

The Siege of 1702

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



The War of Spanish Succession

The War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) was a major European conflict that spilled over into the Americas. It arose at the end of the 17th century in anticipation of the death of the last Spanish Habsburg king, Charles II. Mentally and physically infirm from a very young age, it was clear that Charles, though twice married, could not produce an heir. Thus, the issue of the inheritance of the Spanish kingdoms including not only Spain, but also dominions in Italy, the Low Countries, and the Americas became a contentious political problem. When Charles died the empire that was held by Spain would pass through the female side of this family to one of the other royal houses of Europe.

At issue was the balance of power in Europe. Divided into a complicated puzzle of states ruled by several dominant dynastic families, all jealous of each other and vying for the wealth of the new worlds of Africa, Asia and the Americas, Europe was almost constantly at or on the verge of war. There was a constant forming and shifting of alliances and treaties aimed at keeping a tenuous equality between states. Should any one nation gain too much power, the other countries would be threatened.

The Claimants to the Throne

There were three European royals who had substantial claims to the throne of Spain. The Bourbon King Louis XIV of France, the son of the eldest daughter of King Phillip III of Spain, whose wife was the sister of King Charles II of Spain, was considered the front runner. Leopold I, the Austrian Emperor, who was the son of the youngest daughter of King Phillip III of Spain, and the husband of Charles II of Spain's younger sister was seen a close second. The final claimant to Spain's throne was Joseph Ferdinand, the Electoral Prince of Bavaria, who was the grandson of Leopold I and the great-grandson of Phillip IV of Spain. While there were a number of legal questions surrounding the claims to the throne of Spain, the ultimate concern of every nation in Europe was a shift in power that would occur depending on who succeeded to the throne. With this strategic question in mind, another power viewed this as a time for action.

On the other side of the English Channel, William III of England saw the potential joining of France with Spain as a tremendous threat to England's hopes in the New World as well as to the peace of Europe. William began to make overtures to other powers in Europe to form an alliance against whatever the outcome of the Spanish Succession might be. Ultimately, all the maneuvering by the claimants to the throne was for nothing. After Charles II died, on November 1, 1700, his will set all claims to rest by designating Phillip of Anjou, the grandson of Louis XIV of France, as his chosen heir to the throne of Spain and the empire is its entirety. The war William had feared was inevitable.

World War

In March of 1702, William III of England died, leaving his dead wife's sister, Anne, as the Queen of England. In May, 1702, William III's Grand Alliance, England, Austria, Brandenburg-Prussia, the Netherlands, most of the German states, and Portugal with the leadership of Queen Anne and her ministers, declared war on France and Spain. Their opening movement was an attack on the Spanish Netherlands in what would be a head-long rush toward a war that would encompass the globe. When the sides are considered, it is easy to see that there was no other path to be followed.

On first look, the Grand Alliance would seem quite the match for Spain and France, but this was only the case in appearance. The majority of the alliance's members were small nations with no true power unless they banded together with larger nations. Spain had been a global imperial power for two hundred years by the start of the war, while France, under Louis XIV, had been moving toward becoming the dominant power on the European continent. With Spain, France, and England all having colonial holdings overseas, it would only be a matter of time before war broke out among the people in those colonies in the name of their home countries and kings.

Carolina Declares War

To any intelligent Englishman in North America, it must have seemed obvious where the primary threat to Charles Towne, Carolina was. Only a week's sail to the south, the strong Spanish fortress, of Castillo de San Marcos, and the garrison at San Agustín were like a loaded gun aimed at the heart of the Carolina Colony. Something needed to be done about San Agustín. In late August of 1702, on hearing of the outbreak of Queen Anne's War, the Carolina Commons started to entertain the idea of an attack against the Spanish in *La Florida*.

By early September, the Commons approved the plan for an attack, proclaiming “the Encouragement to free Plunder and a share of all Slaves,” and “all persons that go on this expedition shall have an equal share of all the plunder.” At the head of the expedition the Commons placed James Moore, the governor of the colony and the man whose idea the attack on Spanish outpost had been.

Moore was not a military man. He was a colonial planter of some success who was described as an “ambitious, active, aggressive high-churchman, an outspoken colonist, and a ruthless slave dealer.” He was known to hate and think lightly the Spanish, while at the same time holding the French in respect and fear. While he was seen as a powerful man, the Commons still thought it best to place at his side Colonel Robert Daniel, who had been considered for leadership of the expedition. It was thought that Daniel’s military experience would improve the chances of success.

The Siege of San Agustin

Commanding the Spanish at San Agustin would be Joseph de Zuniga y Zerda, the governor of Spanish Florida. Zuniga was a man of over twenty years experience with the Spanish military in a number of different posts throughout the empire. Often described as “a thoughtful, inspiring, and cautious leader,” Zuniga would prove himself in the defense of Saint Augustine. As early as October 27th intelligence of an impending English attack was coming in from the frontier through Spain’s Indian allies. Zuniga quickly began to arrange the men and material he had to work with. He called for the recent harvest to be brought from the farms to the town to be stored, all livestock was also to be driven in and corralled in the dry moat of the Castillo de San Marcos. These supplies along with the two months worth of rations already in the storerooms at the Castillo would allow the garrison to hold on until help arrived from the nearest Spanish post. Unfortunately this was Havana, Cuba. Upon receiving the news of an impending attack Zuniga sent word to Havana, Pensacola, French Mobile, and his own outlying posts in La Florida asking for additional troops and aid. But it could take two to three months before reinforcements might arrive. Zuniga called his own reserve officers and militia to active duty and barred anyone from leaving the town without his permission.

The English had been underway by ship for more than a week by the time Zuniga and the Spanish had learned that they were moving on San Agustin. Early in October, Moore had moved with his nine ships to Port Royal (Beaufort, SC) to await the arrival of Daniel and their Indian allies before pushing on to San Agustin. Moore’s fleet left Port Royal on October 16th bound for Florida. While the English forces were out to sea, the Spanish would have no intelligence until the English came ashore somewhere in *La Florida* to attack.

Moore’s forces landed at midnight November 3rd, attacking the Spanish mission at the north end of Amelia Island. The English and Indian attack was fast paced and fierce, the attacking forces taking full advantage of fear and surprise. They held all of the island and its missions by the end of November 4th. With the loss of the outposts on Amelia and with knowledge of his own garrison’s weaknesses, Zuniga made the decision to use the strength of the Castillo to hold out until a Spanish relief force could arrive to break a siege. Preparations began immediately for the city to take refuge within the Castillo’s walls. At dawn on the 8th of November, while Zuniga was inspecting the Castillo’s artillery, the English fleet hove into view off the mouth of the inlet. All that day and into the next, supplies and equipment were moved into the Castillo as the English fleet moved to blockade the harbor of San Agustin. On the 9th, with the arrival of Spanish refugees from the surrounding countryside came word of an English Army moving overland toward the city. With this knowledge, the evacuation to the Castillo sped up so that by the 10th November all of those who thought themselves citizens of Spain, almost 1500 people, had taken refuge inside the Castillo.

The English land forces arrived burning the Mission at Nombre de Dios a few hundred yards north of the fortress. This attack was broken up by a Spanish patrol stampeding of 163 head of cattle through the forming English lines and down into the Castillo’s moat. That day also saw the garrison’s greatest tragedy when while firing one of the forts old 16-pound iron cannon in the San Pablo bastion, the gun exploded killing three men including the bastion’s gun captain and wounding five others.

The attack now settled into a set piece siege. Unable to attack the Castillo by assault the English began to surround the fort and cut off its supplies. Digging a series of trenches the English inched closer to the Castillo attempting to get their cannon in a position to try to breach its walls. The Spanish fired on the English whenever opportunity presented to slow their progress. By November 22, the English realized their smaller cannons were ineffective against the fortress walls. They sent to Jamaica for larger cannon, mortars, and bombs. The heaviest fighting during the siege was November 25th, when both sides engaged in a twenty-four hour gun duel that included both sides setting fire to sections of the city to clear lanes for firing.

On Christmas eve, supply ships from Charles Towne arrived in support of Moore’s forces, but this was followed on the 26th by the arrival of the much hoped for Spanish relief force from Havana in the form of four Spanish men-of-war. His position untenable in the face of a fresh army behind him and the Castillo still before him Moore’s attack was over. After setting their ships ablaze the English troops marched up the beach toward the mouth of the St. Johns River. Daniels troops and Indians marched up the inland waterway after burning the rest of Saint Augustine to the ground.

Aftermath

The siege lifted the Spanish began to refortify and strengthen the city and the Castillo. The English retreated but continued to strengthen their American colonies. Despite victory or defeat in this small colonial outpost, the conflicting interests in Europe would continue to create warfare across the globe. St. Augustine would be attacked again; it would only be a question of time. The Spanish here were determined to be ready.

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