

British Night Watch

Florida during the American Revolution

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Castillo de San Marcos National
Monument, St. Augustine,
Florida



The British Nightwatch recreates the celebration of the beginning of advent (in the Anglican Church the four Sundays preceding Yule or Christmastide) in British St. Augustine, December 1776.

A New Power Emerges

In 1763, the Seven Years' War, the first truly world war (the French and Indian War as it was called in America) came to an end. Great Britain (and her American colonies) had won against the combined forces of France and Spain. The armies of Great Britain had conquered Canada and several French-held islands in the Caribbean. They had also stormed and occupied Havana, Cuba, Spain's principal seaport and administrative headquarters for much of Spanish America and Manila in the Spanish Philippines, transshipment point of the wealth of the orient. The Treaty of Paris ending the war left Canada to the English, returned several Caribbean islands to the French, and traded Havana and Manila back to Spain in exchange for the province of Florida: Great Britain now controlled all of North America east of the Mississippi River. At that time, St. Augustine was still a garrison community with fewer than five hundred houses,

Southern Migration

When Florida was officially transferred to the English, most of the Spanish residents chose to depart for Cuba. (Some of those who emigrated, would return when Florida became Spanish again in 1784 and their descendants still live in St. Augustine today) This exodus temporarily depopulated the peninsula, but Florida was on the eve of the greatest population explosion since its initial colonization 200 years earlier. To calm Indian unrest on the frontiers the English Crown's *Proclamation of 1763* outlawed settlement west of the Appalachians. This promoted Florida as a new area of British colonization. Colonial pressure for land found a new outlet. Expansion, blocked to the west, moved south.

The British immediately divided Florida into two distinct colonies (the 14th & 15th in America) with the Apalachicola River as the boundary. St. Augustine remained the capital of East Florida, while Pensacola became the capital of West Florida. With poor road transportation and a treacherous voyage around the Florida Keys, the new arrangement of two separate colonies allowed more effective administration than the Spanish system. Florida was established as a Crown colony, administered by London, through appointed local Governors.

Prosperity & Hope

England had a strong desire to develop Florida for commercial trade. The London Board of Trade advertised 20,000 acre lots to any group willing to enter Florida. The land, however, had to be settled within ten years with one resident per 100 acres. While the Privy Council in London granted land titles, pioneer families could gain land grants at the two colonial capitals, St. Augustine in East Florida and Pensacola in West Florida. Former British soldiers were eligible for special grants. Each pioneer settler was given 100 acres of land and 50 acres per family member. To recruit Southerners, slavery was allowed. Under the able administration of Governor James Grant, 2,856,000 acres were so granted in East Florida.

There was much to celebrate in English Florida. Indian hostilities had for the most part ended and there had been peace in Florida for over ten years, the population of St. Augustine nearly doubled from its Spanish period, new houses were going up, old Spanish houses renovated and expanded, (most notably with second stories being added, almost all construction during the Spanish occupation was single story) Commerce and trade was growing, including cattle ranching, shipping, and plantation agriculture. Despite its youth the colony was showing promise of becoming a flourishing and productive area. But storm clouds were brewing to the north.

Rebellion

The French & Indian War changed the relationship between the northern colonies and their mother country. A decade of conflict over economic policy and control, beginning with the Stamp Act crisis in 1765, led to alienation among a rapidly growing population (over 2.5 million by 1776) which was increasingly of non-British origin. Attempts by the Crown to tighten governmental and fiscal control erupted into open rebellion with the outbreak of war in 1775 and the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Florida remained a loyalist stronghold throughout the war. Its population was newly arrived in America and had no history or experience of the growing commercial unrest and separatist democratic culture in the other colonies. Likewise the colony was dependent on English trade with little internal economic growth of its own. Enraged residents of St. Augustine burned effigies in the plaza of revolutionary leaders Sam Adams and John Hancock.

British Stronghold

St. Augustine as the capital of East Florida rapidly became a military stronghold and the central command post for operations in the southern colonies. England decided to utilize Florida as a staging area for British troops assigned to the South. Florida's warm climate would accustom British forces to the American heat and Florida could develop supplies for the British military.

The town quickly overflowed with British troops and a growing stream of loyalist refugees fleeing the fighting in the Carolinas and Georgia. Fort St. Marks (The renamed Castillo de San Marcos) was used as a supply base and a prisoner of war camp for captured rebels. Among these were three of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Heyward, Jr., Arthur Middleton, and Edward Rutledge.



Failure and Loss

Most of the war took place far north of Florida, but cross-border raids increased. In 1779, Spain took advantage of Britain's preoccupation with the colonies and invaded. By 1781, Britain had lost West Florida to Spain. The war's unpopularity and massive expense continued until by 1784, Britain was forced to concede American independence.

Having lost control of the majority of its colonies, Britain had little interest in keeping Florida. Now an isolated outpost it had little prospect of staying productive. On September 3, 1783 the Treaty of Paris was signed ending the American Revolution. In it Britain recognized the independence of the United States. Under separate treaty England ceded Florida back to Spanish control in exchange for the Bahaman Islands ending British Florida

Although Spain regained Florida, its rule was to be short lived. The newly formed United States now turned its attention to gaining control of and expanding its southern borders.

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