
IMPERIAL GEOPOLITICS, THE FLORIDA-CUBA NEXUS, AND AMERINDIAN PASSAGES

By the late 1520s, while Spain had long begun building colonies on the ruins of the Mexica-Aztec empire and its conquest of Central America progressed, the Spanish Empire had failed to establish a settlement in La Florida. Yet much in the way of reconnaissance had been gained about the North American coasts. Like Cuba, La Florida occupied a strategic position relative to Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and the shipping lanes that linked Spain to those regions. The protection of the shipping lanes and growing Spanish American empire dictated that Spain control La Florida.¹ A logical step toward that end, Jerald Milanich observes, “was to extend Spanish hegemony northward from the new gulf settlements on the east coast of Mexico, tying La Florida to Spain.”²

From the 1520s to the mid-sixteenth century, the crown contracted a number of conquistadors from Mexico and Cuba who, each in his turn, undertook expeditions to secure the peninsula and surrounding regions for conquest and colonization under Spain. As it was for Mexico, Cuba likewise was the launching point and regional administrative center for the conquest of La Florida.

Several decades later, however, stable European settlements in La Florida were conspicuously absent. Juan Ponce de León’s second campaign ended in failure; he returned to Cuba only to die from a Calusa arrow wound. The 1528 expedition of veteran conquistador Pánfilo de Narváez, infamous for his cruelty toward the Arawak Taíno people in the conquest of Cuba, also met with a catastrophic end. Only four members of the expedition survived as captives among the Indians of coastal Texas until they escaped and were

found by Spanish slavers in northern Mexico in 1536, among them Alvar Cabeza de Vaca, who related the story of his ordeal to the Spanish court a year later. Cabeza de Vaca's descriptions of La Florida as a veritable Eden impressed other conquistadors like Hernando de Soto, who departed Cuba with his own fleet in 1539. Four years later, in the autumn of 1543, only about half of that expedition's members had survived and returned. De Soto died the previous year of an illness.

Characteristic of all of these early attempts by Spain to take La Florida were the European presumption of success through "efficient exploitation" (coercion and conquest) and the persistent resistance by the region's indigenous inhabitants. Both Narváez and de Soto began their expeditions on the southwest coast of Florida near present-day Tampa Bay. Both, as their respective campaigns moved northward, also planned to coerce the Indians they encountered into supplying food and bearing the expeditions' supplies. Perhaps hundreds of men and women were exploited. Resistance was often quickly answered with force, including captivity and torture, with hostages a common bargaining tool. In spite of their contracts' clauses insisting on the humane treatment of Indians, the two men had lamentable records of cruelty toward indigenous people.

Yet, contrary to the presumptions of the conquistadors, La Florida was not Mexico. Numerous indigenous communities did indeed persist in various forms of resistance. The Spaniards were simultaneously dominant over and dependent upon their captives, needing them as carriers and as guides, and were not infrequently outmaneuvered by those they sought to conquer. Narváez's expedition was manipulated by the Timucua and then by the Apalachee, who steered them away from populous villages, through unforgiving terrain, and sometimes into traps exploited by raiding parties.³ Indigenous hostages proved of little insurance to the conquistadors. De Soto also was misled by the Timucua, attacked by the Apalachee, and otherwise variously and aggressively resisted. Succeeding expeditions, like that of Tristan de Luna y Arellano in the 1550s, fared no better, thwarted by La Florida's terrain and, Milanich notes, "outwitted by the Indians, who allowed them nothing."⁴ That this period coincided with a dramatic rise in the frequency of slave raids along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts likely contributed significantly to the resistance of aboriginal peoples encountered in Florida by the expeditions from Cuba. Yet the Spanish, too, persisted. Motivated by the Chicora legend of rich and boundless lands and by intelligence regarding

the imperial machinations of France in the region, the Spanish crown was determined to secure La Florida for the empire.

In 1565, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés led the largest expedition to La Florida to that point, defeated the French, and established the first successful settlement at St. Augustine on the peninsula's northeast coast. If the hold was ultimately tenuous in the short and long run, St. Augustine provided the precedent for the spread of Spanish influence into North America. At the same time, the ensuing indigenous-Spanish exchanges provided the framework for the evolution of a complex and substantial relationship, much of which would be wrought through the impetus of indigenous mobility and some of the earliest movements and migrations of indigenous peoples during the colonial period, passages that would transpire between the continent and the Spanish Caribbean, with Cuba as the principal destination.

In La Florida, after a string of failed conquest attempts and with competition from Britain and France closing in on the region, the Spanish were forced to adopt other forms of “pacification”—more cooperative and less violent (though never abandoning the latter)—in order to succeed there. Likewise, indigenous groups adapted in order to take advantage of the offerings of the Spanish and use them as allies against traditional enemies like the Uchise and others who received backing from the British. Each group was forced to establish alliances and modes of exchange that would enable them to continue to coexist and live under the evolving new order of things.

Importantly, the Calusa and Tequesta, like many coastal Florida groups, with varying success retained their indigenous belief systems, sociopolitical structures, settlement patterns, and subsistence practices (primarily fishing), in other words, their autonomy, until the end of the seventeenth century, some even later.⁵ The relative isolation and independence of the Calusa became sources for the attraction and frustration of Spanish missionaries. Other peoples, like the Timucua and Guale, generally experienced intensive European interaction as Spanish colonization and concomitant evangelization took hold early on; although evidence suggests a persistence in political organization of hereditary chiefdoms, in the course of the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century, Victor Thompson and John Worth report, “demography, settlement systems, subsistence strategies and diet (traditionally fishing but, over time, increasingly maize agriculture and livestock), belief systems, sociopolitical organization, and many other facets of life were all affected to some extent in the context of missionization.”⁶

The Spanish policy of pacification by gifts, first implemented on the frontiers of northern New Spain and aided by the Franciscans, was initiated in Florida later, the conditions and qualifications of which are aptly summarized by Amy Turner Bushnell:

[T]he policy of “peace by purchase” appropriate to a nonsedentary native society with a low level of social stratification was overlaid by the policy of “conquest by contract” suitable to a more sedentary and stratified native society. Gifts from the king were means by which civil and religious authorities attracted, attached, and empowered the “lords of the land” and through them exercised control over commoners. . . . [S]uborned by gifts, the Florida caciques induced their followers to be baptized, to restrict their trade to españoles, and to function as a labor reserve. In the Spanish model of European-Native relations, they were the enablers.⁷

Spanish colonization led to various levels of exchange between La Florida and Cuba. Hann has argued that the initial failure of military conquest in La Florida necessitated the institution in practice of what was supposed to have been, for Catholic Spain, the cardinal colonizing institution: the Church. Implicit in Menéndez de Avilés’s broader plan to extend trade routes, develop alliances with the Indians, and expand Spanish colonization generally, the new governor sought to convert the Indians of La Florida and subject them to the rule of Catholic Spain. Menéndez de Avilés’s initial negotiations with the Tequesta and Calusa led to friendly relations with the principal Calusa chief, Carlos, and acceptance of the cacique’s sister as his wife.⁸ The governor also encouraged his indigenous allies to make peace with their traditional enemies, a nagging bone of contention especially as the Spanish asserted and inserted themselves in these relations.

For Spain, the establishment of Christian missions among the indigenous peoples of La Florida was as much a moral imperative as an imperial one.⁹ Historically, this imperative dictated the relocation to and *reducción* (concentration) of prospective indigenous converts in areas that were, in the words of the Laws of the Indies, away from their homes “in the mountains and wildernesses, where they are deprived of all spiritual and temporal comforts, the aid of our ministers, and those other things which human necessities oblige men to give to one another.”¹⁰ As Spain demonstrated in the forced migration and relocation of so many indigenous peoples throughout

the American colonies, migration possessed a very direct relation to Christianity and evangelization and played an essential role in the Christianization and assimilation of indigenous peoples under Spanish colonization.

In the Floridian possessions, the Spanish naturally relied on the missions to follow suit. Whether in the initial attempts at conquest by arms or the concomitant spiritual conquest, however, La Florida, again, was not Mexico. At the same time, the relation between Christian missions and indigenous mobility still held, though in a somewhat ironic subversion of that anticipated by the Spanish. During the early colonial period, mobility, migration, and relocation were instead adapted by the peninsula's indigenous peoples as vehicles, even if not always entirely in their control, but means nonetheless for their own ends in relation to their encounters with Christian missions and the Spanish Empire. Whether among the horticulturalists of the north or the more mobile communities of the south, mobility and migration became substantive vehicles for resistance to and negotiation with a hegemonic Spanish juggernaut whose imperial vision insisted on the organization of space and control of population movement.¹¹

With the establishment of the St. Augustine settlement in the spring of 1565, Menéndez de Avilés soon wrote to General Francisco Borgia, head of the Jesuit order, to invite the newly formed Society of Jesus to start a mission in La Florida.¹² Motivated by several factors—the legal and moral responsibility to ensure the conversion of the Indians, the need for a labor force, and the protection of colonists—the governor sponsored the Jesuit missions among the Calusa and Tequesta. Menéndez de Avilés petitioned the Jesuits to supplement the diocesan priests as missionaries to the Indians. In early 1567, two Jesuits left the Spanish Caribbean headquarters in Havana for South Florida. Father Juan Rogel went to a military outpost near present-day Charlotte Harbor to minister to the Calusa, while Fray Francisco Villareal went to Biscayne Bay to work with the Tequesta and began a somewhat strategic mission, the nearest in Florida to the military and mission headquarters of Havana.¹³ Consistent with the tradition of the setting up such mission garrisons, Menéndez de Avilés himself formally established the Biscayne Bay (Miami) outpost by remaining there for some four days in 1567 and erecting a cross, a sure sign of the initiation of Catholicism in the region.¹⁴

Menéndez de Avilés conceived a plan to help establish a Jesuit school in Cuba for the religious education of Amerindian children, particularly