

The Saltwater Frontier: Specialists in Survival

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My design in this paper is to bring the history of Florida forward within the framework of the wars for empire. You and I know that those wars will eventually depopulate the interior of the peninsula and turn it into a magnet for all the wrong people: runaway slaves, backcountry squatters, and Indians on the losing side of the Redstick War. But as historians, we try to enjoy the ride and not keep asking, are we there yet? So let me take you back to the long 17th century, when people no more knew what lay ahead of them than we know what's going to happen two centuries from now.

Spanish Florida was a by-product of Spain's imperial wars. It was not an isolated, landlocked frontier like New Mexico, but a saltwater frontier exposed to enemies by land and sea. The colony had a hard time attracting non-military settlers, and its economy never quite took off. *Detached* from Spain's record of ideology-driven interventions and desperate fiscal measures, the presidio's problems with supplies and manpower seem to come out of nowhere, and it is easy to conclude that the fault lies with the personnel, especially when one reads the correspondence of Franciscans and governors, blaming one another.¹ *Entangled* with the histories of five seaborne empires--Spain, France, England, Portugal, and the Netherlands,² plus assorted buccaneers--Spanish Florida is revealed to be part of the Atlantic world, and its problems are those of a periphery forced to shift for itself when the center's resources go elsewhere, as Spain's often did: silver by the ton to finance the Spanish Armada, the Flanders Road, or the suppression of the Revolts of Catalonia and Portugal. So let's take a look at what the maritime powers were doing in the Americas between 1560 and 1700 and see how their actions affected this saltwater frontier, directly and indirectly. We'll begin in the South Atlantic, where circumstances in Brazil were eerily parallel to those in Florida.

The Portuguese, who had discovered Brazil by chance, were more interested in their trade with the East than in anything the Americas had to offer, but not so the French. For fifty years after 1500, ships from Normandy came regularly to trade with the Tupi Indians for *pau de brasil*, a dyewood, and the French began to think that they should have an outpost in Antarctic France to match their outposts on the St. Lawrence waterway. Sponsored by Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon arrived at Guanabara Bay in 1555 with a large labor force and began building a stone fort on an island. A martinet and lay theologian, Villegagnon soon alienated the local Norman traders, their friends the Tupi, and his own laborers, who began deserting to the mainland. In 1560 Portuguese admiral Mem de Sá destroyed what was left of the French fort and replaced it with a settlement called Rio de Janeiro.³

The French had also been ubiquitous in the north Atlantic. In the northern part of "La Nouvelle France," their fur trade with the Indians began as a sideline to the cod fisheries.⁴ In the southern part, "La Floride," Indians greeted French ships with salvaged goods, castaways, sassafras, and ambergris. Five years after giving up on Brazil, Coligny persuaded Catherine de Médici to authorize a similar venture in Florida under Jean de Ribault. Leaving a small garrison at Charlesfort, in Port Royal Sound, Ribault went off to get the men and supplies to make the post permanent. In France, however, the Wars of Religion had broken out, and his sponsor Coligny was sitting in prison. Ribault went to England, where the queen helped him to assemble a fleet, then let him cool his heels in the Tower while she turned the fleet over to a privateer said to be her half brother. Meanwhile, Coligny, ransomed and released, sent René de Laudonnière with three ships to build Fort Caroline near the mouth of the St. Johns.⁵ Ribault would bring reinforcements and take command.

Philip II, who had been tracking Ribault's activities through ambassadors' reports, was ready. Spain had been dealing with French corsairs in the Antilles since 1534.⁶ The king made a proposal to Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, an Asturian with experience in the armadas. If Menéndez would put together a fleet and drive out the "Lutherans," he could have the title and privileges of an *adelantado*, or lord of the marches. Ribault and his relief expedition won the race across the Atlantic, but Menéndez was a canny seaman. Unloading part of his supplies at the harbor of St. Augustine, he sent his larger ships south to safety just hours ahead of a hurricane. Ribault, with his lighter ships, gave chase. Battling high winds, Menéndez and his men marched north and captured Fort Caroline, while the French fleet was caught in the storm and wrecked along the coast. When two bands of French castaways walked up the beach to an inlet they could not cross, Menéndez met them, took them captive, and cut their throats.⁷ Apologists have explained that he had no choice, but Menéndez did not apologize, nor did his biographer, chaplain Gonzalo Solís de Merás.⁸ St. Augustine, founded five years after Rio de Janeiro, was thus the second of two Iberian responses to the designs of Admiral Coligny, who would die as a Huguenot on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1572.

The French were not through with Brazil, of course, and Portuguese efforts to punish the Indians who traded with them led to civil wars up and down the coast and thousands of Indian slaves for the sugar plantations. In the 1590s, the French and their native allies moved to Ceará, an arid region in the north that was hard to reach by sea, and established themselves on the island of Maranhão to trade with Amazonia. When they were driven out in 1615, Amazonia became the Portuguese State of Maranhão, a separate entity from the State of Brazil.⁹

The French were not through with Florida, either. In 1568, a Gascon corsair, Dominique de Gourgues, helped the local Timucuan to attack the blockhouses guarding the mouth of the St. Johns and destroy Fort Caroline, renamed San Mateo.¹⁰ In 1577, the ship *Principe*, carrying prince Nicholas Strozzi, a cousin of Catherine de Médici, was shipwrecked near Santa Elena, in what is now South Carolina. Governor Pedro Menéndez Marquez recovered a hundred of the castaways, whom he accused of disseminating their "evil sect" among the Indians and searching out the "secrets of the land," and, obeying the king's command, executed them all, foregoing Strozzi's ransom. In 1580 some French vessels were reported trading with the Indians at the mouth of the St. Johns, and the governor hurried up to engage them in a naval skirmish that an officer reported in a *romancero* fit to inspire a don Quixote. In 1605, Governor Pedro de Ybarra trapped a ship in the Savannah River and captured 21 corsairs. With the help of visiting bishop Juan de las Cabezas Altamirano, Ybarra restored 20 of them to the bosom of the Church and gave them Christian burial after carrying out their sentences.¹¹

Portugal's trade with India and the Moluccas did not normally bring its ships into the Florida ambit, but in 1617, remarkably, Captain Juan Rodríguez de Cartaya, on his way to Spain with dispatches, came upon an enormous Portuguese galleon listing on her side. With her 600-man crew stricken by the plague, she had drifted across the Atlantic to fetch up at Santa Elena. At the risk of their lives, Rodríguez and his men righted the galleon and sailed her to the port of Sagres, to claim a reward for the rescue of vessel and cargo.¹²

Spain and England did not start out as enemies. Henry VIII's first wife was Spanish, and his first daughter, Mary Tudor, married a Spanish prince. As late as the 1560s, when his second daughter, Elizabeth I, confiscated Ribault's fleet and John Hawkins stopped by Fort Caroline in his ship, *The Jesus of Lübeck*, the English were still hoping to trade with Spain's colonies.¹³ But when it became clear that the king of Spain wanted no partners, and when the queen of England beheaded the queen of Scots, gave aid to Dutch rebels, and smiled on seadogs, Anglo-Spanish relations turned sour. By 1585, the two countries were at war, and the Spanish Armada of 1588 was meant to bring down the wrath of God on Philip's heretical sister-in-law.¹⁴

In Spanish America, an important feature of the Anglo-Spanish war (1585-1603) was inflation. The price of wheat flour in St. Augustine doubled, while a soldier's pay remained constant¹⁵--and by now an increasing number of soldiers were family men with Indian wives.¹⁶ Another feature of the war was *über* piracy, in particular Sir Francis Drake, *El Draque*, turned loose on Spanish ports. His fleet's stopover at St. Augustine, after sacking Cartagena, was a major event in Florida, where the parish register goes back to 1586, "the year the books were burned."¹⁷ Yet, although Drake destroyed the buildings in St. Augustine, cut down the fruit trees, and either emptied the king's coffer or found it empty, the Spanish decided to consolidate their forces there, abandoning the less strategic harbor of Santa Elena. When Drake and Hawkins returned to the Indies with a fleet in 1595, gunner Gonzalo Méndez de Canzo's expert deployment of the shore batteries at San Juan foiled the English attack on Puerto Rico and earned him the Florida governorship.¹⁸

The next enemies to appear on the scene were the Dutch, whose republic, the United Provinces, emerged during their eighty-year war (1568-1648) against the Spanish Habsburgs and their two empires, Spanish and Portuguese.¹⁹ Using the printing press as a weapon, propagandists in Amsterdam churned out lurid accounts of Spanish cruelty and avarice, with woodcuts by Theodore de Bry. The massacres in Florida, like the atrocity stories recounted by Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas, gave support to their charges against the Duke of Alva, who had suppressed the original Revolt of the Netherlands.²⁰

When Spain and Portugal were dynastically linked in 1580, the Dutch seized the opportunity to attack the Portuguese seaborne empire, forming the East India Company to capture Goa, Macao, and other trading posts in Asia. After the Twelve Year Truce, ending in 1621, they added the West India Company to prey on Iberian shipping and ports in the Atlantic.²¹ During the 17th century, the WIC captured the Angolan port of Luanda and established one colony at the Cape of Good Hope and another, New Netherland, on the Hudson River, and put trading posts and plantations on Guiana's four main rivers: Berbice, Essequibo, Demerara, and Suriname.²² Vowing to produce sugar as well as carry it, the WIC launched a campaign against northeastern Brazil, where in 1630 they captured Pernambuco.²³ The welcome that many *conversos* gave to the Dutch in Brazil, followed by the Revolt of Portugal in 1640, raised doubts about the members of the *Nação* who resided in Spanish colonies and led to a revival of the Inquisition in Lima and Mexico City.²⁴

The Dutch, regarding themselves as natural allies of American Indians against the Spaniards, offered their aid to native peoples along the seaways and even passed through the Straits of Magellan to visit the "Peruvians" of the "South Sea."²⁵ Admiral Hendrick Brouwer stopped at the island of Chiloé, Chile, in 1643 with five ships and offered to help the Araucanians liberate America. The "wilden," or wild men, accepted his gifts of weapons, but would not agree to feed an invading army without two years' notice, and before the Dutch could set sail, they swarmed aboard their ships and stripped them.²⁶

So how did the animosity between the Dutch and the Spanish affect Florida? The fleets of the West India Company had to return to Europe on the same Gulf Stream, running the length of Florida, as other ships, and like everyone else, they traded in shipwreck salvage with the Indians of the Wild Coast when they stopped to take on wood and water. Between June and October, Dutch corsairs lurked off Cape Canaveral, waiting for the silver fleet bound for Spain, but willing to attack almost anything. In 1627, for example, a Dutch ship with 200 musketeers drove a Spanish frigate aground near the town of Ais, salvaged her cargo, and burned her to the waterline. By the time the crew could return with reinforcements from St. Augustine, 40 leagues to the north, the Dutch were gone.²⁷

The next year, 1628, Dutch Admiral Piet Heyn bottled up the Fleet of the Indies in Matanzas Harbor, Cuba, and captured the year's silver shipment, including two annual subventions, or *situados*, on their

way to St. Augustine. Replacing a lost situado could take years, for the treasury in Mexico City had other claims on its funds, and Spain, fighting on multiple fronts as the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) overlapped with the renewed Dutch War (1621-1648), was in no position to instruct a viceroy on fiscal management.²⁸ In 1638, the Crown was forced to seize the situado bound for Florida in the port of Havana to satisfy its European creditors.²⁹ Florida governors did not protest the Crown's measures; veterans of Spain's wars in Flanders, Catalonia, the Barbary Coast, Sicily, and the Philippines, they understood wartime exigencies.

Fortunately for Spain in America, the shareholders of the West India Company were beginning to see that commerce yielded better returns than piracy or plantation running, and they began divesting the company of its less profitable colonies by withholding the means to defend them. The Portuguese recovered Dutch Brazil in 1654.³⁰ And the English captured New Netherland in 1664, renaming it New York in honor of the king's brother, duke of York. In three Anglo-Dutch Wars, the English challenged the Dutch carrying trade, and by the last third of the 17th century English naval power had replaced the Dutch, but the *holandeses* of New York stayed on as merchants, offering under-supplied ports a timely, if irregular, service. Captain Philip Frederic, a Dutchman out of New York, regularly stopped by St. Augustine with news and supplies and once, in 1683, with the governor's son, whom he had ransomed from buccaneers on Anclote Key. As a neutral, Frederic could go anywhere.³¹

England's 16th-century attempts to gain a foothold in the Americas had been unproductive, from the fiasco at Roanoke, on which the governor of Florida sent reports,³² to the failure to find gold in the "bewtiful empire of Guiana."³³ The deaths of Philip II and Elizabeth I allowed the two nations to take a breather, which the English used to plant more durable colonies: Virginia, Bermuda, Plymouth, Barbados, and Massachusetts Bay. Florida's role was limited to coastguard services: rescuing castaways and checking out sightings of unidentified ships and fleets and rumors of foreign settlements.³⁴ A fear of letting enemies gain a foothold in the Gulf lay behind the Crown's decision to allow missionaries to enter western Timucua and Apalache and Governor Juan Fernández de Olivera's campaign to make the western rivers safe for Christianity with a Florida-built gunboat.³⁵ That "pacification," and the long-term salvaging of eight wrecks from a base on Matecumbe Key, are what turned the Suwannee and St. Marks rivers into outposts for Florida products, mostly deerskins, hides and tallow, and provisions for the fleets in Havana.³⁶

The English Civil War, which broke out in 1640, allowed the English overseas to consolidate their control of local governments and indulge their taste for contraband. When Parliament passed the First Navigation Act to keep the Dutch out of the carrying trade, English colonists were incensed, for the Dutch were the cheapest carriers around. During the Protectorate, Oliver Cromwell's Grand Design to supplant Spain in the West Indies resulted in the capture of Jamaica in 1655, with momentous consequences for Florida. First, Jamaica offered a place to send indentured servants who had completed their terms in Barbados, giving Barbadian planters time to contemplate a colony in Carolina. Second, it was the indirect cause of the Timucuan Rebellion of 1656. Expecting the English to proceed from Jamaica to Florida, Governor Diego de Rebolledo called up the militias of Timucua and Guale, but being unused to ethnic soldiers, he offended their chiefs, and by the time order was restored, Timucua, with a population already severely reduced by yellow fever, was virtually depopulated.³⁷ Third, as predicted, English Jamaica did become a den of pirates; until 1671, piracy was its principal support.³⁸ Robert Searles, the privateer who sacked St. Augustine in 1668, had a license from Jamaican governor Thomas Modyford, and his attack persuaded the queen regent and the viceroy of New Spain to increase the size of the Florida garrison and release the first instalment of funds for building the Castillo de San Marcos.³⁹

The founding of Charleston in 1670 prompted the *floridanos* to send three ships north to dislodge it, but bad weather turned them back, and before they could regroup, word came that Spain and England had signed a treaty of non-aggression, and Charleston was off limits.⁴⁰ The wars of Louis XIV in Europe were producing one anti-French alliance after another, and Spain was hard pressed to finance its continental campaigns. Defenses in the Indies were forgotten, as defenses will be when the theater of war moves elsewhere. The viceroy sent no supplies or soldiers to St. Augustine for five straight years, during which buccaneers had the run of the seaways, attacking Florida's presidio, outposts, ranches, and seaside towns at will,⁴¹ while Creeks armed with English guns raided the towns on the trans-peninsular road, in the Southeastern version of a proxy war.⁴² The Republic of Indians grew disaffected.⁴³ The *caciques'* participation in the colonial compact had always been conditional upon Spain's ability to wield magic, win wars, and keep its friends in gifts and trade goods.⁴⁴

What pulled the center's attention back to the peripheries was the rumor that the French had descended the Mississippi River and meant to establish a colony on the Gulf. The consequences were eleven different Spanish expeditions to find La Salle and, during the Anglo-French war of 1689-1697, which was more destructive in the Caribbean than in North America, two more expeditions: an overland attempt from New Spain to establish missions among the Caddos of East Texas, and renewed interest in the harbor of Panzacola, which the Spanish reoccupied in 1698, just two months before the French occupied Biloxi Bay, near the passage they had discovered into the Mississippi River.⁴⁵

When Charles II of Spain died in 1700, naming a grandson of Louis XIV as his heir, Spanish Florida did an about face. For good or ill, the French were now their allies, and the English, who viewed French activity in the Illinois country, the Arkansas Valley, and the Gulf as a scheme to encircle them, were now their enemies.⁴⁶ In the early years of the War of Spanish Succession (1700-1714), Carolina made two preemptive strikes. In 1702, Colonel James Moore, with an amphibious force, attacked the towns of Guale, then St. Augustine, whose 1000 some inhabitants took refuge inside their new stone fort.⁴⁷ The next winter, with an army of Creeks, Moore attacked the towns of Apalache, whose people scattered to Timucua, Pensacola, and parts unknown, declaring that they would not remain to die with Spaniards.⁴⁸

The provinces were gone, but not the presidio. In the 18th century, St. Augustine would increase in strength and size as the capital of East Florida, while Pensacola would develop into the capital of West Florida, one of several new colonies on the Gulf. Must we then conclude that the Saltwater Frontier was a failure? Considering the little material support that Spanish Florida received during the 17th century, the wonder is that it survived at all. The *gente de mar* and *gente de guerra*, men of the sea and of war, assigned to this "*tierra reputada por guerra viva*," or "land renowned for war," and the women who turned those rough men into settlers, must have been loyal, resourceful, and as tough as nails.

ENDNOTES

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7. Eugene Lyon, *The Enterprise of Florida: Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and the Spanish Conquest of 1565-1568* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976), see contract on pp. 213-219; McGrath, *The French in Early Florida*.
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 28. Hoffman, *The Spanish Crown and the Defense of the Caribbean*, 229.
 29. Bushnell, *Situado and Sabana*, 45; Lane, *Pillaging the Empire*, 67-70.
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 31. Hoffman, *Florida Frontiers*, 151; Bushnell, *The King's Coffers*, 89.
 32. On expeditions from Florida to the Chesapeake in the 1580s, see Hoffman, *A New Andalusia and a Way to the Orient*, 291-307.
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