

Two Spanish Expeditions to Southwest Florida, 1783 - 1793

By JACK D. L. HOLMES

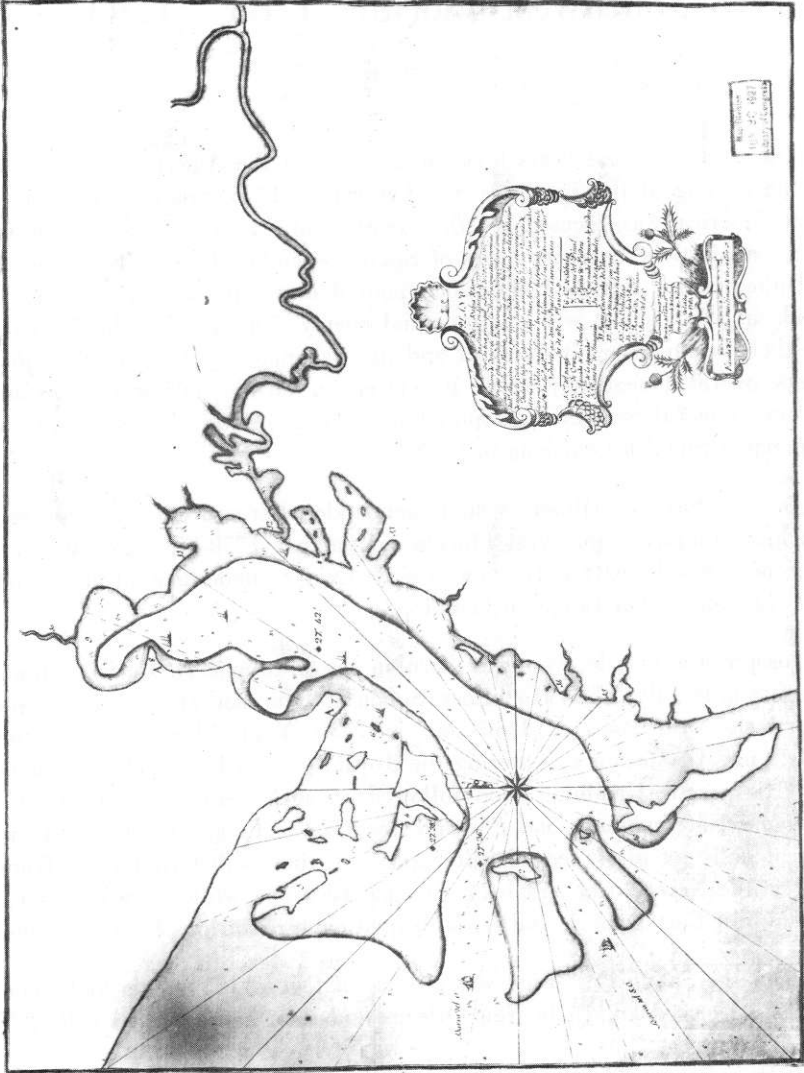
During the critical years between the close of the American Revolution and the signing of the Treaty of San Lorenzo in 1795, Spain's attention in North America was focused on the creation of Florida as a bastion of defense against the encroachments of Spain's enemies. The newly-independent United States, settlers from which poured ever onward toward Spanish Florida and Louisiana, was one potential enemy. Another was the English, with their headquarters in Jamaica and the Bahamas. By 1783 English privateers operated regularly from Provincetown on the island of Nassau, and one vengeful Scot even proposed that the governor of Nassau invade and conquer Spanish Louisiana in 1782.¹

In 1783 Spain's brilliant, young commander, Bernardo de Gálvez, fresh from his triumphs in the West Florida campaigns (1779-1781), ordered an experienced naval officer at Havana, José de Evia, to undertake an inspection of the Gulf coast from Tampa to Tampico.

Joseph Antonio de Evia was born in the northwestern Galician town of La Graña in July, 1740. His father, Simón de Evia, had already sailed and mapped the Gulf coast of Louisiana in 1736. Young José followed the family's naval tradition by entering the Royal Naval School at El Ferrol in 1753. His practical training soon followed on such vessels as the *Dragon*, the *Volante*, *Magnánimo*, *San Pío* and *San Carlos*. Evia, who achieved the ranks of assistant pilot, second pilot and first pilot, sailed frequently from Cádiz to the New World and back. On one occasion, while he was serving on a ship off Cartagena de Indias, he helped capture various British vessels.

After the Spanish declared war on the English in 1779, Evia took command of an armed launch in New Orleans and soon had captured a British

¹ Jack D. L. Holmes, "Robert Ross' Plan for an English Invasion of Louisiana, 1782," *Louisiana History*, V, No. 2 (Spring 1964), 161-77.



*Tampa Bay by José de Evia, 1783
Servicio Geográfico del Ejército (Madrid)*

galeot bound for Fort Bute de Manchak with supplies and reinforcements. In Mobile Bay, during February 1780, Evia captured another English ship, even though his own ship was sunk. During the siege of Mobile, Evia supported the land forces with the artillery of his vessel. Prior to the peace settlement, Evia sailed with messages from the Conde de Gálvez to his various naval commanders. In 1780, as commander of the packet-boat *San Pío*, Evia captured an English frigate of eighteen cannon off the coast of Havana.

After the war, Evia was assigned to duty as adjutant of the Royal Arsenals of Havana, but in 1783 he was promoted to frigate ensign and charged with a highly important commission. In June, Bernardo de Gálvez issued his instructions to Evia for the exploration and charting of the Gulf coast from West Florida to St. Bernard Bay, and from Tampico returning to St. Bernard Bay. The primary concern of the Spaniards was to correct the naval charts used for navigation of their island sea.²

On September 5, 1783, Evia set sail from Havana on the *Comendador de Marsella*, a two-masted lugger. He sailed for Cayo de Huesos (Bone Key), which he sighted on September 7, and anchored off its northern coast in two fathoms of water. The latitude at this point was 24° 36', according to the observations made by Evia. He claimed this was seven minutes variation from the earlier Spanish charts.³

After making several additional observations and taking on water, Evia left on September 12, sailing a course North by North one-quarter West toward Punta-Larga, which he reached the following day. After anchoring in three fathoms of water off the southern tip in the shelter provided against winds blowing out of the first and fourth quadrants, Evia wrote in his diary, "I continued cruising along the shore at a distance of one mile from land,

² Jack D. L. Holmes, "Gallegos notables en la Luisiana," *Cuadernos de Estudios Gallegos*, Fascículo LVII (1964), 110-13.

³ Diary of all that occurred during an inspection made by First Pilot of the Armada José de Evia for the exploration of the coast of West Florida . . . Havana, December 26, 1783, a copy of which is enclosed in Francisco de Borja y Borja (Captain-general of the Spanish Armada) to Fray Bailío Antonio Valdés y Bazán (Chief of Squadron), No. 132, Havana, December 31, 1783, Museo Naval (Madrid), MS Vol. 1036. Other copies from the Museo Naval are in *tomo* 469, folios 143-48; copy enclosed in Francisco Fernández de Córdoba (Secretary of the Viceroyalty of New Spain) to the Marqués de Sonora (José de Gálvez, Minister of the Indies), Mexico, January 5, 1787, in *tomos* 476 and 291. Another copy is in the Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico), Historia, *tomo* 62. With minor variations, which can be attributed to the scribes, these various copies are identical. Evia's diaries have been edited by this writer and will be published in Madrid by José Porrua in 1966.

in three fathoms of water and in the direction of Sanibel, keeping a course to the Northwest and Northwest by one-quarter North."

Evia anchored in a sheltered spot off Sanibel Island in two fathoms of water. From his anchorage he could see at the distance of two leagues Boca Ciega, which he described as a sand bar covered with a shallow sea. Further Northwest was the Boca del Cautivo (Prisoner's Mouth), which boasted a depth of seven feet. Two leagues further, Evia described the sand bar protecting Boca Grande: "This is a mile wide and it has a depth of fourteen Spanish feet."⁴

While at Sanibel Island, Evia cautioned future navigators attempting to cruise in those waters: "The anchorage of Sanibel can be found by a palm grove, located two leagues to the South—the only one appearing on the coast." Special care should be taken, he warned, to avoid the banks extending into the sea in the form of sand bars. Although the banks were broken by apertures at various distances, they should be crossed with great care to avoid grounding, especially at low tide.

On October 10, Evia inspected present-day Charlotte Harbor and, accompanied by his carpenter, explored the surrounding hills for a distance of a league and a half. He found good stands of oak and sabine suitable for naval construction, together with many fine quality pines, some of which he described as being twelve feet in circumference. Inasmuch as Havana was one of the leading naval construction ports in Spanish America, it is easy to explain Evia's excitement over his discovery.⁵

Evia later described the inlet of "Mayac,"⁶ which ran for six leagues from north to south and was fed by a large river of fresh water.⁷ Along the coast he found good quantities of excellent pine, but he noted they were virtually inaccessible. The depth of the small gulf was from two to three fathoms and Evia felt it was suitable only for ships drawing less than ten

⁴ The Spanish foot was eleven inches.

⁵ Cf. Joseph Piernas' proposal to form a settlement on the Calcasieu River in southwestern Louisiana in 1795, in which he mentions the value of the "innumerable trees for naval vessel construction." Jack D. L. Holmes (ed.), *Documentos inéditos para la historia de la Luisiana, 1792-1810* (Madrid, 1963), 151. An excellent discussion of the woods suitable for naval construction found in Louisiana and the Floridas is in George H. V. (Victor) Collot, *A Journey in North America...* (2 vols. plus atlas; Paris, 1826, and reprinted, Florence, 1924). II, 151-58.

⁶ Probably Pine Island Sound.

⁷ This appears to be the Caloosa Hatchee River.

feet of water due to the poor shelter and even worse bottom, into which the anchors could barely penetrate. The bay abounded in fish, however, and Evia said that from twelve to fourteen fishing vessels annually plied the waters between this bay and Havana carrying their catch to the Cuban market. Moreover, there was abundant evidence of hunting—bears, deer and numerous varieties of birds. He found springs of fresh water on all the keys and on some, small lagoons which were full throughout the year. The bay was located approximately where early Spanish charts had placed it, but Evia thought it should be slightly more to the West. It could be approached, he concluded, by sailing five leagues from Sanibel along numerous small channels of seven to eight feet in depth.

As Evia continued his cruise, he passed Boca-Grande and two leagues North by Northwest he discovered another opening into the bay called Friar Gaspar. It was partially covered by a sand bar and situated the same as the preceding islands and bars.

A hiatus in his journey occurred here, however, when contrary winds prevented him from sailing North or Northwest until October 21. As he waited for a change in the winds, he wrote pertinently in his diary that the tides in the region lasted for six hours and regularly changed by two feet from high to low during calm winds. On the other hand, he noted, when heavy winds from the third and fourth quadrants bore down on the coast, the tides experienced wider variations. But when the wind blew from the land, the gulf became so shallow that Evia recommended pilots wait until the tides changed before attempting to cross the bars. The winds along Florida's southwest coast differed radically from summer to winter, he added. In the former he found the breezes quite mild until noon; they were refreshing gusts from the sea. In the winter, on the other hand, particularly after November, the winds became violent and posed a threat to all mariners navigating the coast. Coming from the third and fourth quadrants, these "northers" were strong enough to whip the sea into white froth.

Despite the weather, Evia prepared to reconnoiter Tampa Bay. "This bay," he wrote, "has a good bottom for any frigate, with several channels of two fathoms depth and good shelter for small vessels." He located several large rivers bordered by substantial forests of pine and oak. Two sand bars further north were identified as those titled Castor and Polux Keys on the Spanish charts. They were located at the mouth of Tampa Bay, about a mile

in width, and extending out to sea for a league to the Southwest. Evia described the various soundings made here and in other portions of the bay. The principal bar on the western side of the bay was observed at $27^{\circ} 36'$.⁸

On November 5, the expedition sailed for Anclote Key, which Evia observed at $28^{\circ} 14'$ on the afternoon of the same day. Boasting a fair anchorage of three fathoms on the southern part of the key, Evia found that Anclote Key marked the end of the clean, deep water on Florida's west coast. Further North, sailing toward Apalachee Bay, he found it was difficult to sight the coast due to breakers and numerous sand bars which prevented even small boats from skirting the beaches.

Cape San Blas was Evia's next destination, and he sailed on a northwesterly course until he arrived at $29^{\circ} 35'$ North latitude. After taking various observations and soundings, Evia doubled back on an easterly course until he reached Apalachee Bay and examined the Apalachicola River with its small bay. The latter he found too shallow and offered little protection against the winds from the second and third quadrants, but he said the best anchorage was to be found along the western shore in two fathoms of water. Here, he observed, the current flows with great force toward the Southeast due to the battering winds out of the third and fourth quadrants.

Evia had already mentioned that such winds were especially strong in the winter, and he found himself suddenly in the middle of one of those storms he feared. Fearing he would be swamped in an effort to sail west toward Santa Rosa Bay and Pensacola, Evia hauled to and ran before the wind. His return to Tampa Bay was swift; he arrived at noon on November 12th and anchored his vessel to wait for the storm to blow itself out. The heavy seas, sharp west winds and extremely dark skies made all members of the crew a little uneasy.

Still at Tampa, on November 20th Evia talked with a number of Indians representing the Uchices, Talapoosa and Choctaw tribes. They had traversed numerous rivers on a five-day journey by horseback to hunt around Tampa Bay. They told Evia they had come to sell their peltries to the English in exchange for fire-arms, powder, balls and flannel. Expressing great friendship toward the Spaniards, the Indians gave Evia freshly-killed meat and the Spanish officer reciprocated with several desired gifts.⁹

⁸ Evia's chart of Tampa Bay is found in the *Servicio geográfico del Ejército* (Madrid).

⁹ Trade with the Indians of Florida was regularized in the 1784 conferences held at Mobile and Pensacola.

The storm continued until the 28th. On the 29th Evia once again set sail, but he found the storm was still alive out at sea. Forced to lower most of his linen, Evia decided to run before the wind once again and set a southerly course. On December 2 he reached the Marquesas Keys. The storm was still alive, so he continued on course to Havana. The following day he reached Jaruco and turned over his plans to startled Spanish officials there. Because of the inclement weather, Evia's progress had been slowed down, but he was anxious to return after careening his vessel and taking on fresh supplies.

Evia explained the distances between the major islands and bays of southwest Florida as follows: from Punta Larga to Sanibel, 14 leagues; Boca Grande in the Bay of Carlos to Sarasota, 14 leagues; Sarasota to the principal mouth of Tampa Bay, 7; Tampa to Anclote Key, 11; Anclote Key to Apalachee, 40; Apalachee to Cape San Blas, 26; and Tampa to Cape San Blas, 66.

Evia's charts differed in many details from the early Spanish ones, and he noted in his diary that the English charts made in 1779 were even more inaccurate than the Spanish ones.¹⁰ Since his primary purpose was to correct navigational charts, Evia had indeed accomplished his mission. His reports and charts were later used by the Naval Ministry in their complete series of plans and maps of the Gulf of Mexico.¹¹ Ultimately, Evia explored the entire Gulf Coast, between Tampa and Tampico and his remarkable exploits were the outstanding example of Spanish exploration in North America during the closing decades of the eighteenth century.¹²

An expedition of a different nature took place ten years after Evia sailed up the Gulf Coast of Florida. Vicente Folch y Juan was sent to examine Tampa Bay to ascertain whether or not a Spanish settlement there would be

¹⁰ Evia is probably referring to George Gauld's charts. See *An Account of the Surveys of Florida... to Accompany Mr. Gauld's Charts* (London, 1790). Copies of Gauld's charts are also found in William Faden, "An Accurate Chart of the Coast of West Florida and the Coast of Louisiana... Surveyed in the Years 1764, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 70 & 71, by George Gauld." February 4, 1803, Servicio geográfico del Ejército (Madrid), P-b-2-13, and published in their *Cartografía de Ultramar, Carpeta II (Estados Unidos y Canadá)* (Madrid, 1953), No. 106.

¹¹ Evia's maps and charts were used in the so-called Lángara *Carta esférica que comprende las Costas del Seno Mexicano...* of 1799. Charles W. Hackett (ed. & trans.), *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas* (Austin, 1931), I, 350.

¹² This writer is currently preparing a book-length study of the various diaries and voyages of Evia during the eighteenth century, partially sponsored by the Faculty Research Committee of the University of Alabama, to be published in 1966.

desirable. Should he approve of the site, he was ordered to gain the consent of the Lower Creeks to a Spanish trading post and fort for the settlement.¹³

Few officers were more qualified to undertake such an expedition. Folch was born in Reus, in the Catalonian province of Tarragona, on March 8, 1754. He entered military service as a sub-lieutenant in the Light Infantry Regiment of Catalonia in 1771, having also attended the Military Academy of Barcelona, where he achieved distinction in his study of mathematics and engineering. After serving in the African campaigns of Melilla (1774-1775) and Algiers (July 8, 1775), he participated in the unsuccessful Spanish siege of Gibraltar in 1780. Later that year, under the orders of General Victoriano de Navia, Folch sailed with the Army of Operations to America, but arrived too late to take part in the campaign against Mobile.

In 1781 he was named interim commander of the fort at Mobile, a position he occupied on several other occasions. Under the orders of Pensacola's commandant, Arturo O'Neill, he sent an expedition in 1789 to destroy a camp of runaway Negro slaves on the Tensaw River. In 1792 he turned command over to Manuel de Lanzós and waited for a new assignment from his superiors. The Captain-General of Cuba, Luis de las Casas, noted that Folch had served with the naval forces at the Baliza post, near the mouth of the Mississippi. With his administrative and naval experience, Folch was an ideal choice to command the Tampa Bay expedition.¹⁴

Folch undertook his journey in the fall of 1793 and by December 17, he was ready to report his findings to the captain-general.¹⁵ His report was accompanied by a map showing the depth of Tampa Bay and environs in feet rather than in fathoms. He agreed with Evia about the sandy, shell-covered bottom, but on Punta de Civelos he found hard mud bottoms.

"The banks," Folch wrote, "frequently subject to floods, are heavily overgrown with mangroves, *uversos*, myrtles, and thorns, so that in some places

¹³ Las Casas' instructions to Folch, Havana, August 21, 1793, AGI, PC, leg. 1439. See also, Enrique White to Carondelet, Pensacola, August 17, 23, 1793, both printed in Lawrence Kinnaid (ed.), *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, vols. II-IV, American Historical Association *Annual Report, 1945* (3 parts; Washington, 1946), pt. III, 200-201.

¹⁴ Biographical data on Folch is in Jack D. L. Holmes, "Three Early Memphis Commandants: Beauregard, DeVille DeGoutin, and Folch," *West Tennessee Historical Society, Papers*, No. XVIII (1964), 14-26.

¹⁵ His report is in the AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, old series, leg. 5. It has been translated in Kinnaid (ed.), *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, III, 237-42.

it is impossible to penetrate them, and in others very difficult." He added, "there are, however, some stretches of beach here and there, where the swampy ground which precedes the solid ground extends for more than a mile."

Folch traced four rivers flowing into Tampa Bay. The first, which the Indians called Acachy and the Spaniards, Millian, was graced with fine forests of oak, but Folch thought the pine of poor quality. This river would offer shelter to a war frigate, despite the narrow channel leading to a natural site for careening vessels.

The second river, the Manaties, Folch discovered was navigable only by canoes for some six leagues. Bound by swampy banks, its bordering trees were considered useless for construction. It would offer, however, some shelter for smaller vessels drawing less than seven feet of water.

The Indians called the third river Nattasy, and the Spaniards called it *Río de los Ojos de Agua*. The depth at its mouth was five feet, although, strangely enough, it grew deeper as one ascended it. Brackish or salty water extended for a distance of four leagues inland, and the oaks were even better than those found along the Millian River. The pines were of very good quality and Folch described several species.

The fourth river, named Tala Chakpu by the Indians and *Río de los Ostiones* (Oyster River), took its name from the oyster banks located near its mouth. Although they made ascent of the river difficult, the effort was worth while, according to Folch. Up the five-foot deep stream was a delightful fresh water spring which gushed from a twenty-inch hole. Here, stated Folch, was the ideal spot for a settlement. Small vessels could navigate the river for a distance of eight leagues. Although the quality of the land was poor, he felt isolated patches along the river banks could produce cotton, vegetables, tobacco, indigo and corn. The ideal form of economic activity should be cattle grazing, Folch believed.

Nearby were the Indian villages of Cascavela and Anattylica. Folch discovered the Indians would welcome a Spanish trading post at Tampa Bay, and even offered to settle nearby. These Indians hunted and trapped, and their peltry was delivered to St. Augustine, St. Marks or Pensacola, depending on their proximity. "In exchange for the skins at these posts," Folch wrote,

“they are given blankets, *mitasas*, breechclouts, striped and white shirts, glass beads, vermilion, Limbourg shawls, saddles, bridles, spurs, woolen strips of various colors, knives, combs, mirrors, carbines, shot-guns, powder, bullets flints, chintz, flannel, nankeen, thread, needles, bracelets, pins, and various other gewgaws of this kind.” Prices for their goods were established in the agreement between the Southern Indian nations and the Spaniards reached at Pensacola in 1784.¹⁶

Turning to the question of establishing a fort on Tampa Bay to insure the friendship of the natives, secure Spanish title to the Floridas, and to protect fishing vessels in the Gulf, Folch recommended the stationing of a full-size garrison of fifty men plus their corresponding officers. For a permanent post, based on the pattern of other Florida posts such as Mobile and Pensacola, Tampa would also require gunners, a chaplain, surgeon, medic, royal quartermaster, interpreter, armorer, mason, carpenter, calker, baker, blacksmith, two shipmasters, twelve sailors and a generous supply of convict labor.

Folch recommended the occupation of the islands between Apalachicola and Boca Raton by industrious American families. To initiate such a settlement, Folch suggested that fifty families be given land, cattle, exemption from duties, and standard low prices for salt (to be used in salting meat, which industry would find a ready market in Havana, suggested Folch). In an effort to settle the Florida Keys, Folch proposed that Spain advertise in American newspapers.

Should his proposed scheme succeed Folch envisioned a barrier of settlers, who would resist any aggression from England. It would insure Spanish domination in the Gulf of Mexico on the basis of evident possession, which was preferable to tradition—“the force of which customarily alters with the times.” Folch called attention to the Nootka Sound troubles of 1790, in which Spain had been forced to relinquish her claims in Oregon to the British due to her failure to settle the region. If Tampa and its adjacent coast and islands were well settled, such a disaster would not occur there.

Finally, Folch suggested that the settlements he proposed would put a stop to the English from Providence coming to fish and cut wood or to

¹⁶ See *supra*, note 9.

trade with the Indians. The seriousness of this point was not lost on Spanish officials who the previous year had witnessed William Augustus Bowles, a Marylander supported by the Nassau officials, organize several hundred Indians, who attacked and captured the Panton warehouse at St. Marks.¹⁷

Implied in Folch's report was the point that Spain should employ an adequate coast guard to protect her settlements from ravaging foreign corsairs. The governor-general of Louisiana, the Baron de Carondelet, had considered such a coast guard essential to the protection of coastal shipping between Cape San Blas and the Mississippi, and Folch believed it should be extended along the lower Florida coast as well.¹⁸

The Spanish officials, believing that the Indians would favor such a settlement, providing it was supported by a Panton trading post, prepared to carry out Folch's suggestions.¹⁹ Although he was not chosen to command the post, eventually Spanish wheels of administration moved their slow way and Tampa was garrisoned by a small post.

Thus, the two expeditions of Evia and Folch to the Tampa area did more than provide a background for its ultimate colonization. Their charts and diaries, together with their definitive reports, provide us with substantial information on how the Spaniards viewed southwestern Florida during the closing years of the eighteenth century.

¹⁷ Lawrence Kinnaird, "The Significance of William Augustus Bowles' Seizure of Panton's Apalachee Store in 1792," *Florida Historical Society Quarterly*, IX (1931), 156-92.

¹⁸ On Spanish suggestions for a Gulf coast guard, see Holmes (ed.), *Documentos para la historia de la Luisiana*, 45 note.

¹⁹ Las Casas to Duque de Alcudia (Manuel Godoy, Minister of State), No. 4, Havana, February 1, 1793; and White to Carondelet, Pensacola, October 10, 1793, in Kinnaird (ed.), *Spain in the Mississippi Valley*, III, 135-36, 216.