

1977

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Recommended Citation

White, David H. (1977) "A View of Spanish West Florida: Selected Letters of Governor Juan Vicente Folch," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 56 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol56/iss2/4>

A VIEW OF SPANISH WEST FLORIDA:
SELECTED LETTERS OF GOVERNOR
JUAN VICENTE FOLCH

by DAVID H. WHITE *

THE WANING YEARS of the eighteenth century were a time of conflict and turmoil. Europe was convulsed by the wars of the French Revolution and their repercussions were felt throughout the world, including America. The isolated frontier province of Florida, so prized by Spain because of its strategic location to the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Atlantic shipping routes was in an exposed position. Besides the threats from the English and the French, Spanish officials in St. Augustine and Pensacola had to be concerned with the illicit activities of privateers, particularly along the northeast coast of Florida, antagonistic Indians who resented white encroachment on what they considered their traditional domain, and runaway blacks who hid in the swamps often protected by the Indians. The biggest problem, however, came from their aggressive neighbors to the north, who believed that the flag of the United States should and would fly over all of the territory south to the Florida Keys.

The principal points of defense in West Florida were Apalache, Pensacola, Mobile, Baton Rouge, and Natchez. Although the garrisons of these posts were mostly Spanish or Spanish-American, in Mobile and the other former French settlements along the Gulf coast the civilian population was largely French, which added yet another element to the mixture of peoples in the area. Some French Creoles had joined the Spanish forces as evidenced by their names appearing in the records: Maximiliano de St. Maxent, Jose Deville Degoutin, and Juan Francisco Armand de Courville, among others. The correspondence of Juan Vicente Folch y Juan, Spanish governor in West Florida, reflects the picture of a troubled, remote, and beleaguered province at the turn of the century.

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Florida could be described as a hardship post. It seems to have been an unhealthy place. Governor Folch often complained of ill health and the "fevers" which occasionally caused him to leave his office temporarily.¹ Almost always the soldiers were sick or convalescent causing an acute shortage of manpower at a time when it was badly needed.² Folch was forced to use prisoners to build fortifications which were necessary for the safety of the posts. In one instance, he found that all the prisoners were incapacitated and unable to work.³ Not all the illnesses were physical; the isolation of the posts caused mental affliction as well. Folch complained in 1791 of an attack of nerves which caused him to leave his command for a time.⁴ Occasionally, a soldier or officer seems to have lost his mind, as in the case of Captain Jose Valier, whom Folch described as "clearly mad" and whom he relieved and sent to his family in New Orleans.⁵ Madness affected others. In 1799, a Negro, Bernardo Longodiez, was found dead a short distance from Pensacola. He had hanged himself on a tree, definitely the effect of insanity according to Folch.⁶

Friction often arose among the soldiers of the garrisons, particularly at Apalache, an isolated outpost on St. Marks Bay some distance east of Pensacola. Tomas Portell, commandant of the fort, complained in March 1798 that continual desertions had reduced his force to only thirty-six men, and he begged for reinforcements.⁷ Fights were commonplace, and knives often came into play. Once Juan Duran grappled with another soldier, stabbing him several times, and critically wounding him.⁸ A grenadier died in the hospital from a blow inflicted by one of his fellows.⁹ In Pensacola a prisoner was tried for wounding another, and a third, who had been on guard at the time, was

1. Juan Vicente Folch to Don Estevan Miro, February 28, 1791; Folch to Don Francisco Cervone, June 28, 1791, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, legajo 52. Archivo General de Indias is hereinafter cited as AGI; Papeles Procedentes de Cuba as PC, followed by a legajo number. Don Francisco de Paula Gelabert to Don Tomas Portell, May 6, 1799; Folch to Portell, August 10, 1799, AGI:PC, 53.

2. Folch to Arturo O'Neill, October 26, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

3. Folch to Miro, October 26, 1790, AGI:PC, 52.

4. Folch to O'Neill, June 16, 1791, AGI:PC, 52.

5. Folch to the Baron de Carondelet, November 23, 1796, AGI:PC, 53.

6. Folch to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, February 11, 1799, AGI:PC, 53.

7. *Ibid.*, March 10, 1798, AGI:PC, 53.

8. Folch to Miro, March 11, 1787, AGI:PC, 52.

9. *Ibid.*, October 20, 1790, AGI:PC, 52.

charged with trying to cover up the incident.¹⁰ The fighting among the garrison seems to have been common.¹¹ Occasionally, a distraught soldier might threaten an officer as did Jose Pallerin of the Louisiana Regiment who tried to knife his Adjutant Major Ignacio Balderas.¹² At other times the crime was robbery, a very common offense.¹³ At Fort Barrancas, a small post at the mouth of Pensacola Bay, Governor Folch uncovered a bootlegging operation. Three soldiers were selling *aguardiente* (a crude type of rum which was very popular) to their comrades. Folch first recognized its effects when he noted the increasing number of fires and robberies occurring in the previously quiet outpost. Presumably these were the actions of inebriated soldiers. After repeated warnings, the governor ordered the hut belonging to the soldiers selling the alcohol torn down and the rum placed in the post storehouse.¹⁴

Not all Folch's troubles were from the military. In Mobile the bickering and wrangling of a certain married couple caused him many headaches. On their departure in 1788, he commented that they had caused him more trouble than all the other 2,000 people in the district.¹⁵ The lonely fort at Apalache seems to have exceeded all others in disturbances. One soldier there, Juan Dosal, made advances to a slave girl. When she resisted him and fled, he pursued her down the street until she took refuge in the house of the commandant of the post. Dosal entered the house, wounded a soldier on guard, and threatened to kill the commandant's orderly. He was finally captured and sent to Pensacola under guard.¹⁶

Folch frequently complained about both the number and the quality of his troops. He never had sufficient men to garrison the posts. Both officers and soldiers were worked to the point of exhaustion. Furthermore, Folch noted, the troops were usually of poor quality and could not be used in offensive operations, the type of fighting that was most necessary in that country. With troops of this caliber he could not make sorties against the

10. Folch to Cardondelet, October 6, 1796, AGI:PC, 53.

11. Folch to Gayoso, June 16, 1798, AGI:PC, 53; Ignacio Alonso de Alle to Folch, November 19, 1798, AGI:PC, 57.

12. Folch to Gayoso, June 16, 1798, AGI:PC, 53.

13. *Ibid.*, August 31, 1798, AGI:PC, 53.

14. *Ibid.*, March 10, 1798; AGI:PC, 53.

15. Folch to O'Neill, May 2, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

16. Folch to Carondelet, July 3, 1797, AGI:PC, 53.

Indians who were his chief preoccupation at the time (1799). If Indians, according to Folch, were not effective at sieges, they were well-nigh invincible in the forest. He feared that the first time his troops met an ambush in the woods, they would panic and be lost. If this happened the Indians would become even more menacing.¹⁷ Of the 288 soldiers of the battalion, 114 were natives of New Spain (Mexico) or Cuba. Folch felt that these men, particularly those from New Spain, did not make good soldiers; they had neither the zeal nor the motivation of the European military. On the other hand, he considered the Creoles of Louisiana and Florida to be valuable soldiers and felt they should be actively recruited; they were used to hunting and the hardships of outdoor life. Since Florida was such an exposed province and a vulnerable target for the French, English, and Americans, Folch urged that the best troops be concentrated there. Instead, he received inferior men with serious morale problems.¹⁸

Folch and his officers were plagued with deserters and escaping prisoners. In March 1788 two deserters from Mobile were captured. One was found at Tensaw near Mobile, but the other had managed to reach Apalache.¹⁹ Two prisoners who had escaped from Mobile were apprehended at Point of Mobile.²⁰ Men were deserting not only from the posts on land but from the galleys that patrolled the coast.²¹ Also, there seemed to be a disposition on the part of the guards to allow the prisoners to escape. In June 1797 some prisoners pried open a window of a jail in Pensacola and escaped, taking refuge in the post church underneath the altar. They were recaptured and returned to the stockade, and the corporal of the guard was jailed for lack of vigilance.²² A similar case occurred in Apalache in the summer of 1799, when a guard allowed a prisoner to escape who also took a horse belonging to one of the citizens in town. The guard received fifty lashes, the customary punishment, and was sent under guard to Pensacola.

When it was learned that the escaped prisoner was on his way

17. Folch to Casa Calvo, November 19, 1799, AGI:PC, 53.

18. Folch to Gayoso, July 8, 1799, AGI:PC, 53.

19. Folch to O'Neill, March 6, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

20. Folch to Miro, April 26, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

21. *Ibid.*, October 20, 1789, AGI:PC, 52.

22. Folch to Carondelet, June 8, 1797, AGI:PC, 53.

to the Lower Creek territory north of Apalache, the agent for the Creek Nation was alerted to be on the lookout for him.²³ Fleeing prisoners often used the water route to escape, taking the small boats or "piraguas" which were drawn up on the shore around the forts.²⁴ In November 1798, some military prisoners escaped from the jail at Apalache. An investigation confirmed that there had been a conspiracy between the guards and the prisoners. The guards had provided them with supplies, guns, and articles of clothing. Thus equipped, the men joined some Indians camped about three miles away on the shores of the bay. They were enroute south in canoes to Tampa Bay where they went each year to fish. Many of the Indians knew some Spanish, having learned it at the fort. A few had even travelled at various times to Havana. The commandant quickly dispatched a sailing launch to overtake the Indians and the prisoners, but with orders not to venture too far out to sea because of the danger of British privateers. Although the party found traces of the camp used by the runaways and Indians, they were not able to catch up with them.²⁶

The dissidence and low morale at the forts were probably due in large part to the wretched living conditions of the military in the posts along the Gulf.²⁶ As a result of all these escapes, Folch decided on a measure he had long wanted to put into operation. He formed a company of mounted scouts to be used to pursue deserters, particularly in the Indian country to the north. They were volunteers and were paid twenty-five pesos monthly but were required to furnish their own horses, muskets, and other equipment.²⁷

Slave escapes were still another problem with which Florida officials had to cope. Spanish Florida was a slave area, and the slave trade was a flourishing business on the Gulf coast. Many blacks arrived in New Orleans, but some came directly into Mobile or Pensacola. The authorities were supposed to inspect the slaves carefully to prevent any with contagious diseases from

23. Folch to Geonimo Yberes, August 6, 1799, AGI:PC, 52.

24. Folch to O'Neill, September 22, 1787, AGI:PC, 52.

25. Juan Domingues to Folch, December 14, 1797, January 31, 1798, AGI:PC, 57.

26. Folch to Gayoso, February 17, 23, 1798; Folch to Portell, February 3, 1798, AGI:PC, 53.

27. Folch, Public Declaration, May 2, 1798, AGI:PC, 53.

landing.²⁸ Many came from Havana, but while Spain was at peace with England, a surprising number were transported from Jamaica.²⁹ During the 1790s, the Spaniards were careful about allowing blacks to enter their territory from the French islands such as Martinique and Santo Domingo. In the wake of the French Revolution, there had been serious slave revolts in the West Indies, and the Spaniards feared that the former French blacks might bring with them dangerous revolutionary ideas. Governor Folch met one such black who had come in on a slave ship from Trinidad. Questioning him, Folch found the man to be both capable and well-educated; he had been a member of the First Tribunal after the revolution in Santo Domingo. Fearing that he might prove dangerous, the governor held him in custody until he could be shipped out again.³⁰ Florida's wilderness beckoned to runaway slaves from Georgia and the back country. These people often found refuge with the Indians. Even if they were enslaved by the Indians, as they sometimes were, life was not as harsh as under the Spaniards.³¹

The records of the period are full of accounts of escaped slaves whom the Spaniards called "Cimmarones." In February 1787, a black was being held captive on a Spanish galley on the Mississippi River at Plaquemine Bend. The ship was becalmed and a dense fog came up. During the night, the slave, in chains, was on deck sitting by a fire. Although the officer in charge had been on deck until two o'clock and a trustworthy sentry had passed by the fire all night, when morning came, they saw that the Negro had slipped out of his chains and had escaped over the side.³² Other escapes occurred frequently.³³ Expeditions readily went out to look for runaways since by custom these participants would receive an award when the slaves were found and returned.³⁴

Once the Spaniards encountered a different situation. In 1788 on a road in the Choctaw Nation they found a black called Jacques who was looking for his master. He had been separated

28. ? to Balderas, May 9, 1787, AGI:PC, 52.

29. Folch to Miro, March 26, April 1, 1787, AGI:PC, 52.

30. Folch to Gayoso, July 14, 1798, AGI:PC, 53.

31. William S. Willis, "Divide and Rule: Red, White and Black in the Southeast," *Journal of Negro History*, XLVIII (July 1963), 159-71.

32. Folch to Miro, February 20, 1787, AGI:PC, 52.

33. Miro to Folch, April 7, 1787, AGI:PC, 52.

34. Folch to O'Neill, September 22, 1787, AGI:PC, 52.

from him during an attack on an Arkansas post in the "late war" (the American Revolution). He had escaped his new master to seek his old one, a Frenchman named Vilar.³⁵ However, that was not usually the case; most of the slaves were trying to escape. On another occasion, nineteen slaves belonging to the estate of a recently deceased Frenchman, named de Luvier, ran away into the Indian country north of Mobile. Folch and a party of twelve gave chase and were successful in catching and returning them.³⁶ In 1788, Alexander McGillivray, the half-breed leader of the Creeks, promised to return all runaway slaves that were found living in his Nation or passing through it.³⁷ However, although McGillivray had much influence, he was not always able to stop the raids of his young warriors whose purpose often was to steal slaves.

The presence of large numbers of Indians in the wilderness north of the Gulf presented a continuing problem. Although they were nominally allied to the Spaniards, the Indians were in constant conflict with the Americans, and occasionally they also attacked the white settlers in West Florida.³⁸ The Spaniards tried to placate the Indians, maintaining interpreters and agents among them and giving them presents whenever they visited Pensacola and Mobile. In fact, one of the major expenses of the Spanish officials was Indian gifts, usually provisions and *aguardiente*.³⁹ But these measures did not always satisfy the Indians. In 1797 they came into Pensacola and began openly stealing horses in the town. When they were accosted, they became very belligerent and threatened to burn down the town. Georgians had attacked some of their villages near the Georgia border and they were retaliating against other white men.⁴⁰

The constant encroachment of the Americans was the principal cause of Indian unrest. But some Americans had been moving through Indian country enroute to Spanish West Florida for some time. Two fairly large settlements north of Mobile were Tensaw and Tombigbee. Settlers continued to arrive there both

35. Folch to Miro, January 23, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

36. *Ibid.*, December 9, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

37. Alexander McGillivray to Folch, March 2, 1789, AGI:PC, 52.

38. Folch to ?, August 22, 1787, AGI:PC, 52; Folch to ?, May 6, 1795, AGI:PC, 53.

39. Folch to Gayoso, March 28, 1798, AGI:PC, 53.

40. Folch to ?, May 6, 1795, AGI:PC, 53.

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from Georgia and from the Cumberland in Tennessee, attracted, they said, by the mild rule of the Spaniards and the absence of taxes.⁴¹ Folch was inclined to welcome these newcomers. He found them to be industrious, and he felt that their numbers would strengthen the Spanish position on the frontier. However, among the immigrants in 1791 was a congregation of Baptists who set up their own church in Tensaw. This was too much for Folch; a Protestant church was not to be allowed in Catholic Spanish territory. He placed the minister and some of the congregation under arrest, sending them to the governor in New Orleans.⁴² Meanwhile, the Creeks continued to object to these Americans and attacked them, both on their journey to Florida and in the settlements at Tensaw and Tombigbee.⁴³

The settlers had difficulties with nature as well as with the Indians. In March 1791, the Tombigbee River began to flood. Folch, who happened to be in Tombigbee at the time, helped the settlers retrieve their cattle from the pastures on the other side of the river. On March 19, the dykes began to crumble and on the following day the flood waters swept in, carrying off all the buildings, large and small, slave cabins, barns, and storehouses with their provisions. The whole settlement was in ruins. Folch measured the total rise at twenty-five feet, and Indians said that this was the worst flood in the memory of anyone living. Fortunately, there was not a single fatality, but food was in short supply. Maize that before the flood had sold at five reales per barrel was being offered for five pesos per barrel. Folch was obliged to freeze the price at ten reales per barrel and to prevent a schooner from sailing with 400 barrels of grain aboard. It was one of the greatest calamities to befall the Mobile district and West Florida.⁴⁴

However, one of the most personal glimpses of life in Spanish Florida concerned the governor himself. Possibly, the reason that such an account is to be found in the official correspondence is that Folch was writing to his uncle, Don Estevan Miro, governor general of Louisiana and the Floridas. Folch often discussed very confidential matters in letters to his uncle. Folch was bringing a

41. Folch to Miro, August 22, 1787, May 27, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

42. *Ibid.*, April 17, 1791, AGI:PC, 52.

43. *Ibid.*, May 30, 1791, AGI:PC, 54.

44. *Ibid.*, April 17, 1791, AGI:PC, 52.

complaint against Sublieutenant Don Lorenzo Rigolen, a young Frenchman in the Spanish service, who had come to Pensacola in the spring of 1788 as a replacement. Because he had known a relative of Folch in Madrid, the governor had invited Rigolen to his home several times and had tried to help him.

During this period, Folch had to be absent from Mobile quite often. On his return from one such trip, in May 1788, one of his slaves took him aside, saying: "Master, although I am a slave, I cannot allow what is being done to you while you have been away. Senor Rigolen has gone to bed with your wife every night. The first night I saw him go into the house at a very late hour by the back door. I followed him and saw him raise the mosquito netting on the bed of your wife and get in. I have also heard various soldiers [say] that they had seen him enter and leave the house while they were on sentry duty."

Folch made some private inquiries and discovered that what the slave had reported was apparently true. He found himself, he said, in the position of a wounded husband, and because he was the commandant of the post, he was also the judge. Determined to learn the truth of the matter, on June 15, he announced that he was going to Dauphin Island to take a change of air because of the fever. He made all the usual preparations for a journey, and asked the officer in charge of stores to accompany him. Before he left, he secretly asked another officer, Lieutenant Luis Duret, to meet him at a certain place to discuss an important matter. At nine that evening, Folch departed for Dauphin Island, but about three miles from Mobile, he turned into shore and disembarked to meet Duret. At midnight he returned to Mobile, accompanied by Duret and the other officer. They climbed over the stockade on a rickety ladder. Moving with extreme care, Folch was able to get into his wife's room without being heard by anyone. When he was about five feet from the bed, he suddenly shouted for candles to be brought and for the witnesses to come into the room to see what the two culprits were about. The witnesses, seeing the expression on the face of the governor and fearing what he might do, quickly snatched his musket from him. Folch ordered the guilty pair jailed.

In his letter to his uncle, Folch noted that when a civilian was away from his family he could leave a female relative with his wife to defend her from seducers. However, the soldier, who

is often far from his own country, did not have that advantage even though his wife was in danger. Folch's wife wrote him from jail, claiming that she had not been seduced but "forced" (*forzada* was the Spanish word used). Folch presumably continued to have doubts, and Senora Folch did not immediately regain her freedom, although the governor seems not to have known exactly what to do about her. However, he demanded that the Frenchman be expelled from the colony, claiming that he had destroyed his marriage.⁴⁵ In view of the relationship between Folch and Miro, it is likely that Rigolen was at least deported. Folch and his wife remained together. They had children, at least two sons who were well-educated in England, and a daughter of whom Folch was very fond.⁴⁶

Judging from Folch's correspondence, Florida was not a very desirable post, situated as it was so far from the centers of Spanish power in Mexico and Peru. It was vulnerable to attacks from the sea and aggression by Americans to the north. To the hardships of garrison life were added the tensions and disorders of a slave society. The evidence seems to indicate that life in eighteenth-century Florida was hard and dangerous but perhaps not always dull. This pattern continued until Spain ultimately relinquished her border province to the Americans in 1821.

45. *Ibid.*, July 7, 1788, AGI:PC, 52.

46. John Forbes to William Simpson, December 26, 1808, The Forbes Papers, Public Library, Mobile, Alabama.