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PLANTATION DEVELOPMENT IN BRITISH EAST FLORIDA: A CASE STUDY OF THE EARL OF EGMONT

by DANIEL L. SCHAFER

OVER dinners at their country estates and at the stylish Shakespeare Head tavern in London, British aristocrats talked excitedly in 1763 about the prospects of acquiring huge tracts of land in East Florida, a recent prize of the Seven Years War. "We are all East Florida mad," one potential investor said, describing a "land fever" that prompted his kinsman to abandon prudent caution so as "not to miss a vast future prospect."¹ Another aristocrat described the activities of his friends as "a little confused, . . . but you can make allowance for gentlemen settling a Colony over a Bottle of Claret."²

A prominent player of these "gentlemen's games" was John Perceval, the second Earl of Egmont. A member of the Irish House of Commons from 1731 to 1748, and of the Privy Council in 1755, Perceval had been named Baron Lovel and Enmore in the county of Somerset in 1762, and became a member of the House of Lords. In September 1763 he had been appointed First Lord of the Admiralty, a post of prime influence in a government which rewarded its worthies with huge grants of land. Egmont used his influence well, eventually acquiring 65,500 acres of land in Florida and 122,000 acres in Nova Scotia.³

After resigning from the Admiralty in August 1766, Lord

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1. James Grant of Castle Grant to James Grant, governor of East Florida, February 6, 1767, Ballindalloch Castle Muniments, Bundle 258 (hereinafter BCM followed by the appropriate bundle number); Alexander Grant to Archibald Grant, May 23, 1767, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, Gift Deposit 1/32/38, Grant of Monymusk, no. 22 (hereinafter SRO, GD); for an excellent discussion of British interest in East Florida, see George Rogers, "The East Florida Society of London," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LIV (April 1976), 479-96.
2. Richard Oswald to Grant, July 26, 1764, BCM 295.
3. Wilbur Henry Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida, 1774 to 1785: The Most Important Documents Pertaining Thereto, Edited With An Accompanying Narrative*, 2 vols. (DeLand, 1929), II, 3-4.

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Egmont was anxious to begin an East Florida venture. After receiving munificent gifts of land in East Florida from the British crown, a group of wealthy "Adventurers" had approached Egmont and offered to assign a proportion of their land grants to him if he "would advise and direct the whole." Egmont insisted that "they vest the whole in me, that afterwards I might execute reconveyances to each of them, . . . [while retaining] about 20,000 acres to myself."⁴ Egmont agreed to "take front place and all the troubles," in order to expedite the entire venture through his personal network of influence. "I desire a great deal of land," Egmont explained, "because I can then be able to give away a great deal. I take the deed because I see few able or willing to do it."⁵

After land warrants were issued, the "Adventurers" sent Martin Jollie to East Florida to locate their estates, preferably on both sides of the St. Johns River in the vicinity of Lake George.⁶ Jollie, a former merchant and plantation agent in the West Indies, located tracts totalling 60,000 acres, and chose Mount Royal on the St. Johns River as the first site to develop.

Governor James Grant visited the site with Jollie late in 1767 and called it "fine indeed," located in command of the "Great and Little Lakes" and with a grand view of "one of the finest Rivers in the World."⁷ Grant stayed two days with Jollie to supervise cutting of trees to provide a view for a "Noble House." There was, however, one oak "so big and so fine" that he ordered it left untouched. "The Mount is certainly the work of former inhabitants," he informed Egmont in December of 1767, "but it must have been raised a hundred years ago, for the oak trees upon it are of that age."⁸

Egmont was so "extremely pleased" with the land chosen on the St. Johns River that he decided to accelerate development.⁹

4. Lord Egmont to Grant, June 1, 1768, BCM 264.

5. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1768.

6. *Ibid.*, January 5, 1767. In addition to Egmont, the "Adventurers" were James Crisp, James Anderson, Richard Brett, Edward Wood, James Morrison, Turner Fortrey, and Mr. Porett. By May 1767 they had applied for a total of 60,000 acres of land, see List of Petitioners for East Florida, May 1767, SRO, GD 1/32/38, Grant of Monymusk, no. 26.

7. Grant to Egmont, December 23, 1767, BCM, Bound Letter Book: Colonel James Grant, Governor of East Florida, September 2, 1764 to March 20, 1771 (hereinafter BCM, LB).

8. *Ibid.*

9. Egmont to Grant, February 10, 1768, BCM 264.

In partnership with four investors, none of whom were among the original "Adventurers," Egmont subdivided a 5,670-acre tract at Mount Royal. Each investor agreed to draw by lot a 640-acre subdivision, and to send ten Negro slaves the first year, ten the second, and a total of forty over six years. The investors were also expected to share the cost of building "a fortified house or small Castle for a place of common retreat, either against the Indians or the Negroes."¹⁰ As the former First Lord of the Admiralty, Egmont expected the government eventually to station "armed vessels and floating Castles" on the St. Johns River for further protection.

With several contiguous plantations, each employing laborers to build shelters and to clear the forests and plant crops, and with mutual security provided, this wilderness location on the west side of the river was expected to show "neighborly improvements and a sense of acquaintance," making it attractive to other investors and settlers.¹¹ Eventually, the remainder of the tract would be subdivided and developed and the whole process would be repeated in the other lands owned by the original "Adventurers." Through this process of joint development, Egmont planned "to execute with the money of many, what my own purse could never compass."¹² He worried only about locating enough white persons able to withstand the heat and marshes of Florida in order to fulfill the grant requirement of settling "the Lands with protestant White Inhabitants within ten Years from the Date of the Grant in the proportion of one person for every hundred Acres."¹³

The model for Egmont's plan originated in Ireland, where his ancestors had been given land grants totaling 262,000 acres. According to Egmont, Ireland was then "a country almost as wild as Florida," and his family had settled it "partly by the natives, but chiefly by younger sons of gentlemen and tenants in England."¹⁴ Through a series of awards and inducements the family had given away 162,000 acres over a forty-year period. In 1768 Egmont retained only 50,000 acres, but hardly felt im-

10. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1768.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1768; see also *ibid.*, February 10, April 17, 1768.

13. *Acts of the Privy Council of England, Colonial Series*, 6 vols. (London, 1908-1912), V, 589.

14. Egmont to Grant, February 25, 1768, BCM 264.

proverished since generous distribution of land had made his family rich.

Convinced that the model was applicable to East Florida, Egmont began recruiting white settlers for the Mount Royal plantation. They would be expected to pay quitrents of "one trifling penny per acre" to the investors and to share the produce of their estates. The concept of quitrents was important to Egmont in order to transplant a British class system to Florida: "The use and intention of it is to class up those who engage with me, to create a Bond of Union and a gentle subordination, which, trifling as it is, must tend to produce a reciprocal and common tie between all the present and future inhabitants."¹⁵

After learning of these development plans, Governor Grant awarded Egmont an additional 10,000 acres of land on Amelia Island, which had been reserved for exclusive settlement by small farmers from Bermuda. A humanitarian plan initiated in 1764 by Mr. John Savage of Charleston provided free passage and a bounty of five pounds sterling for every impoverished Bermudian settler that arrived in Florida. Concluding that the project was a failure, Grant awarded Amelia Island to Egmont and advised him to buy up land rights from the few remaining Bermudians.¹⁶

The governor also advised Egmont not to depend on white settlers during the initial stages of plantation development: "Settlements in this warm climate must be formed by Negroes, our indented white people can hardly be prevailed upon to work for their own subsistence," much less the interest of an owner.¹⁷ Only after plantations were established could white farmers on small plots be utilized profitably, "but such a plan is not to be thought of till this new World has in some means been created. . . . This country can only be brought to that rich and plentiful state by the labor of slaves." Two hundred slaves, Grant recommended, would be the minimum number necessary to profitably market produce from the several plantations that Egmont envisaged.

By September 1768 Egmont had placed ten whites and thirty-three blacks on the Mount Royal tract at his own expense, and

15. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1768.

16. Grant to Egmont, June 16, 1764, BCM, LB.

17. *Ibid.*

an additional forty blacks had been supplied by the other investors. His personal expenditures had risen to 3,378 pounds sterling, prompting him to look for a cheaper supply of slaves than the forty pounds sterling that new Africans were selling for in Charles Towne and Savannah. He had also decided to follow Grant's advice concerning the "dismissal of my white artificers who are very expensive and I find but little useful."¹⁸ He hoped to replace them with "Negro Carpenters and Bricklayers at a less expense than £40 per head . . . which would make the remedy worse than the disease. In the meantime, lazy as they are, they cannot but serve as able masters to my young Negroes."

By this time Egmont had become alarmed by the heavy expenses and by Martin Jollie's infrequent communication—so infrequent that the partners were unsure if he was alive or dead. Calling it "outrageous" that he had received no information about the quality of land, water, and harbors in the province, Egmont charged that interminable delays in receiving land titles had caused him to lose six investors for one 20,000-acre tract.¹⁹

By March 1769 problems with land titles had been resolved. Optimistic again, Egmont sent a small vessel directly to the Guinea coast of Africa to purchase fifty slaves at what he hoped would be cheaper prices and sent Governor Grant plans for a series of villages on Amelia Island, including one for a port of entry on the St. Marys River. Since crops were exported from the St. Johns River plantations via the inland waterways to the St. Marys before being shipped overseas, Egmont was confident that "Every grantee upon the whole River St. Johns must certainly be desirous to have one [town lot] for a warehouse or magazine."²⁰ He asked the governor to pick a site for the town and to transfer ten slaves from Mount Royal to Amelia to clear the woods and to lay out town lots.

Egmont also had plans for a series of Negro villages of sixteen houses, each located on one-square-mile tracts. Individual families would be assigned one-acre garden plots and a five-acre field, as well as a forty-acre plot in the commons ground. Tradesmen in the families could earn extra income by plying their skills in St. Augustine. Egmont encouraged the building of log houses

18. Egmont to Grant, September 1, 1768, BCM 264.

19. *Ibid.*, April 17, June 25, 1768.

20. *Ibid.*, March 27, 1768.

modeled after the thirty-eight-by-fourteen-foot structures inhabited by the Negroes of the French island of Cayenne. To keep the male slaves "happy and contented, [give] each a wife. This will greatly tend to keep them at home," Egmont reasoned, as well as augment slave numbers through natural increase.²¹ Babies raised in these villages would become "faithfully attached to the glebe of their master."

Although Lord Egmont continued to complain of heavy expenses, he also acquired additional land and searched for more laborers. In May 1769 he thanked Governor Grant for 8,000 acres near "the Cattle ford, which is to my judgment, one of the most desirable pieces of land belonging to me."²² Egmont was also trying to lure Carolina planters to East Florida by leasing them 640 acres and eight slaves if they brought eight additional slaves with them. Proceeds would be equally shared for ten years, when the land and the increase in stock and slaves would be divided between Egmont and the planters.

Efforts were also underway to recruit Huguenot families from France and from San Domingue, but Egmont found that "the difficulty of getting them away is exceedingly great, for they are closely watched and the punishment is no less than death."²³ Germans and Dutch were difficult to recruit because of propaganda circulated among them defaming Florida as a "barren sandy desert and cursed with a climate hotter than a furnace."

Bad management continued to bother Egmont. In April 1769, when expenses for the Mount Royal tract reached £7,000, and after a 1768 crop valued by Egmont at £1,500 had been lost during a three-month absence by Martin Jollie, he was demoted to steward.²⁴ Six months later Egmont decided to "dismiss him totally from my service," and to appoint Francis Levett "to superintend my business."²⁵ The dismissal came after a letter from Jollie, the first in thirty months, "informed us that the rest of our lands at Mount Royal and the upper parts of the River of St. Johns are good for nothing."²⁶

21. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1769.

22. *Ibid.*, May 29, 1769.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, April 19, 1769. According to Grant, Jollie had been in Georgia for medical care, see Grant to Egmont, September 11, 1769, BCM, LB.

25. Egmont to Grant, October 27, 1769, BCM 264.

26. *Ibid.*

Bitterness had not abated by May of 1770 when Egmont described the “universal discontent” among the London investors in Florida lands because of the ineptitude, definance, and dishonesty of their agents. He warned that unless this problem was resolved, efforts to promote the colony “will be rendered totally ineffectual and your province will be disgraced and ruined.”²⁷

Grant was stung by the criticism and lashed back. Conceding that Martin Jollie had been slow and dilatory, the governor said that he had tried to hurry the agent to “force a settlement at Amelia,” but charges of dishonesty were unfair as he had “not a doubt about his integrity.”²⁸ Since the power to coerce or reprimand agents could be used to abuse and destroy as well as to assist the absentee landlords, Grant felt it fortunate that the governor’s powers gave him “only a narrow field to go upon” in this area.²⁹

The governor was clearly perturbed that Egmont had not been a bit more patient with the Mount Royal project. After the arduous work of clearing the forest and digging, dredging, damming, and draining the swamps had been completed, a crop was finally ready to harvest in September 1770, yet Egmont ordered the plantation abandoned and the work force moved to Amelia Island. In his letters to Egmont and to all grantees, the governor had warned that quick profits were seldom possible where large initial investments were needed to assemble a capable labor force. Plantations were difficult and expensive to establish, but once accomplished, a steady profit could be realized. Grant accordingly countermanded Egmont’s order to abandon Mount Royal and instructed Frances Levett to keep a portion of the workers there until the fifty acres of rice and the fields of corn, peas, and indigo had been harvested.³⁰

In December 1770, before his East Florida plantation experiments had begun to show profits, Lord Egmont died.³¹ James

27. *Ibid.*, May 11, 1770.

28. Grant to Egmont, July 18, 1770, BCM, LB: see also *ibid.*, September 11, 1769.

29. *Ibid.*, September 5, 1770.

30. *Ibid.*; for examples of Grant’s advice to other British absentee landlords, see Grant to Thomas Thoroton, September 1, 1766, and Grant to John Tucker, September 1, 1766, BCM 659; Grant to Earl of Cassillis, February 9, 1768, and Grant to Earl of Moira, June 20, 1768, BCM, LB.

31. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, II, 3.

Grant heard the entire dismal economic history of Egmont's Florida ventures from estate executors: Martin Jollie had drawn over four times his allotment for any one year; Frances Levett continued this pattern and was replaced by Stephen Egan, a young man from one of Egmont's Irish estates. The executors ordered Mount Royal abandoned, with the hope that it could be rented out, and the slaves transferred to Amelia Island. They complained that Lord Egmont had "expended amazing large sums, upwards of £12,000 in endeavoring to establish a plantation. . . . We do not find that to this period of time, any returns of profit have been made."³² With all his abilities and resources, even Lord Egmont had been unable to achieve financial success in Florida, causing the executors to worry: "We may justly tremble for any future attempt of ours."

The executors sent Egan to "the Villa," Governor Grant's plantation near St. Augustine, to observe the highly successful methods of indigo production practiced there, Egan was instructed to become a resident superintendent, living at Amelia, directing indigo production, and personally sending monthly accounts and letters to Lady Egmont.³³ Estate executor Henry Drummond told Egan in November 1774 that the journals could be discontinued as "your whole conduct meets with universal approbation."³⁴

In May 1775 Lady Egmont sent two hogsheads of portar to Egan, along with a large Cheshire cheese as a mark of her appreciation. Henry Drummond sent along samples of French indigo, which was then in demand in England, with instructions to sort carefully by color in order to bring a higher return. In December 1774 Egan had shipped 2,095 pounds of indigo to London, which sold for an average price of four shillings and sixpence per pound. Since Governor Grant's indigo' brought much higher prices, Egan was encouraged to consult again with

32. Henry Drummond to Grant, March 7, 1771, BCM 264. In addition to Drummond, the executors were Brownlow Cust, John Cust, John Holliday, and Thomas W. Partington; see also Countess Egmont to Grant, February 6, 1771, BCM 470.

33. John Holliday to Stephen Egan, January 28, 1772, British Museum, London, Additional Manuscripts 47054 A, Egmont Papers, folio 39 (hereinafter BM 47054 A followed by the folio number).

34. Drummond to Egan, November 1, 1774, BM 47054 A, 44; see also *ibid.*, December 23, 1773, 41.

Alexander Skinner, the manager of "the Villa."³⁵

It was at this time that William Bartram, the Philadelphia naturalist, visited Egmont plantation. Bartram's brief remarks are perhaps the only recorded observations of what Egmont had called the Lordship of Amelia: "After walking through a spacious forest of live Oaks and Palms, and crossing a creek that ran through a narrow salt marsh, I and my fellow traveller arrived safe at the plantation, where the agent, Mr. Egan, received us very politely and hospitably. This gentleman is a very intelligent and able planter, having already greatly improved the estate, particularly in the cultivation of indigo. Great part of this island consists of excellent hommocky land, which is the soil this plant delights in, as well as cotton, corn, batatas, and almost every other esculent vegetable. Mr. Egan politely rode with me, over great part of the island. On Egmont estate, are several very large Indian tumuli, which are called Ogeeche mounts . . . [where] their bones [are] intombed in these heaps of earth and shells. I observed here the ravages of the common grey catterpillar, so destructive to forest and fruit trees in Pennsylvania."³⁶

Following Bartram's visit, he was transported by Egan in "a handsome pleasure-boat, manned with four stout negro slaves, to row in case of necessity," over the inland waterway to the St. Johns River and on to the Cowford (present-day Jacksonville).³⁷ Egan then went overland to St. Augustine, and Bartram continued his explorations upriver.

In July 1776 the 65,500 acres of East Florida land in Egmont's estate, along with the rents, issues, and profits, were divided among the widow Catherine Perceval, Countess of Egmont, and their sons, Charles George, Spencer, Henry, Philip Tufton, and Edward. The Florida lands carried names derived from Egmont titles and lands in Britain: Lordship of Arden, Lordship of

35. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1775, 45. The indigo export data comes from John Holmes, Deputy Collector of Customs, St. Augustine, Account Excerpts from the Port of St. Augustine, December 24, 1774, enclosed in Patrick Tonyn to Lord Dartmouth, January 23, 1775, Public Record Office, London, Colonial Office, 5/555, no. 13. The total export of indigo for 1774 was 22, 129 pounds, with Governor Grant's "Villa" producing 5,460 of it, more than double Egan's output of 2,094, and he was the second leading exporter of indigo.

36. Francis Harper, ed., *The Travels of William Bartram: Naturalist's Edition* (New Haven, 1958), 42-43.

37. *Ibid.*, 46.

Amelia Island, Lordship of Compton, Lovel Bark, Lordship of Gant, Lovel Parva, Lordship of Gournay, Lordship of Holland, and Lordship of Somerset.³⁸

The Amelia Island plantation continued under Egan's direction to the satisfaction of all parties until it was destroyed during the American Revolution. After receiving reports of the "destruction of our plantation on Amelia Island," Lady Egmont and Charles George Perceval wrote to Egan, reaffirming their belief that Egan has "consistently done the best you could do for us. . . . Your attachment to the interests of our family shall neither go unnoticed or unrewarded."³⁹

Egan moved the slaves south to Cecilton plantation on the St. Johns River where they were still producing naval stores on January 1, 1785, when a census was conducted and sent to the Percevals, giving them some indication of the people and their lives in Florida. Listed as property were seventy-eight persons, including fourteen families and eighteen single men. Three had died shortly before—Robin of drowning, Nero of dropsy, and Peter of old age. Juba, Joe, Nestor, Hannibal, and Pan had run away to join the Indians in Georgia.⁴⁰

Also living with Egan were his wife and three sons. He had personal property of 100 wild horses still somewhere on Amelia Island, and thirty head of cattle and twenty-two slaves living at Cecilton, which Spanish officials located "on the St. Johns River, two miles nearer than the Cow Ford."⁴¹

The Perceval slaves were almost all working at production of naval stores in 1785. Listed in the census were Dick, a driver and a sawyer who "understands every branch of naval stores well." Charles was master of many skills, a sawyer, squarer, hunter, and a field slave who also "understands management of horses and cattle." Billy and Castilio were both carpenters and coopers; Ned was a sawyer who "makes Turpentine, Pitch and Tar"; while his wife Diana could cook, wash and iron, and "spin Cotton exceed-

38. Estate Settlement, July 23, 1776, BM 47054 A, 47. There was also a tract of 10,000 acres named Jollie's Land, which included Mount Royal. The tracts are also identified by the name of the original "Adventurers": Woods, Crisp, Fortrey, and Morrison.

39. *Ibid.*, Lady Egmont and Charles George Perceval to Egan, July 28, 1783, 49.

40. *Ibid.*, Return of Lady Egmont's and Lord Arden's Negroes, January 1, 1785, 53.

41. Spanish Census of 1783, copy at the St. Augustine Historical Society office.

ingly well." From February through March 12, Egan sold lumber worth £120 and shipped tar and oars worth £233.⁴²

By 1785, however, British East Florida had been returned to Spain and most British subjects had either left the province or were making plans to leave. Patrick Tonyn, East Florida's second governor, wrote to the Percevals on June 20, 1785, from the ship *Cyrus*, as it prepared to sail from the St. Marys River with the last of the Loyalists. Egan had tried to sell the Negroes in Florida but failed to get a good price and prudently took them to Dominica, where Governor Orde had promised to provide land, tools, and provisions.⁴³

Egan wrote on September 4, 1785, to inform his employers of the chaotic recent events. During the voyage to Dominica, Minto had died, but he had been "long-time sick in Florida"; the others had been sickly at first arrival but had all recovered. Some were raising buildings on land granted by Governor Orde (thirty acres per worker), and others were hired out to clear and cultivate land. In just a few months at Dominica the workers had earned £454.⁴⁴

Egan recommended that the Negroes not be sold since prices were depressed by the prevailing political uncertainties. He reminded the Percevals that they owned "a number of very valuable young Negroes who [could become] very useful in the coffee business," which commonly provided "a permanent revenue" only five years after the trees were planted.⁴⁵ The older slaves could pick and clean the coffee, and with such a healthy group of workers regularly birthing children, Egan predicted a profitable future at Dominica.

Charles George Perceval, Lord Arden by then, had taken charge of the Egmont estate and was unwilling to await a future return. Blaming Egan for not communicating promptly, Perceval instructed Governor Orde to sell the Negroes and to pay Egan's £100 annual salary out of the proceeds of the sale.⁴⁶ Egan's letters to Perceval explaining the chaotic conditions attending

42. Copy of Accounts Current to March 17, 1785, Certified by Governor Tonyn, BM 47054 A, 57-58.

43. *Ibid.*, Tonyn to Egmont Estate, June 20, 1785, 59.

44. *Ibid.*, Egan to Lords, September 4, 1785, 61; folios 69, 71, 72, 76, and 83 have assorted accounts through September 26, 1786.

45. *Ibid.*, Egan to Lords, September 4, 1785, 61.

46. *Ibid.*, Lord Arden to Egan, October 2, 1785, 65.

the transfer from British to Spanish rule and the futility of writing while aboard ship were ignored, as were copies of earlier Perceval letters praising Egan for long and loyal service.⁴⁷ On September 26, 1786, Governor Orde forwarded the net proceeds from the sale, £3,647, to Perceval and dismissed Egan as directed.⁴⁸

In September 1788 trustees of Egmont estate submitted a claim to Parliament for £26,460 for land, Negroes, and other losses sustained by the cession of East Florida to Spain.⁴⁹ By then Egan and the Negro workers had been gone from East Florida for three years. The lordship of Amelia Island and the other Egmont properties in Florida had been abandoned and would soon be forgotten.

East Florida plantation development under Lord Egmont had been dismal at first, but had stabilized shortly after his death. Steady profits were realized by Egmont's heirs for more than a decade, despite the chaos attending the American Revolution and the cession of the province by the British government.

47. *Ibid.*, Egan to Arden, January 4, 1786, 67.

48. *Ibid.*, Governor Orde to Arden, September 26, 1786, 79, 80, 83.

49. *Ibid.*, Copy of East Florida Claims, September 6, 1788, 84.