

# Introduction

*I hereby assert that this bay is the finest jewel  
possessed by His Majesty . . . not only here in  
America but in all his kingdom.*

—Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora to the Conde de  
Galve, Viceroy of Mexico, June 1, 1693

**T**HE FAMOUS MEXICAN INTELLECTUAL, CARLOS DE SIGÜENZA, who visited the American Gulf Coast in 1693, recognized in Pensacola Bay the rare qualities that made it a coveted prize in a fierce competition between the great powers of the early modern age—Spain, France, and England—who were waging a struggle for supremacy in the Gulf region and the wider Atlantic World. This book places the bay in these larger contexts, beginning with its initial settlement in 1559 and ending with its forfeiture to the United States in 1821. Rather than offer a complex historical or archaeological analysis of Pensacola Bay and its environs, the book, which draws on both the historical and archaeological record, presents a brief narrative on the same.

Pensacola Bay formed approximately 6,000 years ago following a period of global warming and the melting of polar ice caps. As sea levels rose, the deep valley that evolved into the modern bay filled with water pushing in from the Gulf of Mexico and flowing down the rivers and streams that emptied into the valley. This convergence of waters and sediments resulted in a deep, sheltered bay skirted by sandy marine terraces and backed by extensive wetlands and dense pine forests, interspersed with stands of oak and hickory.<sup>1</sup>

For thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans, Native Americans moved in and out of the area around Pensacola Bay, hunting deer in the inland forests and harvesting the abundant marine life that thrived in the bay's warm waters. Early Spanish explorers mapped the bay's environs, sounded its depths, charted its anchorages, and recorded their interactions with the native peoples who lived on its shores. Their reports of a sheltered anchorage, natural resources, and resident labor pool convinced officials back in Mexico to settle the area in the mid-sixteenth century. An early, failed attempt to colonize the bay (1559–1561) opened the door to extensive European competition.

Europeans arriving in the seventeenth century found a group of people known as "Panzacola" ("long-haired people") living in the area; these early inhabitants lent their name to both the bay and the modern city of Pensacola. A late-seventeenth- early-eighteenth-century Spanish settlement on Pensacola Bay (1698–1719) did little to discourage French or English designs on the area.

By this date, the French were threatening to colonize the Mississippi Valley from their foothold in the St. Lawrence River Valley and the English had colonized the Atlantic Seaboard. The sparkling bay that captivated Carlos de Sigüenza in 1693 was at the center of a long struggle for empire that changed the course of history in the Gulf region and the broader Atlantic World.