

1979

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Recommended Citation

Maple, Marilyn (1979) "Ruggles Hubbard, Civil Governor of Fernandina," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 58 : No. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol58/iss3/7>

RUGGLES HUBBARD,
CIVIL GOVERNOR OF FERNANDINA

by MARILYN MAPLE *

RUGGLES HUBBARD was one of the four men who became embroiled in a power struggle over Amelia Island, Florida, in the late summer of 1817. The island was originally occupied on June 29, 1817, by General Sir Gregor MacGregor, a Scottish revolutionary who claimed to represent several South American insurgent governments. He dreamed of freeing Florida from Spanish control with support he had solicited from certain United States citizens in Baltimore and Philadelphia. His flag, a green St. George's Cross on a white field, was raised over Fernandina, as he proclaimed his victory in the name of the independence of South America. However, when Ruggles Hubbard, his fellow conspirator, sailed into Amelia Island aboard the privateering brig *Morgiana*, which was then flying the flag of Buenos Aires, without the supplies of guns, food, and money which were so desperately needed, MacGregor announced his departure.¹

MacGregor had never received the support of the inhabitants of northeast Florida, and American officials in Georgia and in Washington became increasingly alarmed over his association with pirates and slaverunners. MacGregor resigned his command on September 4, and turned control over to Jared Irwin, former congressman from Pennsylvania, and to Ruggles Hubbard. Irwin, a native of Georgia, had once served as commissioner for the valuation of lands and dwellings and the numeration of slaves for the Second Division in his home state. Later he moved to Milton, Pennsylvania, where he went into business, served as

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1. T. Frederick Davis, "MacGregor's Invasion of Florida, 1817," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VII (July 1928), 24-25. For additional information on MacGregor and the "Amelia Island Affair," see the Introduction by John W. Griffen to the facsimile edition of *Narrative of A Voyage to the Spanish Main in the Ship "Two Friends"* (Gainesville, 1978), 1-26.

postmaster, and then as sheriff of the county. In 1811 he was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature. During the War of 1812, Irwin was commissioned colonel in the Fifth Rifle Regiment, and he was then elected to Congress.²

Hubbard was the product of two substantial and well-educated Connecticut families. His mother, Anna Gold Hubbard, was the daughter of the Reverend Hezekiah Gold of Stratford, Connecticut, and the granddaughter of the Reverend Thomas Ruggles, a graduate of Harvard in 1696.³ The Hubbard family boasted a Yale heritage, and it was particularly proud of Bela Hubbard, Ruggles's uncle, the well-known theologian.⁴

Ruggles was born in 1778, the third son of Levi Hubbard. He followed in the educational footsteps of his two older brothers, taking his degree in law from Yale University and graduated in the class of 1796.⁵ William G. Hubbard was graduated in 1785, and his brother Henry in 1792. Henry's life was tragically short. Soon after graduation he went to work for Elijah Austin, a New Haven merchant. There, sometime in June 1794, as he and his employer "were engaged in opening a chest of cloths from the West Indies . . . he contracted yellow fever." He was taken to the adjoining town of Derby where he died early on the morning of June 21. Mr. Austin traveled to New York where he succumbed to the fever two days later. Both were buried in New Haven, where "the fever raged . . . alarmingly for four months."⁶

After his graduation, Ruggles began the practice of law in Troy, New York, where he became known as "an ardent and unscrupulous partisan of Jefferson." He was appointed postmaster of Troy, holding this position until about 1812. For some seven years he served as county clerk of Rensselaer County and as a member of the state senate from January 1812, to April 1815.⁷ In 1812, with the outbreak of the war against England, Hubbard

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2. *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress, 1774-1927* (Washington, 1928), 1140.
 3. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History*, 5 Vols. (New York, 1885-1911), II, 252.
 4. *Ibid.*, 537-39.
 5. *Ibid.*, V, 201.
 6. *Ibid.*, 20.
 7. *Ibid.*, 201. There is confusion in extant records as to Hubbard's term as postmaster, Dexter describes his service as lasting until 1812; George Baker Anderson, *Landmarks of Rensselaer County New York* (Syracuse, 1897), 300, states that he was postmaster between 1804-06.

was commissioned captain of the Flying Artillery, which later became the Fourth Battery of Troy, one of the city's leading militia companies.⁸ In October 1811, when he was thirty-three years old, Ruggles married Catherine Storm, daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth (Graham) Storm of New York City. Ruggles moved to New York City in 1815, where he secured an appointment as one of the sheriffs of that city, an office he held until his death.⁹

Some insight into Hubbard's personality and activities while in New York can be gleaned from references to him in the minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York:

March 11, 1816-Asked Common Council to assign one or more convicts to whitewashing and cleaning the jail under power given by law to employ prisoners in public works.

September 9, 1816-City Inspector presented ordinances for correction of "sundry nuisance on the property of Ruggles Hubbard, owner, Columbia Street."

October 21, 1816-Communication by Ruggles Hubbard, stating that the conveyance sentenced to the penitentiary was expensive and recommended that Alms House cart be used-Referred to Alms House Commission.

April 14, 1817-Ruggles Hubbard requests to have use of room in basement [City Hall] which was about to be vacated. "leave given to withdraw request." (Refused) Request on Alms House Cart sent to Commissioners of Alms House.

April 21, 1817-Lots #84, 100, 188 and 163 of the Common Lands leased to Ruggles Hubbard for six years at an annual rent of \$40.00 beginning May 1st.

May 26, 1817-Alms House Commissioners report that request of Ruggles Hubbard concerning use of their cart be granted with the following comments: Corporation [city government] be liable for expense; the Sheriff's method was unduly expensive, but as he is paid or liable for sums charged-that he should be glad for conveyance of convicts to the state prison except for \$6.00 which should be charged to the state; the expense of conveying prisoners should not exceed 50¢ per prisoner.

Report Approved and bills paid by Council.

It was sometime during this period that Hubbard became

8. Anderson, *Landmarks of Rensselaer County New York*, 215, 300.

9. Dexter, *Biographical Sketches*, V, 201.

owner of the *Morgiana*, one of the fifty-five New York privateers that had seen service during the War of 1812 and which had been sold off after the war. The records show that, "late in the War, the *Morgiana*, captained by G. Fellows, took the schooner *Sultan* and the ship *City of Limerick*, the latter with a very valuable cargo of merchandise." The most desirable portion of the *Limerick's* cargo was transferred to the *Morgiana*, and she returned to port with \$250,000 worth of goods.¹⁰ It was this vessel that Hubbard was sailing when he arrived off the coast of north-east Florida in August 1817.

Irwin, with MacGregor's departure, assumed command of Amelia Island. Hubbard took over the running of the civil government. A correspondent of the *Charleston Courier*, who was in Fernandina at the time, September 29, 1817, commented on the situation: "One of the principal leaders at Fernandina comes out with the following declaration: that his friends want only Fernandina and Pensacola, as ports to fit privateers and bring in prizes, and that they are very indifferent as to the fate of the rest of the Floridas; that if the inhabitants will keep themselves at home, or will not act with hostility toward them, they may retain or promise their allegiance to whom they please."¹¹ This partnership arrangement between Irwin and Hubbard was destined to be short lived. Luis Aury, with a notorious reputation as a pirate, arrived at Fernandina on September 21. His ships were flying the flag of the defunct revolutionary Republic of Mexico. Earlier Aury had met with MacGregor at the mouth of the St. Marys and there received full authority to assume control of Amelia Island. Ruggles Hubbard was formally appointed civil governor. Aury took over from Irwin as commander-in-chief of the military forces, with Irwin serving as his adjutant-general.¹²

Hubbard became increasingly dissatisfied with this situation in Fernandina, particularly with the ragtag "army" that Aury had brought with him. Most of his followers were pirates including approximately 130 Haitian mulattoes. They became known as the "French party" as opposed to the "American party" supporting Hubbard. The effort to oust Aury was not successful, and Hubbard was replaced as civil governor. He was branded a traitor and

10. Edgar Stanton MaClay, *A History of American Privateers* (New York, 1899), 441.

11. Davis, "MacGregor's Invasion of Florida," 30.

12. *Ibid.*, 33.

stood accused of treason, cowardice, and of conspiring with the Spanish. Then suddenly on October 18, 1817, Ruggles, at the age of thirty-nine, died of "the prevailing fever, which had all the earmarks of yellow fever."¹³ His end was described by a contemporary almost in poetic terms: "He survived his shame but a few days, and died of a broken heart in the agonies produced by his guilt."¹⁴

Hubbard's death left his widow to contend with many intricate legal matters as entries in the minutes of New York's Common Council would indicate:

August 10, 1818-Petition of Catherine Hubbard, widow and Administratrix of Ruggles Hubbard, deceased, states that she cannot pay rents on lots leased from city. Asks that lease be terminated. Referred to Finance Committee.

August 24, 1818-Finance Committee notes that rent now due as of August 1, is \$60.00 and that leases have preference in law over debts. Corporation has right to "re-enter" properties as last resort. Her request will be granted if the rent is paid on or before November 1st.

December 21, 1818-City Inspector presented ordinance for correction of sundry nuisances which were passed. They included: Ruggles Hubbard, occupant 49 Orchard Street, Privy; George Downey, Owner 47 and 49 Orchard Street, Privy.

November 8, 1819-Catherine Hubbard states on petition to Common Council that bill for rent on lots leased to her husband were presented but that her husband died insolvent and that she expects no assets from his estate. Asks to be allowed to surrender lots. Finance Committee given the right to accept the surrender.

An examination of the map of common lands drawn by Casimir Goerck, city surveyor, of New York, in 1796, shows that property leased to Ruggles Hubbard in the nineteenth century had the following approximate locations in 1980: lot 84-57th and 58th Streets, 5th and 6th Avenues; lot 110-66th and 67th Streets, Park and 5th Avenues; lot 163-88th and 89th Streets, 6th and 7th Avenues (now Central Park); and lot 188-64th and 65th Streets, 6th and 7th Avenues (now Central Park).¹⁵

13. *Ibid.*, 35; Richard G. Lowe, "American Seizure of Amelia Island," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLV (July 1966), 18-30.

14. Charles H. Bowman, Jr., "Vicente Pazos and the Amelia Island Affair, 1817," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LIII (January 1975), 282.

15. Letter to author from James J. Heslin, director, New York Historical Society, May 15, 1969.