"...Everything Carried the Face of Spring": Biscayne Bay in the 1770's

By Daniel L. Schafer*

In March 1772 the edenic wilderness of Biscayne Bay in British East Florida was visited by a charming gentleman whom contemporaries referred to as "reputedly a natural brother of King George III."[1] As a Lieutenant in the Royal Engineers stationed in St. Augustine, where he had earned a reputation as a devotee of the dinner parties and night life of the town, Frederick George Mulcaster seemed an unlikely choice to explore the rugged Biscayne Bay area.

Like so much of Britain's new province, Biscayne Bay was totally uninhabited, its virgin soils uncultivated. Huge tracts of land throughout the province had been granted to British aristocrats, but most lay undeveloped, the major challenge to Governor James Grant's goal to make the colony prosper.

The governor had named Lieutenant Mulcaster the Surveyor General of East Florida in October 1770 in order to speed up the process of surveying land already granted and conveying final title. Mulcaster's experience as an engineer qualified him to conduct the provincial surveys, Grant said in his letter of recommendation, and he had also "served at the Reduction of Goree and Martinique, is God son to the late Prince of Wales, was brought into the Army under the immediate protection of the Royal Family, and has the honor to be known to the King."[2]

Following his appointment as surveyor, Mulcaster travelled

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throughout East Florida and became skilled at identifying lands suitable for plantations. It was in this capacity that he visited Biscayne Bay in March 1772 with orders from Lord Dartmouth to survey 100,000 acres granted to his family, and with orders from Samuel Touchett and John Augustus Ernest to survey 20,000 acres they had each received.[3]

Mulcaster travelled to Biscayne Bay via Andrew Turnbull's New Smyrna settlement and William Eliot's plantation on the Indian River. After a brief visit with Captain John Ross, a Scotsman who managed Eliot's estate, Mulcaster departed for Biscayne, only to be caught in a severe storm. He was forced to lay up on oyster banks and mangrove islands, deprived of fresh water for forty hours on one layover, and to leave three men and a horse on Point Lucea, which he estimated to be forty miles south of Eliot's plantation and one hundred miles north of Biscayne.[4]

Most of his food supplies were lost or exhausted during the layovers, but Mulcaster and his remaining companions arrived at Biscayne on March 13, 1772, and energetically proceeded with the surveys. Travelling in a schooner and a smaller boat, the men were entirely dependent on fishing and hunting for their subsistence.

After experiencing frosts in the north of Florida, and violent storms on the way south, Mulcaster found at Biscayne Bay plentiful food supplies, pleasant weather, sparkling clear water, and a green, blossoming luxuriance of foliage. The land was uninhabited, yet capable of supporting several profitable plantations.

For several years Mulcaster had heard Governor Grant tell the wealthy landlords that if they would invest in the "state of nature" that he found East Florida to be upon his arrival in 1764, they would "create a New World" for the British Empire while adding to their personal fortunes.[5] After viewing Biscayne Bay and returning to St. Augustine, Mulcaster shared his experiences in a lengthy letter to the governor, who was then in London. This correspondence has been preserved at Ballindalloch Castle in Scotland and provides a rare eye-witness account of Biscayne Bay and its environ during the era of the American Revolution.[6]

> "The Entrance of this Bay is at the North End of Key Biscayne, a channel of above a quarter mile wide, with above thirteen feet water, without a breaker, and the water so clear that you might see to pick a six pence at the Bottom. The main land is about three miles from the Inlett; it consists of large fresh marshes and rich open Savannahs, the soil of them Dove coloured, and

Blue Clay, in other parts varied by a rich greasy Marl. The Hammock land is Brown mould in some places entirely without land, in others with a very small mixture. It runs from ten to fourteen or fifteen inches deep upon a Rock foundation. The swamp resembles the Hammock land, only has sometimes a different foundation, which is Marl.

"The Timber growing on them are Live Oak, Red Bay, Mastick, Gum Elm, Mulberry, Grape Tree, Elder, Coro Plumb, Papa, Button Wood, Cypress, Yellow Plumb, Laurel, Black, Red and Yellow Mangrove, Pitsimmon, Willows Cabbage, Maple, Ivey, Pear Grannete, and several others which I am quite a stranger to. The Papa, which is killed at the Head of the Indian River, had here Ripe and green fruit on it, and everything carried the face of Spring and a fine vendure.

"The pine land nearest the Bay is very Rocky and the Pine not very good, but farther back the Pine Land is cut by savannahs, and the timber is straight, tall and exceeding good. The back part of these lands form back marshes of great extent, with small Hammocks here and there dispersed among them.

"The Sound which forms the Head of the Bay has four large fresh water Creeks, or rather small Rivers which empty themselves into it on the West side. Three of these Rivers I am confident no man has been up there [for] fifty or sixty years, probably much longer, but I was obliged to make my way up them by cutting away large branches of trees which from each side hang across. These Rivers are deep, clear and full of fine fish. The Bottom is Rock, and the water is sweet and good as any I ever tasted.

"On the banks of other Rivers are the same kind of land as I have already described. Upon one of them is a remarkable natural curiousity, being a Bridge of solid Rock forming a more regular Arch than you can well conceive when it is certain no Human hand has ever given it assistance. The width of the Arch at the surface of the water is twenty-five feet. The perpendicular height from the water is four feet and the River itself, in the center, is six feet. The breadth of the River is thirty-three feet covered with trees and makes a Romantic appearance."

As he passed under the arch in his four-oar boat, Mulcaster was forced to tuck his head. He recorded water-depth up to seven feet and estimated that the arch was located approximately one and one-half miles from the mouth of the river on a direct line, or three miles by the winding path of the river. There were remains of old Indian fields on the banks of some rivers, but the cultivators had long since vanished.

On Biscayne Bay Mulcaster surveyed 100,000 acres capable of producing rice, indigo, sugar or any other produce that was grown in

the West Indies. While surveying he admired the mangroves along the shore: "The Trees large straight and tall, with spreading tops and carry more the face of an open Forrest than of the Mangrove we see a little farther to the North. The roots of the trees are entirely covered with earth and not going out in suckers as is commonly seen."

Mulcaster noted that the head of the sound appeared to end in a small lake, but actually was a small river which led southwest and northwest and to several branches into a large marsh. From the lake Mulcaster sent the schooner to the mouth of New Hillsborough River, a distance of six miles, while he travelled overland, conducting further surveys enroute. From New Hillsborough back to Key Biscayne was only fifteen miles, Mulcaster estimated, "where a connection might easily be had by land." The river, shallow at its entrance, "for about five miles runs due North and is parted from the Sea by a Beach of forty or fifty yards wide; it then takes a West course and branches and seems to head in large marshes. Upon the Banks of it are many old [Indian] fields and exceeding good land....The fresh marshes run from the River all the way to Biscayne."

On the south branch of the Hillsborough River, Mulcaster surveyed several tracts of land he thought to be "most adapted for and capable of making pretty settlements, which, with the lands adjoining if once settled, would make a valuable Country. This River entrance is but Shallow, but the Beach is almost constantly smooth as a River and in the offing is fine anchoring ground. It is the Sea winds only that rustle the shore, and then not in any manner like the Northern parts, being defended by the force of the Gulph Stream and the Bahama Banks."

After viewing the North Branch of the Hillsborough River, which he thought looked like an arm of the sea with banks and shoals, Mulcaster departed on April 10 for Jupiter's Inlet at the mouth of the Hobe River. Disappointed with the land on the south branch of this river, he spent little time surveying, departing instead for the Indian River to rejoin the men he had left at Point Lucea fifty days previously.

Arriving on the 13th of April expecting to find the rest of his crew, Mulcaster found instead an abandoned camp site. A distressing message scratched on a cabbage tree informed him that the party had run out of food, powder and shot and had headed for Captain Ross's plantation.

Fearing the worst, Mulcaster abandoned the survey and launched

a search for the wanderers, who were inexperienced in the ways of survival in Florida's wilds. The schooner was sent to the settlements on the Mosqueto River, while Mulcaster went up the Indian River in the small boat. After fifty miles he saw a blue flag on shore which proved to be a blanket waved by members of an Indian hunting party. They told Mulcaster that his men were safe and being led to Captain Ross's place by Indian Tom. They had waited forty-two days, "the last twelve without food but cabbage tree leaf," whereupon they wrote a "book with knife" and abandoned their camp. The Indians gave a hungry Mulcaster supplies of venison, honey and bear oil, as they had previously given provisions to the wandering men.

Assured of his men's safety, Mulcaster went the next day to Fishing Point to survey two tracts of 5,000 acres each for Michael and Robert Herries. Unable to find a lake said to run three or four miles back from the Indian River, he finally realized that it was instead a gray pond which resembled a marsh more than a lake. The Indian River shoreline looked to Mulcaster like its "savage name" implied, but upon closer inspection, he found the land and the back swamps to be promising.

Mulcaster described the land he travelled through as "totally unknown," although his father-in-law, and predecessor as provincial surveyor, William Gerard De Brahm, had previously claimed to be familiar with it. That was highly improbable, Mulcaster said of De Brahm, because "his age rendered him incapable of the hardship, and it requires the constitution of a horse to go through the wilderness. A large schooner with conveniences to make it comfortable is useless." The only effective means of conveyance for such work were "boats of little draught of water," but De Brahm had spurned these for the comforts of a larger vessel.

During a surveying trip in this region, Mulcaster said, a man had to be ready to expose himself to all extremes of weather, to sleep in an open boat, on the beach or on an oyster bank; these are the conditions "he must teach himself to laugh at." De Brahm, however, had been unwilling or unable to endure such hardships and had dispatched deputies to conduct the surveys. Mulcaster felt that the deputies had either been incompetent or had taken money without doing the work.

"The expenses are also enormous," Mulcaster said. "If I had not had several large tracts to survey I could not have afforded to have stayed so long as I did." The expedition had lasted three months and

the expenses had totalled 150 guineas. The last five weeks Mulcaster had survived "on the chance of powder and ball, no bread, rice, flower, or biscuit,...[yet somehow] I am in perfect health."

The only pleasant part of Mulcaster's expedition had been Biscayne Bay and its environs which had been warm and "what was very remarkable, only few Musquitos, though in summer no doubt there is plenty." The only place that mosquitoes had been a problem was at the mouth of the Indian River.

After surviving the rigors of this expedition, Mulcaster felt betrayed when, several months later, Samuel Touchett refused to pay for his survey, complaining that he ought not be expected to pay for the chain carriers or for their rum and provisions. An angry Mulcaster refused to process the grant until the bill was paid and referred Touchett to Lord Dartmouth, who had paid his fees without complaint and who "had an Agent on the spot as Judge if the charge was just. He [Touchett] is the first grantee who ever disputed their fees since I have been in this office. If Mr. Touchett had been with me in an open boat in the Gulph Stream blowing a gale of wind and had on his return back lived six weeks on the chance of powder and shott, without Bread and Rice, or even salt, he would not suspect that going three hundred miles to run land was quite a party of pleasure."[7]

Touchett eventually paid the fees and received title, along with Dartmouth and Ernst, to tracts with great agricultural potential bordering Biscayne Bay. A subsequent bankruptcy, followed by his death by suicide, kept Touchett from developing his tract, but both Dartmouth and Ernst attempted unsuccessfully to establish settlements on Biscayne Bay during the British period.[8] Further efforts were discouraged by the turbulence of the American Revolution and by the cession of East Florida to Spain in 1783.

Lieutenant Mulcaster, who left East Florida in 1776 to join General Clinton's army in the northern colonies (James Grant was already there, a Major under Lord Howe), would have been surprised to learn that at the time Britain receded the province to Spain in 1783 not a single settlement had been started at Biscayne. The uninhabited paradise he had found in 1772 and promoted as possessing abundant potential for cultivation had continued bereft of permanent human settlement.[9]

Following the departure of the British from East Florida, Biscayne Bay remained largely uninhabited and undeveloped for more than a century. Neither the Spanish nor the reputedly landhungry Americans

(who gained hegemony in 1821) brought substantial change to the area until Henry Flagler arrived in 1896 with his Florida East Coast Railroad.

Millions of tourists and permanent settlers followed Flagler's railroad and Miami lost forever the uninhabited aspect of its idyllic appeal. Although its attractions remained, none more compelling than Biscayne Bay, recent visitors have been known to wonder what it looked like before development brought causeways, office buildings, high-rises, hotels and condominiums. With Frederick George Mulcaster's recorded observations from the era of the American Revolution, it is possible to recapture Miami when it was still in a "state of nature."

NOTES

1. Charles Loch Mowat, "That 'Odd Being', De Brahm," *The Florida Historical Quarterly,* XX (April 1942), 330. See also Mowat, *East Florida as a British Province, 1763-1784* (Berkeley, 1943; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 44 n., 46; and Wilbur Henry Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida, 1774-1785: The Most Important Documents Pertaining Thereto, Edited With An Accompanying Narrative,* 2 vols. (De Land, 1929), I, 13.

2. James Grant to Lord Hillsborough, April 23, 1770, Great Britian, Public Record Office, Colonial Office 5/551 (Hereafter CO). Ironically, Mulcaster's predecessor as Surveyor General had been his father-in-law, William Gerard De Brahm. Following a long-festering feud between De Brahm and Grant, prompted by long delays in conducting the surveys and a rash of complaints from impatient landowners, the governor suspended De Brahm in October 1770, and said of the man he found covetous and troublesome: "he is at variance with his son-in-law, as he is with all mankind." (See Grant to Hillsborough, October 2, 1770, CO 5/545). Hillsborough upheld Grant's action but De Brahm was subsequently reinstated as surveyor, although he never returned to East Florida.

De Brahm's cartographic and scientific contributions have been admirably chronicled in Louis De Vorsey, Jr., editor, *De Brahm's Report of the General Survey in the Southern District of North America* (Columbia, S.C. University of South Carolina Press, 1971). The controversy between the two men is retold in careful detail (pp. 39-54), although I believe De Vorsey has been too partial to De Brahm's version of the incidents. Having read the extensive correspondence preserved at Ballindalloch Castle in Scotland (Grant's home), as well as the Colonial Office materials, I am convinced that Grant was an unusually industrious and ethical governor and was justified in firing De Brahm.

De Vorsey has additional thoughts in "De Brahm's East Florida on the Eve of Revolution: The Materials for Its Recreation," in Samuel Proctor, Editor, *Eighteenth-Century Florida and Its Borderlands* (Gainesville, University Presses of Florida, 1975), 78-96. Brief but insightful remarks can be found in Paul H. Smith, "Commentary," in the latter volume, 97-101. Still useful are the works by Mowat cited in note 1 above.

3. Council Orders re: Petition of Earl of Dartmouth, CO 5/544; Mulcaster to Grant, April 7, 1773, Ballindalloch Castle Muniments, Ballindalloch, Scotland, Bundle 369 (Hereafter BCM followed by the appropriate bundle number); Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, II, 51-52.

4. Mulcaster to Grant, May 6, 1772, BCM 260.

5. For examples of the governor's promotional letters see Grant to: Earl of Egmont, September 5, 1770, BCM Bound Letter Book; Thomas Thoroton, September 1, 1766, and John Tucker, September 1, 1766, BCM 659; Earl of Cassillis, February 9, 1768, and Earl of Moira, June 20, 1768, BCM Bound Letter Book.

6. Mulcaster to Grant, May 6, 1772, BCM 260. The quotes and paraphrases in the lengthy section which follows are taken from this source unless otherwise noted.

7. The incident is discussed in Mulcaster to Grant, April 17, 1773, BCM 369.

8. For three interesting articles that deal with the Biscayne Bay lands owned by Dartmouth, Touchett and Ernst, see James C. Frazier, "Samuel Touchett's Florida Plantation, 1771," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* (XXXV, 1975), 76-88; and in the same issue, Roland E. Chardon: "The Cape Florida Society of 1773" and "Northern Biscayne Bay in 1776," 1-26 and 37-74 respectively.

9. Mulcaster to Grant, on board His Majesty's Ship *Scarborough,* Cockspur in Georgia, March 2, 1776, BCM 260; same to same, March 26, 1776, from Cape Fear.

Presumably, Mulcaster was sent for a brief period to West Florida, where he petitioned Governor Peter Chester for 2,000 acres of land on December 21, 1776. The petition was approved that same day. The original is in the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

James Grant was in Boston in 1775; subsequent posts were Long Island, Halifax, Brunswick and Morris Town. In July 1779 Major General James Grant was Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Forces in the West Indies. See letter book in Ballindalloch Muniments which begins August 10, 1775.