

An Examination of the History and Cultural Identity of Minorcans in Florida: Final Entry

AUGUST 29, 2010 BY [RMQUINONES LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Amidst RA training and classes starting I finally had time to finish up the loose ends of my research paper. My paper includes a brief overview of the New Smyrna colony, an examination of Dr. Andrew Turnbull's character, and a look at the continued cultural expressions of Minorcan descendants in Florida today. So without much further ado, here is my paper:

In any standard American history class, Jamestown and Plymouth are talked about at length. These early colonies were the beginning of the United States of America and definitely warrant the attention given them. However, ask one American history student what the largest North American colony at its inception was, and I doubt they will be able to supply the correct answer. The New Smyrna, or Smyrnéa, colony in British East Florida was the largest colony at its inception on the North American continent. The brief 1768-1777 run of this colony just south of present-day Daytona Beach has been largely overlooked in American history textbooks, but the leftover traces of the colony have left a strong mark along the Northeast Florida coast. What follows is an overview of the history of the colony and a brief analysis of its proprietor's character and the cultural heritage left by its settlers.

In 1763, Britain gained Florida in the Peace of Paris after the Seven Years War (known as the French and Indian War in the United States). Because Florida was depopulated, the British government started promoting settlement by offering easy terms to prospective settlers. Dr. Andrew Turnbull, a Scottish physician was willing to take the British government up on their offer. He and two other business partners, Sir William Duncan and George Grenville (Sir Richard Temple acted for him in business affairs), were able to amass a 101, 400 acre land grant in East Florida.^[1] Dr. Turnbull would be the proprietor of the colony and live there, while his business partners would provide monetary support for what was supposed to become a lucrative plantation. After picking the location of the plantation, Turnbull needed to find people to work the plantation. Having traveled a bit in Greece, "he

knew the Greeks, their industry and skill, and how fit they were for the Florida climate and produce.”^[ii] Turnbull decided to recruit about five hundred Greeks as indentured servants for his venture in Florida. However, due to problems with Turkish authorities, Turnbull was unable to procure as many Greeks as he had originally planned. Instead, Turnbull ended up with almost one thousand Minorcan islanders and an assortment of Greeks, Italians, and other Mediterranean natives. Today, the settlers are called Minorcans due to the overwhelming majority these islanders had in the group. The infamous total number aboard Dr. Turnbull’s eight ships was one thousand four hundred and three hopeful settlers.

Arriving on North American soil on June 26, 1768 were one hundred and forty-eight fewer settlers due to much illness aboard the ships. Dr. Turnbull named the colony after his wife’s birthplace, Smyrna, Turkey. Work immediately began on clearing the land for planting. Like most American colonies, New Smyrna met with many hardships early on, and within the first eight months “42.62 per cent of those who had sailed from the Mediterranean with Turnbull, had perished.”^[iii] After the initial hardships and a rebellion one month after arriving, the colony did meet with some success. This period of success is usually overlooked because of all of the negative aspects of life on the New Smyrna plantation. However, the early 1770s were prosperous for New Smyrna. Dr. Turnbull had turned the colony into a successful indigo plantation, and between 1771 and 1777 43, 283 pounds of indigo left the coquina wharfs that can still be seen at low tide in present-day New Smyrna Beach.^[iv]

As the mid-1770s approached, so did drought and much discontent. Discontent had been brewing since the moment the settlers had stepped foot on North American soil as they watched their relatives die and realized they would be forced into more intense labor than they had expected. Philip D. Rasico states the feelings of the settlers early on quite well:

“The combination of a number of factors, such as the lack of adequate food, shelter and other basic necessities of life, the heavy workload together with mistreatment at the hands of the overseers, the sense of deception, and the numerous sicknesses and diseases (including scurvy, gangrene and malaria)

from which many of the colonists suffered, particularly the young and elderly, must have produced considerable dissatisfaction among the immigrants, especially as they witnessed daily the deaths of many of their relatives and friends.”^[v]

This dissatisfaction only grew during the nine years the colony ploughed on in New Smyrna. Finally, in the spring of 1777, after a few appeals to Governor Patrick Tonyn, the settlers were released of their contracts and migrated to St. Augustine, the capitol of East Florida. In their depositions against Turnbull and his overseers, the settlers accused the overseers of many atrocities, including murders and the beating of a pregnant woman. Dr. Turnbull was even implicated in some violent acts.^[vi] Many of the settlers were also under the impression that their contracts had already expired, and thus Turnbull was keeping them against their will at the colony. All in all, when one looks at the state of things at the fall of the colony, it is hard not to question Turnbull and his intentions at New Smyrna. After almost ten years, forty thousand pounds had been poured into the plantation, seemingly on equipment and Turnbull’s extensive canal system rather than on clothes or food for the settlers. The death count in 1777 was nine hundred and sixty-four, an astounding 68.7 percent of the original number of settlers.^[vii]

Yet there is reason to believe this story is not as black and white as it appears. Though present day opinion of Dr. Andrew Turnbull among the descendants of the original Minorcans is rather poor, one must consider all of the information available before a verdict can be delivered on Turnbull’s character. The settlers claimed Turnbull had kept them on the plantation after their contracts had expired. While this may be true of those whose contracts were meant to last only five or six years, the Minorcans were supposed to work on the plantation for ten years.^[viii] Because the majority of the settlers were Minorcan, this would mean that the majority of the settlers in 1777 had not completed their contracts yet. One must also take into account Andrew Turnbull’s own perception of the matter in his letter to his business partner, Sir William Duncan: “you will see by my letters by the packet that the engagements I have made with most of the families obliges them to stay with us as farmers for ten years after the cultivation of the

land gives an advantage which ensures them on our farms for thirteen years at least.”^[ix] So how long were the settlers supposed to stay on the plantation? Patricia C. Griffin points out that settlers who were specialized craftsmen may have had shorter indentures, and that most of the settlers were illiterate, so verbal contracts abounded.^[x] No one may ever know what exactly the settlers originally agreed to if verbal contracts were the primary method of securing these settlers’ indentures.

As for the cruelty that existed on the plantation, multiple sources can attest to the overseers’ brutal methods. But what of Turnbull? His own attorney, Henry Yonge, Jr., who presented the depositions to the governor, stated he could not believe Turnbull had committed such acts or condoned them “which from his character certainly could never have come to his knowledge.”^[xi] However one cannot ignore the obvious cruelties that occurred on the plantation. One Antoni Blau, who was very sickly, was apparently brutally beaten for taking a short break while out in the fields one day.^[xii] Many similar stories are related in the settlers’ depositions.^[xiii]

Dr. Turnbull was also accused of not providing clothing or blankets during the last few years of the plantation,^[xiv] which he even attests to in a letter to George Ramsay: “I avoided every other annual expence of clothing and etc. for this year...”^[xv] However, it was not without much remorse that Turnbull had to cut his settlers’ provisions short. He was incredibly stressed about the amount of money owed to his business partners, and was even confined to bed for ten days because of the “anxiety and uneasiness” caused in him by his inability to pay all of his bills.^[xvi] Turnbull even acknowledged his error of biting off more than he could chew in this letter to Governor James Grant: “I have always owned myself in the wrong for bringing so many people into the province, but, tho’ this was more from accident than intention, I resolved to devote my whole time, intentions, and endeavours to make up for that error...”^[xvii] It even seems that Mrs. Turnbull jumped in with helping Dr. Turnbull provide for the settlers when she “raised about 500 head of poultry, which are mostly distributed among the farmers.”^[xviii]

Most compare Andrew Turnbull to Governor Patrick Tonyn and see Tonyn as the

great liberator of the Minorcans, which only makes Turnbull look worse. But there is reason to question Tonyn's motives for freeing the indentured servants of the New Smyrna plantation. Governor Tonyn was still smarting from a legal fight he had just lost with Turnbull's good friend, William Drayton. Not only had Turnbull vehemently supported his friend, he even spent quite some time in London drawing up a case against Tonyn to have him removed from office due to his poor treatment of Drayton. Turnbull's statements against Tonyn apparently include "the most serious accusations – everything, in fact, except disloyalty to England."^[xix] Add to this Governor Tonyn's hurt pride that Turnbull would never visit him while in St. Augustine, and it is clear Tonyn and Turnbull were not on the best of terms.^[xx] Moreover, Tonyn had never before shown a keen interest in the well being of the Minorcans. Indeed, after they refused to join Tonyn's militia against the American rebels, his "opinion of the Minorcans was at a very low ebb."^[xxi] And after he did free the settlers and they "had moved en masse to the capital of East Florida in 1777, Governor Tonyn apparently lost interest in their welfare."^[xxii] In fact, many died the first summer they spent in St. Augustine because absolutely no preparations had been made for their arrival, and they were thus forced to live in damp hovels.^[xxiii] So it is quite clear Governor Patrick Tonyn used the Minorcans as a pawn in his game to get back at Turnbull even if his intentions appear noble in light of the depositions given against Turnbull and his overseers. However, even the legitimacy of the depositions has been called into question. While there were no doubt hardships on the plantation, the depositions may have suffered "some possible distortion by interpreters, and leading questions from the interrogators."^[xxiv] So, in the end, one has to consider all of the facts before condemning Andrew Turnbull. Yes, he brought far too many settlers to his plantation; nearly triple the amount he had originally planned on. And the overseers were no doubt cruel. But one must also consider the incredible pressure Turnbull was under to make a profit for his partners and the efforts he did expend to try to make life on the plantation a little better. And, surely, one must see Governor Tonyn for what he really was: a politician using an unfortunate situation to meet his ends. So who was in the wrong? It truly is up to the careful observer to draw his or her own

conclusions.

The one lasting and unchanging legacy of the New Smyrna colony, however, is the multitude of descendants that live in St. Augustine today. About five hundred settlers arrived in St. Augustine in 1777, most identifying themselves as Minorcans, though there were a few Italians and Greeks in the mix. After hardships at the very beginning of their time in St. Augustine, they formed their own part of town referred to as the “Minorcan Quarter.” They had quite a presence in St. Augustine through most of the early 1800s, and “various nineteenth century sources indicate that the Minorcan population formed one of St. Augustine’s biggest elements until about the time of the American Civil War in the 1860s.”^[xxv] Their culture and language did begin to blend with other local elements in St. Augustine during this time, but remnants still remain.

Though Spanish began to be adopted by the Minorcans in the early 1800s and “no St. Augustinian of Minorcan heritage currently speaks the language of his ancestors,” there are several words and phrases that have survived the years.

^[xxvi] Philip D. Rasico devotes an entire chapter in his book *The Minorcans of Florida: Their History, Language and Culture* to an assessment of words still in use by the Minorcan population of St. Augustine today.^[xxvii] In an interview the author had with a Minorcan descendant, the interviewee even mentioned two words of the Minorcan dialect she knows and uses: *brusha*, which is a woman with unkempt hair, and *peeshone*, which is someone who smells of urine.^[xxviii]

Though the language is mostly out of use, a few Minorcan traditions have been maintained.

The most well known Minorcan tradition is the singing of the *fromajardis* serenade on the eve of Easter Sunday. Young Minorcan men used to go door-to-door singing this song and asking for the ingredients of *fromajadas*, a cheese pastry.^[xxix] While only a few Minorcan descendants still know the serenade, the *fromajadas* are still made in St. Augustine today. Other traditions like Carnival and “Posey dances” have been lost to the years.^[xxx] But the fishing habit inherent in Minorcan blood, as it would seem, is still practiced. Minorcans have always been known for their love of and prowess for fishing. Special fishing nets used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the original Minorcan settlers

in Florida are still made and used by some descendants today.[xxxix] Typical Minorcan dishes are still made today, as well. A rice dish called *pilau* is probably the most popular dish still made, and many dishes make use of the *datil* pepper, which was brought over by the original Minorcan settlers.[xxxix]

Besides food and fishing nets, Minorcan descendants come together every March for a Minorcan heritage festival put on by the Menorcan (Spanish spelling) Cultural Society, and some have even traveled to the island of Minorca in order to see where their ancestors came from.[xxxix] The Minorcan descendant whom the author interviewed is a professional storyteller and has come up with a twenty-five minute act in which she tells the story of her ancestor, a young girl who was one of the settlers of the New Smyrna plantation, in first person while dressed up like an eighteenth century Minorcan.[xxxix] The government of Florida has even gotten into the Minorcan spirit. They proclaimed a Menorcan Heritage Week in October of 1983.[xxxix]

Just walking through St. Augustine today gives you an idea of the importance this group of people has had in the history of northeast Florida. A statue outside of the basilica in the heart of St. Augustine depicts Father Pedro Camps, the Catholic priest who came over with the settlers, and a handful of Minorcan settlers. A couple of houses throughout the historic district of the city bear plaques indicating they were built by Minorcan settlers. A Greek Orthodox Shrine on St. George Street depicts the entire story of the New Smyrna colony on its walls in honor of the couple hundred Greeks that left their homeland in 1768 to come to Florida. Even New Smyrna Beach has its vestiges of the colony. Dr. Andrew Turnbull's irrigation system is quite obvious as the town is riddled with canals, and the ruins of an old stone wharf can be seen at low tide on the waterfront. Recently, the remains of a house built by one of the settlers were found near the airport in New Smyrna. The New Smyrna colony and its Minorcan inhabitants are a large part of Florida and United States history. And though the jury is still out on Dr. Andrew Turnbull's character, one thing is clear. Regardless of his intentions or treatment of his indentured servants, St. Augustine would not be what it is today if he had not brought them over. And if ever things get rough on North American shores again for this resilient group of people, a popular

saying among Minorcan descendants today seems to indicate they have a plan: it is simply “time to go back to Minorca.”^[xxxvi]

Notes

- [i] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida: Their History, Language and Culture* (New Smyrna Beach, FL: Luthers, 1990), 18.
- [ii] E.P. Panagopoulos, “The Background of the Greek Settlers in the New Smyrna Colony,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1956): 97, <http://www.jstor.org/>.
- [iii] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 36.
- [iv] Kenneth H. Beeson Jr., *Fromajadas and Indigo: The Minorcan Colony in Florida* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2006), 72.
- [v] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 36.
- [vi] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 43-44.
- [vii] Kenneth H. Beeson Jr., *Fromajadas and Indigo*, 78.
- [viii] Kenneth H. Beeson Jr., *Fromajadas and Indigo*, 40.
- [ix] Andrew Turnbull, “Andrew Turnbull to Sir William Duncan, February 16, 1768,” *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, <http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Turnbull/letters/3.htm>.
- [x] Patricia C. Griffin, *Mullet on the Beach: The Minorcans of Florida, 1768-1777* (Jacksonville, FL: University of North Florida Press, 1991), 25.
- [xi] Henry Yonge, Jr., “Henry Yonge, Jr. to Governor Patrick Tonyn, May 8, 1777,” *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, <http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Turnbull/letters/8.htm>.
- [xii] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 44.
- [xiii] *Ibid.*, 147-157.
- [xiv] *Ibid.*, 44.
- [xv] Andrew Turnbull, “Andrew Turnbull to George Ramsay, February 20, 1775,” *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, <http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Turnbull/letters/7.htm>.
- [xvi] Andrew Turnbull, “Andrew Turnbull to Sir William Duncan, February 13,

1770,” *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, <http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Turnbull/letters/5.htm>.

[xvii] Andrew Turnbull, “Andrew Turnbull to James Grant, October 7, 1769,” *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, <http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Turnbull/letters/5.htm>.

[xviii] Andrew Turnbull, “Andrew Turnbull to Sir William Duncan, March 7, 1770,” *Florida History Online*, University of North Florida, <http://www.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/Turnbull/letters/5.htm>.

[xix] Carita Doggett, *Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida* (Florida: The Drew Press, 1919), 145.

[xx] Carita Doggett, *Dr. Andrew Turnbull*, 174.

[xxi] *Ibid.*, 121.

[xxii] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 63.

[xxiii] Patricia C. Griffin, *Mullet on the Beach*, 106.

[xxiv] *Ibid.*, 99.

[xxv] Philip D. Rasico, “The Minorcan Population of St. Augustine in the Spanish Census of 1786,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 66, no.2 (1987): 164, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

[xxvi] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 96.

[xxvii] *Ibid.*, 102-123.

[xxviii] Michelle Reyna, in discussion with the author, July 2010.

[xxix] Patricia C. Griffin, *Mullet on the Beach*, 73.

[xxx] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 129.

[xxxi] Michelle Reyna, in discussion with the author, July 2010.

[xxxii] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 136.

[xxxiii] Michelle Reyna, in discussion with the author, July 2010.

[xxxiv] *Ibid.*

[xxxv] Philip D. Rasico, *The Minorcans of Florida*, 138.

[xxxvi] *Ibid.*, 136.

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