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A Clash of Empires: The Fight over the Georgia Colony during the War of Jenkins' Ear

Greg Drummond

During the colonial period of the Americas, European powers fought a number of wars over territory and trade rights. The War of Jenkins' Ear was one such war, which pitted the British Empire against Spain largely because of the new colony of Georgia. According to the historian Kenneth Coleman, in many respects, Georgia served as a buffer between Spanish Florida and the fertile agricultural area in South Carolina, yet the founding of the new colony immediately created a resounding sense of impending war to all parties involved.¹ In 1739, the British put an end to diplomatic wrangling and declared war, encouraging Brigadier General James Oglethorpe, founder of Georgia, to seize the opportunity to invade Florida and lay siege to the city of St. Augustine. Unfortunately, a variety of issues among the British command created a whirlwind of disappointment and delay.

Tumultuous events plagued British progress, resulting in a failed siege of St. Augustine. After more than a year of careful planning, the Spanish retaliated by invading St. Simons Island. Through the sheer stout bravery of Oglethorpe and his men, accompanied by a bit of luck, the British managed an astounding victory that sent Spain into retreat and established the boundaries and standing of the mighty British Empire. Therefore, while the offensive operations against Spain would fail due to a fractured command structure, the spirited defense of St. Simons Island would not only rout the Spanish forces but would also set the southern boundary of the Georgia colony and tip the balance of power in North America in favor of the British.

Causes for War

As with any war, many compounding influences brought the two empires to arms. However, two circumstances in particular were primarily responsible. First, as both nations expanded their empire into the Americas, tensions continued to develop over trade in the New World. The conflict began when Britain and Spain signed the *Asiento* contract. This contract granted the

British unlimited importation of African slaves, as well as five hundred tons of other goods, into Spanish holdings in the Americas, which led to the development of the South Sea Company in 1729.² Throughout the next decade, this arrangement would push both empires to the brink of war.

Eventually, Spain came to the realization that, although they needed the British to help supply New Spain, the British were causing more trouble than it was worth. When British sailors began engaging in smuggling and piracy, it provoked the Spanish Guardia Costa to seize their ships. One such seizure, in April of 1731, gave the war its name when Spanish Captain Juan de Leon Fandino boarded the *Rebecca* and cut off Robert Jenkins's ear with the instruction to take the ear to the British king and "tell him if he were here I would do the same to him," a punishment that was not common and was due to some undocumented disagreement.³ Things quickly deteriorated diplomatically between the two countries, causing their relationship to become that much more strained when the Spanish boarded and captured smugglers. Each side claimed the other owed large sums of money, with the Spanish accusing the British of not paying duties on slaves and other goods, while the British claimed damages to ships and crew.⁴ While these trade disputes were a major cause of the impending war, the biggest rift between the two countries involved the British settlement of Georgia.

The arguments over Georgia had been going on for many years. In 1670, each side agreed to sign the American treaty, which stated that neither side could claim land they did not already hold. This included land that prevented British settlements in the area until 1720, when King George ordered the Governor of South Carolina to send men to build a fort at the head of the Altamaha River, surprisingly named Fort King George, which was an act that was in direct violation of the treaty.⁵ However, British occupation of the area did not last long. In 1725, the fort burned down, and, to the delight of the mercantilists who wanted peace in order to advance their trade agenda, the area remained free of colonists until James Oglethorpe founded the colony of Georgia in 1733.⁶

Right from the start, doom loomed over the colony of Georgia. Much to the consternation of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, who made sure the last thing he told Oglethorpe was to make sure he did nothing to provoke the Spanish, the colonists embarked on their trip to Georgia.⁷ Naturally, the British incursion into the lands south of the Savannah River immediately offended the Spanish, even though it brought quite a bit of relief to the people of the South Carolina colony.

Tensions between the British and Spanish continued to grow. In 1737, these tensions compelled Oglethorpe to return to Britain to secure a force to defend the new colony from a Spanish incursion, a threat made more real when

news reached Britain of a failed Spanish attack on the area.⁸ This was possibly the worst time for this to happen and resulted in the ratcheting up of forces in the southeastern portion of North America.

Gathering Forces

After receiving news of the attack, Britain braced itself for war. Oglethorpe's request for men to defend Georgia was granted. He received permission to raise an entire regiment, comprised of 246 men from a company of foot stationed in Gibraltar and "the King's Independent Company of Foot in Georgia," a force that completely upended the balance of power in the region.⁹ In response to the news of Oglethorpe's preparations, the Spanish equally prepared to protect themselves in the upcoming war.

In 1737, while Oglethorpe was gathering his forces in Britain, Spanish Minister Don Tomás Geraldino sent a list of grievances that the Spanish Crown had with Britain, along with a warning that Oglethorpe's return to Georgia would constitute an act of war, to Walpole.¹⁰ Of course, the British ignored the warning and continued to prepare the regiment bound for Savannah. During this time, the Spanish began to form in Florida. As the letters of Florida Governor Manuel de Montiano show, the Spanish had exemplary spies among the British, which allowed Montiano to begin begging for troops and supplies from the crown while preparing the undermanned defenses of St. Augustine.¹¹

At this point, both countries nullified the possibility of reconciliation. Unfortunately, a series of events in 1738 only worsened the ordeal. Not only did Oglethorpe return with the troops he assembled in Europe, newly named as a general and causing Cuba and Madrid to reinforce St. Augustine, he set about gathering local forces of both European settlers and friendly native tribes, such as the Creek who disliked the Spanish for allying with tribal enemies.¹² He also showed that he was willing to back up his ideals with his own money all while doing his best to fan the flames of war. Oglethorpe outfitted three regiments of rangers, including two from Georgia and one from South Carolina, with horses and other supplies, put together his own flotilla, and while working to gather these forces, he sent back false claims of Spanish attacks to play on popular anti-Spanish sentiments and push the mercantilists toward war.¹³ Alternatively, the Spanish were not exactly innocent of provocation themselves.

The Spanish decided to revive a royal proclamation from the time of Charles II, which stated that any slave from a British colony that appeared in St. Augustine would be granted his freedom if he converted to Catholicism and

provided four years of public service. Montiano even built a city and fort for these freed slaves called Mose, which held the designation of being the first settlement in North America to be self-governed by African Americans.¹⁴ This announcement caused the fear of every British colonist in South Carolina to come true, as the Spanish proclamation severely limited the amount of support to Oglethorpe's future expedition. In September of 1739, twenty slaves gathered near the Stono River, killed a number of whites, stole their weapons, and set off toward St. Augustine. This movement amassed a following of about one hundred slaves who would meet a violent end before they could leave the colony.¹⁵ This, on top of all the other provocations and reasons for war, drove some in South Carolina to push for a fight against the Spanish they formerly wished to avoid. This was an ingenious tactical move by the Spanish.

With slaves rebelling, the colony of South Carolina had to keep as much manpower at home as possible, which led to a reduced amount of help for Oglethorpe and his expedition to St. Augustine.¹⁶ The lack of help began a long chain of unfortunate events for Oglethorpe in the coming invasion of Florida, an endeavor doomed to fail from the start.

Invasion and Retreat

In 1739, the British Empire officially declared war. However, the Spanish took the initiative by attacking the British on Amelia Island, resulting in the deaths of two soldiers and several attacks on traders operating in the area.¹⁷ Oglethorpe's response was a raiding party of his own, one that left an impression on the Spanish. In January, Oglethorpe unleashed a force augmented with Creek auxiliaries in an attack that scorched Spanish boats on the St. Johns River and seized two forts, one of which they burned and one, Fort Picolata, which they kept garrisoned.¹⁸ This opened the opportunity to march on St. Augustine. However, delays and denials plagued Oglethorpe's advance.

Of the many things that went wrong for the British, the one that hurt their plans for St. Augustine the most was the delay in gathering sufficient forces and supplies. When King George sent orders to attack St. Augustine, instead of the full cooperation of South Carolina and the British military, specifically from the Navy and the Ordinance Command, Oglethorpe found only denial and tardiness.¹⁹ Some of these delays were for good reason at all. Oglethorpe had begged for help from South Carolina as far back as September 1739, but the Assembly did not begin to take up the issue until November. They even supplied fewer men than promised. Considering their fear of another slave uprising, there

was some justification for these decisions.²⁰ The situation with the native tribal allies was just as troublesome. The Cherokees had been hit hard with a smallpox outbreak, and the Creeks were coming and going at will, never leaving the Georgians more than about two hundred men, much fewer than they had originally promised.²¹ This was partly because of the boredom that arose from the lack of progress in the campaign. The delays imposed by South Carolina and the British military establishment were beginning to take their toll.

Eventually, Oglethorpe felt he had enough men to begin the march. By May, the British forces moved toward their target of St. Augustine. In conjunction with the southward march of nine hundred British and nearly eleven hundred native allies of various tribes, the British Navy was to blockade the entrances into the harbor leading to St. Augustine. Unfortunately, they were late executing this task and did not get it blocked until the end of May.²² This delay, coupled with several others, was completely detrimental to Oglethorpe's original plan. He had meant to attack just after this earlier raid in an attempt to hit the Castillo that protected the city before Spain could reinforce it, an action that had already happened in April when a group of Spanish ships out of Cuba brought men and provisions into the city.²³ Nevertheless, the British lost the element of surprise because of their late start, which allotted the Spanish sufficient time to prepare for the coming campaign against them.

While Oglethorpe had valid complaints against his allies, the South Carolinians had plenty to gripe about as well. Their main charge was that Oglethorpe lacked the skills to be a general. This was evident in the fact that all he was capable of doing were useless maneuvers that led nowhere, further diminished by a reoccurring fever that contributed to his inaction.²⁴ In addition, Oglethorpe was certainly guilty of not allowing the natives under his command to fight in their accustomed way. Instead, he tried to force them to fight in a European style that they were unfamiliar with, rather than using them to instill fear in the Spanish with their guerilla tactics.²⁵

All of these incidents, from bickering subordinates to illness, caused Oglethorpe's original plan of a surprise assault on St. Augustine to fail, provoking additional support on the matter. After collaborating with Commodore Vincent Pearse, a naval commander sent from Charleston to provide aid, a new strategy quickly developed. The new plan called for a complete block of all routes into St. Augustine in order to nullify its defenses and starve them out.²⁶ This plan played right into the hands of the Spanish. As Phinzy Spaulding pointed out, the Castillo had been built for this exact contingency, leaving the Spanish in the perfect position to fight off the British invaders.²⁷ Unfortunately for the British, they were

not able to carry this plan out because of a series of blunders, ignored orders, and commanders at odds over how to conduct the siege.

The first blow to this plan was the destruction of a force at Fort Mose, which broke the encirclement to the north of the city. With the site having been abandoned by the Spanish upon Oglethorpe's approach, the Georgians had taken Mose easily in their march on St. Augustine, leaving Colonel John Palmer and a force of ninety-five Highlanders and fifty-two native allies to camp at a different location each night so they were not an easy target for the Spanish.²⁸ However, Palmer did not follow these commands, which resulted in disastrous consequences for the British. In late June, the Spanish counterattacked with six hundred troops, including a large contingent of free blacks that had previously resided in the town, which led to the complete destruction of the British garrison and the loss of seventy men.²⁹ This would prove to be one of the most significant events of the war and resulted in the first break of the British lines around St. Augustine.

The loss of Mose was a terrible blow to the morale of an already fractured command structure. The South Carolinians were also frustrated by this loss and blamed it on Oglethorpe's unfitness for command. Some of the Georgians were baffled by their leader's decision to place the bulk of his troops on Anastasia Island, rendering them useless.³⁰ The final blow came at the end of June.

Though the land-based portion of the siege had been broken, Pearse still had the harbor blocked while Oglethorpe had men stationed on Anastasia Island conducting a bombardment of the Castillo. Unfortunately, Pearse made the mistake of pulling his ships out to sea to avoid high winds, and while the harbor was clear, a Spanish flotilla was able to get through to resupply the town.³¹ This effectively eliminated any chance at taking the city, and after one more abortive attempt at a combined land and sea attack, Pearse called his ships back to port due to the threat of hurricane season despite Oglethorpe's pleas to the contrary.³² With the naval blockade finished, the various British forces returned home and the different parties began to cast blame on each other for the failure. This is just another example of a weak and uncooperative command structure.

Rout in the Marsh

If the only actions taken in the Florida-Georgia theater of the war were the unfortunate events of Oglethorpe's failed invasion, the entire scenario would lack substantial historical notability. However, upon return, the South Carolina

Assembly began a very biased investigation into the actions of Oglethorpe as siege commander, calling only the witnesses it needed to prove its predetermined outcome.³³ While Oglethorpe defended himself, other activities of equal merit occupied his time.

Fearing a Spanish attack, Oglethorpe began extending the already impressive defenses on St. Simons Island. His main outpost on the island, Frederica, had walls twelve feet high and twelve feet thick, with a network of batteries, outposts, forts, and native allies protecting it. This made Frederica the largest British fort in North America, and its elaborate defenses ensured ample warning of virtually any enemy approach.³⁴ Oglethorpe had done as much as possible, leaving a tense waiting game as the only remaining task.

From the moment the British campaign ended, the Spanish were planning their retaliation. In a series of letters between St. Augustine, Havana, and Madrid, the Spanish worked out a plan of attack that sought to close off the northern entrances to St. Simons, destroy the Georgia stronghold, and proceed up the coastal channels to destroy all settlements and plantations through Port Royal while simultaneously working to incite slave revolts along the way.³⁵ While this was a very bold plan, with hopes of going as far north as Charleston, it rested on removing the threat that Frederica represented. Although initial requests for reinforcements of three thousand men were denied, Havana eventually sent one thousand regulars and eight hundred militia to St. Augustine, along with enough rations to sustain the army on their campaign due to begin in early June.³⁶ This number represented a major stretch on the resources of the Spanish in the Caribbean, showing just how important the Spanish thought the mission was. They left only four hundred men in Havana, even fewer in St. Augustine, and sent every ship they could in search of a major victory against a force that the Spanish thought to be secret.

Oglethorpe's fear of Spanish retaliation began to become a reality in June of 1742. Though the Spanish had planned an early June start for their offensive, it was delayed nearly a month due to weather and other factors, a time Oglethorpe used to learn from ships which had passed near St. Augustine of a Spanish fleet.³⁷ During this tense time of waiting, Oglethorpe received a major break. Though it was not much, Britain had sent one hundred grenadiers, who arrived on June 17 on a ship laden with both war supplies and notice of denial for requested artillery.³⁸ The Georgians had received all the assistance they were going to get, leaving the outcome to sheer fate.

Oglethorpe and his army spotted the first Spanish ships off the coast of St. Simons on June 22, which, after fifty-two ships added at St. Augustine,

consisted of around five thousand men total, though many of those had been scattered by a bout of bad weather on the trip north.³⁹ The Spanish spent a few days looking for a proper anchorage, and eventually came to a point near Fort St. Simons, across the island from Frederica. After spotting the size of the invading force, Oglethorpe decided to relocate all his men back to Frederica, allowing a relatively uncontested landing as the Spanish took over the abandoned fort.⁴⁰ The Spanish had made it ashore and established a strong base of operations, firmly planting themselves on Oglethorpe's island. In taking the fort, the Spanish found several guns that Oglethorpe's men did not fully spike as well as a number of other supplies including 190 grenades.⁴¹ Things were looking bleak for the people of Georgia, but the following day would see a reversal of fortunes.

By July 11, Montiano began to send out detachments of scouts to find the best way across the island, but these scouts ran into small yet determined resistance. The Spanish scouts began to make their way down an isolated path between the forts only to meet the British allied natives who began to eliminate the Spanish, even taking out two men seeking water within cannon shot of the fort.⁴² It was into this that Oglethorpe came charging.

Hearing reports of the Spanish scouting parties, Oglethorpe gathered a group of four platoons of infantry, along with a handful of rangers and native auxiliaries, and charged directly into a large force of scouts, breaking their lines and forcing them back to Fort St. Simons.⁴³ Here is an example of Oglethorpe taking charge in battle, discounting the accusations of the South Carolinians that Oglethorpe was a poor commander. It also shows that when not confronted by divisions among his command and a high fever he could take decisive action in battle.

Seeing a chance to crush a sizeable chunk of the island's defenses, Montiano began to order more men into the battle. This included three hundred Spanish soldiers, who plunged into battle in a valiant effort to turn back the victorious British force.⁴⁴ Montiano's charge met early success, as the four British platoons were routed and fled back toward Frederica in utter disarray. Though the British had broken in the face of the enemy, they did prove they were a force to be reckoned with.

While Oglethorpe's men had broken, a portion of them regrouped at a bend in the road, encouraging some of the rangers to arrange an ambush. Hiding in dense brush, the rangers faced a marshy area that, unbeknownst to the rangers, was the perfect spot.⁴⁵ Exhausted after a long chase under the hot Georgian summer, the Spanish saw the bend in the road and decided to stop. Assuming the British had rapidly fled to safety, the Spanish decided it was time to rest and fix

lunch before carrying on. They laid down their arms in order to set up a temporary camp, which allowed the British to spring from the bushes and destroy the defenseless force, killing around two hundred, including a number of officers, and chasing the rest into the marshes.⁴⁶ While the Spanish would remain on St. Simons for another week, their consistent failure resulted in their complete withdrawal to St. Augustine.

Aftermath

The British invasion of Florida, and the subsequent destruction of the Spanish forces on St. Simons Island, rippled throughout the world. This fighting marked the last real territorial contest between Britain and Spain on the North American continent with Spain's further inaction unofficially allowing the British to set the border wherever they liked. Nothing became official until after the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle following the War of Austrian Succession in 1748.⁴⁷

The South Carolina Assembly released a report of their investigation, which tried to show the colony's men in the best light possible during the actions in and around St. Augustine. The report heaped most of the blame for the failure at Oglethorpe's feet, which unfortunately stuck with Oglethorpe throughout the passing centuries.⁴⁸ However, a closer look shows that much of what transpired was more because of a fractured and divided command structure. As historian Rodney Baine suggests, when Oglethorpe did not have to butt heads with personalities from South Carolina, or the Navy, he was able to command his men in a much more competent fashion, not to say he did not make his mistakes.⁴⁹ Clearly, Oglethorpe's persistence and bravery eventually secured the British victory.

Regardless of who was to blame, Oglethorpe achieved such a critical victory at St. Simons Island, that he was able to set the southern border of Georgia permanently, relegating the Spanish to a bit player in North America. While modern scholars tend to neglect the relevance of the War of Jenkins' Ear, it had a major impact on North America. It deserves appropriate appreciation as something more than a trade war with Spain. Oglethorpe's efforts portrayed that he was both a founder of a colony and an accomplished military hero in America's colonial history. Therefore, while the offensive operations against Spain would fail due to a fractured command structure, the spirited defense of St. Simons Island would not only rout the Spanish forces but would also set the southern boundary of the Georgia colony and tip the balance of power in North America in favor of the British.

Notes

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