THE LOST KEY

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In the Beginning…

Even compared with our February evening, the earth's surface was significantly colder 12,000 years ago. The enormous glaciers of the Great Ice Age caused all of the seas to be lower, by about 350 feet! This created two conditions that are of interest to our topic this evening:

1. There was a large and direct bridge for the roaming hunter-gatherers of Eastern Asia to enter North America, where they eventually spread throughout, as the continent's first inhabitants.
2. Florida was twice its current size, with the west coast of the Gulf of Mexico extending 100 miles west of its current location

About 9000 BC the glaciers began to melt and the seas to rise. By 3000 BC the climate had become similar to today.

The original native Paleo-Indian population of Florida was spread throughout the state, as was surface water. By 1500 AD there were a small number of loosely organized Indian tribes throughout Florida. The northern portion of the region included about 150,000 Timucua speaking Indians at that time. They relied on agriculture, so they lived in larger, settled villages. This was the population of Florida at the time of the initial European exploration.

Spanish exploration

Within 25 years of Columbus, Pensacola Bay and its sugary white beaches, the center of tonight's essay, was being described by Spanish explorers as the most beautiful bay in the new world. You will see also that Spain is a central figure in much of this essay. Ferdinand and Isabella had struck a deal with Pope Alexander I in 1493, in which Spain received ownership of all of North America. In return, Spain was to convert all of the natives of the New World to Catholicism. The early Spanish explorers were officially supported both by their monarchy and by the Catholic Church. In their view, they were simply exercising legitimate Spanish ownership of the region.

It is not too surprising that the native residents didn't quite see it this way. To give you an idea of the nature of the problem, let me read portions of the statement that the Spanish explorers were to read to the Indians when they were encountered (similar to their Miranda rights).

> "On behalf of the king…and the queen…subjugators of barbarous peoples, we, their servants, notify and make known to you as best we are able, that God, Our Lord, living and eternal, created the heavens and the earth, and a man and a woman, of whom you and we and all other people of the world were, and are, descendants …

> Of all these people God, Our Lord, chose one, who was to be superior to all the other people of the world, whom all should obey. He was called the Pope…
> One of the past Popes…gave these islands and mainlands of the Ocean Sea (the Atlantic Ocean) to the said King and Queen and to their successors…with everything that there is in them…
> We beseech and demand that you understand fully this that we have said to you…and that you accept the Church and Superior Organization of the whole world and recognize the Supreme Pontiff, called the Pope, and that in his name you acknowledge the King and Queen…as the lords and superior authorities of these islands and mainlands by virtue of the said donation…
> If you do not do this…we will enter your land against you with force and will make war in every place and by every means we can and are able, and we will then subject you to the yoke and authority of the Church and Their Highnesses. We will take you and your wives and children and make them slaves…And we will take your property and will do to you all the harm and evil we can."

Perhaps to compensate for the language differences of the Spanish explorers and the native speaking Indians, the statement was to be read three times. If the Indians did not then surrender all goods and agree to immediate conversion to Catholicism, the explorers could do as they wished with them. This included taking their food and any other resources as well as capturing them for use as guides and as slaves to be shipped off for sale. I think you can sense that the scene was set for a less than harmonious introduction of the Spanish into the New World.

Ponce de Leon had accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage, in 1493. He was later authorized to colonize Puerto Rico and then appointed governor. De Leon was replaced in this post by Diego, son of Christopher Columbus. In 1512, he received a more general appointment, as governor of all lands and islands he should discover. He set off north in search of a rumored larger island. Ponce de Leon first sighted land on Pasqua Florida, or Easter Day, the feast of the flowers. He christened it La Florida. This term was subsequently applied to land as far north as the Chesapeake Bay and as far west as the Mississippi River. After an initial landing just north of Cape Canaveral, Ponce de Leon sailed southward, where he stopped to investigate some native huts. His party anchored and went ashore, where there were some skirmishes. In an act to be repeated many times by de Leon and others, they took an Indian captive as a guide and continued on their way. They sailed around the perimeter of Florida and then back north into the Gulf of Mexico. Some records indicate that he went as far north as the northern Gulf Coast. On the Gulf Coast they stopped in a large bay (possibly Tampa Bay), where there was a more serious encounter with a group of Indians that led to fatalities on both sides and the Spanish taking both women and men as prisoners (all within the bounds of their authorized introductory statement). Despite the fighting, there had been some trading. The Indians told the Spanish that their chief had gold, but it never materialized. This ruse just fueled the speculation of the Spanish that the lands of North America would contain gold and treasures similar to those of the civilizations of Mexico and Peru. It took several centuries for them to conclude that, at least in Florida, this was just not the case.

That speculation of treasure led to an expedition a few years later by Narvaez. He was contracted to colonize the region of the north Gulf Coast, establish 3 forts, and Christianize its people. He left Spain in June of 1527 with 5 ships, 80 horses, and 600 people. After a couple of stops for supplies, groundings, and storms, and the desertion or death of 200 people he ended up on Florida's west coast with the remaining 400. He wasn't sure of his location (the map was in error), so he sent two groups of ships to scout farther northward on the coast. Narvaez decided to take the remaining party overland along the coast. The plan was that they would find the large bay they were seeking and meet up again with their ships. In fact, they probably already were in Tampa Bay, the large bay they were seeking.

The coast was such that the ships and the land group never met up. By trying to stay near the coast, Narvaez missed the Indian villages that may have been able to provide some supplies. He captured Indians along the way to use them as guides. This could explain why they ended up taking a very difficult and circuitous route north, going around any villages. Finally many of the land party became ill, and some deserted. When they reached the eastern portion of the Florida panhandle they built five rafts and attempted to sail to Mexico, a questionable plan of action, since anyone with any navigation skill or experience had stayed on the ships. Those on the rafts were never seen again. Some of the party had elected to continue on land, and four of them actually walked to Mexico, where they told of a couple of large, beautiful bays in the northern Gulf.

At this point the early Spanish expeditions had resulted in much damage to Indian relationships and unsupported rumors regarding gold in North America.

About ten years later, de Soto made a similar overland expedition. It was much longer, ranging as far north as Tennessee and as far west as the Mississippi, but it met with the same disastrous results. These expeditions did terrible damage to the Indian populations, through the fighting, the taking of prisoners, and the diseases they left behind.

In spite of the lack of success to date, Spain still wanted settlements around the Gulf Coast, for three reasons. First, they sought to hold up their end of the deal with the Pope, to covert the native populations; second, to lay claim to the anticipated riches of the new land; and third, to keep France from being able to encroach on the territory they had been given.

To this end, in 1559, Tristan de Luna set out from Spain with 1500 people (including 500 soldiers and a group of clergy) on 13 ships. They were seeking a bay called Ochuse that had been reported by the earlier expeditions as especially deep and protected. After searching around for several days, they found it and settled on the end of a barrier island in front of what today is Pensacola Bay. Just five days later a hurricane struck, and de Luna lost 9 ships, many people and most of his supplies. They conducted a desperate inland search for Indians, who might provide food. Probably as

a result of the Indian experiences with Narvaez and de Soto, they found only remnants of villages that appeared to have been either destroyed or simply abandoned. It is not clear whether the Indians had moved to avoid future contact or whether their villages had been ravaged with disease.

De Luna's entire Spanish settlement was eventually evacuated. This however, had been the first European settlement in North America. Six years later St. Augustine was settled and became the first continuous European settlement in North America.

European Competitors

This then sets the stage for much of the next couple of centuries. There were no European settlements in the northern Gulf, but the French were continuing to poke around. They discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River in 1682. This was very important in that with their outposts along the St Lawrence River, through the Great Lakes and down the Mississippi, it gave them the potential to control the subcontinent. The Spanish were uncomfortable with the relationships the French were developing with the American Indians. They viewed the French as befriending the Indians by accepting their heathen ways rather than trying to convert them. British and French corsairs cruised the region and pirated the Spanish galleons at will, taking the ships and their contents and killing their occupants. While the British and French governments disclaimed any support of these pirates, there was little active discouragement … and perhaps even some pleasure at the aggravation they were causing Spain. (Might there be some similarity to the American experience with some of our Middle Eastern "friends"?) There was an interesting account of the Spanish capturing some suspicious Englishmen near St. Augustine. They insisted that the English convert to Catholicism and then hanged them. At least, so the Spanish reasoned, the Englishmen wound up in the right religion and might be saved in the next life.

It was clear that Spain needed to establish a fairly comprehensive presence to protect the land and what they still expected to be the treasure, so they decided to reestablish a foothold on the Gulf Coast and selected Pensacola Bay as the site of their first major colony. While making plans to establish the settlement, they learned that the French were headed for the same area, with the same intention. A Spanish effort led by the newly appointed Governor Andres de Arriola raced to get there first. (Arriola is now the name of a full dress Mardi Gras ball held on the Saturday before Lent each year). Arriola arrived first, and when the French fleet under Sieur d'Iberville saw the bay occupied, they moved on to establish France's first settlement in the region, in Biloxi. There was reasonable cohabitation of the region between France and Spain for several decades. Through most of the time, the Spanish settlement in Pensacola was either at or near desperation for food and supplies. They often received support from the French colonies as far west as New Orleans.

With the Spanish colony in Pensacola and the French just north of Mobile Bay, the Spanish sought a natural boundary. A bay had been sighted between Pensacola Bay and Mobile Bay, but they couldn't find the entrance. In 1693 a noted cartographer and

scientist, Don Carlos Siquenza was sent by the Spanish government to find the entrance. The bay had three points of land, each separated by a narrow, continuous stream of flowing water, with none navigable. As they searched up and down the coast for a navigable entrance, the ship was blown off course and spotted by an Indian chief camped at Bear Point. He had had a good relationship with the Spanish, so he guided them to a connecting deep water channel that was two or three miles east and curved behind two barrier islands to reach the bay. When they found the elusive bay they called it "Perdido", which means "lost" or "hidden". Today, Perdido Bay is a thriving recreational area that is currently recovering from a visit by the eye of Hurricane Ivan and its 15 to 20 foot storm surges and its sustained 140 mile per hour winds. The first barrier island hiding the bay is called Perdido Key.

- Perdido Key serves as the little of our essay tonight, "The Lost Key".

By the way, that elusive deep water pass has moved back and forth on the barrier islands and is now about three miles from its location in 1693.

This supportive relationship between France and Spain was strengthened by the Spanish Monarch Carlos II, having bequeathed the Spanish throne to Philip d'Anjou, grandson of French King Louis XIV, upon his death in 1700. This eventually touched off the European "War of Succession" to prevent France from laying claim to Spain.

The British were trying to expand their presence in the New World. The English Carolinians and their American Indian allies pushed south with substantial success, destroying most of St. Augustine and wiping out much of the Apalachee Indian population. The English sponsored an attack on Pensacola in 1707 and destroyed the village. With assistance from their French friends, the Spanish were able to defend the fort and save the colony.

France also had ambitions for a greater presence. In addition to developing their presence westward on the Gulf Coast, in 1717 France secretly began to set up some settlements on the eastern portion of the coast. This included a small military post on the eastern shore of St. Joseph's Bay (John Merola and I have spent some very good days casting for sea trout and snorkeling for scallops in this bay). The Spanish colony at Pensacola remained weak and impoverished, unable to survive without the aid and support from French Mobile.

In 1718 a brief European conflict in which Spain and France were on opposing sides gave the French commander of the region, Sieur de Bienville a chance to exercise his ambitions for French expansion at Spain's expense. In 1719 the French seized Santa Maria de Galve, and the French flag now flew over the Spanish colony on Pensacola Bay (flag #2). The war in Europe ended in 1720, and Spain demanded the return of Pensacola Bay as a Spanish possession. The French burned the village and the fort to the ground and returned the charred remains to Spanish control in 1722. The Spanish moved the village to a new site on Santa Rosa Island (where de Luna had settled nearly two centuries prior), but continued storms and high tides and a hurricane destroyed it within 30 years. Finally the village was moved to the mainland and the current location

of Pensacola's historic district, Seville Square. The settlement was established as Presidio San Miguel de Panzacola, giving origin to the name we use today.

The French and Indian War began shortly. Although the Gulf Coast was not involved directly, there were major consequences. Spain decided to ally with France in this war with Britain. As a part of the ultimate British victory, France surrendered all claims in North America, Spain received Louisiana and the city of New Orleans, and Britain took possession of Florida. King George III decreed West Florida to be the 14th British colony and the first British colony west of Alleghenies, with Pensacola as its capitol (under the British flag, flag #3). In 1763 Pensacola consisted of government buildings, a fort, a town, and an Episcopal Church. Into the 1770's, the influx of settlers from the Carolinas and Tories fleeing from the North Eastern colonies grew Pensacola to a population of 6000.

The American War for Independence soon captured British attention and resources. In 1779 Spain once again allied with France in its ongoing war against Britain and actually declared war against Britain. Spanish Luisiana's governor had already been providing covert but crucial support to American rebels in the western theater of operations. He immediately made plans and began to consolidate resources to reconquer British West Florida for Spain. Baton Rouge and Natchez fell to his forces in 1779, and Mobile in 1780. After being delayed by storms, he attacked Pensacola in March of 1781. The siege of Pensacola was a combined Franco-Spanish military effort in which a total of more than 7000 Spanish and French soldiers and sailors were matched against a garrison of less than 2000 British, Hessian, loyalist, and allied Creek Indian fighters. On May 8, 1781, a shell fired from siege lines ignited the magazine at the head of Pensacola's British defenses and the explosion killed many of the defenders. Two days later, on May 10, the British garrison surrendered and shortly thereafter, Spain's French allies withdrew from Florida forever.

The American Expansion

Pensacola then entered its Second Spanish Period, as capitol of Spanish West Florida. There was substantial American movement into the region both from settlers moving westward from Georgia and the Carolinas, and those moving East from New Orleans, especially after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Pensacola had a population of 600, and its major non-military activity was the trading house of Panton, Leslie and Company.

Since the days of first contact in the sixteenth century the natives had traded with Europeans, and they offered mainly two articles – furs and captured Indian slaves. By the 1730's the Indian slave trade was diminished because the pool of potential captives had been greatly reduced. The fur trade continued. Panton had been one of the British fur trading companies. Established by two Scotsmen, the company traded European goods on the frontier (primarily to the Choctaw and Creek Indians) for furs and even land, and it eventually became the largest trading empire in America. At one point it held 2.4 million acres of land in West Florida.

Tensions remained high through the period after the revolution. The center of fur trading moved from Charleston to Pensacola, with Panton designated by the Spanish as the authorized trading firm. This British trading company was supported by Spain because of its established trading relationships with the Indians. Many Indians felt that the trading company was paying them too little, and they really preferred the British ammunition and arms they had received earlier. Panton continuously negotiated with the Spanish regarding the tariff he had to pay on the imported goods and for the right to import the British goods preferred by the Indians. This was a booming but very difficult business. The Indian way of life had changed substantially, from primarily agricultural, to hunting, as the Indians moved from being self sufficient with their own skills to being reliant upon the European goods such as tools, guns, housewares, blankets, textiles, clothing and rum. Gunpowder was especially important because it allowed them to slay enough deer to pay their bills (an early version of the company store).

Alexander McGillivray became the regional leader of the Creek Indians. He was the product of a Scottish Indian trader and a half-French Creek woman. Alexander had studied under his cousin, a cleric in Charleston, and then worked in a mercantile house. He subsequently moved back to the Creek country and later became British Commissary to the Creek. He gained the confidence of the Creeks as a protector of their lands, and when Britain withdrew its Indian agents, he became a regional leader of Creeks, and eventually their war leader. (Perhaps it is interesting to stop and consider the drastic changes in the Indians' lives brought about by the trade. They changed from a settled, agricultural society that made its own tools and wares to a more mobile group of hunters who relied upon the Europeans for their material needs. Their criteria for leadership even shifted to an ability to conduct business with the traders. Perhaps similar unintended consequences are underway throughout the world today, as we attempt to develop trade with and even "democratize" nations considered from our perspective to be less developed.) McGillivray worked actively against the encroachment by the American settlers, often directing raids against them. He was of value to the Spanish because of his influence over the Creek fur trade and because of his efforts to protect the lands that Spain viewed as theirs. His relationship with the Panton trading company was furthered by the fact that he had been given an equity stake in their business. At one point McGillivray went to New York to engage in negotiations orchestrated by President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. The simple arrangement was to be that the Indian raids would cease if the U.S. government would protect Indian lands from encroachment, especially by the land hungry Georgians. In reporting to the Senate, President Washington stated that "the present arrangements of the trade with the Creeks have caused much embarrassment. …their commerce was almost exclusively in the hands of a company of British merchants (i.e. Panton), who, by agreement, made their importations of goods from England into the Spanish ports." He stressed the importance of trade control to the "political management" of the Indians.

Spain's inability to hold the land of Western Florida was further eroded by the War of 1812. In 1814 the British occupied Pensacola as an ideal launching pad from which to

seize Mobile and then New Orleans. The Spanish had tried to remain neutral in the war and were very uncomfortable with this situation, but they needed the British supplies for their trade with the Indians. A combination of Indian attacks on the frontier and this presence of British troops in Pensacola gave an enthusiastic Andrew Jackson a legitimate reason to attack Pensacola, even without government orders. After only brief resistance, the British escaped to their ships, blew up a few of the more important defensive buildings and left the Spanish to deal with the wrath of Jackson and his Tennessee Militia of 4000 soldiers. Jackson then quickly moved on to the much more famous Battle of New Orleans.

A few years later, in his continued retaliation for Indian attacks on American settlers, Jackson received information that hostile Indians were in Pensacola. He recaptured Pensacola in 1818 on the grounds that the Spanish were supplying and encouraging the Seminoles. In 1821, the Spanish formally ceded Florida to the U. S. (flag #4 for Pensacola), and it was admitted to statehood in 1845.

There were several military actions in the Florida region throughout the next forty years. It has been described as a military morass for the U. S., in which protection of American settlers into the Indian lands was very difficult. A description of this activity by Senator Thomas Benson in 1839 sounds all too familiar:

> "Its origin was charged to the oppressive conduct of the administration, its protracted length to their imbecility, its cost to their extravagance, its defeat to want of forethought and care….All this (criticism) going incessantly into the Congress debates and the party newspapers, was injuring the administration at home and the country abroad; and, by dint of iteration and reiteration, stood a good chance to become history, and to be handed down to posterity."

By 1860 there were three forts at strategic locations around Pensacola Bay. In late 1860, as national issues were heating up and South Carolina seceded from the Union, the Governors of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia rushed militia troops into Pensacola and requested the Federal troops to surrender the three forts. The Union troops abandoned two of the forts and consolidated their position in the third, Fort Pickens. Florida soon seceded from the Union, and Pensacola was under its fifth flag, that of the Confederate States of America. Shots fired at the union troops in Fort Pickens in January of 1861 have been described as the first shots of the Civil War. Despite several attacks, Fort Pickens never did fall to the Confederates, and that prevented the Pensacola harbor from becoming an effective supply source for the Confederacy. By May of 1862, the Confederates had evacuated Pensacola because it was of little value to them. Only 82 citizens remained. For the remainder of the war, Union troops used the Pensacola forts as bases from which to conduct their military excursions throughout the region. Florida was readmitted to the Union in June of 1868, and the U. S. flag has flown without interruption since that time.

And so with that we will end this evening's tour through time and space. Today Pensacola talks proudly of its heritage under five different flags, and that even serves as the central theme of the Fiesta of Five Flags, an annual week long celebration that

includes reenactment of de Luna's landing. We have seen that, in addition to the spit of land named Perdido Key, or "The Lost Key" that provides the title for tonight's essay, this general region of the Northern Gulf has been a somewhat forgotten key to much of our nation's past.

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