
Etceteras...

“Not Merely Perfidious but Ungrateful”

The U.S. Takeover of West Florida

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Probably not one American in a hundred knows anything about the short-lived Republic of West Florida (1810). At first glance, it might seem to have sprung from a worthy fight for self-government and independence from Spain.

West Floriday, that lovely nation,
Free from king and tyranny,
Thru’ the world shall be respected,
For her true love of Liberty.¹

On closer inspection, however, this venture, born of low-level filibuster and high-level intrigue, illustrates the same ingrained American propensity for land grabbing so evident in other U.S. acquisitions of territory.²

West Florida under Spanish Rule from 1803 to 1810

After the Louisiana Purchase, the United States and Spain disputed whether that transaction included West Florida, a strip extending east from the Mississippi River and along the Gulf Coast to the Perdido River (the westernmost border of today’s Florida State), and Spain continued to rule the area. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, however, many Americans, among others, moved there, and some of those *norteamericanos* obviously pined for the region’s annexation by the United States.

In those days and long afterward, the Gulf Coast served as a sanctuary and foraging ground for outlaws, political refugees, military deserters, buccaneers, fortune

1. Verse six of the marching song of the West Floridian army, 1810; the entire song is reproduced in Arthur 1935, 130. “Floriday” is not a misprint, but part of the song’s rhyming scheme.

2. For a splendidly detailed and documented account of the entire affair, see Cox 1918.

hunters, and a great variety of misfits and malcontents. The American writer Walker Percy (1916–90), who resided in the area during much of his life, mentions “American Tories who had no use for the Revolution, disgruntled Huguenots and Cavaliers from the Carolinas, [and] New Englanders fleeing from Puritanism,” among others (qtd. in Samway 1994, 18). Even more numerous, no doubt, were the ruffians, thieves, and small-scale land speculators who loomed large among the frontiersmen spilling down from Kentucky and Tennessee (Arthur 1935, 29; McMichael 2002). William C. C. Claiborne, the first and only governor of Orleans Territory and later the first governor of the state of Louisiana, once described the people of Louisiana’s “Florida parishes,” which lie in old West Florida between the Mississippi River and the Pearl River, by saying that “a more heterogeneous mass of good and evil was never before met in the same extent of territory” (qtd. in Cox 1918, 507).

Thus, no matter what, the Spanish administrators in West Florida had their work cut out for themselves amid the prevailing “social chaos, crime and political unrest” (Gilbert 2003). They were, as the historian Isaac Cox notes in his marvelous history of the West Florida controversy, “attempting to control a pioneer population, alien in spirit, custom, and political training, but land hungry and unscrupulous in appeasing their appetite. It was inevitable, then, that charge and countercharge, intrigue and evasion, should finally result in revolt” (1918, 63).³

Among the most prominent troublemakers in West Florida were the Kemper brothers—Nathan, Reuben, and Samuel—an uncouth, boozing, and violent trio once described by a Spanish official in the area as “white Indians and river pirates” (qtd. in Cox 1918, 154). From 1804 to 1811, the Kempers engaged in episodic attempts to expel the Spanish from West Florida and actively sought to engage other Americans in their filibuster. In 1804, the so-called Kemper Rebellion failed, in part, because “its leaders miscalculated the strength of pro-French, pro-British, and pro-Spanish elements, all of whom felt threatened by the pro-American faction the Kempers represented” (Hyde 1996, 20), and, in part, because many residents recognized that the Kempers and their gang were not so much revolutionaries as opportunistic and unscrupulous marauders mouthing political slogans (McMichael 2002, 159). As Cox remarks, however, “affairs along the Florida border . . . were not to remain peaceful as long as the Kempers were at large” (1918, 163)—not to mention Aaron Burr and other, less-prominent schemers who kept cropping up. (Cox, who in his book displays much sympathy for the Spanish, calls Reuben Kemper and Aaron Burr “those evil spirits of the frontier” [1918, 313].)

Thomas Jefferson shared these adventurers’ ardent desire to incorporate the Gulf Coast into the United States (Cox 1918, *passim*; Rutland 1987, 213, 215). In 1804, at his urging, Congress passed the Mobile Act, seeking to solidify the claim that the Louisiana Purchase included West Florida, but Spain’s minister to the United

3. Disputing Cox’s interpretation, Andrew McMichael (2002) emphasizes the widespread loyalty of the Spanish West Florida inhabitants, especially before 1805.

States protested, and Jefferson, rather than risk war with Spain, chose to bide his time, anticipating that increases in the number of American residents in the province would eventually tilt the balance of forces there in favor of the United States (Smith 1999, 5–6). The Sage of Monticello, wrote Cox, “expected to gain that part of West Florida bordering on the Mississippi through voluntary action of its inhabitants, and that right soon” (1918, 95–96).

James Madison, too, longed to incorporate the Gulf Coast into the United States. West Florida was, in Cox’s words, “the fruit he [Madison] had so long craved” (1918, 328). After Madison became president, according to his biographer Robert Rutland, he “had an eye on Florida, where some land-greedy Americans were willing to overthrow Spanish rule, then make a deal that would bring West Florida into the union” (1987, 213).

In 1808, the simmering equilibrium was disturbed when Napoleon Bonaparte placed his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne (Arthur 1935, 30, 143–44; Michael 2002, 161). Moreover, by the first half of 1810, “the American government was now ready to abandon oblique diplomacy for underhand intervention” (Cox 1918, 331). In this quest, Madison’s lieutenant, the governor of Orleans Territory, sent an agent, William Wykoff (sometimes spelled Wikoff), to stir up a request for U.S. intervention in West Florida (330).⁴ Whether as a result of this surreptitious agitation or for other reasons, the planters in the far western portion of West Florida, on the plantations north and east of Baton Rouge, fearful of French intervention and eager to increase the value, extent, and security of their land holdings, “concluded that the time had come to exchange the peaceful somnolence of Spanish rule for democracy” (Sterkx and Thompson 1961, 379). From June to September 1810, many secret meetings and three openly held conventions took place in that district—known in those days as Feliciana and described by a contemporary writer as “much the most populous, wealthy and important district in the province”—and out of those meetings grew the West Florida Rebellion.⁵

The West Florida Rebellion and the U.S. Takeover

On September 23, before dawn, an armed group led by Philemon Thomas attacked and captured the ramshackle Spanish fort at Baton Rouge. Three days later the leading revolutionaries signed a declaration of independence, then delivered it to Governor David Holmes of Mississippi Territory and Governor Claiborne of Orleans Territory along with a request for annexation by the United States and protection from Spanish counterattacks.⁶ In late October, the revolutionaries adopted a constitution modeled on the U.S. Constitution. Plans were made to take Mobile and Pensacola from the

4. Claiborne’s letter to Wykoff, June 14, 1810, is reproduced in Arthur 1935, 35–37.

5. *Natchez Chronicle*, July 17, 1810, qtd. in Arthur 1935, 45.

6. Their declaration of independence is reproduced in Arthur 1935, 113–14.

Spaniards—naturally, Reuben Kemper figured prominently in this scheme—and thus to incorporate the eastern part of the Spanish province into the newborn Republic of West Florida (Sterkx and Thompson 1961, 382–85; Cox 1918, 457).

These events, historians say, placed President Madison “in a quandary.”⁷

He wanted to annex Baton Rouge immediately but knew that he could not use military forces for such a venture without congressional approval, and that body would not meet until early December 1810. Moreover, military occupation of Spanish territory would incur the wrath of not only Spain but perhaps even England and France. Yet Madison feared that if the government did not aid West Florida, there would “be danger of its passing into the hands of a third and dangerous party.” Britain, the president had written to Jefferson, had a “propensity to fish in troubled waters,” and Madison realized that the moment would be lost should the United States not cast her line. (Smith 1999, 7)

Though troubled by “constitutional qualms” (Rutland 1987, 215), Madison was no more inclined to let such qualms divert him from grasping an attractive geopolitical prize than his predecessor Jefferson had been when he bought Louisiana from Napoleon. Unwilling to let the opportunity pass unexploited, the president resorted to the oldest justification in the political book: he acted, even without clear legislative or constitutional authority to do so, on the grounds that “a *crisis* has at length arrived subversive of the order of things under the Spanish authorities” (*American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, 3: 397, emphasis added).

On October 27, Madison issued a proclamation directing the governor of Orleans Territory to take possession of West Florida, and Governor Claiborne, with valuable assistance from Governor Holmes, proceeded to carry out the president’s orders.⁸ Six weeks later, on December 10, U.S. authorities raised the Stars and Stripes over Baton Rouge, and the free and independent Republic of West Florida—variously known as “a lusty Tom Thumb Republic,” “the stout little republic,” a “small, spunky, and short-lived nation,” a “half-baked republic,” and “simply a mock government used by the Americans to cloak their aggression”—passed into history just seventy-four days after it had come into existence.⁹

On December 5, Madison delivered his second State of the Union address to Congress. In a single paragraph of that report, he presented his version of the recent events in West Florida, justified his own actions there, and laid responsibility for com-

7. Cox 1918, 488; Smith uses the identical phrase without attribution (1999, 7).

8. Madison’s proclamation is reproduced in Arthur 1935, 134–35.

9. Arthur 1935, 24 and 140, for the first and second appellations; Samway 1994, 19, for the third; Rutland 1987, 215, for the fourth; and Cox 1918, 551, paraphrasing British diplomat J. P. Morier, for the fifth.

pensating the West Florida revolutionaries—if indeed any compensation were to be made—in the legislators’ laps:

Among the events growing out of the state of the Spanish Monarchy, our attention was imperiously attracted to the change developing itself [*sic!*] in that portion of West Florida which, though of right appertaining to the United States, had remained in the possession of Spain, awaiting the result of negotiations for its actual delivery to them. The Spanish authority was subverted, and a situation produced exposing the country to ulterior events which might essentially affect the rights and welfare of the Union. In such a conjuncture I did not delay the interposition required for the occupancy of the territory west of the river Perdido, to which the title of the United States extends, and to which the laws provided for the Territory of Orleans are applicable. With this view, the proclamation, of which a copy is laid before you, was confided to the Governor of that Territory, to be carried into effect. The legality and necessity of the course pursued, assure me of the favorable light in which it will present itself to the Legislature, and of the promptitude with which they will supply whatever provisions may be due to the essential rights and equitable interests of the people thus brought into the bosom of the American family. (President’s Annual Message, December 5, 1810, *Annals of Congress*, Senate, 11th Cong., 3rd sess., December 1810, pp. 12–13)

Thus, the official version of the story made the U.S. government appear to have been an innocent, almost startled bystander to the West Florida revolution—a decidedly misleading characterization even if Madison and his subordinates did not orchestrate the uprising in detail. Although the revolutionaries at Baton Rouge may have acted rashly and with an excess of local initiative, they and the Madison administration “were all working for a common end, although frequently at cross purposes” (Cox 1918, 464).

The Upshot

“The American occupation of West Florida,” opines Rutland, “added no glory to the stars and stripes” (1987, 215). Critics quickly came forth to criticize the president for acting without proper authority and for supplanting the jurisdiction of the Spanish—allies of the North American colonists during their war for independence from Great Britain and current friends—who had done nothing to deserve such aggression (Cox 1918, 538–43). Spanish colonial officials, whose reaction Cox describes in detail, expressed disgust at “the perfidy of the American government”: “Seizing the occasion when Spain was beset by enemies and the Floridas were bereft of defense, its agents stirred up insurrection in West Florida and threatened still further encroachments in

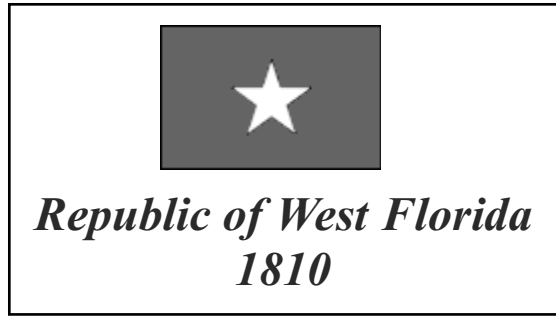
the eastern province. Their course was not merely perfidious but ungrateful, for Spain had assisted the United States in gaining its independence” (519).

At Mobile, the Spanish garrison refused to evacuate until compelled to do so by a well-conducted U.S. naval and military operation in 1813 (for details, see Smith 1999, 13–16, and Cox 1918, 616–19). Thus, oddly enough, the Mobile area, taken away from Spain, became the only territory the United States gained as a result of the War of 1812, declared against Great Britain. For the Spanish, the U.S. action constituted still another outrage “committed in the midst of peace without preliminary complaint” (Cox 1918, 623). Although the U.S. capture of Mobile sealed the fate of West Florida in its entirety, not until ratification of the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1821 did Spain formally relinquish all claims to Florida—east as well as west—once and for all.

The rise and fall of the Republic of West Florida presents us with few genuine heroes. Of those who took action at the scene, all the leaders—with the possible exception of Fulwar Skipwith, the republic’s president—seem to have been land-grabbers, adventurers, or job seekers. Indeed, the revolutionaries revealed their ulterior motives plainly enough: in an early October convention, they laid claim to all the unoccupied lands in the territory because they had “wrested the Government and country from Spain at the risk of their lives and fortunes.”¹⁰ Skipwith, who “had lost his position [as a U.S. diplomat] in Paris and was now seeking to recover his political and financial standing in West Florida” (Cox 1918, 342), ended up as registrar of the U.S. government land office in charge of filings on lands between the Pearl River and the Mississippi (644). Philemon Thomas, who had led the attack on the Spanish garrison at Baton Rouge, declared after the U.S. takeover that “the great object he had in view was now accomplished, and that he approved of the taking” (Sterkx and Thompson 1961, 386). Given that Thomas and his men had killed two Spaniards and wounded five when they stormed the fort at Baton Rouge, and later also killed William Cooper, who opposed their revolution (Arthur 1935, 110, 121), Thomas seems to have got off lightly. Of “Colonel” Reuben Kemper’s motives, perhaps the less said the better. Clearly a man perpetually looking for trouble, he went on to fight with the Mexicans against the Spanish, and later, in 1814 and 1815, he served as an officer in the forces under Andrew Jackson’s command resisting the British at the Battle of New Orleans.

At the upper reaches of the West Florida affair, President Madison seems merely to have engaged in the sort of unprincipled geopolitical maneuvering that one expects from a “statesman” seeking to augment national wealth and power. His actions in regard to the Republic of West Florida wrote a sorry chapter in the life of someone better remembered as a man of high principle, a champion of freedom, and the Father of the U.S. Constitution.

10. John Rhea to James Madison, October 10, 1810, qtd. in Arthur 1935, 123.



Retrospect: The Original Lone Star State

After the revolutionaries had declared the independence of the Republic of West Florida, they adopted a national flag with a single large white star centered on a blue background (Arthur 1935, 102). Thus, West Florida became the original Lone Star State. (Don't let the Texans know; it might break their hearts.)

This flag, known as the Bonnie Blue Flag, was later used briefly by Mississippi in 1861 after that state seceded from the United States, and on that occasion its use inspired one Harry McCarthy to compose a song about it that became popular in the Confederacy (Arthur 1935, 153–54). One verse went:

Hurray! Hurrah!
For Southern Rights, Hurrah!
Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag
That bears a Single Star!

Today, the same flag flies along with the flags of Louisiana and the United States in front of the St. Tammany Parish Justice Center in Covington, Louisiana, my own place of residence in recent years. Notwithstanding everything I have learned about the farcical character of the ephemeral political entity it first emblemized, I get a warm feeling each time I pass the courthouse and see the Bonnie Blue waving proudly in the wind. A free and independent little republic of our very own: that's an ideal for whose realization all Americans—now the subjects of a huge, oppressive, imperial government—might devoutly wish.

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