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orrespondence (1602-1611) on the Decision to Abandon or Maintain Two Spanish Colonies



M. Tattonus, *Nova et recte terraum et regnorum* . . . , 1600, detail with Nova Granada (early name of New Mexico, upper left), and San Agustín (Florida), encircled

NUEVA MÉXICO

Not until the 1590s did Spain pursue settlement north of Mexico, when Juan de Oñate led 600 men across the Rio Grande River and “founded” a colony by seizing an Indian pueblo to serve as its capital. After several years of surviving in scattered and ill-provisioned settlements, while Oñate led futile searches for gold and silver and provoked the Indians to warfare with his demands for food and submission, most of the settlers returned to Mexico, forcing the issue of whether to abandon the colony.

1608, July 2. Council of the Indies to King Philip III of Spain.

Since your majesty realized how unfruitful it would be to continue the discovery and pacification of New Mexico (which was granted under contract to Don Juan de Oñate) because all of that land is of little value, and because the aim of Don Juan and of those who joined him in the enterprise was its prolongation for their private aims, your majesty therefore ordered the Marquis of Montesclaros, by a cedula of June 17, 1606, to halt that discovery as soon as he received the message and not to proceed any farther, to recall Don Juan de Oñate with skill and tact under some plausible pretext, and after his return to detain him in Mexico and disband the people who had taken part in the discovery. . . .

. . . the viceroy . . . learned of the small number of souls that had been saved thus far and the meager hopes for the future since not only had the

SAN AGUSTÍN

This fort settlement was built in 1565 on the Atlantic coast to prevent French influence in the region and to protect Spanish ships returning to Europe. Franciscan priests soon established Indian missions, but attempts to attract Spanish colonists failed. Poor revenues, an Indian uprising, rumors of British settlement to the north, a 1599 hurricane that nearly destroyed the colony — all forced the issue of whether to abandon San Agustín.

1602, Sept. 22. Gonzálo Méndez de Canzo, Governor of Florida, to King Philip III of Spain.

Señor:

. . . My opinion is, if it please your majesty, that you should not order the abandonment of this presidio until in the meantime an entry into the interior can be made, and it can be known and understood with certainty whether there are mines of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls. . . .

In abandoning this presidio entirely, two difficulties are manifest to me, in my opinion very serious, which your majesty ought to consider. These are: if this fort should be abandoned, it would be obligatory to withdraw the Christian Indians who are protected by it, as well as the religious who teach them, because the said religious might continue to work among them. Their lives would meet with much danger and the said Indians would return to their idolatries as they used to. And

¹ Excerpted and images added by the National Humanities Center, www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm, 2006. All except the 1609 Instructions to Peralta in David B. Quinn, ed., *New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612* (New York, Arno Press and Hector Bye, Inc., 1979), Vol. V, 104-107, 151-154. Permission pending. 1609 Instructions in “Ynstruccion a Peralta por Vi-Rey / Instructions to Peralta by Vice-Roy,” by Lansing B. Bloom, tr. Ireneo L. Chaves, transcribed from the Archives of the Indies at Seville, Spain, in *New Mexico Historical Review*, 4 (1929), 178-187. Permission pending. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

natives shown little inclination for the law of the gospel but the friars had no more desire to learn the numerous languages that were used among so few people; he learned also of the difficulty or even impossibility of maintaining any expansion and the great cost it would require because of the poor quality and poverty of the land, its great distance from Mexico (from which supplies would have to come) — it must be some six hundred leagues to the interior of the land, without any gold or silver mines or anything to attract Spanish settlers. . . .

In view of these and many other reasons, it seems to the viceroy and to some of the judges of the *audiencia* with whom he discussed the matter in a special meeting that the New Mexico expedition should be abandoned and that the Indians who had been baptized, who would not number more than four hundred, be removed from the land. This number is very meager, indeed, for ten or eleven years of labor and expense. This action will put an end to the great costs to the royal treasury, both now and later, costs which will always increase. . . .

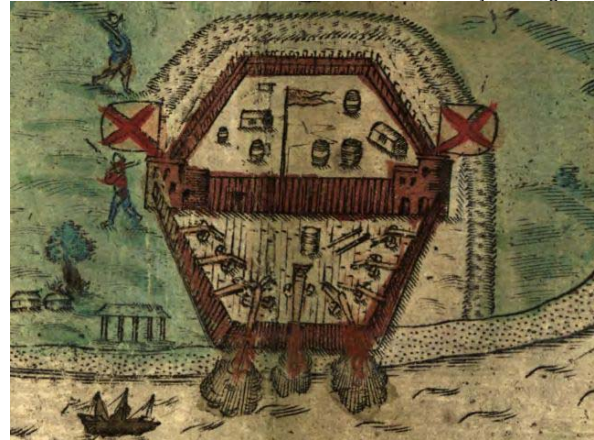
In case there are neither friars nor laymen who will remain voluntarily in the land, and the Indians refuse to leave of their own accord, but will have to be taken out by force, the viceroy should consult with the said persons as to whether it would be better to leave the natives in their land, the Spaniards urging them when they leave to live or die in the faith that they have embraced, or whether it would be more desirable to take them away even if by force so that they would not run the risk of losing their faith. This business is left in the viceroy's hands in order that after he has studied it and conferred with the said persons, he may do what he considers best for the service of God and your majesty. . . .

the other: since the year of [one thousand] five hundred eighty-nine, many Spaniards (who were ship-wrecked on the coast of this province) escaped and were delivered from death, because this presidio was nearby. . . .

Consistent with these two considerations, then, your majesty will at once determine and command what might better serve and befit your service and the service of God, our Lord. . . .

Gonçalo Méndez de Canço

Library of Congress



Fort of San Agustín, detail of Boazia, map of St. Augustine, 1589, depicting the 1586 attack of Sir Francis Drake

1607, 26 January. Junta de Guerra [Committee on War], Council of the Indies.

Sirs:

From the copy of a decision which the Council of War has sent to this Junta, it seems that on the 16th October last year it gave a report to Your Majesty that it had gathered from certain information that a merchant from Plymouth [England] had said that as some ships were going to look for a passage to the north-west to the East Indies and Japan in 1605 they hit the coast of Florida in an area of very good land peopled by Indians who were so civilized and well off that they thought it would be an excellent idea to take some of them to England; they were there in Plymouth, and the talk was that a great fleet was going to be fitted out [for the spring] to take everything that would be needed for Englishmen to go and live in that land with their wives and children; and although the Council was sure that this was wrong, and that the area they call Florida is in fact the land called Virginia, further to the north, they still thought that it was worth investigating this, . . . and so, as far as this is concerned, there seems to be no reason that

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Museum of New Mexico



Inscription Rock, New Mexico

"Passed by here the Governor Don Juan de Oñate to/from? the discovery of the Sea of the South on the 26th of April 1605"

1609, January 29. Order of the Viceroy of Mexico, Luis de Velasco.

. . . in consideration of the present state of affairs in that land and of the people there who have been converted to the faith . . . there should be a governor and fifty settlers, equipped with the necessary arms for defense, each one of whom should be compensated in accordance with his quality and services; that the Indians who may be allotted in accordance with the instructions which the governor has for this purpose should be assigned without injury to those given in *encomienda* by Governor Don Juan de Oñate by virtue of his contract; and since, according to the information available about the settlers in that land, who number about sixty persons, only thirty are capable of bearing arms, the judges decided, in order that the number of fifty soldiers may be complete, to recruit twelve soldiers, two more or less, as his excellency may determine, with the usual salary, paid for one year. . . .

*Don Luis de Velasco. [Viceroy of Mexico]
Licentiate Don Pedro de Ojalora.
Licentiate Diego Núñez Morquecho.
Doctor Juan Quesada de Figueroa.*

1609, March 30. Instructions to Don Pedro de Peralta, Governor and Captain General of New Mexico, in place of Don Juan de Oñate, from Don Luis de Velasco, Viceroy of Mexico.

. . . He shall start from the City of Mexico as quickly as possible with the twelve soldiers and religious which he takes along to said provinces as protection . . .

He shall see that the horses and oxen shall be well cared for so they shall arrive in good condition for the reason that they are actually necessary for the purposes of agriculture which shall be started immediately on that land and they shall carry a quantity of tools and other necessary implements.

When he shall have arrived at said province he shall inform himself of the condition of said settlement of the Villa they claim [later Santa Fe] and shall order the same to be made there so people may begin to live there with some cleanliness and stability, in which he shall allow the citizens to elect four councilmen, and two ordinary *alcaldes* each year who shall try civil and criminal causes which may occur in said Villa and within five leagues around it

The said ordinary *alcaldes* and councilmen of said Villa may mark out for each resident two lots

compels us to add to the decisions already taken, and the plans of the enemy are not thought to involve going to set foot in Florida, for this is a land where they could not stay.

Madrid, 26th January 1607.

<i>The Count of Lemos</i>	<i>The Licenciado</i>
<i>The Count of Puñonrostro</i>	<i>Villagutierre</i>
<i>Don Bernardo de Velasco</i>	<i>Don Francisco</i>
<i>The Marqués de San German</i>	<i>Duarte</i>
<i>Estéban de Ibarra</i>	

[Note on the reverse side:] Everywhere people should be on the watch, for the enemy will not just have one plan in mind.



Castillo de San Marcos, St. Augustine, Spanish bastion built in the late 1600s

1611, May 5. Junta de Guerra [Committee on War], Council of the Indies, to King Philip III.

[The letter begins with a review of a 1609 reconnoitre voyage to Virginia to learn the extent of British settlement and to determine “with what measures and forces they can be driven from there and frustrated of their designs and punished.”]

My Lord:

. . . the governor [of Florida] says in his letter that it appears to him that the plan the English entertain, as far as he been able to learn, is to fortify themselves in the said bay of Jacán [Virginia] . . . , and to make an expedition into the land, taking for that purpose sufficient people, until they shall come to Nueva México, Nueva Galicia, and Vizcaya, and Çacatecas, which are in the same latitude, and to go across the land to the other sea at the west, since from that part of Florida great rivers go up into the land and from the other sea also it is known that others go up, not smaller, and that there is little distance from the one set of rivers to the other, and the enemy could go up through those of the east coast and go down through those of the west, and fortify themselves in the ports of that sea and there make ships and fleets and overrun the whole coast

for house and garden and two *suertes* for vegetable garden and two more for vineyard and for an olive grove and four *cavallerias* of land, and for the irrigation thereof the necessary water, obliging them to live thereon ten years continuously without absenting themselves, if they should absent themselves for three months continuously without leave from the council or regiment they shall lose all and it shall be given to others. . . .

Because I have been informed that the taxes imposed and collected from those natives are excessive causing them great vexation and trouble, the said governor is requested to attend to this in manner to suit himself proceeding in all justification and in discharge of the royal conscience. . . .

. . . I have been informed that the small population of that country is very scattered over it so that they are destitute of administration because very few reside in each place and are also too far to be helped and protected. And some people and nations are in proximity to the frontiers and country of the Apaches which is had a refuge for their enemies . . .

It is understood that that country is settled by various languages very difficult and barbarous which cause many inconveniences for the good administration and consolation of the ministers as well as of the natives. The said Governor is requested to act with great care consulting with the religious in such a manner so that the main things shall be to teach all the Indians and especially the children and ignorant persons so they may learn the Spanish language . . .

With the admonition that you should proceed with great care and mature consideration. . . .

Don Luis de Velasco . . .

New Mexico Dept. of Tourism



Palace of the Governors, constructed in Santa Fe in 1610 as the new capital of Nueva Mexico, n.d.

of New Spain, Tierra Firme, Peru, and China, to the great damage of the crown and subjects of Your Majesty, and that before more of the land is seized upon it would be expedient to manage to drive him from it, since as to the natives they do not deprive them of any of their religious ceremonies, which is what they most cherish, though with things of little value, and keep them very pleased and contented and are attaching them all to themselves. . . .

. . . considering the damages and great inconveniences which are to be expected from the neighborhood of these English and the anxiety to which they would put all the West Indies and their trade, especially if they plant in those regions the religion which they profess, our opinion has been that it would be greatly to the service of God and of Your Majesty and the universal good of your subjects to break up their plans at once, driving them from there before they take more root and possess themselves of more land and fortify themselves, have greater forces and extend through other regions, as they will go on to do, since none other is their design, and if this is not done in time it will afterward be very difficult.

. . . Your Majesty will order inquiry and the providing of what is most pleasing to him.

Madrid May 5, 1611.

Don Diego de Ybarra

Don Diego Brochero

Don Fernando Giron

Licenciado Don Francisco Arias Maldonado

Doctor Bernardo de Olmedilla

Licenciado Don Francisco de Tejada