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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Letter from West Florida in 1768

by ROBIN F. A. FABEL

IT has been generally accepted by historians writing on the subject that “there is little evidence that the inhabitants of West Florida were particularly aware of events such as the Sugar Act, Colonial Currency Acts, Townshend Acts. . .” and that “the inhabitants actually were little aware of the disturbances occurring in the northern colonies. . . .”¹ The author of the following letter would not have agreed. His letter demonstrates that he was no Tory, had read Dickinson’s *Letter of a Pennsylvania Farmer*, and was well aware of the “disturbances occurring in the northern colonies.”

The writer’s prime grievance was local. London’s decision to abandon frontier forts in the interests of economy hurt West Florida more than most provinces. West Florida needed settlers if it were to prosper. Many settlers feared Indians and would stay away from areas, however rich their soil, when military protection disappeared. Riverine commerce too, very important to West Florida, would suffer from evacuation of the garrisons of the forts at Natchez, Baton Rouge and Manchac, all on the Mississippi. Soldiers were customers as well as protectors and West Florida’s fragile economy could ill stand the withdrawal northward of several hundred troops.

The anonymous author deplored the use of these same troops elsewhere to enforce obedience to parliamentary acts. He surely had in mind the act of 1767 imposing duties on tea, glass, red and white lead, painter’s colors and paper known as the Townshend duties. Using soldiers to collect duties to which colonists had not assented, the author thought impractical and unjust.

He could not see why British subjects in America should not have the same rights as subjects in Britain from what the author saw

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1. J. Barton Starr; *Tories, Dons and Rebels: The American Revolution in British West Florida*, (Gainesville, 1976), 36, 45.

as a “happy” constitution. The author’s stance is similar to that of John Dickinson, author of *Letters of a Pennsylvania Farmer*, in that he advocates conciliation, not force. Like most Americans in 1768, this author looked for concessions, not independence, from Britain.

Implicit in this letter is dissatisfaction with Montfort Browne who acted as governor pending arrival of John Elliot. Browne was notorious for absenteeism, rapacity, and resisting the constitutional demands of West Florida’s vigorous legislators, one of whom may have been the author of this letter. We do not know the names of the author, or of the recipient of the letter.

What we do know, as this letter proves, is that although their province itself had no newspaper, West Floridians were getting news of the prerevolutionary debate from elsewhere, and at least one was convinced that the British were in the wrong.

From the *Georgia Gazette*, December 28, 1768

Philadelphia, Nov 3

Extract of a letter from Pensacola of September 27.

“I have no agreeable news to tell you of this place— it has lately declined very much, and a good deal from want of men of influence at home. By some extraordinary orders lately received from Gen. Gage, the out forts are all to be abandoned, and the two regiments (three companies only to be expected) to embark for East Florida. There seems such an absurdity in withdrawing troops from a frontier province, surrounded by numerous nations of Indians, to place them in an interior country, that we are at a loss to reconcile, by any motives whatsoever, such a very singular measure. It is suggested that you Sons of Liberty are the cause of the troops being drawn (from different parts) to the northward, in order to enforce your obedience to the late acts of parliament. It may be so and even was such a step to prove equal to the purpose (which appears impossible) what in the end can be gained by it, but the submission of a people, governed by laws, to which they never gave their concurrence, laws which they deem incompatible with our happy constitution, and which they will no longer obey, than they are compelled thereto by a superior force? It is greatly to be wished some medium could be found out to end these contests with honor to both parties,

which seems an impossibility.

It is a strange consideration, that crossing the Atlantic should make such a difference in the privileges of a free people and that the government of the colonies and that of England should be so opposite under the same constitution, to make slaves of the one and freemen of the other. I would recommend it to you all, as the only expedient that can be fallen upon to save the honor of both, that you embark for England and acquaint the King and Parliament, that as you find the sons of Great Britain cannot live in America and enjoy their birthright, that you thought fit to return to your Mother Country, where it cannot be withheld from you; and that you have left the army in America to take off the goods and merchandize of the Mother Country, and that you are come to assist them in their manufactures. If I have digressed you must lay it to account of the Pennsylvania Farmer, that very excellent performance of your Patriot Mr. D[ickinson].

To return to this province. We have had a meeting of the General Assembly, and addressed his Majesty, with a memorial to the Secretary of State for America, representing the present state of the province, and implored the support and protection of our Mother Country. Nothing keeps us almost from a state of despair, but the daily expectation of our new Governor's arrival, which we hope will once more give life and spirit to the province."