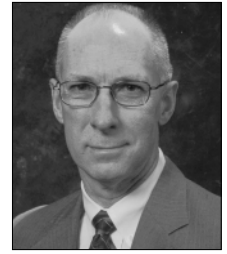


The Republic of West Florida: Freedom Fight or Land Grab?

BY ROBERT HIGGS



Probably not one American in a hundred knows anything about the short-lived Republic of West Florida (1810). At first glance it might seem to have sprung from a worthy fight for self-government and independence from Spain. On closer inspection, however, this venture, born of low-level filibuster and high-level intrigue, illustrates the same ingrained American propensity for land-grabbing so evident in other U.S. acquisitions of territory.¹

After the Louisiana Purchase, the United States and Spain disputed whether that transaction included West Florida, a strip extending east from the Mississippi River and along the Gulf Coast to the Perdido River. Spain continued to rule the area. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, however, many Americans moved there, and some of them obviously pined for its annexation by the United States.

From 1804 to 1810 the Kemper brothers—Nathan, Reuben, and Samuel—engaged in episodic attempts to expel the Spanish from West Florida, actively seeking to engage other Americans in their filibuster. In 1804 the so-called Kemper Rebellion failed, in part, because “its leaders miscalculated the strength of pro-French, pro-British, and pro-Spanish elements, all of whom felt threatened by the pro-American faction the Kempers represented.”² It also failed because many residents recognized that the Kempers and their gang were not so much revolutionaries as opportunistic and unscrupulous marauders mouthing political slogans.³

President Thomas Jefferson shared these adventurers’ ardent desire to incorporate the Gulf Coast into the United States.⁴ In 1804, at his urging, Congress passed the Mobile Act, seeking to solidify the claim that the Louisiana Purchase included West Florida. But Spain’s minister to the United States protested, and rather than risk war with Spain, Jefferson chose to bide his time, anticipating that increases in the number of American residents in the province would eventually

tilt the balance of forces there in favor of the United States.⁵

James Madison, too, longed to incorporate the Gulf Coast into the United States. After he became president in 1809 he “had an eye on Florida, where some land-greedy Americans were willing to overthrow Spanish rule, then make a deal that would bring West Florida into the union.”⁶

In 1808 the simmering equilibrium was disturbed when Napoleon Bonaparte placed his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne. In the far western portion of West Florida, on the plantations near Baton Rouge, the planters, fearful of French intervention and eager to increase the value, extent, and security of their land holdings, “concluded that the time had come to exchange the peaceful somnolence of Spanish rule for democracy.”⁷ From June to September 1810 many secret meetings and three openly held conventions took place in that district. Out of those meetings grew the West Florida Rebellion.

On September 23 an armed group led by Philemon Thomas attacked and captured the Spanish garrison at Baton Rouge. Three days later the leading revolutionaries signed a declaration of independence, then delivered it to Governor David Holmes of Mississippi Territory and Governor William C. C. Claiborne of Orleans Territory along with a request for annexation by the United States and protection from Spanish counterattacks. In late October the revolutionaries adopted a constitution modeled on the U.S. Constitution. Plans were made to take Mobile and Pensacola from the Spaniards—naturally, Reuben Kemper figured prominently in this scheme—and thus to incorporate the eastern part of the Spanish province into the newborn Republic of West Florida.⁸

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These events, historians say, placed President Madison “in a quandary.”⁹

He wanted to annex Baton Rouge immediately but knew that he could not use military forces for such a venture without congressional approval, and that body would not meet until early December 1810. Moreover, military occupation of Spanish territory would incur the wrath of not only Spain but perhaps even England and France. Yet Madison feared that if the government did not aid West Florida, there would “be danger of its passing into the hands of a third and dangerous party.” Britain, the president had written to Jefferson, had a “propensity to fish in troubled waters,” and Madison realized that the moment would be lost should the United States not cast her line.¹⁰


Though troubled by “constitutional qualms,”¹¹ Madison was no more inclined to let such qualms divert him from grasping an attractive geopolitical prize than his predecessor Jefferson had been when he bought Louisiana from Napoleon. Unwilling to let the opportunity pass unexploited, the President resorted to the oldest justification in the political book: he acted, even without clear legislative or constitutional authority, on the grounds that “a crisis has at length arrived subversive of the order of things under the Spanish authorities.”¹²

Flag Raised

On October 27 Madison issued a proclamation directing the governor of Orleans Territory to take possession of West Florida, and Governor Claiborne, with valuable assistance from Governor Holmes, proceeded to carry out the President’s orders. On December 10 U.S. authorities raised the stars and stripes over Baton Rouge, and the free and independent Republic of West Florida—alternatively known as “a lusty Tom Thumb Republic,” “the stout little republic,” a “half-baked republic,” and “simply a mock government used by the Americans to cloak their aggression”—passed into history just 74 days after it had come into existence.¹³

“The American occupation of West Florida,” observes Madison’s biographer Robert Rutland, “added no glory to the stars and stripes.”¹⁴ Critics quickly came forth to criticize the President for acting without prop-

er authority and for supplanting the jurisdiction of the Spanish, friends who had done nothing to deserve such aggression.¹⁵ At Mobile the Spanish garrison refused to evacuate until compelled to do so by a well-conducted U.S. naval and military operation in 1813.¹⁶ Not until ratification of the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1821 did Spain formally relinquish all claims to Florida—East as well as West—once and for all.

The rise and fall of the Republic of West Florida presents us with few genuine heroes. Of those who took action at the scene, all the leaders—with the possible exception of Fulwar Skipwith—seem to have been land-grabbers, adventurers, or job-seekers. At the upper reaches of the affair, Madison seems merely to have engaged in the sort of unprincipled geopolitical maneuvering that one expects from a “statesman” seeking to augment national wealth and power. His actions in regard to the Republic of West Florida wrote a sorry chapter in the life of someone better remembered as a man of high principle and as the Father of the U.S. Constitution. 

1. For a splendidly detailed and documented account of the entire affair, see Isaac Joslin Cox, *The West Florida Controversy, 1798–1818: A Study in American Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1918).

2. Samuel C. Hyde, Jr., *Pistols and Politics: The Dilemma of Democracy in Louisiana’s Florida Parishes, 1810–1899* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), p. 20.

3. Andrew McMichael, “The Kemper ‘Rebellion’: Filibustering and Resident Anglo American Loyalty in Spanish West Florida,” *Louisiana History*, Spring 2002, p. 159.

4. Cox, *passim*; Robert Allen Rutland, *James Madison: The Founding Father* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 215.

5. Gene A. Smith, “‘Our flag was display’d within their works’: The Treaty of Ghent and the Conquest of Mobile,” *Alabama Review*, January 1999, pp. 5–6.

6. Rutland, p. 213.

7. Henry Eugene Sterkx and Brooks Thompson, “Philemon Thomas and the West Florida Revolution,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, April 1961, p. 379.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 382–85.

9. Cox, p. 488; Smith, p. 7, uses the identical phrase without attribution.

10. Smith, p. 7.

11. “Constitutional qualms” from Rutland, p. 215.

12. *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, III, pp. 397–98.

13. Stanley Clisby Arthur, *The Story of the West Florida Rebellion* (St. Francisville, La.: St. Francisville Democrat, 1935), pp. 24 and 140, for the first and second appellations; Rutland, p. 215, for the third; Cox, p. 551, paraphrasing British diplomat J. P. Morier, for the fourth.

14. Rutland, p. 215.

15. Cox, pp. 538–43.

16. Smith, pp. 13–16.