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ST. AUGUSTINE, 1784: DECADENCE AND REPAIRS

by JOHN D. WARE *

AMONG THE FIRST of many duties of the Spanish officials upon their return to St. Augustine after an absence of twenty years was to examine and perform necessary repairs to the public buildings. Many of these had fallen into disrepair during the latter years of the British tenure. ¹

Arriving in St. Augustine as part of an advance detachment, Mariano de la Rocque (Roque), commandant of engineers and engineer-in-ordinary, was charged with this responsibility. ² In a letter to Governor Luis de Unzaga, captain general of Cuba, Roque reported on the need for general repairs of the fortress, barracks, and guardrooms, and he called for a new hospital, a church, powder magazines, and a stone seawall to protect the city from the high tides of winter weather. The forts in the outlying areas were also in need of repair. ³ Thus, by inference, Roque not only further confirmed the general state of decadence of St. Augustine in the year 1784, but he also left the impression that he addressed himself straightway to the problems at hand.

Vicente Manuel de Zespedes (Cespedes) y Velasco, first governor of Spanish East Florida, arrived off St. Augustine bar on June 26, 1784. ⁴ Due to the closing of the main channel he

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1. Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (New York, 1775; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1962), 263-64; Joseph Byrne Lockey (assembler and transl.), *East Florida, 1783-1785, Documents*, ed. by John Walton Caughey (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1949), 278-79.
2. Mariano de la Rocque (Roque) to Luis de Unzaga, July 30, 1784, Lockey, *East Florida Documents*, 244. Engineer-in-ordinary or *Ingeniero en ordinario* carried with it the rank of captain. See Charles W. Arnade, *The Architecture of Spanish St. Augustine, The Americas*, XVIII (October 1961), 162, fn. 42, quoting from Comision Redactora, *Estudio Historico del Cuerpo de Ingenieros del Ejercito* (Madrid, 1911), I, 12.
3. Roque to Unzaga, July 30, 1784, Lockey, *East Florida Documents*, 244.
4. Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *Zespedes in East Florida, 1784-1790* (Miami, 1963), 28; Galvez to Zespedes, October 31, 1783, Lockey, *East Florida Documents*, fns. 1 and 2, p.174.

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was forced to resort to what must have seemed a rather ignominious landing in the pilot's launch the following morning.⁵ Preoccupied as he was with a multitude of matters, many of them troublesome, he nevertheless found time to look askance at his official residence. In a carping letter of September 16, 1784, to Juan Ignacio de Urriza, intendent in Cuba, Zespedes said of the governor's house: "This house is nearly in ruins, and it contains not a single room or apartment not completely inundated when it rains. . . ." In the preceding sentence of this letter he had characterized other buildings in St. Augustine in much the same terms, adding that his own house would be the last one to be repaired.⁶

Zespedes' memory was short. In an unusual exchange of official notes between the governor and his engineer-unusual in that the three notes were dated on three consecutive dates—Zespedes requested that the governor's house be examined and that necessary repairs be made at the earliest opportunity. The first of these notes was dated just two days after his letter to Urriza. It would seem that the ink was scarcely dry on his letter to the intendent when he broke his resolve of two days earlier. It is safe to assume that Zespedes felt certain that his request for immediate repairs to his own official residence would not soon reach the eyes of Urriza or any other high official in Cuba, since it, along with the other two related missives, were what might be termed today "inter-office memos."⁷

The governor was not only dissatisfied with the wretched condition of his abode but also with the lack of security it afforded him and his family. After his inspection, Rocque replied on the following day with a note in which he agreed that a new fence and repairs to the courtyard fences were essential to the immediate security of the property while it was being restored.⁸ Zespedes' follow-up note of the next day gave his engineer carte-blanche permission to carry out whatever repairs he thought necessary to make the "king's house" secure and habitable. He

5. Lockey, *East Florida Documents*, 237-38, in a letter from Zespedes to Unzaga, the former stated that he arrived June 26, 1784, on the brigantine *San Matias*. *Ibid.*, 14-38, *passim*.

6. *Ibid.*, 276-79.

7. Cf. Documents 1, 2, and 3, *infra*.

8. Cf. Documents 1 and 2, *infra*.

further pledged the necessary authority to assist his engineer in this objective.⁹

Inasmuch as Rocque did not arrive in St. Augustine until well into the year of 1784, his annual "statement of repairs" would therefore not have been expected to cover more than the latter part of that year. Dated December 31, as was customary with such annual reports, the 1784 "statement" reflects a starting date of July 12, further suggesting an expeditious beginning by Rocque.¹⁰

While most of these repairs and renovations would be considered of little consequence by comparison with today's achievements, they were, nevertheless, of no little importance to a fledgling government barely established. Adequate (at least for that day) sleeping platforms were certainly essential if the troops were to keep an alert guard when on duty. Stocks were also considered necessary for the maximum security of hardened criminals or for the proper exercise of public humiliation and discomfort in dealing with lesser malefactors. Certainly no one could argue with the need for repairs to the hornwork¹¹ and its guardhouse, nor with the work done to provide a provisional church, although the purpose of each was poles apart. Finally, the provisional hospital with its apothecary and mortuary could have been no less important to the overall welfare of the city. It appears that a carefully considered list of priorities was drafted as a guide in carrying out these initial public works. The total cost to the crown was 2,050 silver *reals*.¹² The lumber for the necessary repairs to the governor's residence was furnished on credit by Francisco Philippe Fatio, a Swiss who remained to become an influential, if somewhat controversial, citizen during the Second Spanish period.¹³

9. Cf. Document 3, *infra*.

10. Cf. Document 5, *infra*.

11. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* defines "hornwork" as "fortification, an outwork composed of two demibastions joined by a curtain."

12. The silver *real* from 1772-1811 was worth \$0.2123 in terms of 1936 United States monetary values. Therefore, 2,050 *reales* would have been worth \$435.22. See J. Villasana Haggard, *Handbook for Translators of Spanish Historical Documents* (Austin, Texas, 1941), 98, 107.

13. Wilbur Henry Siebert, *Loyalist in East Florida, 1774 to 1785*, 2 vols. (DeLand, 1929), I, 162, 165, 168, 171. See also East Florida Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, 170A14. Hereinafter cited as E.F.P.:L.C.

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Two minor points which invite questions are immediately apparent upon reading four of the five documents included herein. First, why were there no convicts to assist in the repairs to the public buildings, as pointed out by Rocque in the closing sentence of his "statement of repairs" for 1784? It is entirely possible that no criminals had been apprehended, charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced to hard labor within the first six months after the Spanish returned to St. Augustine, even though a substantial criminal element roamed at large in East Florida during this time.¹⁴ Second, why is there no record of the repairs to the governor's residence in Rocque's "statement" for 1784, notwithstanding that part of the timber was provided during that year, according to Fatio's letter? As suggested earlier, Zespedes probably was not anxious to have his request for immediate repairs come to light shortly after his statement to Intendent Urriza that his would be the last house to be repaired. He might therefore have prevailed on Rocque to omit any reference to repairs in 1784; the work may have been started that year but finished in 1785; or it may not have been started until the latter year. In any event, the "statement of repairs" for the year 1785 and for several years thereafter—at least through 1789—shows varying amounts of annual repairs to the governor's residence.¹⁵

This historical sketch and its accompanying documents are not definitive on the subject. The latter were selected from among many of the earliest and most relevant from the East Florida Papers in the Library of Congress in order to provide a glimpse of the decadence the incoming Spanish regime encountered in 1784, and the approach to this problem as they took possession of East Florida.

(Microfilm copies of East Florida Papers are in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.) Itemized statement from Fatio, March 18, 1786, and a follow-up letter of August 26, 1786, from Fatio to Zespedes, containing a request for payment for timber delivered for repairs to the governor's house, from September 20, 1784, until March 18, 1786, in the same amount as the earlier statement, that is: 460 *pesos*, six *reals*, and seventeen *maravedis* of *plata fuerte*. According to Haggard, *Handbook for Translators*, 105-07, *passim*, this amount would have been equivalent to \$790.31 in terms of 1936 monetary values.

14. Lockey, *East Florida Documents*, 14-17.

15. E.F.P.:L.C., 170A14. See the *Relacion de los Reparos*, etc., or "statement of repairs," December 31, for the years in question.

Document No. 1. *Zespedes to Rocque*¹⁶

St. Augustine, Florida.
September 18, 1784.

Will you arrange with the utmost dispatch for my habitation, which is the king's property, to be inspected for the purpose of repairing it, and insuring by all means possible that it have some security. In the meantime you may effect other measures to put it into a habitable condition.

May God preserve you many years.

Vizente Manuel de Zespedes

Senor don Mariano de la Rocque

Document No. 2. *Rocque to Zespedes*.

St. Augustine, Florida.
September 19, 1784.

My most honored Sir:

I have inspected the house of the king¹⁷ in which you reside and find it is necessary to renew the wooden fence surrounding it; to repair the partitions of the courtyard and rear courtyard, along with other necessary repairs for its immediate security while effecting the entire restoration to make it habitable. Your Excellency will doubtless indicate what your greatest pleasure may be.

I kiss the hands of Your Excellency.

Your most attentive servant and subordinate.

Mariano de la Rocque
(rubric)

Senor don Vizente Manuel de Zespedes

16. The documents included herein numbered 1 through 5 are from the E.F.P.:L.C., 170A14, to and from the engineering department. They were translated and annotated by the author.

17. Crown property was entitled to the same consideration as other public property.

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Document No. 3. *Zespedes to Rocque.*

St. Augustine, Florida.

September 20, 1784.

Being advised of all that you related to me in your letter of yesterday, I agree that you may carry out whatever you consider urgent concerning the repair of the king's house in which I reside. For my part, I will grant the necessary authority to assist you with whatever you need for this objective.

May God preserve you many years.

Vizente Manuel de Zespedes

Senor don Mariano de la Rocque

Document No. 4. *Rocque to Zespedes.*

St. Augustine, Florida.

October 11, 1784.

My dear Sir:

I deliver into the hands of Your Excellency the information and map of the city which you have verbally ordered oriented to that of the English surveyor. I was able to copy it, having confirmed by comparison that it is not entirely true to measurement. As the intention of Your Excellency is to manifest to His Majesty the decadent state in which the city is found, (for which [the map] might be important to the prospect of expecting royal orders) I have attempted to set down minutely all that which I have been able to acquire with said map and survey which I have made with it—the only map that could be made while it is in use with the planchette.¹⁸ Therefore, I am working on the plans of the Castillo¹⁹ and barracks together with the calculations of the restoration, so as to draft a general statement of its cost in order that Your Excellency may send them to the court. Consequently, they may release the funds which are sought. All of

18. Webster's defines a planchette as a circumferentor, an instrument used by surveyors for taking angles, or a surveyor's compass. It consists of a compass with a magnetic needle and a dial graduated into 360 degrees, mounted on a horizontal brass bar at the ends of which are sighting slits.

19. Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine.

which I will attempt with all dispatch possible to me, my only object being the success of my assignment, and with this to achieve the satisfaction that His Majesty is served as I desire.

May our Lord preserve Your Excellency many years.

I kiss the hands of Your Excellency.

Your most attentive servant and subordinate.

Mariano de la Rocque
(rubric)

Senor don Vizente de Zespedes

Document No. 5. *Statement of Repairs: Rocque*

PLAZA OF ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA.

YEAR OF 1784.

From the 12th of July.

Statement of the repairs performed in the guard-house of the night-guard, same for the hornwork, work on the provisional church, and repair of the provisional hospital.

Guard-house of the Night-guard

A new sleeping-platform of pine has been built, suitable for two corporals and twelve men and a separate one for the Sergeant; a stock with six holes for the feet and one for the head with the suitable iron fittings.

Guard-house of the Hornwork

All the board sheathing of the said hornwork, which is of pine, has been repaired, as well as the sleeping-platform for the troops; the doors, windows, their frames, and iron work; the roof which is of shingles; likewise two pillars have been placed under the shed.

Work of the Provisional Church

A portion of the partition wall on the second floor has been torn down to the extent of one third of the total as well as a chimney which was in the center of this, in order to form the room for the church. It has been fashioned to support the

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remaining portion of the wall, the ceiling to receive an octagonal arch made of pine timber of adequate thickness; likewise the altar table, the platform, steps, the cibary²⁰ [have been built]-all of the same material.

Repair of the Provisional Hospital

Eight compartments of the third floor of the barracks have been restored, as well as two on the second, one of them in particular for an apothecary. In like manner, the space which the top ceiling forms with the roof of one of the rooms facing the south has been enclosed with boards and secured for a clothing room and other utensils for the use of the aforesaid hospital. The same was done to the corresponding space which faces north for a mortuary for the deceased.

The expenditure of this year has amounted to two thousand fifty silver reals, inclusive of the amount of the laborers in the absence of convicts.

St. Augustine Florida, December 31, 1784.

Mariano de la Rocque
(rubric)

20. Velasquez, *Spanish and English Dictionary* (Chicago, 1964), 589; *Sagrario*: Cibary, the place where the consecrated host is kept.