British East Florida, 1763 - 1783

The British Take Over Florida

Florida belonged to Great Britain from 1763 to 1783. The British immediately divided Florida into two distinct colonies with the Apalachicola River as the dividing line. St. Augustine remained the capital for East Florida, while Pensacola became the capital of West Florida. This gave the British exclusive control of the eastern seaboard and the British wasted no time in the occupation of their 14th and 15th colonies.

In the Beginning

James Grant, the first royal governor, had such a strong desire to develop East Florida that many lots were given to any group willing to settle in Florida.

Each settler were eligible for land grants of 100 acres of land plus 50 acres for each familiy member. Many wealthy Britions who never set foot in Florida were given large land grants.

Many of the first settlers were hardy folks, farmers, tradesmen and frontiersmen.

The area of Northeast Florida had attracted so many settlers that, by 1770, more than 100 plantations had been established along the St. Johns and St. Marys rivers.

With hostilities brewing in the other colonies, many families loyal to King George flocked to East Florida for safety. Quite a few of these refugees settled in East Florida , mostly in St. Augustine , St. Johns Town, and along waterways.

British Town Life

Florida's towns grew during this time. The English residents went about remodeling the Spanish homes until they discovered that the Spanish design kept out the winter wind and summer mosquitoes. They quickly adopted the Spanish styles and enjoyed a tropical lifestyle.

St. Augustine was one of the most important cities in East Florida. Many of Florida's wealthiest businessmen and planters lived there. In the cities and towns, people worked hard to earn their livelihood. Carpenters and blacksmiths were in high demand as town populations boomed, and sailors and pilots continued to be important to the seafaring economy.

St. Johns Town

St. Johns Town, near present day Jacksonville at St. Johns Bluff, grew rapidly as a result of this influx of loyalists, many of whom arrived with just the clothes on their backs.

The town was a tract of two hundred acres. Just like today they divided the town into lots. The first houses were small log homes, but in the summer of 1782 numerous frame homes with detached kitchens and other structures were hastily built.

St. Johns Town soon had over 300 buildings and its population grew to more than 1500, including blacksmiths, ship carpenters, a doctor and a clergyman. With its better harbor facilities, St. Johns Town soon overtook St. Augustine as a major seaport.

British Plantation Life

Land was freely available in East Florida to those who asked for it. While some land was plotted into towns, most was divided into large plots and granted to men willing to begin plantations. These plantation owners continued the practice of using enslaved men, women and children to work on their lands.

Indigo, a difficult and demanding crop that was used to make an expensive and highly-prized blue dye, was one of the most important plantation crops in British East Florida.

Soon East Florida was beginning to meet its own needs, quickly developing ties to the other colonies as well as to Britain itself.

As well as indigo, they provided considerable quantities of furs, lumber, turpentine, resin, tar, rice, oranges, coffee, molasses, and tobacco to the other colonies.

Many important town officials like James Grant and Patrick Tonyn, both governors of the city of St. Augustine, also owned plantations. Tonyn once owned Fort George Island, later the site of Kingsley Plantation.

The End of British Rule

As a result of Britain's loss in the American Revolutionary War, Florida ceded back to Spain in 1783. This ended 20 years of British rule.

The newly-settled loyalists once again found themselves on what they saw as hostile territory. Many packed up their families and possessions and relocated to the nearby British Bahamas and Jamaica. By 1785 the village at St. Johns Bluff was a

deserted place, just three years after its population boom. All along the St. Johns river stood abandoned plantations.

When the Spanish took back Florida they showed little interest in occupying the British homes.

The Spanish Take Over

Florida was once again a Spanish colony as a result of the peace treaty with Great Britain. Spain continued to use the land grant system and further developed the plantation economy.

Many different cultures, Spanish, American, Minorcan and African, both free and slave, lived peacefully in the colony.

Kingsley Plantation on Fort George Island is just one example of Florida's

development in the Second Spanish Period.

Sea Island cotton was the largest cash crop grown on the island. The economy continued to prosper under Spanish rule until Florida was sold to the Americans for five million dollars in 1821, marking yet another change of rule handed down from above, the third in less than sixty years.