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FLORIDA AND THE ROYAL NAVY'S FLORIDAS

by ROBERT R. REA

THE naming of ships, like the naming of babies, may depend upon the most whimsical of circumstances, yet in both instances some significance is apt to lie behind the name. Just as the adoption of a long-hallowed family name displays a pride of ancestry, the attachment of a place-name to a ship reflects a certain territorial pride. So it was with the great battleships of the United States Navy that bore such names as *Florida* and *Alabama* – the latter now enshrined in Mobile Bay. It is a matter of considerable historical curiosity, however, to find the name of Florida among the ships of Great Britain's navy. Territorially, the connection between Britain and Florida was brief, 1763-1783, but that was time enough to christen a number of His Majesty's ships *Florida*, and just as the memory of a British Florida remained alive in the minds of ambitious empire-builders, so the Royal Navy retained the name until that much-contested land was clearly destined to become a part of the United States. Directly or indirectly, each of these British *Floridas* played a part in Florida's history. An account of the Royal Navy *Floridas* is, therefore, both an essay in British naval history and in the international aspects of Florida history.

The first *Florida* appeared in the British navy shortly after the cession of Florida by Spain in 1763. She was a humble store-ship whose name was intended to suggest her function: the conveyance of supplies to the two new colonies (for Britain had divided the Spanish lands into East and West Florida). In fact, both ship and name were part of a cloak-and-dagger operation designed to steal a march – and another colony – from France and Spain.

The Seven Years' War had been a world-wide conflict which touched every known continent. British and French fleets had clashed in Asian waters, and from India Britain had launched a

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successful assault upon the Spanish Philippines. Men of vision foresaw that the Pacific would be the scene of future rivalry, and European fleets might reach it most quickly by sailing west through the Straits of Magellan, rather than by following the old eastern route around Africa and across the Indian Ocean. The western route required a supply base, however, for sailing vessels could not cross both Atlantic and Pacific oceans without replenishing their stores of food and drink. The coast of South America was held by Spain, but there were islands off that coast, vaguely located, casually claimed by earlier explorers, certainly unoccupied at the moment, and possession was nine-tenths of the law of nations. With the coming of peace in 1763, the French and British governments prepared to probe the South Atlantic for a suitable base.

The British admiralty took action in the spring of 1764, and chose Captain John Byron for the mission. Byron was provided with two ships, *Dolphin* and *Tamar*, and secret orders to explore the South Atlantic and the Pacific with an eye to Britain's imperial interests. To cloak his purpose, Byron was elevated to the rank of commodore and given command of the East Indian Station. He sailed in June 1764, touched at Rio de Janeiro in September, and spent December and January cruising the South Atlantic. Hitting upon the Falkland Islands in the latter month, he formally claimed them for George III, left a small party to begin the construction of a base, and returned to the Argentine coast to rendezvous with his supply ship, the *Florida*.¹

The admiralty sent Byron on his way before it took the necessary steps to see that his expedition would be revictualled prior to entering the Pacific. Not until July 10 did their lordships authorize the Navy Board to purchase "a vessel of about 230 or 250 tons burthen . . . to carry stores & provisions to the *Gulph of Mexico & coast of Florida*" – the official cover-story.² At the end of the month, the Navy Board replied that it had negotiated the purchase of the *Glocester*, a 299-ton, seven-month old, Virginia-built merchant vessel. Ninety-five feet in length and twenty-eight

1. See Robert E. Gallagher, *Byron's Journal of his Circumnavigation, 1764-1766*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd ser., CXXII (Cambridge, 1964), passim.

2. Out-letters, British Admiralty Papers (hereinafter cited as ADM), 2/234, p. 258, author's italics. (Unless otherwise noted, Admiralty papers cited are in the Public Record Office, Kew; those located in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, are identified by N.M.M.)

feet of beam, she cost £1,900. She had yet to unload her cargo, but it was expected that she would be cleared in six days. As the naval dockyard at Deptford was fully engaged at the moment, the Board suggested that she be fitted out in a private dock. The Board also proposed a complement of twenty-four men and asked the Admiralty to provide a name for their new ship.³ On August 6, the Admiralty accepted the vessel and directed that she be known as the storeship *Florida*.⁴

During the ensuing month, correspondence passed between the Admiralty and the Navy Board as *Glocester* was transformed into a naval vessel. Fitting, victualling, manning, and arming required the cooperation of the Victualling Board and the Ordnance, but the selection of a commander lay with the Navy Board. On August 10, the Board advised the Admiralty that it had named Robert Deans master and commander of *Florida*, and that day he began entering men aboard his ship.⁵

Deans was a twenty-four year-old Scot who had entered the navy as a midshipman in 1755, secured his passing certificate June 10, 1764, and came aboard *Florida* as master and commander without rank. In spite of his lack of status, Deans showed no hesitancy in asking for more than the Admiralty had intended to provide. At his request he was granted a personal servant and two extra crewmen for his ship.⁶ *Florida's* complement also included a master who received £6.6.0 per month, a master's mate at £3.10.0, one midshipman who was paid £2, a surgeon's mate at £3, boatswain and carpenter's mates at £1.12.0, and eighteen able-bodied seamen.⁷ The ship was victualled for six months with all types of provisions except beer, a shortage in that commodity being made up in brandy.⁸ Although technically an unarmed vessel, *Florida* was allowed ten swivel guns, and her crew was

3. Navy Board Out-letters, July 30, 1764, ADM/B/174 (N.M.M.); Admiralty to Navy Board, July 30, 1764, ADM/A/2562 (N.M.M.); J. J. Colledge, *Ships of the Royal Navy: An Historical Index*, 2 vols. (Newton Abbot, 1969), I, 213. Lieutenant Commander C. G. Pitcairn-Jones's manuscript list (N.M.M.) gives *Florida's* dimensions as 72' and 27'11".

4. ADM 2/234, pp. 270-71; ADM/A/2562 (N.M.M.).

5. ADM/B/174 (N.M.M.); Log, *Florida*, ADM 51/3838.

6. Admiralty to Navy Board, August 25, 1764, ADM/A/2562 (N.M.M.); Admiralty to Navy Board, August 25, September 26, 1764, ADM 2/234/316, 370; Admiralty to Robert Deans, September 26, 1764, ADM 2/724.

7. Admiralty to Navy Board, August 9, 1764, ADM/A/2562 (N.M.M.); Muster books, *Florida*, ADM 36/8523.

8. Admiralty to Navy Board, August 16, 1764, ADM/A/2562 (N.M.M.).

armed with muskets, pistols, and cutlasses provided by the ordnance department.⁹

While Deans readied his ship for sea— it did not leave the docks until August 25— the Admiralty prepared his secret orders, which were not to be opened until he reached the Cape Verde Islands. Throughout September, Deans saw his ship victualled, manned, and supplied with stores ostensibly intended for delivery to Captain Sir John Lindsay who was then in H.M.S. *Tartar* at Pensacola. Deans must have been appalled to receive a reprimand, at the beginning of October, expressing the Admiralty's dissatisfaction with his "not being further advanced" on his voyage and ordering him to sail without a moment's loss of time, but it was November 11 before he began the long voyage west.¹⁰

Arrived at the Cape Verde Islands, off the coast of North Africa, Deans opened the sealed orders that directed him to Pepys Island at 47° 30'S, eighty or ninety leagues off the coast of Patagonia, there to meet Commodore Byron. Should either Byron or Deans leave Pepys Island without contacting the other, word was to be left in "a Bottle [which was to be] buried Two feet deep, at a distance of Six feet on the South Side of a large Cross which you are to erect as a Mark of your having been there." A second rendezvous was designated at Port Desire (Puerto Deseado), far south of Buenos Aires on the Patagonian coast. Deans was ordered to keep his destination secret from his crew but to give them "strongest assurances" that their efforts would be rewarded: as for himself, "Your own diligence & perseverance in the execution of these Instructions will secure you Preference."¹¹

Florida made a rapid crossing of the Atlantic, but Deans wasted no time searching for the completely mythical Pepys Island. The storeship anchored at Port Desire January 23, 1765, and on February 5, *Dolphin* and *Tamar* appeared at the harbor

9. Philip Stephens to Navy Board, August 29, 1764, ADM/A/2562; September 1, 1764: ADM/A/2563; Navy Board to Admiralty, August 31, 1764: ADM/B/174 (N.M.M.); Admiralty to Lord Grandby at Ordnance, September 1, 1764: ADM 2/234, p. 326.

10. Admiralty to Deans, October 2, 1764, ADM 2/724; Log, *Florida*, ADM 51/3838. (Unless otherwise noted, Deans's log is the source of subsequent references to the ship's movements.)

11. Deans's orders, September 11, 1764, ADM 2/1332. See also Gallagher, *Byron's Journal*, 6-9.

mouth. Unhappily, Deans had to report that his foremast was badly sprung, and the commodore observed that *Florida* "was little better than a Wreck." Byron would have transferred *Florida's* supplies to *Dolphin* then and there, but strong tides and winds that nearly cast the storeship and *Tamar* ashore persuaded him to carry out a few hasty repairs and leave the treacherous waters of Port Desire. Providing Deans with extra crewmen and two boats, *Florida's* having been stove, Byron's little squadron headed south on February 13. *Florida* lagged far behind the others, and as the British captains looked back toward her, they sighted a strange sail following on her course. Inside the Straits of Magellan, Byron anchored, prepared to challenge the shadowing stranger, and signalled *Tamar* and *Florida* to join him. In attempting to do so, *Florida* went aground, whereupon the unidentified vessel closed, ran up French colors, and dispatched two boats toward the stricken storeship. The commodore quickly sent off his own boats to keep the Frenchman at a safe distance while *Florida* was floated free. The Frenchman, none other than the intrepid Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, founder of a rival colony in the Falklands, remained warily aloof. For a week, Deans transferred supplies to *Dolphin* and *Tamar*, and on February 25, it having been agreed that *Florida* was not fit to continue into the Pacific, Byron ordered Deans to return to England with dispatches.¹²

The commodore left Port Famine Bay February 25, and *Florida* began her lonely northward voyage March 5, through frozen seas dotted with icebergs. It was June 21 before Deans anchored in Portland Road on the south coast of England. He immediately went ashore with Byron's papers and delivered them to Lord Egmont at the Admiralty the next evening. The story they told of the British occupation of the Falkland Islands would lead to an international crisis that threatened a world war in 1770. No less interesting was Byron's report of encountering on the Patagonian coast a race of painted savages, clad in skins, whom he described as the "nearest to Giants of any People . . . in the World."¹³ Governments might tremble during the Falk-

12. Gallagher, *Byron's Journal*, 63-66. See also Julius Goebel, Jr., *The Struggle for the Falkland Islands* (New Haven, 1927), 221-40.

13. The original report carried by Deans is in ADM 1/162 and is printed in Gallagher *Byron's Journal*, 155-56.

land Islands crisis; it would soon be forgotten by all save scholars. The scientific world still wonders about the Patagonian giants. Whatever John Byron saw, Robert Deans and the crew of *Florida* probably observed as well.¹⁴ It was imperial policy rather than scientific discovery, however, that moved the Admiralty to order *Florida* far north to Moray Firth, Scotland, when Deans returned to his ship on June 26. There *Florida* remained, in virtual quarantine at Fort George, until November, when she was ordered back to Deptford for refitting. For Robert Deans there was, at least, the satisfaction of the promised commission, antedated to June 20, as third lieutenant of H.M.S. *Panther*, a ship on which Lieutenant Deans never set foot.¹⁵

In January 1766, *Florida* sailed again, ostensibly for Pensacola, but actually to the South Atlantic, but this time with rather more excitement and less expedition.¹⁶ On January 31, 100 leagues southwest of Cape Finisterre, Deans was intercepted by a large vessel flying Algerine colors. Undeterred by the sight of the Union Jack, the North African pirate fired at *Florida*, closed with her late in the afternoon, and Deans, seeing that "her Decks were full of Men arm'd for Boarding," hove to. The Algerian ordered the captain, master, and mate of *Florida* aboard his ship, and his unwilling guests watched helplessly as the pirate unsuccessfully attacked a second passing English vessel. At nine o'clock that evening, Deans and his officers were returned to *Florida*, but the surgeon and eight crewmen were taken as hostages, and

14. The Admiralty succeeded in keeping secret any report of the Patagonian giants until May 1766; the story was then received with scorn by the scientific world. Horace Walpole remarked that the crew of *Florida* had said nothing about giants after returning to England in 1765, but when *Florida* returned from her second voyage in 1767, the newspapers reported that "the late accounts of a gigantic people inhabiting the shores of the Magellan straits" were confirmed by her crew. Gallagher, *Bryon's Journal*, 185-86; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 8, 1767 (I am indebted to Dr. Robin F. A. Fabel for this reference). Captain Samuel Wallis of *Dolphin* is said to have measured the Patagonian giants in 1766 and found them to be 6'4" to 7' tall. Richard Pickersgill's log, LOG/N/D/6 (N.M.M.).

15. To make *Florida's* isolation more bearable, the government ordered the commandant of nearby Fort Arderseir to receive the crew ashore and provide them with any convenience they might desire. Earl of Sandwich to commanding officer, June 24, 1765, *Calendar of the Home Office Papers of the Reign of George III, 1760-1765* (London, 1878), 568; Commissions and Warrants, ADM 6/20.

16. The cover-story is explicit in Admiralty to Captain John McBride, January 10, 1766, ADM 2/1332.

twenty-six "Turkish" soldiers were placed aboard the storeship to guarantee that Deans sailed directly for Algiers. *Florida* moored at the Mole in Algiers harbor on February 11. Three days later her captor returned both the men and equipment he had removed, and the effectiveness of diplomacy was celebrated by a formal visit from the resident British consul on February 16, just before *Florida* was released and sought refuge at Gibraltar.

When he resumed his voyage, Deans encountered great difficulties. Contrary winds and currents held him off the coast of Brazil for eighty-three days, and he was forced to put in at Rio de Janeiro in October for repairs.¹⁷ Not until late November did he reach bleak, windswept Port Egmont in the Falkland Islands. During the winter of 1766-1767, *Florida* was given a thorough over-hauling. Early in December, Deans accompanied Captain John McBride in H.M.S. *Jason* on a cruise around the islands that discovered the French settlement in Berkeley's Sound. Armed confrontation resulted in a graceful retreat by the French and their eventual withdrawal from the Falklands.¹⁸ By the beginning of May 1767, *Florida* was ready to sail for England, and Deans was home at the end of July. In August, *Florida* was paid off and laid up, though she would eventually be recommissioned for further service in the South Atlantic. At this late date, the Admiralty still maintained the fiction that *Florida* was engaged in transporting supplies to the Gulf of Mexico. The official admiralty Office List of Ships for 1767 described her as "gone to Pensacola" – which she never did!¹⁹ Robert Deans, on the other hand, won advancement for his service aboard *Florida*, and as captain of H.M.S. *Mentor* in 1780-1781, he was stationed at Pensacola where he lost his ship and his freedom when West Florida was conquered by Bernardo de Gálvez.²⁰

If the first *Florida* was so named as a subterfuge, the next three British *Floridas* enjoyed intimate associations with insular, peninsular, and continental Florida. They were all vessels assigned to the survey of the Gulf coast undertaken for the Ad-

17. An account of his disbursements is in AGC/28 (N.M.M.).

18. McBride to Admiralty, March 21, 1767, ADM 1/2116.

19. ADM 8/43. The storeship *Florida* was subsequently recommissioned and employed in the south Atlantic before she was broken up at Deptford in 1772. See ADM 51/3838 and Colledge, *Ships of the Royal Navy*, I, 213.

20. See the Introduction to Robert R. Rea and James A. Servies, *Log of H.M.S. Mentor* (Gainesville, 1981).

miralty by George Gauld. The vessels themselves have not heretofore been clearly identified or distinguished from one another, and Gauld's work, though known to contemporary navigators and cartographers, has yet to be fully appreciated.²¹

George Gauld sailed to the Gulf coast in 1764 with Captain John Lindsay— to whom the first *Florida* was officially said to be delivering supplies. The naval surveyor promptly began the preparation of a great series of charts that minutely and precisely described the Gulf coast and its bays, notably Tampa, Pensacola, and Mobile, from the Mississippi River to the Florida Cape. He worked out of Pensacola and utilized whatever naval vessel was temporarily made available to him by the admiral on the Jamaica Station at Port Royal. When Sir George Brydges Rodney assumed that post, he discovered that although the British had been in possession of Port Royal and Kingston harbor for over a century, the waters of their naval base had never been accurately sounded, its shallows charted, or its dangers marked with buoys. To do that work, Rodney summoned Gauld from Pensacola to Port Royal, and the surveyor was employed there from January 1772 until February 1773.

For Gauld, the Jamaican interlude was merely an interruption of his major task. He yearned to return to the yet uncharted Florida keys, and a grateful Rodney sent him on his way with a gift— a new surveying boat, large enough to mount two masts with sails, yet sufficiently compact to be maneuvered by oars when Gauld's work required it. This little craft was unofficially christened *Florida* by the surveying team. Although too small to warrant notice in any list of Royal Navy ships, she was referred to as a schooner by Lieutenant Nathaniel Phillips of the survey's mothership *Earl of Northampton*, and thereby young Phillips elevated himself, in his own mind, at least, to the status of commodore of a tiny squadron.

Presented to Gauld on February 23, 1773, the survey boat *Florida* was altered and fitted for his use in April and sailed in company with *Northampton* at the end of the month. From Jamaica, the surveying party made for Grand Cayman Island where Gauld drafted a fine chart during the first two weeks of

21. See the forthcoming book by Captain John D. Ware and Robert R. Rea, *George Gauld Surveyor and Cartographer of the Gulf Coast* (Gainesville, 1982).

May. The utility of the light, shallow-draft schooner was immediately evident as the surveyor worked his way around the island, sounding inside the reef and within the shallow harbor which *Northampton* could not enter.

The threat of bad weather sent the expedition scurrying to sea, headed for Cape Antonio, the western tip of Cuba. On May 22, there were nervous moments aboard *Northampton* when day-break brought no sight of the little *Florida*, but Lieutenant Phillips fired a signal gun, and hearing a musket shot in answer, he soon regained contact with the boat. At Cape Antonio, Gauld used *Florida* to chart the promontory and the nearby islands, and in June both vessels sailed to the Dry Tortugas for the next phase of the surveyor's work.

In addition to sounding the island waterways, *Florida* was repeatedly dispatched to Key West to secure water for the expedition. On such occasions she may have been commanded by John Payne, formerly a master in the Royal Navy and Gauld's valued assistant for many years. Gauld himself frequently used the schooner for exploration cruises among the keys when the expedition transferred its base to Key West. *Florida* led the way back to the Marquesas in October, and on to the Tortugas where an autumnal storm grounded *Northampton*, and *Florida's* assistance was necessary to haul her off. At the end of the month the expedition fought stormy seas and headwinds to reach Pensacola, and there *Florida* was turned over to the carpenters of H.M.S. *Ferret* for repairs.²² The schooner-rigged boat was employed again in 1774, when Gauld worked between Key West and Bahia Hondo, but she lost her name to another vessel that year and was very nearly lost herself in a November gale while returning to Pensacola.²³

The new *Florida* was a replacement for the *Earl of Northampton* and was purchased with an eye to the requirements of the Gulf coast survey. As he said farewell to his old ship, which was found to be "entirely unfit for further Service," Gauld asked for a vessel that would draw less than seven feet and at the same

22. Log, *Earl of Northampton*, ADM 51/4178; Log, *Ferret*, ADM/L/F/70A (N.M.M.). This *Florida* does not appear in any contemporary or modern navy list.

23. George Gauld to Admiral Clark Gayton, December 2, 1774, ADM 1/240. She seems to have been used as late as 1777, see Gauld to Gayton, December 30, 1777, ADM 1/240.

time would be "strong, roomy, and commodious." Appreciative of the naval surveyor's work, Admiral Rodney instructed the storekeeper at Port Royal "to be very Attentive in the purchase of another Surveying Vessel" that would fit Gauld's description. By March 1774, the storekeeper had located "a new sloop remarkably well found" that was purchased for £670 and named *Florida*. Lieutenant Charles Cobb took command of her, and in June, Gauld sailed from Pensacola for the Florida keys where *Florida* served as his base ship for the next five months.²⁴

During the early months of 1775, *Florida* returned to Port Royal for refitting; she was back at Pensacola in April, and Gauld took her to Key Largo that summer. Again in January 1776, the sloop *Florida* returned to Port Royal to be careened.²⁵ While that work was in hand, a new Floridian appeared on the naval scene. Aware of the need for increased strength on the Gulf coast in order to curb Spanish support of American rebels who ranged far and wide, in February 1776, the admiralty authorized the new Jamaican commandant, Admiral Clark Gayton, to purchase a vessel of no more than six-foot draft, mounting two four-pounders and three two-pound guns, to be employed on the lakes separating West Florida from Louisiana. She was to be named *Florida*. By June, Gayton had secured a suitable sloop of sixty tons which he "call'd the *West Florida* (to make a Distinction between her & the Florida Surveying Sloop)." Her command was given to Lieutenant George Burdon, formerly a midshipman aboard *Florida*.²⁶

Although Gayton employed *Florida* on patrol duty off Hispaniola in the spring of 1776, he returned her, grudgingly, to the coastal survey in May. Both Gauld and Lieutenant Cobb thought it "very imprudent to proceed among the Florida Kays" in view of the activity of American privateers in the Bahamas and adjacent waters, so in 1776, the surveying sloop operated in the Mississippi Sound area. She made the customary voyage to Port Royal that winter and returned in April 1777 under the com-

24. Sir George B. Rodney to Admiralty, January 4, March 14, 1774, ADM 1/239; Gauld to Rodney, November 8, 1773, ADM 1/239; Gauld to Gayton, December 2, 1774, ADM 1/240.

25. Gauld to Gayton, November 17, 1775, ADM 1/240; Gayton to Admiralty, January 21, 1776, *ibid.*

26. George Jackson to Gayton, February 17, 1776, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 8 vols. (Washington, 1964-1980), IV, 919.

mand of Lieutenant John Osborn.²⁷ That spring *Florida* headed west again, and during the summer Gauld conducted a remarkable survey of the Gulf coast from the mouth of the Mississippi to Galveston Bay. While the surveyor, in a small boat, traced the coastal contours, the sloop, with John Payne in charge of technical operations, was used to take, offshore soundings. Returning to the Mississippi in September, *Florida* headed up the river, intending to secure supplies, and on the way, Gauld wrote, "We had like to have had a Scuffle with a Spanish Packet for their Insolence." The incident was reported to Governor Bernardo de Gálvez at New Orleans, and he promptly dispatched "an Armed Brig and a large Party of Soldiers on purpose to take or destroy us. Perhaps it was lucky for both them and us," said George Gauld, "that we were gone before they came, for Mr. Osborn never would have suffered with Impunity any Indignity to be offered to the Kings Sloop."²⁸

Florida returned to Pensacola, from whence Lieutenant Osborne reported that "the Sloop leaked much, & complained in every part"; she could scarce be kept free of water with the pumps. Indeed, when she was heaved down, it was discovered that her sheathing had been destroyed by worms or ripped off, and her bow timbers were so rotten "they might be pulled to pieces with one's fingers." The senior naval captain at Pensacola ordered her surveyed and found her "unfit to proceed to Sea" on January 18, 1778. By March she had been sold to the army ordnance department to be used as a barge and floating warehouse.²⁹

The replacement for the surveying sloop was a schooner, also named *Florida*, possessing a more desirable type of rigging thanks to Lieutenant Osborne's complaint that "a Sloop is a very improper Vessel for the Surveying service, as Accidents contin-

27. Gauld to Gayton, May 20, 1776, ADM 1/240; Muster book, *Florida*, ADM 36/7978. No log for this vessel has been located.

28. Gauld to Gayton, December 30, 1777, ADM 1/240.

29. Lt. John Osborn to Gayton, January 17, 1778, *ibid.*; Capt. Thomas Lloyd's report, January 18, 1778, *ibid.*; Colledge, *Ships of the Royal Navy*, I, 213, lists this vessel as a storeship of fourteen guns, 202 tons, 68' length, and 19' beam, but Colledge was not aware of a second survey ship named *Florida*. Pitcairn-Jones (N.M.M.) lists Osborne's ship as a sloop of twelve guns, 63' by 19'2", but he confuses her dates with those of the second survey ship of the same name. Pitcairn-Jones's description of the 1774 *Florida* as 56' x 17'6", depth 6', would appear to be correct; Colledge's 1774 vessel would appear to be the 1778 schooner *Florida*.

ually happen to the Boats in hoisting them in and out. In a Schooner . . . those operations are performed with more ease and safety." The new *Florida* was rigged fore-and-aft, rather than with square sails. Its crew of thirty men was commanded by Lieutenant James Kirkland, and it arrived at Pensacola, May 27, 1778. The *Florida* schooner was armed with twelve or fourteen light guns, and during its short life it was employed as a frigate, never as a surveying vessel. Kirkland took one prize en route from Port Royal to Pensacola, and he left in search of a rebel privateer just two days after he reached the capital of West Florida. He spent most of the summer cruising between Ship Island and the Rigolets. Returning to Pensacola in September, the schooner was careened at Deer Point where she suddenly filled and sank in shallow water. The senior officer at Pensacola, Captain Joseph Nunn of *Hound*, condemned her where she lay.³⁰

There remained the *West Florida*. Her past history had not been happy, and her future would prove disastrous. Lieutenant George Burdon took command of His Majesty's armed sloop *West Florida* at Port Royal on June 7, 1776. He got to sea on August 7, and reached Pensacola on the twenty-fourth. There he remained until October 20, when he cruised west along the coast, investigating shipping in the Mississippi Sound. In November *West Florida* entered Lake Pontchartrain and began patrolling in search of Spanish interlopers who regularly gathered pitch and tar on the British side of the lake. Lieutenant Burdon made himself very unpopular with the Spaniards by ostentatiously sailing close by their little post at Bayou St. John and flaunting the Union Jack.

Returning to Pensacola in January 1777, Burdon found his canvas much damaged by vermin; it was early April before he sailed west again. In the Pearl River he took two Spanish smugglers laden with wine and tobacco. By May, *West Florida* was showing ominous signs of wear and tear and making fifteen inches of water every two hours. Nevertheless, Burdon returned to Lake Pontchartrain to interrupt the illicit tar trade, and seizing a small coasting vessel as a prize, he manned and employed her as

30. Gayton to Admiralty, April 20, 1778, ADM 1/241; Admiral Peter Parker to Admiralty, April 19, June 21, September 23, 1778, January 12, 1779, *ibid.*; Nunn to Parker, December 4, 1778, *ibid.*; Log, *Sylph*, ADM 52/2025; Log, *Hound*, ADM 51/463.

an auxiliary patrol boat. The duty was dull, the weather miserable, though lively enough on July 5, when three water spouts were observed. *West Florida* put in to the Chefunka River to make repairs in August, and four crewmen who "went away in the night" escaped the search party sent after them. Burdon could ill afford to lose men. At the beginning of September he noted: "The fevour Ague so bad on Board that only the Lieutenant, Mate, and one Man well." Fortunately, Burdon fell in with surveyor George Gauld near the mouth of Lake Pontchartrain. "It was very lucky for him," Gauld reported, "that we happened to come that way, for he had so few hands, by the desertion of his people on the Lakes, that he could hardly have got to Pensacola, his sloop being very leaky." *Florida* provided *West Florida* with additional crewmen, and together they limped home.³¹

Not until January 1778, was *West Florida* ready for sea again, but only four of her men were then fit for duty. When Burdon finally got back to the lakes in February, he found the situation changed. On February 26, off Pass Manchac, Philip Livingston and Adam Chrystie, two prominent British West Floridians, came aboard and advised him that Manchac was in the hands of rebel Americans. Anticipating trouble, Burdon barricaded his ship with old sails and hammocks filled with Spanish moss, but he was disappointed of seeing any action against James Willing and his raiders. On March 20, *West Florida* encountered a British coasting vessel with a military detachment under Captain Richard Pearis aboard, and Burdon learned that this party had restored order at Manchac and taken a number of rebel prisoners. The two British ships triumphantly exchanged nine-gun salutes. Returning to the Mississippi Sound, Burdon heard that Willing's boat, the *Rattletrap*, was on its way down the Mississippi from New Orleans, intending to attack Mobile. As she was reported to carry sixteen swivel guns and forty men, Burdon, anticipating a fight, lightened ship and headed east to intercept the Americans. At Ship Island, March 28, he was told that the rebels had passed by, on their way to Mobile, but no sign of them could be found.

Back in Lake Pontchartrain in mid-April, Burdon touched at Tangipahoe where the American raiders had demolished a house

31. Log, *West Florida*, ADM 51/4390; Gauld to Gayton, December 30, 1777, ADM 1/240.

and destroyed the cattle of a British planter. This was the high-water mark of Willing's raid, but by that date British naval strength in western waters had also reached its peak. The sloops *Hound* and *Sylph* were in the Mississippi below New Orleans, and the survey ship *Florida* was posted at the mouth of the river. *West Florida* was joined in Lake Pontchartrain by a provincial schooner dispatched from Pensacola by Governor Peter Chester. Burdon anchored at Bayou St. John, maintained contact with the sloops in the Mississippi, and the British effected a naval encirclement of New Orleans. The best the Spaniards could put up against them was one schooner armed with two swivels and carrying an officer and seven privates. Smaller Spanish *guarda costas*, frequently encountered in Lake Pontchartrain, were stopped and investigated before they were allowed to proceed. In June, when *West Florida* was forced to put in at the Lacomble River in order to effect repairs, the British naval patrol was maintained by seizing a schooner from Manchac, arming her with two swivels, and stationing her at the Rigolets under the command of Midshipsman William Dixon. Both messages and supplies moved between Burdon's *West Florida* and H.M.S. *Sylph* in the Mississippi, and Captain John Fergusson's letters from New Orleans to Pensacola were relayed through the lakes in order to avoid the long route down the river and across the Gulf. On July 11, lightning struck and shattered *West Florida's* mainmast, damaging the mainsail at the same time. She limped along the shore of Lake Pontchartrain in a futile search for timber that might provide a replacement. Finally in August, Burdon was able to secure a spare mast from *Hound*. Refitted, he was able to run down a smuggler bound for Mobile with a profitable cargo of cordials, rum, and rice. *West Florida* returned to Pensacola for overhauling in November 1778.

In spite of sea-worms and wood-rot, ships could be maintained and patched up easier than men. On January 10, 1779, the naval officers at Pensacola were advised that Lieutenant George Burdon was suffering from "a long continuance of pulmonic complaints attended with a flux" and was unfit for active duty. Burdon was replaced by John Payne, whose experience and knowledge of Gulf coast waters was exceptional, and on February 1, Lieutenant Payne took *West Florida* to sea again. During the spring and summer of 1779, Payne cruised the sound and the lakes border-

ing Spanish Louisiana.³² He was in Pontchartrain on August 27 when Bernardo de Gálvez launched his surprise attack on British West Florida, and Payne's ship became the first victim of the Anglo-Spanish war. On August 29, Payne sent a yawl and eight men toward Manchac in order to contact the British forces under Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Dickson; the boat party was captured by the Spaniards that same day. Payne was still unaware of the outbreak of hostilities on September 10, when, at two o'clock in the afternoon, he sighted and gave chase to a strange sail. Coming along side, he hailed the vessel and was told that she was a merchant from Pensacola carrying supplies to Manchac. Suddenly the British colors she was flying were struck, and an American flag was raised. Grappling lines were thrown aboard *West Florida* and she began to receive small arms fire. Payne was ill-prepared for action; he had removed his boarding barricades the previous day, so his deck was exposed to musket fire, and of his crew of fifteen, several were sick. Nevertheless, he was twice able to push back the American boarding party; only on the third attempt did they succeed in gaining the deck of *West Florida* and overwhelming her defenders. Lieutenant Payne was mortally wounded, one seaman was killed, and Master's Mate Gerrald Savage was wounded. The victor proved to be the American privateer *Morris*, commanded by William Pickles, formerly a British merchant skipper trading at New Orleans, now turned American patriot. *Morris* mounted eight guns and carried sixty-five men, according to Master's Mate Savage, and she lost eight men, in addition to some wounded, in an action of twenty minutes that both Pickles and his second, Pierre Rousseau, described as "very violent."³³

32. Parker to Admiralty, April 2, 1779, ADM/241. In the absence of her log for this period, *West Florida's* movements must be followed through the logs of H.M.S. *Sylph*, ADM 51/918, and ADM 52/2025.

33. Gerrald Savage to Francis LeMontais, October 24, 1779, ADM 1/242; LeMontais to Parker, December 20, 1779, *ibid.*; Pierre Rousseau, "Account of the Battle of the Schooner Tender of the Frigate *Morris* Capt. William Pickles, American, Against the Boat the *West Florida* of Pensacola Captian Paine [*sic*]," *St. Tammany Historical Society Gazette*, I (September 1975), 20-21. Accounts of the engagement that concentrate attention upon the number of guns aboard the two ships are misleading, for it is obvious that no guns were fired; the action was essentially hand-to-hand. Pickles is sometimes said to have had only seven men; he may have had only seven Americans, but he had enough Spaniards (or Frenchmen) to smother *West Florida's* handful after Payne fell.

Twenty months later, to the day, Pensacola surrendered to Gálvez. British West Florida was lost, and East Florida was surrendered to Spain by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. British merchants and adventurers did not lose interest in the Gulf coast, however, and Spanish authorities perforce accepted their commercial services and influence with neighboring Indian tribes. Florida and *Floridas* would reappear when Anglo-American hostilities were renewed in the War of 1812.

The next H.M.S. *Florida* began her career as an American ship, the *Frolic*, a new twenty-two gun sloop of war launched in February 1814, and commanded by Master Joseph Bainbridge. *Frolic* enjoyed a successful voyage until the morning of April 20, when, in the Florida Straits, she fell in with Captain Hugh Pigot in H.M.S. *Orpheus* (36) and Lieutenant David Hope in *Shelburne* (12). The British ships took up the chase and were within range at noon when *Orpheus* fired two guns to bring the American to. Outnumbered, outgunned, and outmaneuvered, Bainbridge struck at 12:20.³⁴ The prize was put under the command of *Orpheus's* first mate and taken to Nassau, where she remained until June. Pigot, meanwhile, sailed to the West Florida coast and delivered a shipment of arms to the Creek Indians at Apalachicola – a visit that resulted in the dispatch of ill-fated Major Edward Nicholls to the Gulf coast.³⁵ In mid-June, *Orpheus* and *Frolic* made their way to Bermuda, and there the American vessel was re-christened *Florida* before being taken on to the British naval base at Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she was formally commissioned in the Royal Navy, July 12, with Nathaniel Mitchell as her captain. There followed a period of refitting, from which H.M.S. *Florida* emerged as a twenty-gun sixth rate ship armed with eighteen thirty-two pound carronades, two nine-pound guns, and carrying a crew of 135 men.³⁶

The new *Florida* sailed to the West Indies late in the year and returned to Bermuda, where her people witnessed the arrival of

34. Log, *Orpheus*, ADM 51/2615. The account given by Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York, 1889), 311, is more creditable to Bainbridge, but it is not supported by Pigot's journal.

35. Robin Reilly, *The British at the Gates* (New York, 1974), 171.

36. Log, *Orpheus*, ADM 51/2615; Log, *Florida*, ADM 51/2372. As *Frolic*, she had carried twenty thirty-two pound carronades and two long eighteen-pounders, with a crew of 171 men. Her measurements were 119 1/2' length, 32' beam, 539 tons. See Colledge, *Ships of the Royal Navy*, I, 213; Pitcairn-Jones list (N.M.M.).

Commodore Stephen Decatur, U.S.N., and the U.S.S. President, captured in January 1815 while trying to escape the British blockade at New York. Early in February, *Florida* sailed for the Gulf coast, conveying Major General Manley Powers and his staff to the Mississippi, on whose banks American forces commanded by Andrew Jackson had recently won a most memorable victory. *Florida* found the British fleet anchored off Dauphin Island, and after landing provisions, she headed east. Off the Atlantic coast of Florida, March 9, Captain Mitchell learned that peace had been made between Britain and the United States. *Florida* returned to the fleet at Dauphin Island and was dispatched to the Balise, the mouth of the Mississippi, where she took aboard British wounded from the battle of New Orleans. The redcoats were carried to Havana and there transferred to hospital ships. *Florida* subsequently returned to England and was broken up in 1819.³⁷

Another *Florida* served the British navy during the War of 1812— an armed brig, hired into service at Nassau, December 12, 1814, and commanded by Lieutenant Edward Handfield. She sailed with a supply convoy bound for the Gulf of Mexico late in December, and joined the fleet in the Mississippi Sound, January 9, 1815, just after Pakenham's defeat at New Orleans. She was soon dispatched to the mouth of the Apalachicola River and on January 25, began "discharging Provisions, Arms &c for the use of the Indian Army." On the twenty-ninth, Handfield "supplied Colonel Nichols R.M. with 2 six pounders and other Ordnance Stores." *Florida* left the Gulf coast at the end of the month, and off Havana, February 9, she just missed taking an American privateer when her intended victim ran under the guns of Morro Castle. Three days later Handfield had the satisfaction of chasing another American vessel ashore on Cat Key. He returned to Nassau and hauled down his ensign on February 18, at which time the armed brig *Florida* was returned to her civilian owners.³⁸

After 1819, the name Florida disappeared from the Royal Navy; Anglo-American relations improved, and the disputed territory became an American state—no fit namesake for a Royal

37. Log, *Florida*, ADM 51/2372.

38. The log of the armed brig *Florida* is contained within that of the *Florida-ex-Frolic*, ADM 51/2372. She is not listed by either Colledge or Pitcairn-Jones.

Navy ship. During the two great wars of the twentieth century, however, the name reappeared as private vessels were utilized to swell the ranks of the British navy. From March 8, 1914, until July 10, 1916, the hired ship *Floridian* was employed as a naval supply vessel. Again, December 12, 1940, at a particularly dark moment in British history, a commercial whaling vessel was purchased by the Royal Navy, christened *Florida*, and served as a minesweeper throughout the Second World War. She was sold out on March 25, 1946.³⁹

None of the *Floridas* were great ships, but each, in its own way, was an interesting ship and, until the present century, enjoyed a direct link with the history of Florida. In that sense, modern Floridians may take pride in the Royal Navy's role in their history and in Florida's contributions to the Royal Navy.

39. Colledge, *Ships of the Royal Navy*, II, 134.