

# Juan Baptista Franco and Tampa Bay, 1756

By JACK D. L. HOLMES AND JOHN D. WARE

## INTRODUCTION

It has become a fact of recent historiography that historians have drawn upon the advice, experience and knowledge of persons whose training is in another field. Thus, in recent years, geographers, geologists, naturalists, architects and other specialists have cooperated with historians in bringing to light meaningful studies of ancient records. It should come as no surprise, then, that the two collaborators here approach the subject from varying paths. Dr. Jack D. L. Holmes, a specialist in the history of the Spanish Borderlands during the eighteenth century, has written previously concerning voyages of exploration to the Florida coast.<sup>1</sup> Captain John D. Ware, a Tampa Bay Pilot, has a wealth of experience garnered over a period of thirty-five years as seafarer and shipmaster along the Florida coast, plus a dedicated interest in the early history of that area.<sup>2</sup>

Spain made but disappointing use of the rich timber resources of her Florida colony, although several Florida governors pleaded for support in developing a lively trade in these products with Havana. In 1735 Governor Francisco del Moral Sánchez had taken initial steps to stimulate the production of naval stores, spars and masts for use by Cuban shipbuilders, but following his departure in 1737 little was done to follow through. In 1744 Governor Manuel de Montiano planned to erect a factory to produce naval stores in order to furnish the shipbuilders of the Havana Company with lumber taken from the tall pines in the mountains north of Apalache. Montiano envisaged the production of tar, pitch, resin, spars and masts by means of a new company on the order of the Havana Company. Unfortunately, Mon-

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<sup>1</sup> See Jack D. L. Holmes, "Two Spanish Expeditions to Southwest Florida, 1783-1793," *Tequesta*, XXV (1965), 97-107; "José del Río Cosa," *ibid.*, XXVI (1966), 39-52; "The Southern Boundary Commission, the Chattahoochee River, and the Florida Seminoles, 1799," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIV, No. 4 (April, 1966), 312-41.

<sup>2</sup> See John D. Ware, "From Havana to the Port of Tampa, Year of 1757," Unpublished MS, translated from original in Museo Naval, Vol. II-A (North Atlantic Ocean), MS Vol. 176, copy in possession of author and the Florida Historical Collection at the University of Florida.

tiano received little support for his plans. In 1756 and 1757, however, Ferdinand VI became interested in the Florida timber industry and issued orders that Floridians might cut royal timber there for use as masts and spars.<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the new interest in Florida lumber resources, the naval arsenal or shipyard at Havana sponsored an expedition to West Florida in 1756 under the leadership of Juan Baptista Franco. Franco was a draftsman at the shipyard, but little is known of his early naval career.<sup>4</sup> The following year, however, Franco did accompany a full-scale reconnaissance of Hillsborough Bay under the direction of the pilot, Francisco María Celi. A river in Hillsborough Bay was named Río Franco in honor of this unsung explorer's 1756 voyage to the Florida coast.<sup>5</sup>

Although both Franco and Celi issued glowing reports on the advantages to be derived from the rich lumber resources of West Florida, Havana was slow to follow their advice. In 1783, when José de Evia visited the same area he also reported on the suitability of developing a trade between Florida and Havana in the valuable wood, pointing out in his report that prior to 1783 the English shipbuilders at Providence on Nassau in the Bahamas had regularly sailed to Florida to obtain ship timber for their shipyards.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, in 1787, when José del Río Cosa made his voyage to the east coast of Florida, he drafted some "Observations corresponding to the measures for re-establishing East Florida in a flourishing state during the present Spanish government and advantages which may be derived from its products, particularly the making of pitch and lumber, as interesting and useful to a maritime nation." His report also included an extensive discussion of naval stores and ship timbers found in the environs of St. Augustine.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Jay TePaske, *The Governorship of Spanish Florida, 1700-1763* (Durham, N.C., 1964), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Ware, "From Havana to the Port of Tampa," 29. Dr. Holmes attempted to locate service records of Franco in the Archivo-Museo Álvaro Bazán Marina de Guerra at El Viso del Marqués (Spain) in the summer of 1966 but was unsuccessful.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 31, 36. Franco accompanied Celi in his reconnaissance of Hillsborough Bay on April 24, 1757.

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, "Two Spanish Expeditions to Southwest Florida," 100, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Holmes, "José del Río Cosa," 39-52.

It was Juan Baptista Franco, however, who in 1756 first suggested utilizing the fine timber surrounding Tampa Bay—near the site of Fort Tocabaga which had been established by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés as early as 1565. His report, although brief, is a welcome addition to the scanty literature available concerning the early history of southwest Florida.

#### FRANCO'S REPORT<sup>s</sup>

Description of Tampa Bay, in the environs of which one finds fertile sabine,<sup>9</sup> live-oak,<sup>10</sup> walnut,<sup>11</sup> and laurel<sup>12</sup> trees and innumerable pines, easy to work and all of them most useful for the construction of vessels.

#### COPY.

Mr. Commissioner—*Ordenador*:<sup>13</sup>

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- <sup>s</sup> Franco's original report, dated Havana, December 7, 1756, has not been located, but a reliable, certified copy, made at Havana by Domingo de Lavradores on April 6, 1761, from which Dr. Holmes made the translation, is in the Archivo y Biblioteca del Servicio Histórico Militar (Madrid), legajo 5-1-6-5. Dr. Holmes obtained the copy in the summer of 1966 while in Spain under grants-in-aid from the American Association for State and Local History and the University of Alabama Research Committee (Grant No. 502), for whose financial help he wishes to express his thanks.
- <sup>9</sup> The sabine may have been the cypress or juniper, both of which are found abundantly in West Florida. See Lillian E. Arnold and Erdman West *The Native Trees of Florida* (Gainesville, 1956), 12-14. Luis Fatio, an East Florida planter, wrote of the sabine: "Sabine is an exquisite wood and does not decay. It is excellent for the upper works of large ships and for the construction of small, light ships, such as those of the Bermuda Islands. Besides this, it is a very good wood for lining furniture such as bookcases, wardrobes, or cupboards. Its odor keeps out bedbugs, cockroaches, or other vermin that usually breed inside of such furniture." Luis Fatio's "Description of the Commerce of East Florida," Havana, November 17, 1790, in Arthur P. Whitaker (trans. & ed.), *Documents Relating to the Commercial Policy of Spain in the Floridas with Incidental Reference to Louisiana* (Deland, Fla., 1931), 127.
- <sup>10</sup> Fatio reported: "Live oak is recognized as the best lumber for construction in existence, and it is highly esteemed in North America, as well as in French shipyards." *Ibid.* General Collot may have meant live-oak when he described the "green oak": "The most valuable wood for naval construction which grows in the Floridas and in Louisiana, is the green oak . . . The quality of the green oak, its solidity and duration, are generally known. The vessels which are constructed with this wood are of long duration. . . ." George H. V. Collot, *A Journey in North America* . . . (2 vols. & atlas; Paris, 1826; translated by J. Christian Bay; Florence, 1924), II, 153.
- <sup>11</sup> It is probable that the walnut referred to by Franco was really the hickory nut, a tree quite common in the Tampa Bay region. William Bartram also confused the two trees: William Bartram, *Travels of William Bartram* (ed. by Francis Harper; New York, 1958), 544; Arnold, *Native Trees of Florida*, 22-25.
- <sup>12</sup> It is possible that Franco meant the laurel or the wax-laurel (*Myrica cerifera*), two species quite common in Florida. Jack D. L. Holmes, "Observations on the Wax-Tree in Colonial Louisiana and the Floridas," *The Mississippi Quarterly*, XX, No. 1 (Winter, 1966-1967), 47-52.
- <sup>13</sup> The Commissioner-*Ordenador* of the Havana arsenal was Lorenzo de Montalbo. Ware, "From Havana to the Port of Tampa," appendix, viii, ix, showing Celi's chart.

In following the advice which you have seen fit to give me so that I might give an exact description and account of that which I may have discovered and passed through in the exploration which I have made of the coast and mainland of Florida and Apalache, so that from it you may be able to gain a complete understanding of the timber which may be there for the outfitting of ship-masts, which are to be constructed on His Majesty's account in this royal arsenal; I report to you in the following manner:

Having left a second time from this port for the said coast and arrived at the latitude of twenty-eight degrees,<sup>14</sup> [where] I found a large bay with three very extensive mouths at its entrance<sup>15</sup> with sufficient depth in all of them for any large ship, inasmuch as their channels contain five fathoms depth.<sup>16</sup> The natives give this bay the name Tampa; it is considerably extensive, for from the mouth to the center of said bay the distance is more than eight leagues. Within it are included two large coves, one of which has more than sixteen leagues in circumference and the other, about twelve or thirteen.<sup>17</sup> Sailing up the stream of the latter cove for about a league and a half distance,

<sup>14</sup> It is probable that Franco was rounding off the latitude's figure. A landfall at 28° would have found him near the north end of what is presently called Clearwater Beach Island, some 26 nautical miles north of his objective!

<sup>15</sup> To these three mouths Celi in 1757 gave the names Canal de Santilla, Canal de San Juan y Navarro and Pozo o Seno de San Tiburcio. Ware, "From Havana to the Port of Tampa," Appendix, IX, chart. These are presently called Passage Key Inlet, Southward Pass and Egmont Channel; and the center of each lies in 27° 32.5'; 27° 34.3'; and 27° 5' respectively.

<sup>16</sup> Franco probably exaggerates. Celi's "Plano de la Gran Bahía de Tampa y Nuevamente San Fernando" of 1757, *ibid.*, chart, shows less than five fathoms for all three channels; indeed, Celi's Journal and Chart render his Pozo or Seno de San Tiburcio (Egmont Channel) as useless for navigation by reason of a large unsounded shoal closing it to the open sea. This was almost certainly a result of incomplete soundings occasioned by bad weather. Ware, "From Havana to the Port of Tampa," 54, 55. Otherwise, Celi is supported generally by George Gauld's "A Survey of the Bay of Espíritu Santo, 1765," original in the Public Records Office, London; Thomas Jeffries' "The Bay of Espíritu Santo, 1769," in William Stork, *A Description of East Florida* (London, 1769), cited in Woodbury Lowery, *A Descriptive List of Maps of the Spanish Possessions Within the Present Limits of the United States, 1502-1830* (Washington, 1912), 385 (L.C. 595); Bernard Romans' "Espíritu Santo or Tampe Bay, 1774," *ibid.*, 370 (L.C. 566); and José de Evia's "Plano de la Bahía de Tampa, 1783," published in Jack D. L. Holmes (ed.), *José de Evia y sus reconocimientos del Golfo de México, 1783-1796* (Madrid, 1968), appendix.

<sup>17</sup> From Franco's description, these are apparently present-day Old Tampa and Hillsborough Bays. The former has an actual circumference of 15.8 leagues (each of 2.6 statute miles); the latter, 8.8 leagues, instead of the 12 to 13 leagues reckoned by Franco.

I found on the mainland a quantity of very large and healthy pines,<sup>18</sup> and continuing to the end of the said [cove] I found two excellent rivers<sup>19</sup> which I entered for about six leagues by my reckoning,<sup>20</sup> and found their banks covered with various trees, among which are sabine, live-oak, walnut, and laurel, with an immense stand of pine. I examined their banks and found them covered with pastures and several watery lagoons, abundant in animals, among which are deer, rabbits, bears, and turkeys.<sup>21</sup>

I traveled through this land for twenty-two days without finding the least bit of rock, for there is none anywhere around. But there are beautiful and vast plains covered with pine suitable for all types of ship timber, from which I cut three logs and carried them as samples to this port. I found them pliable, white, and without mark save the resin, which they need for their preservation, so that there is no necessity for draining them,<sup>22</sup> such as takes place with others that are heavily laden with it. As for the distance between these said pines, I should mention that they are so close together that one will have to go no more than two miles to begin cutting from at least half of the banks of the said rivers.

<sup>18</sup> It is probable that Franco used leagues which equalled three nautical miles or 1/20 of a degree of latitude for his distances at sea, and leagues which equalled 2.6 statute miles when he was on dry land. The naval league of 3 or 3.14 nautical miles is given in J. Villasana Haggard, *Handbook for Translators of Spanish Historical Documents* (Austin, Texas, 1941), 79.

<sup>19</sup> The first river is present-day Hillsborough River; the second is variously known as Palm River or Six-Mile Creek.

<sup>20</sup> Franco's guesswork was apparent here. Celi's longboat, some four months later, was stopped by the "waterfall" of the Hillsborough River, a distance of some 5.8 leagues. Ware, "From Havana to the Port of Tampa," 35. Franco's distance in the Hillsborough would likewise have been limited. Moreover, his entry into Palm River (Six-Mile Creek) with a similar craft would have been limited to not more than 2.1 leagues both distances @ 2.6 statute miles per league), rather than "about six leagues." Cf. Celi's chart of 1757, *ibid.*, appendix.

<sup>21</sup> Although Celi did not mention the animals encountered in his voyage by name, his chart shows interesting illustrations of snakes, alligators, wildcat, deer, turkeys, and possibly rabbits, foxes, bears and a cow! Celi's chart, *ibid.*, appendix.

<sup>22</sup> Collot, *Journey in North America*, II, 156, noted that the American southern pines were "of the greatest height, straight, and without knots; they have the same elasticity as those of Riga, only they are more heavy and less liable to break than the cypress, and can be more easily repaired. . . ." Francis Baily, *Journal of a Tour in Unsettled parts of North America in 1796 & 1797* (London, 1856), 346, noted: "These pines are of the species which is called by the inhabitants 'pitch pine,' and grow to an enormous height and vast size: they are bare of branches to near their tops; so that in travelling through them they appear like a grove of large masts, which has a very curious effect."

As for transporting [the logs] to the ships where they will be loaded, you can carry them between two men almost to shipside<sup>23</sup> because the aforesaid cove has deep, sandy banks and there is no mud. All these facts are great advantages, and in my opinion we could not find a more delightful and comfortable place for everything, especially for the desired goal [of obtaining lumber]. And what makes it even more desirable is my not having found a single mosquito in the area through which I went; these pests usually bother me greatly.<sup>24</sup> The experience I have had in examining these trees, as well as those of Tortosa in the Pyrenees,<sup>25</sup> of Abete and Coral, those of the North at the port of Scandinavia, those of Philadelphia, and Guasaualcos,<sup>26</sup> has aided me in comparing the quality and condition of the pine masts. Among all these, the most excellent that I have found are those of the said Scandinavian Port; to these we can compare the ones recently discovered on the mainland of the said Tampa Bay. Moreover, it seems to me, according to the information that I have obtained, that they will be of greater strength and duration.

I sorely regret that a spot as pleasant and abundant and of such benefit to His Majesty (whom may the Lord protect), as well as to his vassals, is not settled; for if foreigners manage to take possession of this port and bay, it would be a serious blow to everything, [especially] since it is no more than ninety leagues from this city<sup>27</sup> in this way:

Thirty from this port to Cayo de Guesso,<sup>28</sup> and the remaining sixty from the said key to the aforementioned Tampa, having at the same time all the sounding of the said Tortuguilla where all the boats ordinarily turn the point when heading for this city, and those which go by this way to the Bahama Channel. For this reason we ought to show considerable concern in this enterprise and not waste time.

<sup>23</sup> It is probable that Franco meant that logs might be transported on carrying sticks between two men abreast followed in tandem by other two-man teams.

<sup>24</sup> Although mosquitoes are rarely encountered in the Tampa Bay area in November or December, Andrew Ellicott was plagued by the pests at Natchez on December 1, 1797. *The Journal of Andrew Ellicott* (Philadelphia, 1803; Chicago, 1962), appendix, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Franco is in error here. Tortosa is near the Mediterranean coast on the Ebro River about midway between Valencia and Barcelona, at some distance from the Pyrenees.

<sup>26</sup> Franco means Coatzacoalcos (Puerto México).

<sup>27</sup> From Tampa to Havana Franco reckons ninety leagues, or approximately 270 nautical miles. Captain Ware figures the distance today at 276 nautical miles.

<sup>28</sup> Cayo de Hueso (Bone Key) is present-day Key West. It was observed in 1783 by José de Evia as being located at 24° 36' North Latitude, or some seven minutes variation from earlier Spanish charts. Holmes, "Two Spanish Expeditions to South-west Florida," 99.

This is all that I am able to disclose on the matter, and I hereby state that all I have said and related is certain and the truth as far as I know it, and I hereby remit it and sign the same in this city of Havana on the seventh of December in the year one thousand seven hundred and fifty six.

JUAN BAPTISTA FRANCO

[This] is an identical copy of the original; thus I certify it. Havana, the sixth of April, one thousand seven hundred and sixty-one.

DOMINGO DE LAVRADORES<sup>29</sup>

(rubric)

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<sup>29</sup>A diligent search in the archives at El Viso del Marqués failed to discover the service records of Domingo de Labradores, and it is assumed he was a scribe in the Havana naval arsenal or shipyard.

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