A TROUBLED SEVEN YEARS: SPANISH REACTIONS TO AMERICAN CLAIMS AND AGGRESSION IN “WEST FLORIDA,” 1803-1810

By GILBERT C. DIN*

The Florida Parishes occupy a unique position in Louisiana as it is the only region in the state that was not a part of the Louisiana Purchase. Situated between the Mississippi and the Pearl Rivers and below the state of Mississippi at the thirty-first parallel, the area extends down to Bayou Manchac. From there, the southern boundary follows the eastward flowing Amite River and the northern banks of Lakes Maurepas and Pontchartrain back to the Pearl. Although eight parishes make up the area today (West Feliciana, East Feliciana, East Baton Rouge, Livingston, St. Helena, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, and Washington), at the start of the nineteenth century just four larger districts (Feliciana and Baton Rouge in the west, St. Helena in the center, and Chifoncté [later changed to St. Ferdinand] in the east) divided up the area.

*The author is a history professor emeritus from Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. His research has focused on the Spanish period in Louisiana and surrounding areas and is spread across many topics in the time period 1762 to 1803. In doing so, his work has received a number of awards. He was president of the Louisiana Historical Association during the year 2010-2011.
Using the name "West Florida" to describe this truncated region as writers have occasionally done creates some confusion except for persons who regard it as the solitary West Florida lying along the Gulf Coast.¹ It, however, consists of only a hundred-mile portion of the less than four-hundred-mile long territory that Great Britain formed and named West Florida in 1763. Spain conquered the lengthy colony beginning in 1779 in the American War for Independence and formally received both the East and West Florida colonies as war prizes by the 1783 Treaty of Paris.² To avoid a

¹The boundaries of West Florida need an explanation. Upon Great Britain’s creation of the colony in 1763, it was less than four hundred miles long. The Spaniards later extended it to 450 miles. After the Louisiana Purchase, Jeffersonians began arguing that "West Florida" was a part of the Purchase but shortened its length to the area between the Mississippi River and the Perdido River, or less than two hundred miles. Still later, writers on the 1810 uprising limited their "West Florida" to about one hundred miles, or the distance from the Mississippi River to the Pearl River. This "West Florida" lies totally within modern Louisiana and is known today as the Florida Parishes. Writers on the 1810 rebellion who use the name West Florida usually ignore the rest of the colony that remained in Spanish hands.

²Despite many publications that prove "West Florida" was not part of the Louisiana Purchase, several writers shortly after the Louisiana Purchase’s Bicentennial Celebration in 2003 have again insisted that it was. This hyper-patriotism supported Thomas Jefferson’s contention to its ownership and surfaced in history books that have again succumbed to the jingoistic claptrap of early nineteenth-century politicians. Among the books, Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York, 2009), presents expansion positively; J. C. A. Stagg, *Borderlines in Borderlands: James Madison and the Spanish-American Frontier, 1776-1821* (New Haven, Conn., 2009), 52-86, stresses the validity of the American claim to West Florida to the Perdido River; and Peter J. Kastor, *The Nation’s Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven, 2004), 42, evades recognition of West Florida being Spanish and interprets American claims to the area as legitimate. However, it must be recognized that as early as the nineteenth century some American historians were already in sharp disagreement with Jefferson’s contention that the Louisiana Purchase included the Florida Parishes. Among writers who stated before 1910 that
misunderstanding with its parent colony, the area in present-day Louisiana that once bore the moniker "West Florida" will hereafter be called by its present name of Florida Parishes or simply the Parishes. Persons who produced this more descriptive name in the early national era must have recognized the absurdity of applying the full colony's designation to solely a portion of it.³


³Spain's conquest of British West Florida is told in Eric Beerman's *España y la independencia de los Estados Unidos* (Madrid, 1992); and Thomas E. Chávez, *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An Intrinsic Gift* (Albuquerque, 2002). Contrary to the belief of some people, the Louisiana Purchase did not include the Florida Parishes. Perhaps what compels diehards to believe that the names Florida Parishes and West Florida are synonymous is that today it is one of two places where the moniker "West Florida" still has minimal usage; the other is the Florida Panhandle, which in my opinion has a better claim to the old name.

⁴About twenty years ago, Samuel C. Hyde Jr. started publishing on the Florida Parishes. For an introduction to this area, see his edited work, *A Fierce and Fractious Frontier: The Curious Development of Louisiana’s Florida Parishes, 1699-2000* (Baton Rouge, La., 2004). See also Hyde’s earlier work, *Pistols and Politics: The Dilemma of Democracy in Louisiana’s Florida Parishes, 1810-1899* (Baton Rouge, 1996), which, of course, does not focus on the Spanish period. In contrast, the Louisiana Purchase has a surfeit of studies. One example is Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America* (New York, 2003).
ally, American writers of the 1810 "West Florida rebellion" have been unconcerned with the Spanish struggle of the previous six years to prevent absorption by the newly formed United States. Instead, they have focused on the diplomatic wrangling at the national level over the area while minimizing or ignoring the aggressive behavior of Louisiana’s first American governor William C. C. Claiborne and the violence perpetrated by dissident settlers who sought West Florida’s absorption by the United States. On the opposing side, officials of a declining imperial Spain resisted American assertions to ownership and utilized their limited defense capabilities to quash incipient hostile designs for several years. This paper examines the Spanish struggle to preserve the area that became the Florida Parishes following the loss of Louisiana.

A selected list of American works on “West Florida” and its 1810 rebellion include Stanley C. Arthur, *The Story of the West Florida Rebellion* (St. Francisville, La., 1935); James A. Padgett, ed., “The West Florida Rebellion of 1810, as Told in the Letters of John Rhea, Fulwar Skipwith, Reuben Kemper, and Others,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 21 (1938): 76-202; works that have more on the Spanish side are Cox’s “American Intervention,” 290-311, and *The West Florida Controversy, 1798-1813: A Study in American Diplomacy* (Baltimore, 1918), and two more recent works, F. Andrew McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810* (Athens, Ga., 2008) and William C. Davis, *The Rogue Republic: How Would-be Patriots Waged the Shortest Revolution in American History* (Boston, 2011). It must be pointed out that the revolt did not occur throughout all West Florida, but only in the western-most region of the Florida Parishes, where Spanish authority was present.

While several writers have touched on the Spanish side of events in the Parishes between 1803 and 1810, principally Isaac J. Cox who did so in greater detail than others, this examination presents new information and interpretations on events. Cox first presented his paper, “American Intervention,” at the annual American Historical Conference in 1910. His paper was severely criticized by two commentators for its supposed anti-Americanism; see Frederic A. Ogg and Dunbar Rowland, “A Discussion,” in Benjamin Shambaugh, *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Association*, Vol. 4: *For the year 1910-1911* (Cedar Rapids, Ia., 1912), 47-52. Cox apparently toned
The historical background of the Mississippi Valley has differed considerably from other regions of the United States due to its frequent eighteenth-century changes in ownership. For this study, the significant alterations to the geopolitical landscape began with France’s defeat in the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) and Great Britain’s assumption of French Canada and trans-Appalachia (the region extending from the Appalachian Mountains west to the Mississippi River). At the peace table, Spain, France’s ally, also exchanged La Florida, an area larger than the present-day state, to recover Havana, which Great Britain had captured in 1762. The new acquisitions gave the British dominion over all lands east of the Mississippi except for New Orleans and its Isle of Orleans. In addition, Spain received from France the undefined domains on the Mississippi’s west bank that became the definitive Louisiana territory. Several years later during the American War for Independence, insurgent and expansionist American patriots attempted to seize British lands in Canada and along the Mississippi River in West Florida.

Indian, French, and British background to the Florida Parishes can be found in Charles N. Elliott, “A Geography of Power: French and Indian Alliances on the Southeast Louisiana Frontier,” and Robin F. A. Fabel, “Boom in the Bayous: Land Speculation and Town Planning in the Florida Parishes under British Rule,” both in Hyde, ed., A Fierce and Fractious Frontier, 15-43, and 44-59, respectively. See also Fabel’s The Economy of British West Florida (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1988). I distinguish between two categories of domestic historians: those who approach American history from U. S. documentation and those who base themselves overwhelmingly on foreign documents, Spanish, French, or any other non-American sources since they often offer different, and sometimes more accurate, perspectives on events.

efforts foundered. Spain entered the war against Great Britain in 1779 and occupied sections of the Mississippi River’s British east bank below the Ohio River. In addition, it conquered all of West Florida. Great Britain, which also lost trans-Appalachia to the new United States, did not specify boundaries to the West Florida lands it ceded to Spain because of its secret scheming with American diplomats who wanted territory down to the thirty-first parallel, never mind that Great Britain no longer held these lands. Nearly two decades before, Britain had created the East and West Florida colonies, the first consisting of the Florida peninsula and the second extending westward along the Gulf Coast from the Apalachicola River to the Mississippi River. After capturing West Florida between 1779 and 1781, Spain moved its eastern boundary farther east to the Suwannee River. Ignoring the Spanish conquest of the colony that preceded the Anglo-American pact, the United States demanded the navigation of the Mississippi River and the territory indicated in its 1782 accord with Great Britain, which had been West Florida’s original northern boundary. Great Britain later moved it up to the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg. Spain was not a party to the Anglo-American agreement and resisted yielding the northern portion of the colony for a dozen years, with the United States periodically spewing threats. But weighed down with mounting imperial and domestic crises, Spain’s ineffectual first minister, Manuel Godoy, ceded the area in question in 1795 to secure goodwill—which he did not obtain—in the Treaty of San Lorenzo, generally known to

Americans by its negotiator's name, (Thomas) Pinckney's Treaty. The agreement also recognized Spanish ownership to the rest of West Florida.⁹

At the same time the Spaniards attempted to augment their colony's population, the Founders in the United States regarded the lower Mississippi Valley with its few white inhabitants as an inviting area for development. With settlers moving into Kentucky and Tennessee since the recent war, they wanted use of the Mississippi River to transport their products to the east coast via New Orleans.¹⁰ Among the American expansionists, Thomas Jefferson considered varied ways to acquire territory from Spain. As early as 1786, he wrote to a friend in Kentucky: "We should take care, too, not to think it for . . . [our] interest . . . to press too soon on the Spaniards those countries (that is, Louisiana and West Florida). [They] cannot be in better hands. My fear is, that [the Spaniards] are too feeble to hold them till our population

⁹Beerman, España y la independencia de los Estados Unidos, 43-65, 81-96, 123-70; Chávez, Spain and the Independence of the United States, 166-83; Alexander DeConde, This Affair of Louisiana (New York, 1976), 38-9; Samuel Flagg Bemis, Pinckney's Treaty: America's Advantage from Europe's Distress, 1783-1800, rev. ed., (New Haven, 1960). As early as 1793, Spanish foreign minister Diego Gardoqui had offered the United States navigation of the Mississippi and the northern boundary of West Florida at the thirty-first parallel in return for an alliance with Spain. President Washington's administration declined. W. Edwin Hemphill, "The Jeffersonian Background of the Louisiana Purchase," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 22 (1935): 177-90. The British had earlier set the northern limit of West Florida at the mouth of the Yazoo River (at 32 degrees, 28 minutes), or just north of the present-day city of Vicksburg, Miss. See Figure One; Bemis, Pinckney's Treaty, 41.

¹⁰There are many studies on the American acquisition of territory and the settlement of the west. See, for example, Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier (New York, 1967).
can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them, piece by piece.”

Only a few years later, when Jefferson heard that Spain, unable to attract Catholic colonists, was now welcoming American Protestants, he notified President Washington: “I wish a hundred thousand of our inhabitants would accept the invitation. It may be the means of delivering to us peaceably what may otherwise cost a war. In the meantime we may complain of this seduction of our inhabitants just enough to make them believe we think it is a very wise policy for them, and confide them in it.” Jefferson firmly believed that Americans in Spanish territory would preserve their allegiance to the United States. But as an upper class planter and large slave owner, he failed to perceive that many economically strapped farmers who settled on Spanish soil valued their farms that they had freely received and feared their loss in a change of national sovereignty. Unable to buy land in the United States, a good number of them migrated to Spanish territory. Heads of families, moreover, took oaths of loyalty to the Spanish government, which included taking

---

11Hemphill, “Jeffersonian Background,” 183, and with slight grammatical alterations to clarify Jefferson’s meaning.


up arms to fight national enemies. Moreover, citizenship in the eighteenth-century Mississippi Valley was fluid as nations often seized or exchanged territory and with it went the fidelity of individuals living on those lands or adjusting their residency. The United States expected the same in 1803 Louisiana.

Although Louisiana governors ruled West Florida, beginning with Bernardo de Gálvez who conquered it from Great Britain, and Spain held it for more than twenty years prior to 1804, it never made West Florida part of colonial Louisiana. Instead, Spain retained the British jurisdictional divisions of East and West Florida. In advance of Louisiana's retrocession to France, Spain appointed Col. Vicente Folch y Juan, commandant at Pensacola, as the first Spanish governor of solely West Florida on September 16, 1803. Since distance and terrain hampered communications between Pensacola and the Florida Parishes, Baton Rouge gained a deputy governor, Carlos de Grand-Pré to early 1809 and Carlos Dehault Delassus to 1810, both of whom served under Folch's orders and expedited resolution of local problems.

Additionally before the retrocession, Cuban Capt. Gen. Salvador de Muro y Salazar, Marqués de Someruelos, in April 1803 dispatched Brig. Gen. Sebastián Calvo de la Puerta y O'Farrill, Marqués de Casa-Calvo, to assist Gov. Manuel Salcedo of Louisiana in the retrocession. Salcedo, an aging and undistinguished administrator, did not comprehend the royal order of July 24, 1802, that explained the return of

14 On fluctuating citizenship, see Gene Allen Smith and Sylvia L. Hilton, eds., *Nexus of Empire: Negotiating Loyalty and Identity in the Revolutionary Borderlands, 1760s-1820s* (Gainesville, Fla., 2010).

15 Carlos de Grand-Pré to the Marqués de Casa-Calvo, (Baton Rouge, February 1804) and February 9, 1804, both in the Archivo General de Indias (Seville), Papeles procedentes de Cuba, legajo 73, hereafter cited as AGI, PPC, leg. #; David Hart White, *Vicente Folch: Governor in Spanish Florida, 1787-1811* (Washington, D. C., 1981), 77, 104.
Louisiana to France because he soon asked whether it included West Florida as he wanted its governorship. The following November 10, Someruelos instructed Salcedo to abide by the treaty’s literal meaning that specified only the return of territory received from France in 1763. In a public proclamation on the forthcoming retrocession of Louisiana issued in New Orleans on May 18, 1803, Casa-Calvo and Salcedo stated explicitly that no part of West Florida was included. Nor was it or Texas mentioned in the Spanish retrocession on November 30 or in France’s transfer of Louisiana to the United States on December 20, 1803. After these events, Casa-Calvo remained in New Orleans to supervise the withdrawal of Spanish troops and equipment to Pensacola and to determine the boundary between now American Louisiana and Spanish Texas.

Despite Spanish territorial precautions, Casa-Calvo learned soon after the retrocession that the Jefferson administration


18On Casa-Calvo, see Gilbert C. Din, An Extraordinary Atlantic Life: Sebastián Nicolás Calvo de la Puerta y O’Farrill, Marqués de Casa-Calvo (Lafayette, La., 2016).
was clamoring that both West Florida west of the Perdido River (it flows into the Gulf of Mexico just west of Pensacola) and Texas down to the Rio Grande were parts of the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson's unilateral expansion of the Purchase contradicted his letter to Salcedo of July 4, 1803, announcing the United States' purchase of Louisiana and New Orleans from France, and he mentioned nothing about boundaries or West Florida and Texas. But as his representatives had failed to buy West Florida (see below), Jefferson's ambitions shifted to insisting ex post facto that the Purchase meant Louisiana's size prior to 1763, when France owned both sides of the Mississippi River and on seventeenth-century French claims to Texas. Guided by his own expansionist beliefs, Jefferson deliberately ignored the French renunciation of its earlier territorial claims and Spain's valid occupation of Texas (San Antonio was founded in 1718), the Spanish conquest of West Florida from Great Britain, and Spain's obligation to retrocede only what it had received from France in 1763. Similarly, he disregarded the Washington administration's recognition of West Florida as Spanish in 1795. How


20 Casa-Calvo to Pedro Cevallos, New Orleans, January 13, 1804 and Cevallos to Casa-Calvo, Aranjuez, April 2, 1804; both in MPA, SD, vol. 8, ff. 236-37 and 237-41, respectively; "Cession of Louisiana," Washington City, July 4, 1803; and Salcedo and Casa-Calvo to Someruelos, New Orleans, August 8, 1803, both included in Someruelos to Cevallos, Havana, August 27,
Jefferson could rationally skirt around earlier territorial transfers and treaties and link tenuous French claims of more than a century before to the Louisiana Purchase baffled contemporaries. Although knowledgeable American politicians rejected Jefferson’s claim to ownership of West Florida, he persisted in his game of power politics with the “sick man of Europe,” in this case Spain.21

Casa-Calvo’s apprehension about American territorial ambitions led him to report to the Spanish foreign minister. On May 18, 1804, he wrote: “They wait no other moment to realize the [intervention] than the declaration [for assistance] from the inhabitants of that district [the Florida Parishes], for which [the Americans] had offered [the

1803, AGI, Estado, leg. 2. Historians familiar with Spanish documentation generally reject Jefferson’s inclusion of West Florida as part of Louisiana. See, for example, William S. Coker and Susan R. Parker, “The Second Spanish Period in the Two Floridas,” in Michael Gannon, ed., The New History of Florida (Gainesville, Fla., 1996), 154; and Whitaker, Mississippi Question, 308, n20. Territorial governor William C. C. Claiborne showed his subordination to Jefferson by claiming West Florida was part of Louisiana. Claiborne to James Madison, New Orleans, January 24, 1804, in Dunbar Rowland, ed., Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne, 1801-1816, 6 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1917): 1:344-49. Joseph T. Hatfield, William Claiborne: Jeffersonian Centurion in the American Southwest (Lafayette, La., 1976), 238, is a sympathetic study of Claiborne and describes him and James Wilkinson, the American commissioners assigned to receive Louisiana, as not insisting on West Florida’s inclusion to avoid “some Embarrassment.” Indeed! The prevailing opinion in New Orleans in 1803 was that West Florida was not a part of Louisiana as Spain had not united the two provinces. François Barbé-Marbois, The History of Louisiana: Particularly of the Cession of that Colony to the United States of America, ed. by E. Wilson Lyon (1830; reprint ed., Baton Rouge, 1977), 240. Numerous documents in Spain’s Papeles de Cuba also prove this point. Furthermore, Spain had rejected French claims to ownership of Texas in the eighteenth-century.

21 Although the term “sick man of Europe” was first applied to the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century, it has since been used to describe other European countries experiencing economic difficulty or impoverishment.
inhabitants] protection, and as much aid as might be needed to effect it[s] acquisition." Casa-Calvo's letter demonstrated that only several months after the loss of Louisiana a handful of plotters in the Florida Parishes were already scheming the seizure of Spanish territory through extra-legal means.

Prior to Louisiana's retrocession, Americans scattered throughout the Mississippi Delta were already displaying their growing presence. By the Treaty of San Lorenzo, Spain had consented to the duty-free passage of American goods across Spanish territory on the Mississippi where it owned both banks. The commodities could also be stored in New Orleans warehouses while awaiting shipment out of the colony. In the following years numerous boats filled with raw materials arrived from the Ohio and Tennessee rivers as did ocean-going ships loaded with merchandise from cities on the Atlantic seaboard. These activities added greatly to the maritime traffic that had already been growing from the beginning of the 1790s when Spain permitted free trade with neutral nations because of the French revolutionary wars that convulsed Europe. Furthermore, the duty-free privilege on the Mississippi soon inspired other Americans to cry out for the same rights on the Spanish Mobile and Alabama rivers in West Florida. Spanish officials in the colony, however, refused since no treaty permitting American use of those rivers existed. Strategy devised in Spain, however, sometimes misfired in the colonies, and it happened when the court secretly instructed Intendant Juan Ventura Morales to end the right of deposit for American goods at New Orleans. He did so in October 1802, arguing that the treaty's duration for the free passage of American goods had expired. The Jefferson administration, however, greeted the announce-

\[22\] Whitaker, *Mississippi Question*, 155-56, 181-82; Casa-Calvo to Cevallos, New Orleans, May 18, 1804, in Robertson, *Louisiana under the Rule*, 2:187. The snippet of Robertson's extremely awkward translation has been improved here to make it more readable.
ment belligerently, and a shaken Spain resumed its former policy.23

Obtaining West Florida was a primary consideration for Jefferson, and he first attempted to employ legitimate methods before he turned to devious maneuvers. President since March 1801, he was eager to acquire use of West Florida's rivers that flowed southward from the Mississippi and Alabama territories to the Gulf. When he learned of Spain's pending transfer of Louisiana to France, he quickly instructed both his American minister to France, Robert R. Livingston, and his appointed extraordinary minister to France and Spain, James Monroe, to buy New Orleans and West Florida from Napoleon Bonaparte, who now exercised power in France. If the purchase could be arranged, it would give the United States the remaining Spanish territory on the Mississippi's east bank. France, however, was acquiring New Orleans and Louisiana, not West Florida. When Livingston and Monroe learned that Spain refused to sell West Florida, they tried to salvage their commission by accepting French minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's unexpected proposal to sell Louisiana and New Orleans. The approaching end of the brief Peace of Amiens in 1803 and Bonaparte's failure to subdue the slave insurrections in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) had provoked his sudden offer. A new war against the world's leading naval power, Great Britain, would obstruct French use of the Atlantic and stymie formation of an overseas empire. With hostilities imminent, money became more

valuable than land. Furthermore, for the United States the Livingston-Monroe territorial purchase created a dilemma. East coast Americans dismissed west bank Louisiana as a negligible acquisition, and the failure to obtain West Florida shocked them. Some soon advocated exchanging Louisiana for the two Floridas. Rumors of a possible swap persisted for several years and came from both Americans and Spaniards.24 Jefferson, for his part, contemplated only territorial gains, not exchanges.

When Spain did not yield West Florida, Livingston switched to another scheme. He declared that French diplomats had inserted in the sale of Louisiana a phrase that could be manipulated to American advantage. It stated that Spain had retroceded to France, and France then assigned to the United States, “the colony or Province of Louisiana, with the same extent that it now has in the hands of Spain, & that it had when France possessed it; and Such as it Should be after the Treaties subsequently entered into between Spain and other States.”25 Livingston and other resourceful politicians quickly argued that the phrase in the treaty referred to Louisiana’s “original size.”

But what the treaty signified was Spain’s return of territory that it had received from France in 1763, hence the widespread use of the word retrocession in the writing. Both Livingston and Monroe and the Frenchmen involved in negotiating the Louisiana Purchase (Talleyrand, François de Barbe-Marbois, and Bonaparte) all understood that West

24Cox, West Florida Controversy, 67-77. Spaniards in Louisiana, especially Casa-Calvo, clung to the possible restoration of the colony longer than the Americans, who as predecessors of Manifest Destiny soon coveted all Spanish borderlands.

Florida was neither a part of the Spanish cession to France nor included in the French sale to the United States.  

Jeffersonians, nonetheless, attempted to manipulate Louisiana's imprecise treaty boundaries to magnify its size. Spain emphatically disagreed and insisted that its conquest of West Florida had been recognized in the Paris peace treaty of 1783 and by the United States in 1795. Undeterred, Jefferson adopted Livingston's convoluted word play, and Secretary of State Madison followed by maintaining that "West Florida" was part of Louisiana and demanding its surrender. Livingston and Monroe tried to persuade French diplomats to accept their definition of the Louisiana Purchase's size and use it to pressure Spain, but their unrelenting insistence alienated the French. Thus Jefferson's attempt to gain additional territory through Livingston's inflated boundaries of Louisiana and French persuasion ultimately failed. Despite this and in anticipation of its eventual acquisition, Jeffersonians grandiosely kept calling West Florida, by which they

26DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana*, 167-75; Nugent, *Habits of Empire*, 102. Spanish policy over its refusal to accept the American contention that West Florida was part of Louisiana can be seen in a letter written by its foreign minister Pedro Gómez Labrador to Luis de Onis, Madrid, May 19, 1813: "The United States know well that the Louisiana ceded to France, and by it to them, is the same Louisiana which France had ceded Spain and whose limits were well known and fixed, and the doubts raised over them are nothing but effects of the blind ambition of the United States to extend its territory. ..." Cited in Philip C. Brooks, "Spain's Farewell to Louisiana, 1803-1821," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 27 (1940): 33-4.

meant the area west of the Perdido River, as “American territory” that remained in Spanish hands.

Soon after the administration laid claim to Jefferson’s definition of West Florida, it attempted to assert ownership through the American Congress’s passage of the Mobile Act on February 24, 1804. It unilaterally defined Spanish Mobile as an American revenue district that embraced “the shores, waters and inlets of the bay and river of Mobile.” Jefferson confidently signed the measure. Instantly, however, the Spanish minister in Washington, the Marqués de Casa-Irujo, denounced the dishonesty of the act that posited American ownership to a region lying inside Spanish territory. Spain’s refusal to countenance a large part of West Florida’s inclusion in the Louisiana Purchase forced Madison and Jefferson to shift ground. Madison attempted to justify the Mobile Act as an effort to thwart smuggling through West Florida, a fumbling explanation that lacked credibility. Jefferson, for his part, nullified the Mobile Act with his May 30 proclamation that moved the revenue district upriver to Fort Stoddard in the Mississippi Territory. Casa-Irujo rejected Madison and Jefferson’s unconvincing prevarications as “example[s] of American duplicity.”

All was not over, nonetheless. In May 1804, Folch in Pensacola noted that the U. S. government had published a schedule of the taxes to be collected at Mobile, which the New Orleans newspaper *Le Moniteur* reprinted. Folch protested the Congressional act that presumed to exercise authority over Spanish Mobile to the American governor of Louisiana,

---

28Julius W. Pratt, *A History of United States Foreign Policy* (New York, 1955), 102; Nugent, *Habits of Empire*, 103; Cox, *West Florida Controversy*, 97-9. Cox states in ibid, 97, 100-01, that Jefferson permitted Congress to pass the Mobile Act to test Spanish resistance to his claim. When Spain proved inflexible, Jefferson foisted blame on John Randolph who introduced the act in Congress. Randolph took umbrage at Jefferson’s accusation. Spelling of Casa-Irujo’s name has varied; the modern form is used here.
William C. C. Claiborne. The latter was a zealous Jeffersonian whom the president had appointed first as governor of the Mississippi Territory and then of Louisiana. Claiborne referred Folch to the federal government in Washington to resolve the tax problem. To Folch, he merely declared that his complaint “failed to excite in my mind either any doubt as to the rights of the United States contemplated by the Act alluded to, or to justify in the Smallest degree the heavy charge of usurpation which you [Folch] have alleged against the Proceedings of Congress.” Claiborne had stated as early as 1802, when he was still in the Mississippi Territory, “I wish to God the U[nited] States could possess themselves of East & West Florida, including the Island of Orleans.” Claiborne, together with Jefferson and his followers in Congress, were all determined to proceed in whatever way attained their objectives.

It was not long before Jefferson renewed his effort to obtain West Florida. Congress authorized James Monroe to spend two million to buy French support in persuading Spain to sell the Floridas to the United States and sent him on what became a fruitless mission to France. When French officials declined to back American claims, Monroe grew belligerent. His three-week journey to Spain turned into a calamity. The Spaniards had already tired of the presence of Charles Pinckney, the American minister, but he stayed and participated in the talks with Monroe. In their negotiations with Spanish diplomats, they claimed not only West Florida to the Perdido River, but even demanded the cession of both Floridas. Writing to Madison after his unproductive journey,

29Folch to Claiborne, Pensacola, May 1, 1804, and Claiborne to Folch, New Orleans, June 2, 1804, Rowland, Official Letter Books, 2:183-85, 185-86. See also Claiborne to Madison, New Orleans, June 2, 1804, ibid, 2:186.

30Hatfield, William Claiborne, 238.
a livid Monroe recklessly urged the government to seize both Floridas and Texas to the Rio Grande.\textsuperscript{31}

Jefferson's diplomacy, especially as practiced by Monroe and Pinckney, needed help because discussions with Spanish foreign minister Pedro Cevallos in 1805 had stalled. He regarded their proposed talking points as repugnant and designed to benefit them alone. Topics called for (1) indemnification for U. S. losses sustained when Spain seized American ships and cargos in its ports at the outbreak of the Anglo-Spanish war of 1796-1801; (2) Spanish compensation for American ship and cargo damages inflicted by French corsairs off the Spanish coast; (3) indemnification for financial losses precipitated by the termination of the right of deposit at New Orleans; and (4) recognition of Louisiana's boundaries as extending from the Floridas to the Rio Grande. Cevallos judged only the first point as legitimate and rejected the others. On point two, France had already indemnified the United States by an agreement of September 30, 1800, for damages inflicted by French corsairs and courts, and the American commissioners were now trying to collect more. Cevallos deemed the third point absurd because the right of deposit had already exceeded the time specified in the Treaty of San Lorenzo when Morales ended it. As for the territorial dimensions of Louisiana in the last point, it was another crude attempt to secure Jefferson's fanciful boundaries without regard to facts. Moreover, the Spaniards considered the two diplomats as ill-informed, arrogant, and eager to profit personally from their dealings. Cevallos dismissed the American offer to negotiate since their representatives

considered all their demands just and would not make meaningful concessions.\textsuperscript{32}

Over the next three years, Jefferson and Madison kept pressuring France to obtain title to the Floridas and sell them to the United States inasmuch as Spain would not. The American willingness to purchase West Florida at this time also seemed to invalidate the earlier claim to ownership of the colony through the Louisiana Purchase. Nevertheless, Jefferson simultaneously insinuated that genuine peace with Spain was impossible until the United States acquired the colony, which was hardly the attitude of a peaceful neighbor. What’s more, the French were poor emissaries and did little to fulfill the American president’s bidding. Louis-Marie Turreau, the minister to Washington, advised Secretary of State Madison that neither Spain nor France recognized the American right to West Florida and further insistence was futile. Conditions, however, again changed dramatically when in 1808 Napoleon seized the Spanish royal family and installed his brother Joseph as king of Spain. During that summer of 1808, Jefferson suggested to Madison that without becoming involved with either France or England, the United States could seize the previously claimed territory as a “right.” In Spain, upheaval followed the French intervention as a large part of the Iberian people rose up against the invaders, and the warfare paralyzed the Spanish government—when one existed—from actively pursuing foreign affairs. The chaos in Spain increased Jefferson’s optimism about securing the Florida lands. Nevertheless, he left the presidency in early 1809 without doing so as he refused to

resort to war. Perhaps he now accepted the falsity of his own claim to West Florida.33

While these diplomatic predicaments hung over the Parishes, American dissidents on the ground as early as 1804 began unleashing attacks against the Spanish authorities that were designed to instigate U. S. intervention. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the region consisted of scattered agricultural settlements along the Mississippi and on other rivers. On the Mississippi, they included Bayou Sara and Bayou Tonica in the Feliciana District, Manchac, and Baton Rouge; the last was the district’s principal settlement. Smaller numbers of residents lived farther to the east along interior rivers such as the Amite, Tangipahoa, Tchefuncte, and Pearl, which was the largest waterway.34 The white inhabitants were overwhelmingly Anglo-Americans, with fewer numbers of Britons, French Creoles, and Spaniards. Most were middling farmers who raised cattle, indigo, corn, sugar cane, and cotton; in addition, they produced pitch, tar, and wood products, especially barrels, from the region’s piney forests. Well-to-do landowners brought in slaves for the arduous labor needed to clear and level land, log, and plant and harvest crops. Spanish offers of free land had attracted American settlers, and the successful and affluent among them kept petitioning for more. They had an ally in New Orleans, where Intendant Morales ran a money-making operation that sold land grants in the Parishes to residents and non-residents alike; the well-known New Orleans mer-


chant and speculator Daniel Clark Jr. acquired thousands of acres this way.\textsuperscript{35}

Governor Claiborne, who acted as if the United States had a legitimate claim to much of West Florida, tried futilely to compel Morales to stop selling land. He argued that the province was disputed territory and sales should await a resolution of its ownership. When Morales rejected his arguments, Claiborne forced him out of New Orleans in 1806. Nevertheless, the resolute intendant relocated to Pensacola where he quickly resumed his sales.\textsuperscript{36}

Among the inhabitants of the Parishes were many people satisfied with Spanish rule and who had no wish to see a change in sovereignty. Samuel C. Hyde Jr. has described the


blocs of settlers who retained their loyalty to Spain in the following way:

The group included... Anglo residents in the service of the Spanish Crown, such as prominent land baron Shepherd Brown. The pro-Spanish faction found enthusiastic allies among merchants, traders, river boat operators, and others who enjoyed the lax regulations and available market the Spanish territory offered. The largest group among this faction included the scores of piney woods farmers in the uplands and the Creole French, along with a smattering of Islenos who resided in the lowlands along lakes Maurepas and Pontchartrain. These people valued the absence of governmental intrusion into their lives and the tax free lifestyle offered by the Spanish. More important, many enjoyed generous Spanish land grants that might not have been honored should a transition in governance occur. British loyalists such as Michael Jones and William Cooper aligned with this group as the faction most capable of resisting American encroachment. Existing evidence suggests that the pro-Spanish faction represented a majority of inhabitants in modern Livingston, Tangipahoa, St. Tammany, and Washington parishes, along with sizeable minorities in modern St. Helena and East Feliciana parishes.37

A serious problem for Spanish authority in the Florida Parishes during the tumultuous years after 1804 was maintaining order among a rowdy and rebellious group of newcomers. They were opportunists, outlaws, army deserters, and adventurers—almost all of them Americans from the neighboring Mississippi Territory. They crowded into the poorly protected northwestern fringe of Feliciana in growing numbers to raid, steal slaves and livestock, destroy property,
and perpetrate other violent acts. Some of it was done to stimulate unrest among people who favored American intervention. Nevertheless, a large contingent of the settlers, especially in the early years, retained their loyalty and cooperated with Spanish authorities against troublemakers. Imposing order in the countryside fell to rural residents who served in militia units as a police force while respectable and learned men acted as alcaldes (magistrates). Garrisoning the Baton Rouge fort, meanwhile, was the principal duty of the limited Spanish troops. Among the most notorious rabble-rousers were the Kemper brothers—Reuben, Nathan, and Samuel—who began their criminal activities in 1804. The latter two were described pejoratively as brutal "white Indians and river pirates." Their vicious behavior started when John Smith terminated their contract to develop his land, and he evicted them after they refused to leave. They revolted against Smith and the Spanish authorities, hoping to instigate a general uprising in which other American landowners supported them. To the Kempers' chagrin, the peaceful inhabitants quashed the disorders. Reuben Kemper, a sometimes New Orleans resident and an alleged colonel in the local militia, had ties to Claiborne, who was disinclined to curb the Kempers' hostile activities. In 1804, Gen. James Wilkinson, who led American army forces in the West, briefly detained the two brothers in the Mississippi Territory before he released them. It was the first example of American authorities refusing to prosecute or extradite fugitives for crimes committed in Spanish lands.  

38 Cox, West Florida Controversy, 154; Andrew McMichael, "The Kemper 'Rebellion': Filibustering and Resident Anglo American Loyalty in Spanish West Florida," Louisiana History, 43 (2002): 133-65; Hatfield, William Claiborne, 244, 239-40, mistakenly identified Vicente Folch as the author of "Reflections on Louisiana." In reality, Wilkinson was the author, and Folch translated it into Spanish; Nugent, Habits of Empire, 104. Early interpretations of the Kempers hailed them as heroes in the American acquisition of the Florida Parishes. See, for example, Arthur, Story of the West
When disorders first erupted in the Parishes, the garrison at Baton Rouge obtained reinforcements from the Spanish soldiers evacuating upriver posts due to Louisiana’s change in ownership and from the Galveztown fort on the south or now-American side of the Amite River. In July, Grand-Pré reported that brigands in the Feliciana district had burned militia captain Vicente Pintado’s home. Grand-Pré quickly dispatched a boatload of soldiers to restore order. Elsewhere tranquility prevailed. Grand-Pré offered the arrested outlaws amnesty provided they left Spanish territory and never returned. Such consideration, however, merely granted the lawbreakers, especially the Kemper brothers, fresh opportunities to continue their criminal behavior.

The armed bandits constituted a serious menace inasmuch as they moved through the sparsely inhabited countryside threatening residents with near impunity. They operated in two or three bands each with twenty to twenty-five followers who displayed a flag adorned with two stars and seven white and blue stripes (the two stars most likely represented East and West Florida). On August 3, 1804, Samuel and Nathan Kemper murdered a constable and savagely lashed another while from New Orleans brother Reuben tried intimidating Alcaldé Alexander Sterling with written threats. Four days


Grand-Pré to Casa-Calvo, Baton Rouge, April 21, and May 9 and 13, 1804; (Casa-Calvo) to Grand-Pré, New Orleans, May 22, 1804; all in AGI, PC, leg. 73. Many Canary Islanders at Galveztown were then migrating to Baton Rouge, where they created Spanish Town.

Grand-Pré to Casa-Calvo, Baton Rouge, July 6 and 19, 1804, ibid.
later, outlaws momentarily seized Pintado, magistrate John O’Connor, and other persons. Growing more brazen, they attempted to grab Grand-Pré at his home and attacked the Baton Rouge fort, both to no avail. Reports from Feliciana told of troubles there and in Bayou Tunica. Claiborne described them as “insurrections” in his letters to Washington, perhaps to magnify their seriousness. But they were only minor flare-ups not worthy of the word, and the loyal inhabitants quickly restored order. Casa-Calvo requested Claiborne to instruct commanders in the Mississippi Territory and Pointe Coupee, which was across the river from Feliciana, to deny the rebels sanctuary and to arrest Reuben Kemper for his incendiary pamphlets.41 Claiborne fiercely refuted the allegation that he coddled insurgents and advised commandants near Spanish territory to prevent American involvement in the Parishes. His instructions soon appeared insincere since disorders persisted into September. At that time, Claiborne told Casa-Calvo, “I do not feel that my Authority permits me to direct or allow the seizure of [insurgents] within the Limits of the United States.” 42 By his declaration, he consented to their operations, which was what the governor of the Mississippi Territory was doing. Nor

41Casa-Calvo to Claiborne, New Orleans, August 11, 1804, Rowland, Official Letter Books, 2:307-09; Grand-Pré to Casa Calvo, Baton Rouge, August 4, 1804, MPA, SD, vol. 7, ff. 397-401; McMichael, Atlantic Loyalties, 77-8; F. Todd Smith, Louisiana and the Gulf South Frontier, 1500-1821 (Baton Rouge, 2015), 221. A flag with two stars on it that once belonged to insurrectionists is in the Center for Southeast Louisiana Studies at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, La.

did Claiborne believe that the reasons for the turmoil in the Parishes merited his attention. On many occasions, especially when requested by Spanish officials, Claiborne shirked responsibility for acting to quiet the dissidents and referred the Spaniards to higher authorities in distant Washington.

In August, Grand-Pré noticed that one of his militia detachments sent to capture outlaws had forced many of them to flee to Pinckneyville, a settlement just across the border in the Mississippi Territory. Casa-Calvo requested Claiborne to arrest them, and if he would not, their removal from the boundary line to prevent further incursions and disseminations of provocative writings that sought to inflame the Spanish province. The request disturbed Claiborne, who admitted to Madison "that [as Casa-Calvo was] becoming troublesome I shall probably in a Short time refuse to hold any correspondence with him, until he shall have been acknowledged by the President of the United States as a Public agent on the part of Spain." Inasmuch as that took time, Spanish protests became futile.

Raids on the Florida Parishes continued from bases in Pinckneyville in the Mississippi Territory and from Pointe Coupee across the Mississippi, all of which kept Grand-Pré concerned. As reinforcements from Pensacola required many days to reach him, Grand-Pré in 1804 sought help from Casa-Calvo in New Orleans. Despite having only his small military escort and limited funds, in August he sent two officers with about a dozen soldiers, his entire military picket, and 1,500 pesos upriver aboard a Spanish galiot. Later that month, Folch in Pensacola dispatched 150 grenadiers and fusiliers to

---

quiet the unrest.  By the time they arrived, tranquility prevailed again.

Troubles, nevertheless, persisted. On December 11, 1804, Claiborne, who was not an eyewitness, described another “insurrection” at Baton Rouge involving perhaps thirty persons who were mainly local residents. It quickly subsided, and Folch expelled the leaders from the Parishes and granted their followers amnesty. Nevertheless, the American government’s assertions to ownership of the area continued, and Claiborne, as a devoted Jeffersonian, expected Louisiana’s extended eastern (the Perdido River) and western (the Rio Grande) boundaries to be achieved.

Sporadic strife continued through 1805, with the Kempers operating without restraint from American territory into Spanish lands. Requests for their arrest had no effect despite Claiborne’s assurances that he would prevent American citizens from helping the raiders. Many residents in the Parishes identified Samuel and Nathan Kemper’s activities as designed to incite enmity toward Spain. On a visit to several upriver Louisiana “counties,” Claiborne stopped in Baton Rouge on August 26, for a short visit. Serenity then prevailed, but a group of exasperated residents in opposition to the outlaws had had enough and planned a raid on Pinckneyville to apprehend the two firebrands who used the village as a base. Late one night in early September disguised men rode into the settlement and entered a house where they seized Samuel and Nathan Kemper. Some accounts reported that Reuben Kemper was also apprehended. Upon returning to Spanish territory, the masked men unexpectedly ran into a mounted militia patrol. The cloaked riders immediately

---

44Casa-Calvo to Folch, New Orleans, August 11, 1804, MPA, SD, vol. 7, pp. 396-98; Casa-Calvo to Folch, New Orleans, August 15, 1804, AGI, PC, leg. 69; McMichael, Atlantic Loyalties, 91-4.

decamped, leaving the Kempers behind. Upon realizing who the bound men were, the patrol officer conducted them to the Mississippi River to send them to Baton Rouge by boat. Once under way, the apparently sympathetic boat commander veered toward the American bank, where Nathan identified himself to a settler and shouted that he was being taken to Baton Rouge as a prisoner. Immediately, a rider dashed south to alert the Pointe Coupee fort commander. As soon as the Spanish boat passed the fort, a larger vessel with numerous American soldiers apprehended it. Once on shore, the Kempers gained their freedom, but their guards spent two weeks incarcerated until a judge, acting under Spanish pressure, released them. The lost opportunity to quell the Kempers frustrated the residents favorable to Spanish control, and, instead, they witnessed the heavy-handed protection Americans afforded the outlaws.46

As the Mississippi Territory remained a staging ground for raids into Spanish territory, in April 1806, Grand-Pré reported a force three hundred strong strung out along the border that he believed was preparing to attack Mobile. Public talk alleged that three mercantile houses in New Orleans had provided them with arms. While the American governors of the Orleans District and Mississippi Territory disclaimed knowledge of the armed men, Grand-Pré deplored his inadequate defenses, troops, and money. He had only thirty able-bodied soldiers to confront enemy raiders.47 Although Claiborne publicly denied knowledge that insur-

46Grand-Pré to Folch, Baton Rouge, December 21, 1805, MPA, SD, vol. 8, ff. 575-76; also see accompanying documentation that consists of letters and depositions in ibid, ff. 576-629; Cox, West Florida Controversy, 165-67; Gayarré, History of Louisiana, 4:86; Hatfield, William Claiborne, 245; Davis, The Rogue Republic, 69-78. Davis is very sympathetic to the Kempers.

47Grand-Pré to Folch, Baton Rouge, April 1, 1806, MPA, SD, vol. 8, ff. 630-32. Grand-Pré perhaps mistook soldiers who were heading to reinforce Natchitoches for armed men who intended to raid West Florida.
gents used American soil to further their illegal activity in the Parishes, from the end of 1805 he expressed his hawkish sentiments to Jefferson and urged him to seize West Florida. He protested the hardships imposed on Americans traveling through the Parishes by requiring them to have passports. He labeled it a new practice, which it was not, and he suggested not enforcing it, especially for the flatboat men who arrived during the spring flood season and returned home by land. He insisted on free passage through Spanish territory for all American transients. However, it was not a decision Claiborne could freely make.

Aaron Burr’s two journeys through the Mississippi Valley between 1805 and 1807 was another source of great concern to the Spaniards. Folch at Pensacola, who received his news from the schemer Gen. James Wilkinson, looked upon Burr’s presence apprehensively. Although he never laid out his plans clearly, Burr most likely contemplated intervening in the Spanish territories and possibly wanted to create a new nation. Reaching New Orleans in late June 1805 on his first journey, Burr met members of the city’s Mexican Association, a political club that advocated the “liberation” of Spanish territory, including West Florida. Its members spread their propaganda and sought recruits without hindrance. After spending about two weeks studying conditions on the Spanish frontier, Burr returned to the east coast through the Florida Parishes but caused no disturbance. The next year, Wilkinson turned on Burr and started sabotaging his projects. During Burr’s second journey down the Ohio River, Folch received word that Burr’s supporters in Kentucky were increasing daily (it was an exaggeration Wilkinson purposely disseminated), and the news alarmed the Spaniards. Soon Burr’s rival, President Jefferson, ordered his arrest, and it occurred in Alabama in 1807. Burr never achieved what he

48Claiborne to Grand-Pré, New Orleans, April 8, 1806, ibid, ff. 637-38; Hatfield, William Claiborne, 246-47.
perhaps sought, an invasion of Mexico or formation of an autonomous nation. The Spaniards on the Gulf Coast, especially those in the Florida Parishes with their frail defenses, feared their inclusion in his devious plans. Due to the bloated reports about Burr’s strength in late 1806 and early 1807, in which Wilkinson helped enormously, Folch led a military column from Pensacola to defend the westernmost portions of his colony. Jefferson, meanwhile, kept increasing the number of American soldiers and gunboats in the lower Mississippi Valley to put up a more formidable presence. He had already proposed to Congress developing a military stronghold in Louisiana in 1806 to control the French population, whom he eyed apprehensively. Congress, however, rejected his project.49

An ongoing concern during these years was the American insistence on the free use of the Mobile River and the right to cross Spanish territory without paying duties on goods their ships carried. To improve relations after a couple of troublesome years, Governor Folch in 1806 favored opening the rivers to American navigation through Spanish territory, for which he solicited the captain general’s permission. Folch,

however, insisted on reciprocal treatment from the Americans who had closed the Mississippi to the residents of the Parishes or taxed their goods as they attempted to ship them out of the colony; he even offered to return the duties Americans paid in 1805 for passage down the Mobile River. Claiborne, however, refused to cooperate and, instead, suggested to Jefferson seizing Mobile, a proposal the president disregarded.50

Nevertheless, Col. Carlos Howard, the military commander in West Florida and acting governor during Folch’s journey to Baton Rouge in late 1806, permitted the Americans to use the Mobile River until Someruelos replied. The captain general, however, deferred the matter to a council of war in Pensacola, but then Folch’s absence prevented the council from making a decision. Meanwhile, treasury official Miguel Cayetano Soler also advised granting Americans use of the rivers. On March 20, 1808, the captain general relayed a royal order from Spain to Morales that requested more information before royal officials resolved the matter and until then instructed him not to innovate. The government, however, never solved the dilemma because of the French intervention in Spain that year.51

While American use of the Mobile River remained unresolved, on June 1, 1807, Morales candidly answered an inquiry from Rafael Gómez Rumbaud of the Cuban

50Someruelos to the commander of West Florida, Havana, November 21, 1806, AGI, Estado, leg. 17, no. 85. Someruelos in Havana also chastised Folch for acting on his own, ignoring the captain general’s superior authority, and communicating directly with Spain. See also Hatfield, William Claiborne, 243.

intendancy, which dealt with economic matters, about conditions in the West Florida colony. Morales sent a dismal report since he regarded expenditures for the province’s development and defense as useless burdens. In his opinion, retention of West Florida without Louisiana was both impossible and pointless since the colony lacked the resources needed to convert it into a viable possession. Its military protection was woefully inadequate, and Mexico had not provided funding to improve it despite the royal order of May 22, 1805, to do so. The absence of the Mexican subvention in silver pesos forced Morales to issue vouchers payable by the treasury; recipients, however, preferred real money, not paper promises. Unfamiliar with West Florida, Morales judged much of the region unfit for agriculture. Spanish settlements situated on the sandy and infertile coast often required foodstuffs from upriver American settlements. Contrary to Morales’s thinking, the interior lands of the Florida Parishes were capable of producing cotton, corn, and diverse other commercial and edible crops; however, irregular terrain, rivers, creeks, rains, and floods often adversely affected the farmers. Morales lamented that ambulant Americans were increasing everywhere. To lessen settler complaints, the Spanish government removed import and export duties on goods and produce. Morales argued that blocking the American acquisition of West Florida required a formidable garrison and massive expenditures. Those onerous obligations made him question the colony’s value and its ability to be developed. Moreover, he predicted its loss in the near future because its narrow width that averaged sixty-six miles and its extensive length of 450 miles, together with its arduous communications, impeded different regions from readily assisting each other with arms and men. Morales advised minimizing expenditures by reducing soldiers, officials, tax collection, defenses, Indian gifts, construction, and repairs, or just about everything. He recognized that
retaining West Florida was unfeasible and preferred to conserve scarce funds.52

Because of Spain’s minuscule military presence in the Floridas, American authorities believed they could deal with the Parishes as they pleased. In 1807, Postmaster General Gideon Granger wanted to establish a postal road through “that portion of our Territory which is kept in possession of Spain.” Claiborne as well as officials in Washington thought that construction of the thoroughfare could be easily arranged. But they had not counted on Grand-Pré, who wanted no part of it. He saw no benefits accruing from an intrusion of lawless people who would enter and stay. The colony’s northern lands already harbored too many American military deserters, criminals, and other worrisome miscreants.53

Jefferson’s embargo on American shipping was another dilemma that affected the Parishes in the last years of Spanish rule. He imposed it because warships of belligerent European nations had been seizing neutral American vessels on the high seas, and he tried to prevent their capture by denying ship owners the right to engage in foreign trade. The embargo took effect in New Orleans in January 1808. Folch, who was then in the city, quickly sought to exempt Spanish vessels engaged in trade with the Florida Parishes from the restriction. Claiborne refused because he aimed to impose as much hardship on the inhabitants as he could. He wanted

52Morales to Rafael Gómez Rumbaud, Pensacola, June 1, 1807, MPA, SD, vol. 8, ff. 68-85. Morales stated the inquiry was made on December 11, 1806. William S. Coker and Susan R. Parker, in “The Second Spanish Period in the Two Floridas,” in The New History of Florida (Gainesville, 1996), 153, agree that West Florida under Spain was unprofitable.

53White, Vicente Folch, 98; Kastor, Nation’s Crucible, 70. In the fall of 1805, Folch had not been opposed to a U. S. mail route where post-riders at Fort Stoddard shifted to water for the voyage to New Orleans. Cox, West Florida Controversy, 172.
their dissatisfaction with Spanish rule to fire up an insurrection that culminated in an American takeover. He bluntly admitted to Folch that he had received instructions to place gunboats on Lake Pontchartrain to disrupt Spanish communications between the Parishes and Pensacola. In addition, Claiborne sinisterly alleged to the president that if West Florida were exempted from the embargo, the diversion of American products to Spanish Baton Rouge, Mobile, and Pensacola would advantageously profit Spain.54

While Claiborne harmed the residents of the Florida Parishes in diverse ways, doing so did not increase their yearning for American intervention. Instead, on January 29, 1809, a year after the embargo began, they contemplated using Bayou Manchac and the Amite River to ship their crops and goods out of the colony. They also considered building a nine-mile road along Bayou Manchac to deeper waters on the Amite since the bayou was traversable by boat only during the spring flood season. The possibility excited Delassus, who was then in charge. The petitioners calculated the construction expense at two thousand pesos.55 How far this plan proceeded is unknown, but the cost most likely exceeded their limited finances.

Earlier in July 1804, Folch had started another project, the development of a road from Pensacola to Baton Rouge. Because of Kemper-instigated disorders shortly before, he had led a military force from Pensacola to the Florida Parishes, traveling mostly by water and plodding through the wilderness on the last leg of the journey. He repeated this in

54Pratt, United States Foreign Policy, 121-22; Claiborne to Folch, New Orleans, March 13, 1809, Rowland, Official Letter Books, 4:330-31; Cox, West Florida Controversy, 218-19.

55Delassus to Folch, Baton Rouge, February 4, 1809, with enclosure, petition of John Rhea, Robert Percy, Thomas Lilly and nine others, Baton Rouge, January 25, 1809, both in MPA, SD, vol. 8, ff. 179-81, and 181-88, respectively.
SPANISH REACTIONS TO AMERICAN CLAIMS

1805 and again in a journey in late 1806 and early 1807. To initiate road construction in 1804, Folch appointed Joseph Collins, a militia captain of dragoons, to lay out the route in September. A year later, Collins petitioned for the money he had spent and for the post of commandant of Pascagoula, a small settlement on the river of the same name. Work on the road proceeded by fits and starts, with only the middle portion partially finished by February 1809. Although Folch described it as nearing completion, it probably had unfinished gaps, especially where rivers intersected it.\(^5\)\(^6\)

As road building went on, the Jefferson embargo produced a demonstration of loyalty to Spain by a portion of the residents in the Parishes, an act that surprised the Americans. The Spanish supporters signed petitions attesting their allegiance to the government. In the Baton Rouge area, they denounced the land-hungry machinations of the United States against them. They assured the crown of their devotion and their appreciation for past favors. Furthermore, they protested the injuries Americans inflicted on them and the scant respect shown to Spanish territorial sovereignty. The petitioners railed against the American refusal to permit their vessels to introduce slaves or export the product of their labor. They enumerated the harmful American deeds that either seized their European purchases

\(^{56}\)Joseph Collins to [Folch], Pensacola, October 5, 1805, John Forbes Papers on microfilm, reel 1, Mobile Public Library, and Folch to Someruelos, No. 760, Pensacola, February 21, 1809, AGI, PC, leg. 1566, information provided by Martin Britt; Hatfield, William Claiborne, 244; “Instructions for the Captain and Commander of the troops going to reinforce Baton Rouge” and “Instructions for Militia Captain Joseph Collins,” (Pensacola), October 11, 1805, both in AGI, PC, leg. 55; White, Vicente Folch, 95. The water and land route from Pensacola to Baton Rouge began on the Gulf by ship to the Tchefuncte River and to the Tangipahoa, and at last to the Amite, where soldiers disembarked to go by land to Baton Rouge. Cox, West Florida Controversy, 172, denied that Folch was building a road from Mobile to Baton Rouge.
or taxed them—customs the same Americans had earlier condemned; the harassment they experienced from Jefferson’s gunboats on the Mississippi; and the American troops who brazenly violated Spanish soil to arrest deserters. The petitioners drew analogies between American complaints against illegal British seizures of their ships and the diverse injury the United States inflicted on residents of the Parishes. Although they accepted their inability to resolve their wretched situation, they assured Grand-Pré:

We ask nothing. You will do what is proper. But we know that we cannot conclude this respectful petition without again assuring you that if you find it convenient to charge us with defending the honor and rights of our august sovereign and nation, we are ready to imitate the glorious example of our brothers in Spain, and every inhabitant will assemble for service under the flag. Long live Fernando VII.57

While Spanish officials possibly helped in redacting the document, the residents freely signed it.

To protest the American embargo and the taxes imposed on the settlers living on Spanish soil, Folch entertained the chimerical idea of sending a ship from the Parishes downriver loaded with cotton for export. When New Orleans authorities stopped it, the ship’s captain would show them a

57Petition to Grand-Pré, Baton Rouge, October 1808, MPA, SD, vol. 8, ff. 166-78. Cox, in West Florida Controversy, 315-18, mentions other protesta­tions of loyalty by the residents of the Florida Parishes about the same time. In Grand-Pré to Folch, Baton Rouge, October 1808, AGI, PC, leg. 1566, he recounted many of the same complaints contained in the petition. One example of American military aggression was committed by a gunboat that landed sailors on Spanish soil to search for and seize a deserter named Armstrong, which was done without seeking Spanish permission in advance. Grand-Pré vigorously protested the American violation of Spanish territory. His complaint compelled the Americans to return Armstrong. White, Vicente Folch, 93-5.
copy of the 1795 treaty that granted Spanish subjects the unencumbered navigation of the Mississippi. Such a move, Folch suggested, might shame the American government or public into compliance. Possibly, too, exposure of the reprehensible Jeffersonian practices could encourage his political opponents in the United States to disapprove them. When Captain General Someruelos replied to Folch's letter, he cautiously advised him against provoking American anger.58

In the midst of all these troubles, the Kempers continued their crimes in the Florida Parishes, particularly against the Spanish authorities. Perhaps their most serious violation occurred when Reuben Kemper lost a lawsuit, and he and his cohorts responded by kidnapping the offending judge, Ira C. Kneeland, whom they beat and maimed. Kneeland identified one of his attackers as a Kemper. Before Grand-Pré could take effective measures, his already poor health worsened and compelled his search for medical assistance in Havana, where he succumbed to the unknown ailment. The disorders in West Florida persisted, if not intensified, at that time.59

General Wilkinson, who had charge of American troops in New Orleans in December 1803, was still around a half dozen years later and a principal player in the Gulf Coast drama in which he displayed his thespian qualities on every side of the political stage.60 He had continued his clandestine services

58 Folch to Someruelos, Pensacola, January 25, 1809, and Someruelos to Folch, Havana, March 7, 1809, AGI, PC, leg. 1566.

59 White, Vicente Folch, 93.

for the Spaniards, all-the-while retaining charge of the American army in the Mississippi Valley. Before leaving office in 1809, Jefferson placed Wilkinson in charge of troops sent to New Orleans, allegedly to protect Spanish territories along the Gulf Coast against the incursions of other nations. But as it turned out, they spent their time harassing the inhabitants of the Parishes.\(^{61}\)

Moreover by late 1809, Napoleon’s army in Spain had grown in size and controlled many of the cities and towns. With French dominance in Spain nearing completion, Folch in early 1810 hinted to both Wilkinson and Claiborne his inclination to entrust West Florida temporarily to the United States should Spain’s political misfortunes decline further. It was a desperate attempt to forestall American intervention in the Parishes that now appeared likely.\(^{62}\)

Folch’s premonition proved right. In April 1810, Governor Claiborne arrived in Washington City to inform President Madison about his plan to occupy the two Floridas. It called for inciting the American inhabitants of both East and West Florida to rise up against Spain and request annexation by the United States. This would be the excuse for intervening in the colonies. Claiborne had failed to persuade Jefferson to adopt his proposal several years earlier, but he now succeeded with Madison.\(^{63}\)


\(^{62}\)Wanjohi Waciuma, Intervention in the Spanish Floridas, 1801-1813: A Study in Jeffersonian Foreign Policy (Boston, 1976), 133-45.

\(^{63}\)Ibid. See also Joseph Burkholder Smith, The Plot to Steal Florida: James Madison’s Phony War (New York, 1983), and Julius W. Pratt, Expansionists of 1812 (New York, 1925), that discusses similar events in East Florida.
Although an examination of the insurrection in the western reaches of the Florida Parishes in 1810 lies beyond the purpose of this study, the factors responsible for the area slipping from Spanish grasp deserve some attention. To reiterate, turbulent incidents typified the half dozen years after 1803 and they came at a time when the Spanish Empire was crumbling because of multiple colonial rebellions and the inability of royal representatives to offer much assistance. Jefferson and Madison’s diplomatic tactics that aimed to acquire as much of West Florida as possible caused instability and enabled residents who favored annexation to act disruptively. At the same time, diplomacy failed American diplomats as France refused to cooperate with them and Spain declined to sell land. Initially, the Parishes’ fragile defenses proved sufficient to hold back the annexationists who were too few to spark a general uprising until Napoleon toppled the Iberian monarchy in 1808 and the provisional government that replaced it in 1809-1810. The presence of inhabitants loyal to Spain in the Parishes contradicts the long-held contention that American settlers had all preserved their allegiance to the United States as Jefferson presumed they would. While accurate figures are unavailable, even in 1810 a fair segment of the residents retained their allegiance toward Spain.

Furthermore, and this point is of fundamental importance, without the backing of many Anglo-American, British,

---


French, and Spanish residents in the Parishes, the Iberian presence would have collapsed much sooner. Spanish military strength throughout the length of West Florida was weak in 1804 and thereafter steadily kept losing strength, except when occasional reinforcements trickled in until Havana could no longer spare them. The shortage meant that local residents were always crucial in staffing the militia that tried to keep order in the countryside. In 1809 only about 474 officers and soldiers, both able-bodied and disabled, guarded the colony, and their numbers dropped precipitously soon after. They defended an area of approximately 29,000 square miles. With only these slender forces, no one could doubt that the Spanish Empire's military power in the northeastern periphery of North America had fallen into irreversible decay.66

In the midst of Spain's decrepit military posture in West Florida, rebels began their September 1810 uprising cautiously since they momentarily left Delassus in charge as the local governor and proclaimed devotion to Fernando VII. They did not want to alienate the pro-Spanish residents or precipitate a hostile reaction to the insurrection. This impasse, however, did not last long as radicals among the insurgents soon drove Delassus and other moderates from office and seized possession of the Baton Rouge fort, the only military structure in the Parishes. But Spanish action was not the only movement that stalled as efforts to develop the "Republic of West Florida," also known colloquially as the "Lone Star Republic" (no uprising occurred in East Florida, hence the single star), never progressed far. Upon learning of events in Baton Rouge, Madison in Washington City immediately enacted plans for annexation with his proclamation of

October 27, 1810. It decreed the seizure of West Florida west of the Perdido River, with the justification that it had belonged to the United States since the Treaty of Paris of April 30, 1803, that purchased Louisiana and New Orleans from France. It was a crude gesture to legitimize the annexation as nothing in the 1803 treaty alluded to West Florida. Two months following Madison’s proclamation, federal soldiers arrived in Baton Rouge and took possession; the land claimed, however, extended no farther east than the Pearl River. As in schemes of this kind, only a minority of the inhabitants of the Parishes were activists in the political and military commotion that centered along the Mississippi River.67

In the years after annexation, many peaceful residents continued to harbor positive thoughts about Spanish rule. They made up a majority of the inhabitants in the present-day interior districts of St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Washington, and Livingston, with other supporters residing in East Feliciana and St. Helena Parishes. No doubt additional numbers lived in other areas, too, even along the Mississippi River. When the insurrection occurred, they had not been able to oppose the insurgents as they lacked Spanish support in leaders, troops, and weapons. Meanwhile, the rebels held decisive advantages such as control of the newly created colonial administration and the assistance and resources of the American government.68 In the end, Jefferson’s work at


68Hyde, “Consolidating the Revolution,” 267; Henry Adams, History of the United States of America: The Administration of James Madison, 5-9 vols. (New York, 1890-1891), 5:217; Cox, West Florida Controversy, 412. Cox, "American Intervention," 293, wrote “most of the inhabitants of the Floridas . . . desired annexation to the United States.” In doing so, he accepted the traditional interpretation and failed to acknowledge that sizable numbers of the inhabitants had supported Spanish rule even after the province’s
land grabbing in West Florida appears to have been gamesmanship as he did not resort to overt force. Nevertheless, his actions helped kindle an ardent desire among nationalists, westerners, speculators, and assorted other followers of the expansionist ideology that in the following years became Manifest Destiny.\textsuperscript{69}

insurrection and annexation in 1810. American writers have usually offered three principal reasons for seizing the area: security, the residents’ desire for annexation, and Spain’s inability to govern the colony adequately, which presumes that Spain was responsible for the unrest in the colony. All three are questionable.
