

Who says Florida was never an English colony?

By Lester Dailey
PCHS member

Several years ago, a co-worker of mine visited Colonial Williamsburg and mentioned that she was from Florida. A costumed docent proceeded to tell her that in the 1770s, the era he was portraying, Florida was a Spanish colony, and Floridians were enemies of the English colonists in Virginia.

Wrong! For 20 years, from 1763 to 1783, Florida was as English as tea and crumpets. In fact, there were two Floridas in those days, and they were both English.

In the conflict known in this country as the French and Indian War, and globally as the Seven Years' War, England had captured Havana, Spain's principal seaport in the Americas. Spain wanted the city back, and offered its 200-year-old Florida colony in exchange. The British didn't especially want Florida, which they variously described as a "sandy desert" and a "peat bog." But Spanish troops in Florida were a threat to the English colonies in Georgia and the Carolinas so, in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, they agreed to the trade.

The Anglican British promised religious tolerance to Florida's Catholic inhabitants, but the inhabitants didn't trust the Brits. Most of them fled to

Cuba, Mexico or South America.

The British divided Florida in two. The peninsula was called East Florida, and its capital was at St. Augustine. West Florida, with its capital at Pensacola, stretched all the way from the Apalachicola River to the Mississippi River and included the Florida panhandle, as well as parts of present-day Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana.

What is now Pinellas County was largely uninhabited during the English period. But a few Spanish fishermen established winter fish camps on the barrier islands, where they caught and salted fish to take back to Cuba.

"On the Mullet Keys are huts built by the Spaniards who resort here for the purpose of fishing," cartographer Bernard Romans wrote in 1769.

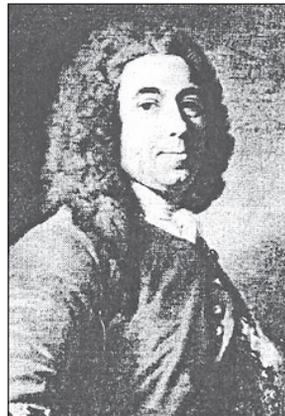
That alarmed some British officials in St. Augustine, who feared that the fishermen might be trying to recruit Indians for a Spanish plot to retake Florida. They urged Major Gen. James F. Grant, governor of East Florida, to send an expedition to oust the squatters, but Grant had other priorities.

During the American Revolution, Loyalists flocked to British Florida to escape the fighting and the wrath of their Patriot neighbors. But Britain lost the war, and the peace treaty returned Florida to America's ally, Spain.

Spain didn't reciprocate the religious tolerance England had shown its Florida colonists 20 years earlier. Catholicism was the only religion allowed in its colonies, so most Loyalists left for the Bahamas, Canada or England.

But a few die-hard Tories decided to stay in Florida and hatch a fantastic plot. They'd establish a Loyalist colony on the shores of Tampa Bay, one of Florida's best natural harbors.

There, protected by British warships, they'd hold out until Britain could trade Gibraltar, which Spain had long coveted, for Florida. But their plan fell apart when the British government decided that Gibraltar, which controlled the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, was worth far more than Florida would ever be worth.



Major General James F. Grant