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FUNERALS AND FIESTAS IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ST. AUGUSTINE

by JOHN J. TEPASKE

THE DRAB SOCIAL LIFE of early eighteenth-century St. Augustine contrasted sharply with the glitter and pomp of life in the viceregal centers of New Spain and Peru.¹ Amusements, which gave pleasure to the people of Mexico City and Lima, were unknown in this fringe outpost of the Spanish Empire in America. The soldiers of the Castillo de San Marcos and their wives and children had little opportunity to enjoy plays, operas, tournaments of poetasters, bull fights, cock fights, horse racing, parades, mock jousts, or the joyous *recibimiento*.² Even the dubious pleasures to be obtained from the inquisitorial *auto de fe* were denied them. Floridians had to be content with the common amusements and pleasures. St. Augustine was a harsh, out-of-the way frontier area, where life was seldom lightened by the amenities or diversions common in the more populous centers of the empire.

Social activities for the Floridians of the early eighteenth century had a crude simplicity. Soldiers tiddled wine, drank smuggled English rum, played cards, or cavorted with the local trollops. Wives found their outlet in the church, in gossip, and an infrequent public festival or dance, all of which helped to relieve the monotony of an existence characterized by grinding poverty. Florida was not like other areas of the Spanish Empire where social life found its focus in the local parish or convent church. In St. Augustine, both the secular and regular clergy were impoverished. Unable to provide adequately even for the

1. For a picture of cultural and social life in New Spain in the seventeenth century, see Irving A. Leonard, *Baroque Times in Old Mexico: Seventeenth-Century Persons, Places and Practices* (Ann Arbor, 1959).

2. The *recibimiento* was the reception held for the incoming viceroy in Mexico City and Lima and later in Bogota and Buenos Aires. For the people of the viceregal capitals, it meant a gay round of tournaments, banquets, plays, bull fights, parades, dancing, and the like every time a new viceroy was installed in office. Sometimes these *recibimientos* lasted up to six months.

religious welfare of the colony, the priests and friars found it difficult to sponsor the religious fiestas, which had become the emotional catharsis for so many of Spain's imperial subjects, from the remotest hamlet in the high Andes to the wilds of northern Mexico. The principal holidays in the Roman Catholic calendar, so scrupulously and riotously observed elsewhere, passed virtually unnoticed or received only token recognition. Even Saint Augustine's Day, August 28, which should have been a time for feasting and gaiety, passed by year after year without a suitable celebration on the part of the people of the Florida capital.³

The moribund social and cultural life in Florida had its roots in two factors—poverty and the military nature of the colony. Without productive enterprises or a self-sustaining economy, the province depended almost entirely upon outside aid for its existence. The *situado*, a yearly subsidy of specie and supplies, shipped into the colony from Mexico by way of Havana, maintained the residents. The total amount of the *situado* was approximately 100,000 pesos in 1736.⁴ The colonists might have been able to live comfortably or at least provide for their needs with such support, but they encountered many difficulties. Sometimes the subsidy was delayed by the viceroy in New Spain, who did not wish to release the goods and money for Florida; by the bishop of Puebla de Los Angeles, who provided the subsidy from his sales taxes (*alcabalas*); or by the governor of Cuba, who often took for his own the goods and specie intended for St. Augustine. Occasionally *situado* ships were seized by English or Dutch pirates, who found it easy to prey on Spanish vessels as they sailed through the narrow, dangerous Bahama Channel. Frequently, delays in Vera Cruz or Havana caused shipments of flour and corn to mold or rot and meat to spoil, putting new strains upon the colonial economy. Forced to lead virtually a hand-to-mouth

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3. I make my statements about the lack of festivities on holy days very hesitantly, for *fiestas* may well have occurred on religious occasions. In my research on early eighteenth-century Florida, however, I have found no documentary evidence of special celebrations on holy days outside a special Mass. In Peru, where I have also carried on research for the same period, there is a great deal of evidence that holy days were a time of feasting, drinking, and revelry.
4. A ship containing 97,000 pesos of the *situado* was seized by the English in the Bahama Channel in 1736. Letter of the governor of Florida to the viceroy of New Spain, March 26, 1743, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain, Audiencia of Santo Domingo, legajo 845. Cited hereafter as AGI, Santo Domingo.

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existence, soldiers and their families had few extra pesos to spend on frivolous amusements.⁵ The poor soldier needed what little money he obtained to feed his family and to provide himself with a little rum to forget his hard lot and his bad luck in getting an assignment in Florida.

A second reason for the drab character of social life was the nature of this wilderness colony. Florida was purely a military outpost, untempered either by the civilian populace or by the regular or secular clergy. St. Augustine was governed by trained soldiers; residents were soldiers or the wives and children of military personnel; and shopkeepers, clergy, and civil officials catered mainly to the needs of the soldiers. Life had a military texture, and it is not surprising that Floridians did not taste the more pleasurable amenities enjoyed by those in the viceregal capitals, whose backgrounds and environment better fitted them for a variety of amusements.

In the eighteenth century there were at least a few occasions on which the colonial populace could let go, on which it could break its routine. These were celebrations of significant events in the lives of the royal house in Spain. The accession of a new king, birth of an heir, death of one of the royal family, pregnancy of the queen, a great military victory, or the marriage of one of the royal children were all occasions that demanded a suitable expression of joy or grief on the part of the king's colonial subjects. The monarch hoped, too, that his subjects in the New World would reinforce their expressions of loyalty with offerings of money as a tangible symbol of their love and respect.

In St. Augustine two events especially stirred the Floridians to a show of pomp and panoply. These were memorial funeral rites for a deceased monarch and the celebrations on the accession of a new king. The governor bore the responsibility for commemorating these occasions in the proper fashion, and it was he who insured that his colonists made the appropriate demonstrations of loyalty to the monarch. He was always careful to give official recognition in his correspondence to other significant events in the life of the royal family, such as the marriage of a prince or princess or the pregnancy of the queen, but formal

5. For a more detailed description of the economic tribulations of the Florida colony, see John J. TePaske, *The Governorship of Spanish Florida, 1700-1763* (Durham, 1964), 77-107.

celebrations occurred only upon the death or accession of the monarch.

Despite their somber character, funerals brought a change-of-pace to the Florida colony. Although hardly in the tradition of an Irish wake, burial rites forced a variation in the tempo of life in St. Augustine and helped break the terrible monotony. For funerals the governor set aside two days to celebrate the obsequies for a monarch and one day for the death of one of the royal family. The governor also prescribed the conduct of the residents of the town for the mourning period. Houses and public buildings in St. Augustine were draped with black crepe and everyone wore appropriate mourning dress. Women donned black gowns and head dresses. Soldiers and civil officials wore dress uniforms or their best clothes, suitably adorned with black symbols of mourning. Flags flew at half mast. On each day of the formal ceremonies the sacristan tolled the bells of the parish church continuously from five in the morning until ten in the evening. Both the curate of the parish church and the guardian of the convent recited a funeral Mass for the deceased, burning votive candles at their respective altars. The governor and the important civil and military leaders marched together to the parish church for the service, where they gave funeral orations, eulogizing the king or the deceased person of the royal family.⁶

During the first half of the eighteenth century the most lavish memorial services in Florida were celebrated for the death of three monarchs. The best known are the rites on March 28, 1702, commemorating the death of Charles II in 1700; on February 9 and 10, 1747, for the death of Philip V which occurred the year before; and, on March 27, 1760, for the passing of Ferdinand VI in 1759. Generally the death of a royal personage received little notice in St. Augustine. The governor and his soldiers were too preoccupied with other more immediate tasks, and there was little time, energy, or money to devote to a eulogy of a Spanish prince or princess three thousand miles away. While the people may have sympathized with the king's grief, most of St. Augus-

6. "Testimonio en relacion de haberse hecho las honras para su magestad," March 28, 1702, AGI, Santo Domingo, legajo 840. This document describes the funeral rites in Florida for Charles II on March 28, 1702. In this case the obsequies for Charles followed the celebration of the accession of Philip V to the throne of Spain.

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tine's residents in the early eighteenth century were Creoles with little attachment either to the mother country or to the royal house, outside the king himself. Their world was narrow, their outlook limited, and their pocketbooks empty. While the death caused little consternation, the funeral services were highly significant.

Like obsequies in the Middle Ages, funeral rites in Florida for a dead monarch assumed the character of a spectacle. There was a tendency both to exaggerate expressions of sorrow and to formalize the emotions. This might be explained in two ways: the funeral was both an honest expression of grief and an emotional outlet. Johan Huizinga has pointed out in his study of the Middle Ages that, "The manifestations of sorrow at the death of a prince, if at times purposely exaggerated, undoubtedly often enfolded a deep and unfeigned grief. The general instability of the soul, the extreme horror of death, the fervour of family attachment and loyalty, all contributed to make the decease of a king or a prince an afflicting event."⁷ He also points out that "the nobler the deceased the more heroic will be the mourning."⁸ The Floridians demonstrated much of the medieval tendency toward exaggeration, but this was only part of it. The obsequies, eulogies, mournful processions, tolling of bells, crepe-bedecked buildings, and black-clad spectators all helped to relieve the colonists' humdrum existence and to furnish them with an emotional outlet.

In sharp contrast to the somber atmosphere pervading royal funeral rites, public festivals were joyous events in St. Augustine. Although no more frequent than funeral obsequies, the fiestas occurring upon the accession of a new monarch or on the occasion of a royal wedding were eagerly anticipated by the residents of St. Augustine. These celebrations were times of approved license in which they could feast freely on the food provided by the governor and drink deeply of his liquor. If they were fortunate enough to have some enterprising impresario to put together a drama, they enjoyed a play - extremely amateurish, to be sure - but a theatrical, nonetheless. They enjoyed the music of the trumpeters, drummers, and pipers of the presidio, who gladly turned their talents away from martial music and joined guitarists of the town to play for dancing and singing. Candles lighted St.

7. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Garden City, 1954), 51-52.

8. *Ibid.*, 53.

Augustine's narrow streets, doorways, and the windows of her houses and put the town in a festive mood. Church and convent bells were rung joyously in contrast to the sonorous tolling on funeral days. Soldiers in dress uniforms, civil officials in their best clothes, and women in their most elegant finery promenaded along the gaily decorated streets and attended Mass at the parish or convent church.

To honor a new monarch's assumption of the throne, formal ceremonies usually preceded informal celebrations in the colonies. The governor opened the formal rites with an official proclamation, stating that the new king had come to the throne, and followed this with a short eulogy. The residents then gave their own voluble demonstration of love and loyalty. On January 7, 1702, for example, His Majesty's Florida subjects assembled in St. Augustine's public square to hear Governor Joseph de Zuniga y Cerda honor the newly crowned Philip V. After his speech extolling the virtues of the new Bourbon monarch, soldiers and residents shouted their tribute to Philip, and cries of "*Castilla Florida, Castilla Florida, por el rey catolico, Don Felipe Quinto*" rang out from those standing along one side of the square. Those on the other side joyously replied, "*Viva, viva, viva.*" Three times the enthusiastic crowd repeated these cries. At the close of the formal ceremony, the governor announced that he was freeing prisoners from the St. Augustine jail in honor of the happy occasion.

The informal celebration then followed. There were chocolates and sweet meats to delight the children, and barrels of rum and wine to please the adults, and then there was dancing. Festivities continued throughout the afternoon, and often it was early morning, before the revelers, exhausted from feasting and carousing, returned to their homes and beds. One of the *fiesta's* unsavory features was a request for donations for a royal gift, and while rum and wine generally loosened the pursestrings and made for more cheerful givers, unfortunately for the king, the soldiers of Florida had little to offer.⁹

Perhaps the most festive occasion in Florida during the first half of the eighteenth century occurred in the spring of 1747 during the tenure of Governor Manuel de Montiano, when a gala

9. "Testimonio sobre las reales fiestas que se hicieron en la ciudad de la Florida," March 4, 1702, AGI, Santo Domingo, legajo 840.

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festival was held honoring the accession of Ferdinand VI to the throne of Spain the year before. Having held the obsequies for Philip V in February, the governor declared April 30 and May 1 as the time to honor the newly crowned king. The first morning soldiers of the Castillo de San Marcos raised the banner of the new monarch high atop the fort and the town. In the plaza on a stage constructed especially for the festival, the officials of St. Augustine including Treasurer Juan Esteban de Pena, proclaimed their great love and devotion for Ferdinand VI and solicited donations from the crowd. Afterwards, the citizens dispersed to spend the rest of the day in their own private merry making.¹⁰

The following morning, the entire town attended a high Mass at the Church of San Francisco and heard another panegyric for the king delivered by the parish priest. After Mass, Governor Montiano announced in accordance with custom that he was pardoning several criminals held in the St. Augustine jail. After the formal ceremonies, the populace turned to the public festivities. For the informal celebrations there was some class distinction. Montiano entertained the principal military, civil, and religious officials, and a "few notable residents" at a resplendent banquet in his residence. The rank-and-file, not important or fortunate enough to enjoy the governor's well-laden table or fine wines and brandy, feasted on a liberal supply of free food and imbibed a prodigious amount of free liquor in the public square and in the surrounding streets of the town. As they celebrated, the residents shouted continually, "Long live our king, Ferdinand VI." Plays, masquerades, and dancing on the newly constructed stage entertained the residents throughout the afternoon and gave local people a chance to display their talents. Improvised horse races satisfied those with gambling blood.¹¹

Montiano also arranged a bull fight for the afternoon of May

10. The Floridians never seemed willing or able to make large contributions to the king upon such occasions. Letter of the governor of Florida to the king, November 28, 1708, *ibid.*, legajo 841. In this letter Corcoles points out that he could not get contributions from his men upon the birth of a new prince because of the poverty and misery of the colonists. Letter of the governor of Florida to the Marquis of Ensenada, February 1, 1749, *ibid.*, legajo 2541. Montiano explains in this letter that his soldiers are able to contribute only a meager sum for the celebration of Ferdinand's accession to the throne.

11. Letter of the governor of Florida to the Marquis of Ensenada, June 6, 1747, *ibid.*

1. Using all his ingenuity, the governor ordered six bulls from an English cattle raiser in Georgia. (One can only speculate on Montiano's fervent hope that the *toros* be of the same quality as the brave bulls of Jerez in southern Spain.) As it turned out the Englishman could only furnish five animals and while they were being put into fighting trim, three wandered off and could not be found anywhere on the appointed day of the spectacle. Left with only two bulls whose fighting prowess was suspect, Montiano called off the *corrida*, which disappointed an eager crowd and several erstwhile matadors.¹²

The liquor continued to flow far into the night, and some of the soldiers, emboldened by the heady draughts, left the public square to intrude on the governor's private, more sedate gathering. Entering the courtyard of the governor's residence, the soldiers began shouting loudly to get Montiano's attention. When he appeared, they pointed out boisterously that no festival in Havana had ever compared with the one now taking place in St. Augustine. Admitting their discontent with conditions in Florida and their own penchant for complaint about the poverty and isolation of the colony, they now saw the advantages of service in this rough, frontier province. Montiano listened politely, and then urged them to leave, personally accompanying them to the door of the courtyard where they finally made a noisy exit. Later, the governor wrote that he was proud of the loyalty of his men, despite the fact that an excess of drink may have clouded their judgment.¹³

Fiestas and celebrations enlivened the colony, adding zest and color to its otherwise drab existence. Festivities were de high point of social life in early eighteenth-century St. Augustine and were eagerly anticipated by the residents. But these events occurred all too seldom. The accession of Philip V, Ferdinand VI, and Charles III were times for rejoicing, but they took place only three times in sixty years, an average of once every twenty years. It is no wonder that they took on the aspects of a bacchanalian revelry. The fact that they occurred so infrequently, however, is testimony to the nature of the colony. It was a struggling, military outpost on the fringe of empire with few of the amenities of civilization.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*