans, all your subjects and vassals, who tearfully throw themselves at your majesty's feet, with the entire obedience and natural submission which they owe you and bring to your excellency and highness a pitiful tale of their most just complaints and grievances: or rather the sad spectacle and visible image of their fathers, husbands, children, brothers, nephews, cousins and relations by marriage, up to some eight or nine hundred, men, women and children alike, slaughtered and cut to pieces practically to the last in this land of Florida, by Captain Petremlande <sup>8</sup> and his Spanish soldiers. The more as this outrage is already odious enough and all too villainous by itself, and as the blood of your poor subjects, thus treacherously shed, cries to God

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6. The anonymous author of this letter appears to have produced numerous copies of it and to have distributed it for whatever propaganda effect it might have. It is preserved in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. In the meantime, several editions have appeared in print, one of the earliest being that of Theodor de Bry, who produced it simultaneously in German and Latin in 1591 appended to the minor works of J. Lemoyne. (Theodor de Bry, *America* [Part II, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1591]). It is also included in L. Cimber et F. Danjou, *Archives Curieuses de l'Histoire de France* (Paris, 1834-40, 27 vols.), VI, 232-237. In preparing this translation I have relied on the editions of Paul Gaffarel, *op. cit.*, pp. 477-81, and Suzanne Lussagnet (ed.), *Les Francais en Amerique Pendant la Deuxieme Moitie du XVIe Siecle* (Paris, 1958), pp. 234-9.
  7. This term has been erroneously employed. It was earlier used by Andre Thevet, *Les Singularitez de la France Antartique autre nommee Amerique* (Paris, 1558, to designate the parts of Brazil under French control. See Lussagnet, *op. cit.*, p. 201, n. 2.
  8. Pedro Menendez.

for vengeance. It behoves your majesty, Sire, to consider, if you please, that he has made you sovereign King and granted you the obedience of so many people to govern them with good laws and to uphold and defend them. Therefore the poor supplicants have no other recourse, after God, but to implore your aid and protection and most humbly entreat your majesty to succour, raise and sustain them: at the very time when the wound of their anguish is still bleeding. In short, to assist them with the same gentleness and consolation, as the embrace of a father to his own children, or the master's good face to his loving and faithful servants: and, in fact, their complaints are not less worthy of compassion and pity than the cruelty of the Spaniard Petre-lande is contrary to all war practices, and to all laws and decrees that have been received either from God or from men. And to explain it to you in full, your majesty, Sire, knows well that your aforesaid subjects were sent by you in this land of Florida, under your authority and by your express command, and by virtue of your letters patent, in the form of commission and leave, carried by Jean Ribaud: <sup>9</sup> the aforesaid vessels have arrived in the aforesaid place in the land of Florida, were furiously invaded by five Spanish boats, the largest of which was eight hundred tons, the second two hundred tons and the others average tonnage. The people on board these vessels took first of all the fort which had been built in your name by the French: and the men women and children found inside the aforesaid fort were murdered and maimed by the aforesaid Spaniards without mercy. On the contrary, they displayed the pierced bodies of the little children held on the point of their pikes, <sup>10</sup> and secondly, they killed the aforesaid Captain Jean Ribaud, and all his company of seven to eight hundred men, in spite of the assurance and pledge they had given to spare their lives, having bound their hands and arms behind their backs, calling your subjects wicked, scoundrels, knaves,

9. A more common spelling, in French documents, is Ribault.

10. An obvious exaggeration. There exists no reliable eye-witness account of this event by any Frenchman, Le Challeux, Laudonniere and Le Moyne having fled Ft. Caroline before the massacre. Spanish accounts specifically point out that Menendez had ordered all children under the age of fifteen and all women, regardless of religious declaration to be spared. See the account by Gonzalo Solis de Meras in Eugenio Ruidiaz E. Caravia, *La Florida, su Conquista y Colonizacion por Pedro Menendez de Aviles* (Madrid, 1893-4, 2 vols.), I, 87, 97, *et passim*.

and French thieves, and all this in the presence, and under the eyes, of the aforesaid Ribaud who, through horror of the aforesaid massacre, wanted to come near the aforesaid Petremelande to place himself under his protection, and nevertheless, the said Petremelande repelled him and had him killed instantly by one of his soldiers, who struck him a blow through the body with his dagger from behind, from which blow the aforesaid Ribaud fell to the ground, and, once fallen, the aforesaid soldier struck him another blow through the body from in front, so that the aforesaid Ribaud remained dead on the spot, and, which done, the aforesaid soldier cut off his head, shaved his beard and split the head of the aforesaid Ribaud in four quarters, which were stuck on top of four pikes in the centre of the place where the other French people had died. Finally, the aforesaid Spanish captain sent a letter to the King of Spain, and enclosed in it the hairs of the beard of the aforesaid Captain Jean Ribaud, in such a way that the aforesaid Spanish Captain Petremelande and his men, insulting with such brazen acts the servants of so powerful and renowned a King, want to make it plain that they set very little store by honour, and fear even less the meeting of a mighty master. Your majesty, besides, knows that, to complete the triumph of wickedness and increase the outrage of such an execrable crime: even after death fun was made of, and mockery bandied at, the head and the beard of him who was no less a person than your lieutenant-general, and the paper of a letter was used as a dish to make a gift of the hair of his beard. It is, however, incredible that there should be a christian, or even pagan, King or prince ready to own the aforesaid Petremelande after such a cruel and barbarous deed, surpassing the rage and fury of Lions and Tigers, and the more execrable as it was performed in a period of complete peace, truces and a friendly meeting arranged, while there was no war declared by you on any other nation or principality whatsoever, and nevertheless the Spaniards have set their hands upon places and people: which in no way belong to other than your Sceptre and crown: unless Petremelande chose to say that the strength of a foreigner can prevail against the King, to usurp what is yours, or to appropriate the power to command in your stead, or to give himself the authority of the letters and to take upon himself to punish and correct those that God has entrusted to you as subjects, with such a

treasured wealth of submission, obedience and natural affection towards you, that they would rather die a thousand deaths, than deign to entertain the idea of changing masters, or voluntarily submitting to the yoke of another principality. If, therefore, Petremelande is disowned, his master has only to say that he is having, or will let you have, justice done, with such satisfaction and reparation as you are entitled to: in addition, forsaking and handing over to you the jurisdiction and possession of this land of Florida, which has long been acquired, occupied and held by your subjects in your name and under the title and authority of your Sceptre and crown, taking also into consideration that your aforesaid subjects have not been deported or relegated there as fugitives or deportees, but sent as ambassadors, officers and ministers of your majesty, and as, such recognized and owned by your letters patent commissioning the aforesaid Ribaud, held and acclaimed to act in these matters in the same capacity as you yourself, and no matter how atrocious such an indignity is by itself, yet it is made worse when left unpunished, and the dishonour is increased and the scandal carried further when the murders, violators of public faith, have their malice fed and sustained with impunity and can freely exercise it. Which your mansuetude, Sire, never allowing, will take up the quarrel of your poor subjects, thus unjustly outraged to the detriment of all laws, and with such great cruelty that it seems to be in order to dissolve the bonds of all human society, and break the divine order so thoroughly that the aforesaid Petremelande would, through his cunning, have all occasions for modesty lost, when patience is tried to the extreme.

The Carthaginians and African peoples have been strongly blamed for breaking their pledges in spite of all assurances given whenever this was advantageous to them. The Romans so faithfully observed theirs that they would keep them even to their enemies. Would to God that the same tribute could be paid today to Petremelande and his fellow-countrymen, who have made so light of their promises and assurances and hypocritical solemn oaths impiously calling upon the name of God as though to make him a party to their treacherous disloyalty. If at times God uses the wicked ones, and allows them rope to give the full measure of their wickedness, as he did the Cananeans, he is not, however, subject to the strength of men, and, being stronger than them

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all, he fortifies the weaker and keeps us ceaselessly alive to our duty, that the thought of his gentleness and mercy does not make us forget the rigour of his justice and vengeance. So much so that, as in the same act, the crime of men is revealed, and the justice of God made manifest, so the warning befits them, that, it is said, God works in the hearts of the wicked as he pleases, yet pays each of them back according to their demerits.

To the King again.

Sire, you have heard what lamentations and regrets, what tears, or rather what dying sighs accompany the sad memory of our misery and misfortune, the pitiful account of Petremelande's audacious and scandalous enterprise, the marks of his injustice and tyranny condemned by all laws: the tokens and memorials of his infidelity and treason, the intolerable contempt he showed for your authority and grandeur: in short, the murders and cruelties perpetrated against your servants and subjects, all or most of them virtuous and brave captains, men of honour and good repute, who would have acted as a living rampart around your majesty, and as frontiers to hold back all the enemies of your state. By which if there were ever humanity, compassion and mercy on record, the supplicants hope that our God in his goodness will so fill your heart with these, that your majesty will let himself be touched by our just grievances and pitiful complaints, will espouse our cause to see justice done, and, to that end, will extend to us his favour and protection, which will be a pious work, worthy of your calling, and a manifestation of charity towards your poor subjects and faithful servants, with a view to assuaging the bitterness of their afflictions and bearing witness to their innocence to the whole of Christendom, which will make you beloved and hailed by all nations, not only as a King, but also as a father to your people.