Second Spanish Period and the American Government Takes Over Our Town

Following 1783’s Treaty of Paris, St. Augustine was once again a military outpost on the fringe of Spain’s colonies. The Spanish tore down the British wooden construction atop the Watchtower and then refortified it with coquina. A series of white balls were hung from the top of the tower to indicate the depth of the draft in the harbor, and to help ships enter port. It is likely that if the tower was a lighthouse, it returned to use as a watchtower at this time, as was the Spanish custom in the America’s and Caribbean.

Maritime commerce continued to expand in St. Augustine, and the new United States of America became the primary trading partner. In 1806, 42 ships called at the port of St. Augustine, 37 from the United States and 5 from Havana (Griffin 1983:144, as cited in Turner, Burke, Meide, 2007. P. 15). The influx of “foreign” (American) settlers into the state eroded Spanish influence in the region (Turner, Burke, Meide, 2007. p. 15).

A Spanish Colony Again

An ongoing study by the Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program (LAMP) of historical customs (2008) documents from the beginning of the Second Spanish Period in 1784 has shown that trade to St. Augustine was dominated by the newly independent ports of Savannah and Charleston. The trade was carried in small and relatively shallow draft goletas, schooners, and balandras, sloops. In 1806, 42 ships called at the port of St. Augustine, 37 from the United States and 5 from Havana (Griffin, 1983, p. 144 as cited in LAMP 2006, p. 13).

Cargoes included barrels of flower, line for ship’s rigging, sweets, soap, Madeira wine, and a customary amount of beer. One of the more interesting aspects of the study is the interpretation of English names rendered in Spanish by the newly arrived Spanish authorities. Examples of this include a shipmaster Juan Ytan, almost certainly John Eaton and sabana for the port of Savannah. The documents re-discovered by LAMP researchers in Spain, cover the years 1784 to 1821. They reveal changing trends in commerce such as renewed trade from Spanish ports and possibly a change in tastes reflected by changes in the kinds of cargoes unloaded in the port of St. Augustine during the course of the Second Spanish Period.

It is during the 2nd Spanish period that many of the St. Augustine’s oldest families settled permanently here. Families named Hernandez, Sanchez and Ponce among others, still populate the local area today. The following description of the 2nd Spanish Period in St. Augustine is from the State of Florida, Viva Florida! Web site at: http://www.vivaflorida.org/St_+Augustine.21.lasso, celebrating the Spanish Heritage of our state.
“With the defeat of the British, Spanish rule returned to East Florida and its capital of St. Augustine in 1783. St. Augustine was a town of many cultures during the Second Spanish Period. English was heard on the streets almost as often as Spanish. The majority of British subjects left Florida when the Spanish control returned, but many remained to become Spanish subjects, including those from the Turnbull plantation. Previous Spanish residents who had evacuated St. Augustine in 1764 returned to reclaim the houses and lots they had left behind, leading to squabbles and lawsuits with British period residents. Free and enslaved blacks born in America or recently from Africa, Mexico, Cuba, and Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) worked and lived in St. Augustine.

As it did during the First Spanish Period, the situado (military stipend) allocated by the Spanish Crown provided a major contribution to the economy of St. Augustine. After Napoleon Bonaparte’s 1808 occupation of Spain, funding for Spain’s colonies disappeared. Exports of timber, beef and citrus fruit to Spanish, British and American ports sustained the economy. Ships arrived from New York and Baltimore, Liverpool, Havana and Veracruz carrying cloth, cookware, wine and news. East Florida’s governors relied on local militia to supplement the soldiers. Minorcans, Spanish, and blacks formed their own militia units to protect St. Augustine.

Roman Catholicism returned as the official religion of the colony. Among the most important additions to St. Augustine during the Second Spanish Period was the parish church, built on the north side of the plaza between 1793 and 1797, where it stands today as the Cathedral-Basilica of St. Augustine. At long last the congregation of the St. Augustine parish had its own church after decades of holding services in “temporary” quarters following the total burning of the town in 1702. Local shell-stone, known as coquina, was used for walls of the church and better houses in the town. About two dozen of the colonial buildings in St. Augustine today originated in the Second Spanish Period. Another dozen colonial structures still stand from the First Spanish Period, including Castillo de San Marcos. All but one have exterior walls of coquina.

St. Augustine began as and remained a place of refuge. Residents of East Florida’s countryside fled to St. Augustine when threatened by invasions from Americans, raids by Seminoles, and rumors of pirate attacks. In the summer of 1821, Spanish soldiers and families evacuated St. Augustine when Spain ceded the colony to the United States. But most of the town’s population—Minorcans, naturalized residents who had immigrated from the southern U.S., free blacks and slaves—stayed to form the core of the now-American population.
Down on the Water Front

Merchants and mariners of all ranks kept up with the latest news of exploration and marine developments by associating and conversing with the crews of newly arrived ships. The arrival of an exploratory expedition foreshadowed the diffusion of knowledge regarding new lands throughout the maritime community.

Nautical charts quickly found their way into circulation. These were eagerly examined by pilots and shipmasters. These nautical charts were made by hand and a master chart made on a voyage of discovery would be copied many, many, times. This no doubt, let to copyist errors that had their own effect on Indies navigation. A diligent pilot kept his charts up to date, adding notes and penning in coral reefs, sandbars, or other obstacles to navigation as he came across them. This information would have been shared with his colleagues and friends. Such exchange of information and updating of charts meant that after a time a pilot would redraft his charts and probably store or dispose of the old ones. Today, very few of these Pilot’s charts exist and very few have seen the light of day.

The Americans Arrive

The young United States government perceived Spain’s lack of control in the region and negotiated Florida’s purchase. The signing of the Adams-Onis Treaty in February of 1821 ceded all of Florida to the United States (Franklin and Morris 1996:51, as cited in Turner, Burke, Meide, 2006). The American Revolution ended with the signing of the Second Treaty of Paris in 1783. This occurred in part because the Spanish came to the aid of the American Colonies, attacking the English along the Mississippi and in the Gulf. The Spanish were led in part by the Governor of Louisiana, Bernado Galvez, a native of Malaga, Spain, in his ship the Galveztown, when Galvez attacked the British colony of West Florida in the Battle of Pensacola. England lost control of Florida, and the British fearing that East Florida would be attacked next returned the entire peninsula to Spain. While the battles that returned Florida to the Spanish hands did not occur in St. Augustine, it is important to understand that the war waged on Great Britain by the Spanish played an important role in returning East Florida and it’s capital St. Augustine.