

The Forgotten Front: Prisoners and Patriots in Revolutionary St. Augustine (1780-1781)



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Introduction

St. Augustine as a Loyalist Stronghold: As the capital of British East Florida, St. Augustine remained under British control throughout the war. It became both a refuge for Loyalists fleeing Patriot persecution and a prison for captured revolutionaries.

The Siege of Charleston (1780): In May 1780, British forces captured Charleston, South Carolina, in one of the biggest Patriot defeats of the war. Over 5,000 Patriots, including key leaders like Christopher Gadsden, were taken prisoner. Initially, some were allowed to remain in Charleston under strict parole, but after reports of renewed Patriot resistance, the British revoked these paroles and sent many, including Gadsden, to St. Augustine.

Harsh Treatment in Exile: Once in St. Augustine, exiled Patriots were placed under close supervision and stripped of their former influence. Local Loyalists, many of whom had suffered under Patriot rule, retaliated by imposing harsh restrictions and poor conditions on their prisoners.

A Cycle of Revenge: Before the British takeover, Patriots had seized Loyalist property, imprisoned them, and even forced them into exile. Now, with the roles reversed, Loyalists in St. Augustine took advantage of their position, ensuring that Patriots experienced similar mistreatment.

Timeline

Christopher Gadsden, a patriot leader from South Carolina, was taken as a prisoner of war during the American Revolution and held in St. Augustine, Florida. A timeline of his captivity goes as follows:

May 12, 1780 – Gadsden, Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina, is captured along with other patriot leaders when Charleston falls to the British.

August 27, 1780 – British forces arrest Gadsden and other prisoners and transport them to St. Augustine, Florida.

September 1780 – July 1781 – Gadsden is imprisoned at Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine for 42 weeks. Unlike other captured Patriot leaders who accepted parole and remained under house arrest, Gadsden's defiance led to harsher confinement.

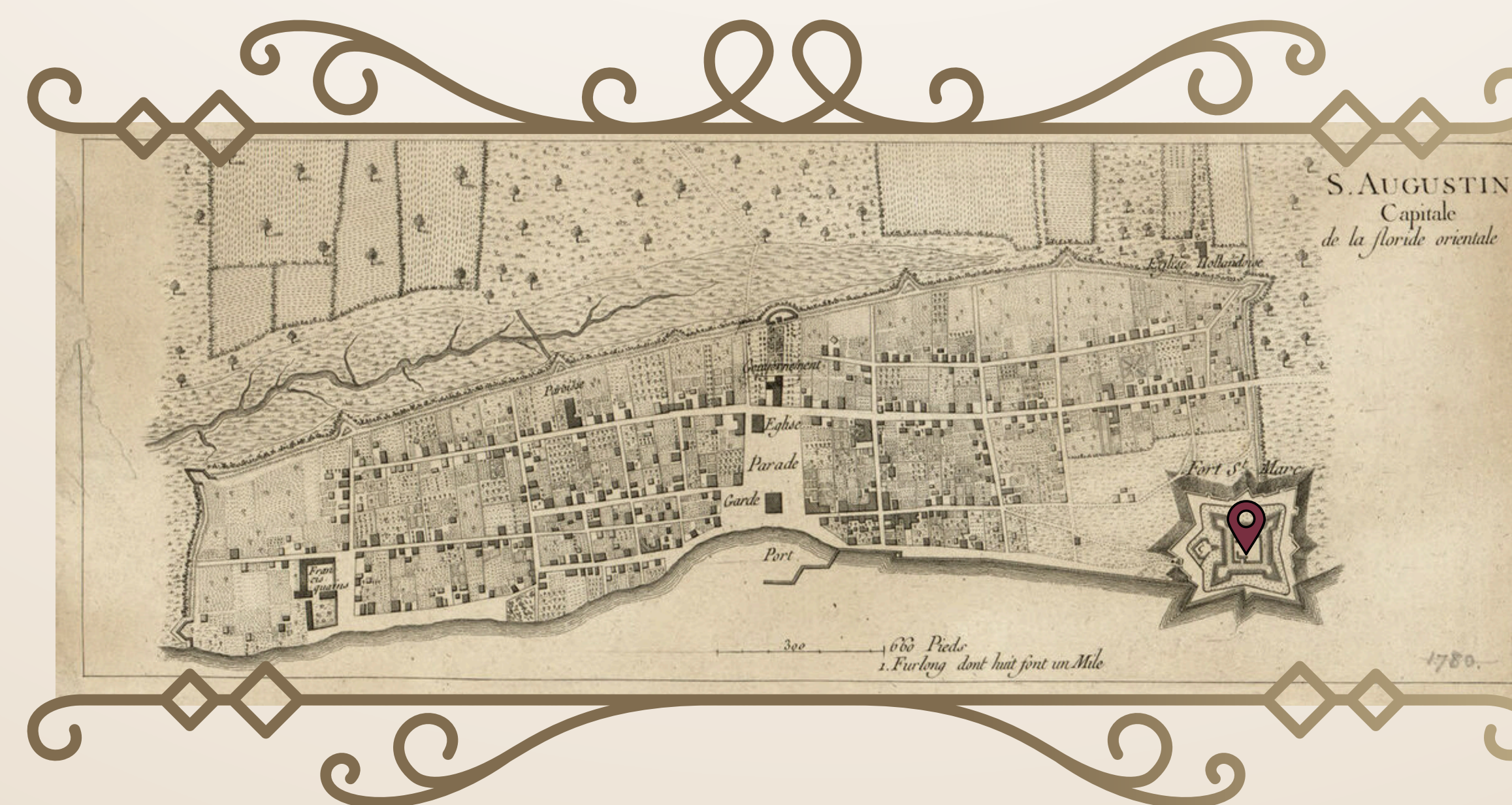
July 1781 – Gadsden and the other prisoners are exchanged and allowed to return to South Carolina.

1782 – Gadsden resumes his political career and helps in the post-war rebuilding of South Carolina.



A prominent Patriot leader from South Carolina, Gadsden was exiled to St. Augustine after refusing to accept parole. His unwavering resistance led to 42 weeks of harsh imprisonment at Castillo de San Marcos, strengthening his resolve for American independence.

"I gave my parole once, and it has been shamefully violated [...]. I shall not give another."



This 1780 map of St. Augustine highlights key locations relevant to the city's role as a Loyalist stronghold during the American Revolution. The Castillo de San Marcos, marked here, served as the primary holding site for high-profile Patriot prisoners such as Christopher Gadsden.

Methods

Primary Sources

This research relies on letters, diaries, and government documents found in archival collections and online databases. These firsthand accounts provide insight into the experiences of prisoners of war and exiled Patriots.

Secondary Sources

Books, scholarly articles, and historical analyses were used to provide context and enhance the interpretation of primary sources. These sources help clarify the broader political and social conditions surrounding St. Augustine's role in the Revolution.

Criteria for Selection

Sources were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Time Period – Documents from 1775 to 1783 were prioritized to ensure relevance to the American Revolution.
- Geographic Focus – The study specifically examines St. Augustine and its connection to the war.

Author Credibility – Primary sources were evaluated for authenticity, while secondary sources were selected based on the qualifications and expertise of the authors.

Preliminary Results

Parole as a Political Weapon: Initially a means of controlling prisoners without confinement, parole became a tool of British authority to undermine Patriot leadership. While many accepted parole in exchange for conditional freedom, Christopher Gadsden refused, resulting in his imprisonment at Castillo de San Marcos. He justified his decision, as demonstrated by the quote. His refusal not only led to harsher treatment but also underscored the deep mistrust between Patriot leaders and British officials.

Patriots Stuck in Limbo: Those exiled to St. Augustine found themselves trapped, unable to return home, powerless, and entirely at the mercy of the Loyalist government. Their fate depended on the ever-changing political and military landscape.

Beyond the Battles: The struggles of these exiled Patriots reveal deeper conflicts within the Revolution. More than just a war for independence, it was a battle over justice, identity, and the long-term consequences of shifting power.

References

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