

The Many Hats of John Forbes

St. Augustine 1773-1783

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INTRODUCTION

The Rev. John Forbes arrived at St. Augustine in the province of East Florida in 1773. Florida was previously Spanish territory but had been ceded to Britain after the Seven Years War (which was also known as the French and Indian War, or the Great War for Empire). Forbes was sent over to the province by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and wore just one hat - that of an Anglican clergyman. However, he went on to collect more hats. In addition to being a minister of the Church of England, he also filled the positions of treasurer of the King's Council, Judge Surrogate of the Court of Admiralty, Assistant Judge of the Common Law Court, Chief Justice, and Grandmaster of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons. All of these roles were undertaken to provide for his growing family: his wife, Dorothy Murray, and their three sons—James Grant Forbes, John Murray Forbes, and Ralph Bennet Forbes.

METHODOLOGY

I used literature reviews of both primary and secondary sources to get information. Secondary sources such as the book *East Florida in the Revolutionary Era* by George Kotlick introduced me to the character of the Rev. John Forbes and gave background information on St. Augustine while articles such as "Reverend John Forbes (d. 1783)" by Edgar Legare Pennington provided more information on the clergyman and his life. As for primary sources, a letter written by Mr. Forbes himself was used to get an understanding of the gentleman and his fiscal condition working in St. Augustine.

REFERENCES



Canterbury hats were developed in the 17th Century and worn by some Anglican clergymen.

Judges wore only full-bottomed wigs until the 1780s and the wigs continued to be used for criminal trials until the 1840s.



The cocked hat, also referred to as a Tricorne/Tricorn hat was popular with military and civilian men during the 1700's



Painting of Dorothy Murray (c. 1760), wife of Rev. John Forbes

RESULTS

- **Clergyman:** Forbes was an Anglican clergyman in St. Augustine from the time of British occupation of the province in 1764 till the British left in 1783. He lived through the American Revolution and gives us a glimpse of the Revolution from the perspective of a loyalist living in a loyalist province. Forbes received £100 per year as minister of the Church of St. Augustine, the same wages paid to other regularly licensed clergymen, such as Rev. John Leadbeater and Rev. John Kennedy. Forbes's letters repeatedly complained that this salary could not support his family.
- **Member of King's Council:** Forbes was appointed as the Treasurer of the King's Council on June 7th, 1771. He was on the Council with eleven other gentlemen and their duty was to advise and assist the governor in ruling the colony
- **Judge Surrogate of the Court of Admiralty:** Forbes was given this position April 30, 1771 - the very day this position was created. He had jurisdiction over local cases of maritime law, including war prizes, maritime contracts, and disputes between merchants and seamen and he could issue rulings without a jury trial. However, this position was given to Robert Catherwood in 1776 after Forbes took on the position of Chief Justice.
- **Assistant Judge of the Courts of Common Law:** Forbes was given this position on December 15, 1772, and a commission was made out to him under the Great Seal of the province.
- **Chief Justice:** Forbes was appointed Chief Justice upon the suspension of Chief Justice William Drayton on March 30, 1776, and his position as Judge Surrogate of the Court of Vice-Admiralty was given to Robert Catherwood. Drayton returned, took back his position from Forbes, and was again promptly dismissed, this time permanently, on December 16, 1777. The position was again taken by Forbes on December 17th. However, he had to give up the position soon after (in 1780) to Mr. Hume because his appointment was not confirmed.
- **Plantation Owner:** Forbes was also a substantial planter who had managed to get ownership of six thousand acres of farmland, some of which he efficiently worked with a force of only sixty slaves. He preferred to live on his plantation west of town, an elegant, beautiful and convenient location that he called Mount Forbes. Forbes was not the only plantation owner in St. Augustine. Governors Grant and Toinyn, and Lieutenant Governor Moultrie owned impressive plantations as well. Analyzing Forbes's connection to his plantation at Mount Forbes can also give more information on the plantations of the other government officials.
- **Property Owner:** In addition to the plantation, Forbes also had large property holdings in the town, which during the Revolutionary years he rented to both loyalist refugees and to enemy prisoners on parole. One of these properties was the rectory and garden on the main plaza which came with his ecclesiastical post. It was a stone-built house on the northwest parade with a large orange garden and he rented it out to eight gentlemen who were exiles from Charleston for seventy pounds sterling per annum.

