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“THE HEAVENLY PLANTATION”:  
A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MENTION  
OF FLORIDA

by NANCY LEE-RIFFE \*

DURING ENGLAND'S civil war in the seventeenth century, British journalism and newspapers got their start. Legions of newsheets were written and distributed. Though some of them ran for several years and hundreds of issues, most were only short-lived ventures. The underground Royalist papers had a particularly difficult time. One of these, of which only three issues have survived, is *Mercurius Aulicus (For King Charles II)*. A weekly published in 1649, its intent is to attack and mock the actions of the new government and to spur loyalty and support for Charles, the son of the beheaded king. In it Florida is mentioned as a possible place to which Royalist members of Parliament may flee to set up a sanctuary from the troubles raging in England.

The first “Courtly Messenger” for the week August 14-21, 1649, makes clear his loyalty to the monarchy and to Charles and his bitter hatred of Parliament and the Presbyterians. In the second issue, August 21-28, 1649, the writer points out that not only is Parliament fighting internally, but that when Cromwell returns from Ireland's bogs he will be so angry at some of the law makers' enactments that “Doctour *Oliver*” will cause “a generall purge . . . to scoure away these excrements.” Therefore, *Mercurius* predicts Parliament will probably adjourn, as its out-of-town members prepare to flee to “*Florida in America* . . . to set up a Government and Discipline there, subordinate to the Government of England, and for propagating and promoting their new-found Religions and whimseys in these new-found-Lands.”

*Mercurius Aulicus* describes this refuge in idyllic terms: “This *Florida* is a spacious Country, abounding with very many sorts

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of Pheasant, Fruits and Plants, a pleasant Climate near to *Virginia* and not farre from the *Spanish* Gold and Silver; so that without doubt, this is the Promised Land, which our Independent Israel hath so long sought after, for they fought for a Land flowing not only with milk and honey, but with thousands of Gold and Silver; the Natives of this Country are said to live unto a very great age, some of them to nigh 300 years, and the most part of their life very free from sickness; and therefore a fit habitation for our modern Saints."

In the third and last issue which has survived, for the week of August 28-September 4, 1649, *Mercurius Aulicus* continues in the same vein. According to him Parliament has considered means "for measuring the Country of *Florida* and other the West-India Islands, and if the heavenly Plantation be found large enough for the Saints to erect their new Jerusalem, to make it subordinate to the government of *England*, untill such time as they must take their journey, bag and baggage through the red sea to exercise their new revelations, gifts, and whimsies, in that new world."

The *Journals of Parliament* for this same period do not mention Florida. While they reflect many of the items mentioned by *Mercurius Aulicus*, he presented his own special biases in the discussions of the need to "enlarge" those imprisoned for debt, reaction to the treaty between General Monck and Irish General Owen Rowe, and Royalist jubilation over victories in Ireland. Within the time covered by these three newsheets, however, the *Parliament Journals* report debate on the waiver of an excise tax for a company trading in Eleutheria, an island near the Florida coast. Permission is also granted for colonizing in the West Indies islands located between 24° and 29° North Latitude. These items are reported briefly; there is no indication reflected in the *Journals* of colonial aspiration or activities by any members of Parliament.

That the members of Parliament were seriously considering colonization of Florida seems unlikely. But that the author of *Mercurius Aulicus*, in his heavy-handed attack on the government he deplored in 1649, chose to name Florida is at the least testimony to his knowing of the area and of its own special attractions.