

The Minorcan Immigrants to "The New Smyrna Colony"

By Steve Rogero

"The New Smyrna Colony" was the name given to a large group of immigrants from the island of Minorca, off the coast of Spain; and a much smaller group of Italians and Greeks from Italy and Greece. Colonel James Grant, governor of the British province of East Florida, in a letter to the Count of Shelbourne in England on July 2, 1768, wrote, "This my Lord, I believe is the largest importation of white inhabitants that ever was brought into America at a time."

England gained control of Florida in 1763 in a trade with Spain and held this control until 1783, when Spain regained Florida. It was during this period, that a Scottish doctor by the name of Andrew Turnbull, a former British Consul at Smyrna, Greece was given a grant of approximately 20,000 acres of land about 70 miles south of St. Augustine, Florida and called it New Smyrna. It was proposed that the colony would undertake the raising of cotton, olives, indigo, and make wine and silk.

Minorca is the second largest of the Spanish Balearic Islands, which at the time of the New Smyrna project was under English control. The islands are 50 to 190 miles off the coast of Spain. Together, they form a province of Spain. Minorca is about 30 miles long and 10 miles wide. The primary town is Mahon, considered one of the finest deep-water ports on the Mediterranean. The immigrants would sail from this port for the New World and, more specifically, for the Florida Colony.

Dr. Turnbull first recruited one hundred and ten Italians and took them to the port of Mahon. He then sailed to the port city of Smyrna and the surrounding Levant to collect several hundred Greeks. It was some months later when he returned to Mahon to find that nearly all of his young Italians had married or were betrothed to the lovely Minorcan girls. The Minorcan families of these girls appealed to be included in the proposed British Colony. Other Minorcan families pressed to go also. So, rather than a couple of hundred Italians and Greeks, the final group that sailed in eight ships, totaled 1,403, largely Minorcans, whose ancestry was mostly Roman and Latin, descended from the famous Carthaginians.

The Minorcans' contract with the British colonizers came under the Indentured Servant Law. Each was to serve 6 to 8 years and at the end of that time, would receive 50 acres of land, plus 5 acres for each child. Father Pedro Camps of San Martin de Mercadel, in Minorca accompanied the group and was their spiritual leader and advisor. His pain taking efforts in recording baptisms, marriages and deaths formed the background for many of the families histories that was later recorded about many of these families. His diary is called "The Golden Book of the Minorcans". The original book of Father Camps is still in good condition and several handwritten copies are on file at the Historical Library in St. Augustine. The original at the diocesan archives is kept along with other important documents in a special room under at prescribed temperature to aid preservation. The Diocesan headquarters is now located in Loretto across the street from St. Joseph's.

"LES MESQUITES" as the colony was also called, came to a bitter end in 1777. In the face of extreme adversities, the colony had lasted nine years. Scorching heat, disease, deaths,

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menacing Indians, inadequate shelter, lack of food, insufficient clothing, but most of all the cruel treatment by Andrew Turnbull and his overseers. There are several accounts of how the English authorities in St. Augustine became aware of the seriousness of these problems. One story passed down through the years, tells of how Ramon Rogero, father of Alberto, and Francisco Pellicer, Sr. undertook to build a makeshift boat so they could get to St. Augustine to report conditions to the governor. Instead of reaching St. Augustine, they were picked up by a British ship sailing to Baltimore. From there they worked their way back down to St. Augustine on foot and horseback.

They reached St. Augustine and met with the governor, who showed great empathy for their plight. He sent soldiers to the colony and took numerous depositions (all a matter of recorded history) from a number of the colonists. As a result, the governor permitted the colony to come to St. Augustine "en masse" which they did in July 1777. And in the Fall of that year, Father Camps followed with the aged and infirm for whom special provisions had to be made. The total number of Minorcans that arrived in St. Augustine was a far cry from the number left Minorca nine years prior. There were 1403 that left Minorca in those eight ships and in the ensuing nine years 930 died. With new births in that same period, there were 600 who fled to St. Augustine in 1777.

Some of the more notable descendants of this group were the Benet brothers, Stephen and William, both famous poets, Stephen the better known of the two. Also, Judy Canova, the famous comedienne and Hollywood star of the thirties and forties. There were also two Bishops, Bishop Manucy and Bishop Pellicer. Both served in the Confederate army as Chaplains and were later assigned to the diocese of Mobile, Alabama and San Antonio, Texas. The Minorcans got along fine with the English, but they were happier to see Spain regain St. Augustine in 1783. They were very much at home with their Latin cousins. They intermarried with the Spanish families and those of the English who remained in the area. It is safe to say that in the veins of all St. Augustine native families runs the blood of the Minorcans.

Minorcans are primarily of Catalan descent, Catalonia being a province in the northeast section of Spain, with Barcelona the principle city. The slingshot was invented by the Minorcans and they were famous as "stone slingers" in the armies of Julius Caesar. Mayonnaise was invented by the Minorcans during the French occupation of the island and carried back to France. Admiral Farragut's father settled in Tennessee from Minorca in 1783. He was the famous admiral who is known for his alleged cry, "Damn the Torpedoes, full speed ahead."

The Minorcans were a close knit group, they settled close together in what is now the historical district of St. Augustine, frequently called the Minorcan Quarter. Many of them worked farms a few miles out of town, but returned at night to the protection of the nearby fort. There were frequent encounters with the Indians initially, but as they became less frequent, the farmers went further and further out from town.

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Suggested reading for more in-depth information on the Minorcan Colony.

Rascio, Philip . *"THE MINORCANS OF FLORIDA: THEIR HISTORY, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE"*
Luthers Press, 1009 North Dixie Freeway, New Smyrna Beach, FL 32168-6221.

Griffin, Patrica. *"MULLET ON THE BEACH: THE MINORCANS OF FLORIDA, 1768-1788."* University
of Florida Press, Gainesville, FL.

Quinn, Jane. *"MINORCANS IN FLORIDA: THEIR HISTORY AND HERITAGE"*. Mission Press, St.
Augustine, FL.

Corse, Carita Doggett. *"DR. ANDREW TURNBULL AND THE NEW SMYRNA COLONY"*

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Family Names

Acosta (M)	Genovar	Perpaul
Andreu* (1550) (M)	Hernandez*(1550)(M)	Peso De Burgo
Baguer	Joaneda	Pomar* (1566)
Baya	Leonardi* (M)	Ponce(M)
Benet*	Llambias	Reyes* (M)
Bonelli (M)	Lopez (M)	Rogero*(1550) (M)
Canova (M)	Manucy* (M)	Sabate*
Capella	Marin (M)	Segui*(1550)
Capo (M)	Masters* (M)	Sintes
Carrera (M)	Medici	Triay* (M)
Casanovas	Oliveros*	Usina*(1550)
Caules*(1550)	Ortegas(M)	Vens
Fallani	Pacetti*(M)	Vila (1550)
Famanias	Papi (M)	Villalonga (1757)
Fornes	Pellicer*(1550)(M)	Ximenez
Genopoly	Perez (M)	

M – Individuals from the Mandarin Florida area.

* - direct ancestors of Steve Rogero

The Minorcans in Florida