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A FRENCH REPORT ON ST. AUGUSTINE IN THE 1770's

Edited and Translated by LEE KENNETT

THE ORIGINAL OF this unsigned undated report is preserved in the French War Archives at Vincennes in the *Memoires Historiques* series, carton 1681, document 6. It is most probably the work of a French officer who arrived in Charleston late in 1777 and was subsequently captured by the British and held prisoner at St. Augustine. The importance which the author assigns to St. Augustine as a blockading base would indicate that neither Charleston nor Savannah had fallen to the British at the time the report was written. A report on Charleston in the same handwriting (document 7) can be dated as late 1778 or 1779, and it is possible that both of these reports were originally solicited by the French government when it was considering openly supporting the American colonies.

* * *

St. Augustine is situated on very poor soil, a loose white sand which produces no crops, having for fruit trees only oranges and a few peaches; however, for a part of the year European vegetables do fairly well.

St. Augustine is half deserted, mostly inhabited by some five hundred Minorcans sent over at the peace of [1763] who are steadily succumbing to misery. The fort which defends the entrance to its port is fairly good, a square built of masonry with a moat filled with water and a sheltered access also of masonry. It has fifty pieces of heavy cannon.

The entrance to the port is very difficult for any vessel because of a very dangerous bar. Its channel is sometimes no more than five or six feet deep, and shifts with the direction which the currents and tides give to the accumulating sand. ¹ In a

1. Maximum depth at high tide was nine feet. Charles L. Mowat, "St. Augustine Under the British Flag, 1763-1775," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XX (October 1941), 134.

few years this port will be absolutely useless to its owners through impossibility of access; already this has caused the loss of numerous ships of all sizes which have broken up in attempting to enter.

Nevertheless, in present circumstances it is very useful to the English; otherwise they would be unable to maintain ships before the ports of Georgia and Carolina for lack of water and supplies.

It would not be difficult, however, to seize the fort at St. Augustine with troops debarking on the island which has the signal tower, and which is opposite the fort and the city at about the distance of a cannon shot.² One could even land here without being seen and seize the town which is only separated from the island by a narrow stretch of water; this would facilitate the attack on the fort.

St. Augustine could also be attacked by land by debarking without much opposition on the St. John's River twelve leagues to the north,³ which is the port where ships cannot enter St. Augustine use the channel of twelve and one-half feet.

Five leagues further to the north is the St. Mary's River which separates Florida from Georgia. Here the English have desired to create a town while abandoning St. Augustine; which it appears the owners of this territory will be obliged to do sooner or later; for in addition to this land being much better, the entrance to this port is at least fourteen feet in depth.

As the course of the rivers is parallel to the coast, it is possible by ascending them to come quite close to St. Augustine. From the St. John's River to St. Augustine by land the way is not too bad, and with a little difficulty artillery could be moved over it. The fort of St. Augustine has no fresh water well. There was one, but through an accident salt water has been mixed with the fresh water and it has been impossible to separate them.

The English have at present a garrison of a thousand regular troops in the fort and town of St. Augustine. In addition,

2. Anastasia Island. The signal tower or "lookout" is shown on the map in William Roberts, *An Account of the First Discovery and Natural History of Florida With a Particular Detail of the Several Expeditions and Descents Made on that Coast* (London, 1763).
3. The French *lieue* or league was approximately two and one-half miles.

there are in the province about 900 men, militia, Indians and light mounted troops.

The Indians of Florida are few in number, at the most there are some 400 in this region capable of bearing arms. At the present time the English are humoring them and lavishing attention on them. From time to time they make joint forays into Georgia, principally in the hopes of procuring cattle. This always occasions skirmishes in which first the one party and then the other has the advantage, but presently there is a corps of observation of three to four thousand Americans camped on the St. Mary's River.

The English frigates and corsairs stationed before the port of Charleston have taken seventeen French ships from last November up until March, and some four hundred sailors from these ships have been taken to St. Augustine.⁴ At first, when there were not so many of them, they were confined in the tower which adjoins the signal tower, situated on a deserted island. It is true that they gave them a little rice and salt meat for food, but they were so closely confined that several went over to the English, joining either the navy or the land troops. Since the prisoners have become more numerous the English have found it better to give them their liberty, but to provide them with neither shelter nor food, so in a region such as that, where there is not the least resource, they have been in a pitiable state. Fortunately the governor,⁵ desiring to conserve the little food there is in the colony, has decided to send them to the French islands in a brigantine prepared for this purpose and in three smaller craft which the French ship captains obtained permission to purchase with their own money.

4. In addition, some two hundred French officers and soldiers were confined there at one time. Wilbur H. Siebert, "Privateering in Florida Waters and Northwards in the Revolution," *Florida Historical Review*, XXII (October 1943), 71.

5. Patrick Tonyn, governor of East Florida from 1774 to 1783.