

1962

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Recommended Citation

Warren, Harris G. (1962) "Textbook Writers and the Florida "Purchase" Myth," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 41 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol41/iss4/3>

TEXTBOOK WRITERS AND THE FLORIDA "PURCHASE" MYTH

by HARRIS G. WARREN

THAT TEACHERS AND writers of history must strive for accuracy is a proposition hardly open to debate. Our textbook writers labor under an especially heavy charge to keep us abreast of research which corrects misinterpretations and presents newly discovered facts. They must not call true those myths or fables which once masqueraded as sober fact. No history professor would be likely to adopt a text which presented the cherry tree myth as a true incident in Washington's life. Yet many textbooks contain explanations which do not conform with the published results of careful research. A case in point is the failure of many writers to be accurate in their discussion of the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819.

The facts in the acquisition of Florida are presented clearly by Philip Coolidge Brooks in his *Diplomacy and the Borderlands -the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939). This splendid monograph should be required reading for all writers of textbooks in American history, and for all teachers who use them, until the myth of the Florida "purchase" has been buried in the rubbish with the parson's silly little cherry tree.

The facts are, briefly, as follows. Many American officials insisted that the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 included both West Florida and at least part of a vaguely defined Texas. By 1813, the United States had seized West Florida as far as the Perdido River. Spanish authority in the rest of Florida was only nominal, and many American officials took for granted that the acquisition of Florida east of the Perdido was inevitable. The Jackson invasion emphasized the weakness of Spanish control, and the Spaniards certainly knew that they could not, without European aid, retain title to the Floridas.

American citizens had accumulated a large number of claims for damages against Spain. These claims varied widely in origin. Some had accumulated before the Convention of 1802; others originated in "unlawful seizures at Sea, and in the ports and ter-

ritories of Spain or the Spanish Colonies." Some were on account of "Prizes made by French Privateers, and condemned by French Consuls, within the Territory and Jurisdiction of Spain." There were indemnities claimed "on account of the suspension of the right of Deposit at New-Orleans in 1802," and there were still others, not specified in the Adams-Onis Treaty as were these. Spain, too, had legitimate claims which a stronger government might have pushed to advantage. Most of these claims Spain renounced without assuming any obligation to compensate her own citizens, but there were claims of Spanish citizens and officers in Florida which the United States promised to pay.

The boundary between the United States and New Spain had to be negotiated because the France-Spanish boundary had never been delineated. Moreover, Spain also had claims to the Oregon country which conflicted with those of the United States, Great Britain, and Russia.

These, then, are the three principal matters involved in the Adams-Onis negotiations: Florida, the western boundary, and the damage claims. Florida and the western boundary were linked in the negotiations, not Florida and the claims. There is one exception to this statement. Before Adams took over the negotiations, Monroe reported that Onis had "intimated that his Government . . . might be willing to cede its claim to territory on the eastern side of the Mississippi, in satisfaction of claims, and in exchange for territory on the western side."¹ This, apparently, is the basis for Fuller's statement that "The United States received the Floridas in return for an agreement to settle the disputed claims of certain of her citizens against Spain to an amount not more than \$5,000,000 . . ." ² But, as Brooks demonstrates, in the Adams-Onis negotiations the claims were not linked with the cession of territories. There was, rather, a mutual renunciation of claims except for the obligation undertaken by the United States in Article IX.

Even so, both Monroe and Adams sought the territory east of the Mississippi in exchange for a manufactured claim to territory west of the Mississippi. In 1816 and 1817, Monroe "tried

1. James Monroe to George W. Erving, March 11, 1816, *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, 6 vols. (Washington, 1832-1859), IV, 433.

2. Herbert Bruce Fuller, *The Purchase of Florida - Its History and Diplomacy* (Cleveland, 1906), 307.

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to persuade Onís to accept the Colorado River of Texas as the boundary line, the United States thereby offering to yield the region between that and the Rio Grande *in exchange*, so it was stated, *for all Spanish lands east of the Mississippi.*"³ On June 10 and 11, 1817, the Spanish Consejo de Estado considered a plan to *exchange* the Floridas "for all the territory west of the Mississippi."⁴ This offer was made to our minister in Spain who rejected it. The Spanish government then authorized Luis de Onís, its minister in Washington, to make a similar offer.⁵ Onís on December 18, 1817, informed Adams that the King had decided to cede the Floridas. Brooks summarizes the whole thing clearly and accurately: ". . . the United States received the almost abandoned Floridas and the valid Spanish claim to Oregon *in exchange for her own debatable claim to Texas.*"⁶

Then what about the damages claims? "The third dispute involved one of the most common misinterpretations which historians have made of the treaty. *There was no 'purchase' of the Floridas.* The claims discussion, . . . was kept quite separate during the whole course of the negotiations from that on the boundary. Adams always spoke of sacrifices in other sections of the frontier, particularly in Texas and the Northwest, as the price of the Floridas, and never mentioned the claims assumption in that connection."⁷ The fact is, of course, that in settling the claims dispute, the United States absolved Spain from liability for damages claimed by American citizens to the date of the treaty. The \$5,000,000 mentioned in Article XI was simply a limitation on the amount that the United States would itself pay to its own citizens and was included against Spanish wishes.

It would be difficult, and, one hopes, impossible to find any treaty in our history that has been so badly mangled by some textbook writers. The facts are clear. The United States did not buy Florida; the United States did not exchange the damages claims for Florida. The United States did exchange a manufactured territorial claim to Texas for Florida and the Spanish claim to Oregon. Getting such a good bargain in this, and know-

3. Philip Coolidge Brooks, *Diplomacy and the Borderlands-the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819* (Berkeley, 1939), 77. Italics mine.

4. *Ibid.*, 81.

5. *Ibid.*, 85.

6. *Ibid.*, 194. Italics mine.

7. *Ibid.*, 162. Italics mine.

ing that the damages claims could never be collected anyway, the United States assumed a limited liability for the monetary claims of its citizens against Spain, and promised to pay for damages caused by its operations in Florida. Yet, despite the fact that Brooks long ago conclusively proved these points, some historians prefer to perpetuate the Florida "purchase" nonsense and to make deplorably inaccurate statements about the nature of the monetary claims.

Article XI of the treaty provided that the President would appoint a commission of three United States citizens to consider the damages claims. This commission "reported on June 8, 1824, after having considered eighteen hundred claims for a wide variety of damages to United States citizens, chiefly those incurred in maritime shipping, and many resulting from the blockade of the South American coast by the Spanish royalists. . . . The commission finally adjudicated all the claims at a total of \$5,454,545.13 . . ." but each award was reduced by $8\frac{1}{3}\%$ to bring the total down to \$5,000,000.⁸ Our text and encyclopedia authors almost invariably ignore another group of claims mentioned in Article IX. These were claims of Spanish citizens and officers for damage done "by the late operations of the American Army in Florida." To satisfy these claims, the United States paid \$1,024,741.44.⁹

A sampling of the old masters reveals practically all of the misinterpretations repeated by our contemporaries. Albert Bushnell Hart asserted: "East Florida was ceded for a payment of about \$5,000,000, and at the same time the western boundary of Louisiana was settled."¹⁰ The Beards, too, were off the track: "In exchange the United States agreed to pay five million dollars to its own citizens, discharging claims for damages to American commerce committed by Spanish authorities during the recent European war."¹¹ David Saville Muzzey has Onis signing the treaty "on condition that our government would accept responsibility up to \$5,000,000 . . ."¹² Homer Carey Hockett links the claims and

8. *Ibid.*, 192.

9. John Bassett Moore (ed.), *History and Digest of the International Arbitrations to which the United States has been a Party* . . . , 6 vols. Washington, 1898), IV, 4519-30.

10. *Formation of the Union 1750-1829* (New York, 1911), 234.

11. Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, New ed., 2 vols. in 1 (New York, 1933), 432.

12. *The United States of America*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1922), I, 303.

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the cession of Florida.¹³ All of these writers committed themselves long before Brooks published *Diplomacy and the Borderlands*. There are some who have no such excuse.

How many thousands of school children have read that "In 1819, the United States purchased Florida from Spain for \$5,000,000. No money actually was paid to Spain. The Federal Government agreed to pay for damages to the property of American settlers which had been caused by the Spanish during the battles over Florida."¹⁴ Except for the second sentence, which contradicts the first, this entire statement is incorrect. Henry Bamford Parkes commits the "purchase" error.¹⁵ John D. Hicks uses "Purchase of Florida" as a marginal heading, then avoids that error in the text, but joins Muzzey: ". . . the Spanish agreed to the cession on condition that claims of American citizens against Spain, amounting in all to five million dollars, should be met by the United States."¹⁶ Harold Underwood Faulkner incorrectly describes the claims as being "for damages to commerce during the Napoleonic wars."¹⁷ The claims were much broader than this. Williams, Current, and Freidel are essentially correct in their treatment. They point out that "we did not 'purchase' Florida, as is sometimes said,"¹⁸ But they link the claims too closely with Florida. Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron are far off base: ". . . she agreed by treaty in 1819 to cede all Florida in exchange for payment by the United States of the \$5 million owed to American merchants who had lost their ships to Spain during the Napoleonic wars."¹⁹ Michael Kraus has Spain "transferring Florida to the United States for \$5,000,000."²⁰ Malone and Rauch do much better, but fall into the error of ascribing the claims to "depredations against American commerce."²¹ This, of course, is far too

13. *Political and Social Growth of the United States, 1492-1852*, Rev. ed. (New York, 1937), 449-50.
14. *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago, 1952), VI, 2618.
15. *The United States of America, A History* (New York, 1953), 169.
16. *The Federal Union-A History of the United States to 1877*, 3d ed. (Boston, 1957), 337.
17. *American Political & Social History*, 7th ed. (New York, 1957), 229.
18. T. Harry Williams, Richard N. Current, and Frank Freidel, *A History of the United States*, 2 vols. (New York, 1959), I, 290.
19. Richard Hofstadter, William Miller, and Daniel Aaron, *The American Republic*, 2 vols. (Englewood Cliffs, 1959), I, 350.
20. *The United States to 1865. The University of Michigan History of the Modern World*, edited by Allan Nevins and Howard M. Ehrmann (Ann Arbor, 1959), 337.
21. Dumas Malone and Basil Rauch, *Empire for Liberty: The Genesis and Growth of the United States of America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1960), I, 398.

limited, but it is not a serious error. Carman, Syrett, and Wishy should know better: "In 1819, the Spanish minister at Washington signed a treaty ceding the Floridas to the United States in exchange for \$5,000,000, the sum due American citizens for damages to their commerce by Spanish authorities during the Napoleonic wars."²² Bailey, correct in his diplomatic history, unnecessarily confuses the issue in his popular survey text: "The Spaniards . . . wisely decided to sell the alligator - infested area. . . ."²³

Morison and Commager like their version so well they repeat it in the fifth edition: "General Jackson was forced to disgorge his rather generous bites, but his invasion of the province in 1818 convinced Madrid that Florida had better be sold before it was seized. Accordingly, Spain sold all her lands east of the Mississippi, together with her claim to the Oregon country, in return for \$5 million. . . ."²⁴ Of course, the decision to cede Florida preceded Jackson's invasion. Perkins and Van Deusen perform some interesting arithmetic: "The latter country assumed up to \$5 million of the claims of its citizens against Spain, thus adding 37,931,520 acres to the national territory at a cost of \$.171 an acre."²⁵ Assuming that the \$.171 is a typographical error, these authors erroneously link Florida and the claims and also ignore the \$1,024,741.44 paid by the United States under Article IX. Textbook writers, including authors of diplomatic histories, generally ignore the Article IX claims.

It is a relief to turn to one author, Leland D. Baldwin, who handles the treaty skillfully and almost correctly:

Spain was convinced that sooner or later it would be seized and decided to get what she could and turn to the far more serious problems posed by her rebellious colonies. The Adams-Onis Treaty, often known as the Transcontinental Treaty, of 22 February 1819 made a clean sweep of boundary controversies with Spain. Florida was ceded in exchange for a definition of western boundaries; the United States gave up its

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22. Harry J. Carman, Harold C. Syrett, and Bernard W. Wishy, *A History of the American People*, 2 vols. (New York, 1960), I, 387.
 23. Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 2d ed. (Boston, 1961), 237.
 24. Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (New York, 1962), I, 454.
 25. Dexter Perkins and Glyndon Van Deusen, *The United States of America: A History*, 2 vols. (New York, 1962), I, 298.

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manufactured claim to Texas and accepted a boundary which followed the Sabine River, ascended in steps to the forty-second parallel (the northern boundary of California), and ran thence westward to the Pacific. . . . Actually no purchase money was paid for Florida, but the United States assumed \$5,000,000 in claims of American citizens against Spain."²⁶

This last sentence is unfortunate in an otherwise exemplary statement. There is a genuine difference between *assuming* \$5,000,000 in claims and in *limiting* one's liability to not more than \$5,000,000. Baldwin, too, ignores the Article IX claims.

Another excellent and accurate discussion of the acquisition of Florida appears in Chitwood, Patrick, and Owsley. After a masterful summary of antecedents, these authors conclude: "By this treaty Spain ceded East Florida to the United States and recognized the latter's right to West Florida. The United States agreed to pay the claims of its citizens against the Spanish government to the amount of \$5,000,000 and gave up her claim to Texas."²⁷ The Article IX claims are not mentioned. These authors, moreover, do not fall in the common error of showing Florida as having been acquired in 1819; the date, of course, is 1821.

Our diplomatic historians generally are far more accurate than the authors of general surveys. Thomas A. Bailey and Samuel Flagg Bemis, authors of widely used diplomatic histories, present the Adams-Onis Treaty accurately, although Bailey errs in saying that "the United States agreed to assume the claims of its own citizens against Spain to the tune of \$5 million."²⁸ The "tune of \$5 million" may be colorful and colloquial, but it is not the same as "to a maximum of \$5 million." Bemis is accurate to the last detail.²⁹

Since writers of textbooks are unblushing borrowers, let us hope that in the matter of the Adams-Onis Treaty they will follow the excellent models provided by those who have both read and heeded the Brooks monograph.

26. *The Stream of American History*, 2 vols. (New York, 1952), I, 425.

27. Oliver P. Chitwood, Rembert W. Patrick, and Frank L. Owsley, *The American People, A History*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (Pnnceton, 1962), I,

28. Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 6th ed. (New York, 1958), 173.

29. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, 4th ed. (New York, 1955), 189-90, 193.