

Take, Seize, Burn, Sink and Destroy: Privateering in Revolutionary St. Augustine (1775)

Maegan Lewis, Dr. Benjamin Gunter, and Idy Codington

Abstract

When the 1763 Treaty of Paris awarded the then Spanish Florida to Britain, no one could predict the events that would rock the very same British colony a decade later. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, St. Augustine was the primary settlement in East Florida. A loyalist settlement bordered by Rebels, St. Augustine soon became a target for Patriot attacks. Getting supplies by sea was more difficult with Rebel ships patrolling the waters. The resulting orders from both sides to go by boat and steal war stocks set the stage for an event that took place on August 7th, 1775, on St. Mary's River. Patriots of the ship *Commerce* stole 'six tons' (or about 13 thousand pounds) of gunpowder from the Loyalist brig *Betsy*. Governor Tonyn of St. Augustine was furious, whilst the South Carolinian patriots rejoiced. My research into Revolutionary St. Augustine and further into privateering has allowed me to go in-depth on this specific event and both sides' perspectives and responses, as well as the numerous factors and characters at play. This event paints a colorful picture of just exactly how St. Augustine participated in the Revolutionary War through privateering efforts, adding to the city's already rich history.



Portraits of Governor Patrick Tonyn of St. Augustine (top) and President of the South Carolina Committee of Safety Henry Laurens (bottom)



Introduction

On August 7th 1775, at approximately 6AM, the Patriot ship *Commerce* captained by Clement Lempriere sailed through the St. Mary's River located at the border between Florida and Georgia. They spotted the loyalist brig *Betsy* (also sometimes spelled *Betsey*) and hailed her. Thinking the *Commerce* to be "a Negro vessel" - likely full of former slaves who sought freedom by fighting for the British - the *Betsy* allowed her approach, a fatal mistake. Twenty-six Patriots boarded the ship with bayonets, pistols, and other weapons, managing to take a whopping six tons of gunpowder, or 111 barrels. Lempriere claimed his permission came from the South Carolina Committee of Safety, headed by founding father Henry Laurens, to take whatever means necessary to procure gunpowder and other war stocks from the King's men. Without any arms to fight back, the men of the *Betsy* took a bribe of £100 each, and Lempriere allegedly had the captain agree to accept £1,000 (£200,000 today) in exchange for the gunpowder - leaving a signed paper that Governor Tonyn claimed was forged. The Patriots made a clean escape, and Tonyn was furious. Fourteen days after, on the 21st of August, Tonyn signed a proclamation with a reward of £200 to anyone who could bring justice for this act - and even a full pardon for any men of the *Commerce* who came forward. Nothing came of this proclamation, however, as the Patriots rejoiced over their victory. Tonyn was successful in asking the Crown for more naval assistance - the *St. Lawrence* schooner captained by Lieutenant John Graves was sent to St. Augustine, and permitted to "take, seize, burn, sink, and destroy" every pirate and rebel that came his way.

Methodology

For this project, our team had the goal of illuminating aspects of life in St. Augustine in 1776. I started out by reading secondary sources delving into life in St. Augustine under British rule - from their first arrival to their departure. This painted a broad picture of the politics, events, and people that were most important at the time. It is with this broad picture that I was able to narrow down my interest to privateering based on a few curious mentions - like how furious Tonyn was after one specific incident. From there I scoured for more specific secondary sources relating to privateering, creating an annotated bibliography. It is from the footnotes of these secondary sources that I found my primary sources, which in turn helped me narrow down the specific event I am talking about today - the very same that Tonyn was in fact so furious about. The research that my peers and I did will help Theater with a Mission create a play set in revolutionary St. Augustine for audiences to enjoy!

References



Please scan the QR code to view.

Conclusions

This is by far the best documented instance of privateering near St. Augustine during the American Revolution. What can we extrapolate?

- Though Loyalists never avenged the piracy of the *Betsy*, they got their revenge in other ways.
- St. Augustine participated in the Revolutionary War on land with the East Florida Rangers, recapturing South Carolina for the Crown.
- The privateering of the *Commerce* in British Florida seems to display a common theme throughout the war from both sides. There is a recurrent back and forth, a sort of 'eye for an eye' mentality that shows up again and again. Temporary victories are met with even greater losses, as is often the case for the Loyalists.
- Governor Tonyn's response to the raid is instructive. He was frequently forced to plead for reinforcements that never came - after this attack only one ship was sent to help.

More primary sources that shed further light on privateers seizing, sinking, and destroying Patriot and Loyalist ships around St. Augustine during the American Revolution will be welcome. In the meantime, I am thankful to have been able to shed light on a little-known element of the colorful history of Florida.