

IN DEFENSE OF CAPT. TOMÁS PORTELL: AN EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF SPANISH WEST FLORIDA

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(Resumen)

En 1800, el capitán Tomás Portell, comandante del fuerte de San Marcos de Apalache en la Florida Occidental española, rindió el fuerte al aventurero americano y lealista británico William Augustus Bowles. Este pequeño incidente en la historia de la colonia española ha recibido poca atención. Arthur Preston Whitaker lo narra hace unos setenta años, pero hasta ahora nadie ha investigado la exactitud de los duros comentarios de Whitaker sobre la rendición española y el papel de Portell en ella. Este artículo, sin embargo, demuestra que Whitaker malinterpretó los documentos de los archivos españoles y cubanos para sostener su opinión tendenciosa de los españoles en la Florida Occidental. Más importante aun, el artículo contradice la versión dada por Whitaker de la rendición y revela información que explica de modo más comprensivo los acontecimientos en el fuerte, los motivos razonables de la rendición, y lo que ocurrió a Tomás Portell.

In 1800, fifty-seven-year-old Spanish army Capt. Tomás Portell surrendered Fort San Marcos de Apalache to the adventurer William Augustus Bowles after a five-week siege. The submission of this small and seemingly insignificant fort attracted attention at the time mostly because of the person who seized it and Spain's frail grasp on West Florida. Bowles's escapades in this Spanish colony were well known. In 1792, he had seized a trading post near the fort in the Apalache district, attempted to subvert the local Indian tribes, and sought to open up the colony to British trade. Spain, however, quickly frustrated his plans by arresting and imprisoning him. In 1798, he escaped custody, consumed with determination to return to Florida and fulfill his plans. The Spanish fort at San Marcos de Apalache figured at the center of those plans.¹

Until now, the only historian to use Spanish and Cuban archival materials to describe this obscure episode in Spanish colonial history has been Arthur Preston Whitaker seventy years ago. In his 1934 study, *The Mississippi Question, 1795-1803: A Study in Trade, Politics, and Diplomacy*, Whitaker rendered his vituperative interpretation of events that denigrated Portell's defense and surrender of Fort San Marcos. Subsequent American historians writing about the Spanish era in Florida adopted his judgment unquestioningly.² His account appeared in his third

1. The more recent works on Bowles include Leitch Wright, J. Jr. *William Augustus Bowles: Director General of the Creek Nation*. Athens, GA, 1967; Douglass, Elisha P. "The Adventurer Bowles," *William and Mary Quarterly* 6. January 1949. 3-23; and two articles by McAlister, Lyle N. "The Marine Forces of William Augustus Bowles and His 'State of Muskogee,'" *Florida Historical Quarterly* 32. July 1953. 3-27; and "William Augustus Bowles and the State of Muskogee," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 40. April 1962. 317-28.

2. Preston Whitaker, Arthur. *The Mississippi Question, 1795-1803: A Study in Trade, Politics, and Diplomacy*. Gloucester, MA, 1934. 169-70. Among works that discuss Bowles, Portell, and

book to focus on the lower Mississippi Valley and adjacent Spanish borderlands of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries.³ From the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, the prolific Whitaker simultaneously penned numerous articles published in prominent American historical journals on subjects in the same field that dealt with diplomacy, Indians, and leading personalities of the late Spanish colonial period. His publications earned him distinguished teaching posts in the American historical profession, and colleagues long hailed him as the premiere scholar of the eastern Spanish borderlands in the United States.⁴

Fort San Marcos, largely following Whitaker's interpretation, are Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 170; William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Pantón, Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847*. Pensacola, 1986. 233; LaVanture Olds, Dorris. "History and Archaeology of Fort Saint Marks in Apalachee." Florida State University: MS Thesis, 1962. 103; Boyd, Mark F. "The Fortifications at San Marcos de Apalachee." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 15. July 1936. 21; Kinnaird, Lawrence and Lucia B. Kinnaird. "War Comes to San Marcos." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 62. July 1983. 25-43; Hart White, David. *Vicente Folch, Governor in Spanish Florida, 1787-1811*. Washington, D.C., 1981. 47-67; and Holmes, Jack D. L. *Honor and Fidelity: The Louisiana Infantry Regiment and the Louisiana Militia Companies, 1766-1821*. Birmingham, AL, 1965. 72. Sánchez-Fabrés Mirat, Elena in *Situación histórica de las Floridas en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII (1783-1819)*. Madrid, 1977. 173-218, discusses Bowles, but she writes almost nothing about Fort San Marcos de Apalache. On page 210, in one paragraph, she states that Bowles took the fort by assault and, in the next paragraph, claims that he captured it without encountering resistance. She accepts as accurate the letter of Benjamin Hawkins, American agent to the Upper Creeks, who was entirely wrong in his version of the surrender. Hawkins to Regil, Coweta, June 12, 1800, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Estado, leg. 3889bis, exped. 10, No. 161.

3. Preston Whitaker, Arthur *The Spanish American Frontier: 1782-1795: The Westward Movement and the Spanish Retreat in the Mississippi Valley*. Gloucester, MA, 1962; ed. and trans., *Documents Relating to the Commercial Policy of Spain in the Floridas, with Incidental Reference to Louisiana*. Deland, FL, 1931; and *Mississippi Question*.

4. Among Whitaker's articles are "Spanish Intrigue in the Old Southwest: An Episode, 1788-89," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12. 1925. 155-76; "Spain and the Cherokee Indians, 1783-1798," *North Carolina Historical Review* 4. 1927. 252-69; "James Wilkinson's First Descent to New Orleans in 1787," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 8. 1928. 82-97; "The Commerce of Louisiana and the Floridas at the End of the Eighteenth Century," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 8. 1928. 190-203; "Alexander McGillivray, 1783-1793," *North Carolina Historical Review* 5, Nos. 2 and 3. 1928. 181-203 and 289-309 respectively; "Harry Innes and the Spanish Intrigue, 1794-1795," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 15. 1928. 236-48; "New Light on the Treaty of San Lorenzo: An Essay in Historical Criticism," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 15. 1929. 435-454; "Godoy's Knowledge of the Terms of Jay's Treaty," *American Historical Review* 35. 1930. 804-810; "France and the American Deposit at New Orleans," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 11. 1931. 485-502; "The Retrocession of Louisiana in Spanish Policy," *American Historical Review* 39. 1934. 454-76. Whitaker also contributed many biographical sketches of leading personalities and officials in the Southeastern Spanish borderlands in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. 20 vols. New York, 1928-36.

At this point, however, a discordant note that forms the basis of this study must be trumpeted. Whitaker's assertions and conclusions about Portell, the capitulation of the fort to Bowles, and his portrayal of the Spaniards are not sustained by the documentation he consulted. This is not meant to discredit all the historian's many publications. But on the items mentioned here, Whitaker neither used correctly nor researched extensively reliable records.⁵ Moreover, he peppered his generalizations with an anti-Spanish bias, which perhaps was symbolic of the times in which he wrote.

Whitaker's arguments about the surrender and Portell are summarized here. The historian claimed that the Spanish garrison at Fort San Marcos de Apalache consisted of 106 officers and men; the fort "was solidly constructed of hewn stone"; it held "a sufficient store of all the supplies necessary to withstand a long siege, and, though the drinking water was not very palatable, it was always to be had in abundance"; and the fort "was apparently impregnable against any attack that Bowles could launch." Despite Whitaker's allegations about the fort's manifold strengths, Portell yielded the stronghold "after a brief and perfunctory defense," for which, the historian professed, the captain "was dismissed from the service."⁶

Whitaker then bizarrely asserted that at his court-martial in Havana, Portell decided to surrender because a nearby squadron of Spanish galleys from Louisiana chose not to respond to his pleas for help. According to the historian, although the officers on the galleys "had indeed received personal letters and verbal messages from Portell reporting his plight, he had never requested them officially in writing to come to his rescue; and that therefore their failure to relieve him was neither a dereliction of duty on their part nor a justification of Portell's surrender." When at the end of the siege, Bowles found four-pound cannons on board a ship he captured suitable for bombarding the fort, Portell realized the futility of further resistance. Whitaker asserted, "As it turned out, the captured guns were only two-pounders, and Portell was cashiered."⁷

The historian then recapped his antagonistic analysis of Spanish behavior:

The truth of the matter seems to be that Portell and his garrison and the naval officers—and indeed every Spaniard in Florida at that time—were all in a dead funk. That is why the episode is worth recounting. The whole service, military and civil, was thoroughly demoralized. Otherwise one hundred well-armed Europeans in a substantial stone fort would never have surrendered to a rabble of four hundred Indians led by ten white men, on the mere rumor that two-pounders were four-pounders; nor would the Louisiana galleys have remained in the offing while they awaited a formal invitation to relieve a beleaguered fort to which they had direct access from the [Mexican] Gulf. While the traditional ferocity of the Florida Indians may have contributed to it in this case, the panic was a symptom of the general breakdown of Spanish morale in North America.⁸

5. My questioning of Whitaker's accuracy began in an article published long ago: Gilbert C. Din, "Pierre Wouves d'Argès in North America: Spanish Commissioner, Adventurer, or French Spy?" *Louisiana Studies* 12. 1973. 354-55. In the article, my comments on Whitaker are found in notes numbered 2, 17, 37, 38, and 45. The article dealt with Spanish immigration efforts in Louisiana.

6. Whitaker, *Mississippi Question*, 169.

7. *Ibidem* 169-70.

8. *Ibidem* 170. Among his errors, the galley naval officers Whitaker referred to were really army

This is the gist of Whitaker's denunciation of the Spaniards, but his depiction of events at Fort San Marcos de Apalache is riddled with errors that alert historians should have detected and condemned long ago. Before focusing on these mistakes, the obscure Portell deserves illumination prior to becoming the ill-fated commandant at Fort San Marcos.

As Portell's name suggests, he was a Catalan, born about 1743. Possibly the son of an army officer, he entered the Guadalajara Infantry Regiment as a cadet in 1754, at age eleven. He was commissioned a sublieutenant only two years later, on October 24, 1756, at age thirteen, perhaps because the post was purchased for him or because of parental connections. Ten years then elapsed before he was promoted to lieutenant, and after another ten years he rose to captain in 1776. During his twenty-eight years and ten months in the Guadalajara regiment, he served at Oran, North Africa, for three and a half years; came under enemy fire at the beach in Algiers in Gen. Alejandro O'Reilly's ill-fated assault on July 8, 1775; and participated at the siege of Gibraltar four years later, upon Spain declaring war on Great Britain. In 1780 he joined the thousands of soldiers sent in the Spanish Army of Operations to reinforce troops fighting the British in the Gulf of Mexico. With his regiment, he arrived in Louisiana about 1781. Not long after, he transferred to the Fixed Louisiana Infantry Regiment, swapping posts and seniority with Capt. Martín Ugarte, and, in doing so, lost several valuable years of seniority as a captain.⁹ Perhaps the confident Portell believed that Louisiana offered greater career opportunities than Spain.

His army service in Louisiana from 1781 to 1798 has escaped scrutiny because until the 1790s Portell generated few documents. What stands out was his tenure from 1791 to 1796 as commandant at New Madrid, in what is today Missouri. There, Portell dealt with American immigrants, who were establishing themselves in Spanish territory in return for free lands, and, later, with American officials who took charge on the opposite bank of the Mississippi River. As his was the first Spanish post on the Mississippi below the mouth of the Ohio River that flowed from the United States, Portell needed to be vigilant about hostile river traffic, such as French Republicans at war with Spain and American westerners angry about Spanish closure of the Mississippi to them. He proved to be an able officer who performed his duties with skill and

officers of the Fixed Louisiana Infantry Regiment. Few naval officers served in Louisiana and West Florida. Army officers, who had charge of ships and lacked sailing skills, usually had a *patrón* (skipper or coxswain) charged with that duty.

9. The only biographical data on Portell are in his army service sheets. See Jack D. L. Holmes, *Honor and Fidelity: The Louisiana Infantry Regiment and the Louisiana Militia Companies, 1766-1821*. Birmingham, AL, 1965. 146, and several copies in the Archivo General de Simancas, Guerra Moderna, legajo 7291, and the Archivo General de Indias, Papeles procedentes de la isla de Cuba, legajo (hereafter abbreviated as AGI, PC, leg.) 161AB. Incomplete service sheets for Capt. Martín Ugarte, dated December 1781 and December 1782, are in AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, leg. 2662. They state that Ugarte bought the rank of captain, which became effective on March 1, 1781. On O'Reilly's attack on Algiers, see Cesareo Fernández Duro, *La armada española desde la unión de los reinos de Castilla y Aragón*, Vol. 7. 1895-1903. 165-76; the supplement to the *Gazeta de Madrid* of July 18, 1775, in W. N. Hargeaves-Mawdaley, ed., *Spain Under the Bourbons, 1700-1833: A Collection of Documents*. Columbia, SC, 1973. 188.

efficiency.¹⁰

Upon being relieved at New Madrid, the captain returned briefly to New Orleans before transferring to Pensacola, headquarters for his regiment's third battalion that served in West Florida. Before long, he received the appointment as commandant of Fort San Marcos de Apalache, situated approximately two hundred miles east of Pensacola. Isolation and wilderness made it a despised assignment; only native villages surrounded it for vast distances. He assumed command on February 11, 1798. Very early, Portell notified superiors about weaknesses in the fort's construction and decline of its fifty-man garrison to thirty-six.¹¹ Although he complained repeatedly about his few troops through 1798 and 1799, the garrison remained well below full strength.¹²

On August 17, 1799, the governor of Pensacola, Lt. Col. Vicente Folch y Juan, alerted Portell to William Augustus Bowles's possible reappearance in Florida, news that soon convulsed the Gulf Coast. Seven years before, aided by Creek Indians, the roguish Bowles had seized and looted the Pantón, Leslie and Company trading store, located only a few miles above Fort San Marcos de Apalache. Bowles railed against Pantón's commercial monopoly in East and West Florida that inflated prices for European trade goods and depressed them for Indian hides and furs. After inducing Bowles to present his commercial proposals in New Orleans and Havana, the Spaniards seized and imprisoned him in Spain and later held him in political exile in the Philippine Islands. After a six-year detention, the resourceful adventurer fled detention, adamant to exact revenge on the Spaniards and erect the Indian state of Muskogee in Florida, with himself as its director-general.¹³ He wanted to rid Apalache of Fort San Marcos and fling open its ports to

10. Carl J. Ekberg, *Colonial Ste. Genevieve: An Adventure on the Mississippi Frontier*. Gerold, MO, 1985. 355 and 429-30; Roscoe R. Hill, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Documents Relating to the History of the United States in the Papeles Procedentes de Cuba deposited in the Archivo General de Indias at Seville*. New York, 1965. 569-70. On Spanish immigration efforts and policy, see Gilbert C. Din, "Spain's Immigration Policy in Louisiana and the American Penetration, 1792-1803," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 76. January 1973. 255-76.

11. Juan Domínguez to Folch, Nos. 36 and 48, San Marcos de Apalache, December 17, 1797 and February 11, 1798 respectively; [Tomás Portell] to [Vicente Folch], No. 2, San Marcos de Apalache, February 12, 1798, all in AGI, PC, leg. 223A; Domínguez to Folch, No. 51, San Marcos de Apalache, February 11, 1798, AGI, PC, leg. 57. Published works that survey the fortifications at San Marcos include Olds, "History and Archaeology," 103; and Boyd, "Fortifications at San Marcos de Apalache," 21.

12. Portell to Folch, No. 14, San Marcos de Apalache, May 31, 1798, AGI, PC, leg. 223A. Folch sent Portell's first complaint about his few soldiers to Gov. Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, who answered, "This is an evil about which I must be the first to complain." The shortage was general. [Gayoso] to Folch, New Orleans, March 10, 1798, AGI, PC, leg. 57. Folch generally gave more attention to his needs in Pensacola before attending to shortages at the other West Florida forts.

13. Folch to Portell, Pensacola, August 17, 1799, Jackson, MS: Mississippi Provincial Archives, Spanish Dominion, Volume 6, folios 731-35 (hereafter abbreviated as MPA, SP, Vol., ff.), on microfilm. On Bowles in 1792, see Jack D. L. Holmes, ed., *José de Evia y sus reconocimientos del Golfo de México, 1783-1796*. Madrid, 1968. 193-230; Kinnaird, Lawrence. "The Significance of William Augustus Bowles' Seizure of Pantón's Apalachee Store in 1792," *Florida Historical*

British Bahamian merchants, with whom he had personal dealings, to bring in cheaper Indian supplies. In this way, he planned to secure native support and topple Spanish control. By early October 1799, the San Marcos commandant learned that the adventurer's ship *Fox* had wrecked at St. George's Island, in the Gulf of Mexico, only several miles opposite the mainland and the mouth of the Apalachicola River. He soon left the island for the nearby Apalache district. Fortunately for the Spaniards, the shipwreck cost Bowles most of the arms intended for his indigenous followers, and hardship quickly induced many of his white recruits to desert him.¹⁴ His unexpected accident delayed, but did not arrest, his military designs.

Meanwhile, in November and December 1799, Fort San Marcos de Apalache's countless defects and tiny garrison disheartened Portell and obliged him to conclude that it was indefensible. Usually one-third of his soldiers were sick and others debilitated by their constant toil. To no avail, he kept insisting on reinforcements.¹⁵ Although he disbelieved that Bowles and his native allies dared attack the fort, they could ambush the small parties of soldiers dispatched for firewood and clean water. Portell repositioned cannons and swivel guns on the fort's various walls, but the arms required more manpower and experienced artillerymen than he possessed.¹⁶

Folch, who often complained about his own lack of troops, waited for aid from the colonial capital in New Orleans. On November 28, 1799, Acting Gov.-Gen. Marqués de Casa-Calvo dispatched a naval squadron of Mississippi River vessels to the Apalache area, designed to intercept Bahamian ships with arms for Bowles and, if possible, capture the adventurer himself. Army captain Manuel García commanded the squadron of three war galleys and two gunboats. The ships carried an officer and thirty soldiers to reinforce the Fort San Marcos garrison; in addition, Casa-Calvo assigned the galley *Leal* to the fort. The squadron belatedly reached the mouth of the San Marcos River about February 20, 1800, because of unanticipated stops. Although the garrison benefited from the reinforcements, García professed that the *Leal* drew too much water for use on the shallow San Marcos River and kept it for himself. His unfortunate decision deprived the fort of a warship at a critical time.¹⁷ García soon took the squadron to the Apalachicola River to

Quarterly 9. January 1931. 156-92; Kinnaird and Kinnaird, "War Comes to San Marcos," 25-43; and Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 109-23. On Pantón, see Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands*.

14. Andrew Ellicott, *The Journal of Andrew Ellicott*. Philadelphia, 1803. 230-32. See also Merritt B. Pound, *Benjamin Hawkins—Indian Agent*. Athens, GA, 1951. 190-91; Portell to Folch, Nos. 78 and 79, San Marcos de Apalache, October 15 and 17, 1799, respectively, both in AGI, PC, leg. 223A.

15. Portell to Folch, Nos. 80 and 82, San Marcos de Apalache, November 13, 1799, both in AGI, PC, leg. 223A; Folch to the Marqués de Casa-Calvo, No. 361, Pensacola, December 14, 1799, MPA, SD, Vol. 6, ff. 836-39.

16. Portell to Folch, Nos. 87, 90, 91, and 107, San Marcos de Apalache, November 30, two of December 16, and December 29, 1799, respectively, all in AGI, PC, leg. 223A. See also Folch to Portell, unnumbered letter, San Marcos de Apalache, November 17, and No. 94, December 16, 1799, both in *ibid*.

17. [Casa-Calvo] to Folch, New Orleans, November 19, 1799; and Casa-Calvo to Portell, New Orleans, November 28, 1799, both in AGI, PC, leg. 57; Portell to Casa-Calvo, Nos. 110, 114, 118, 119, 120, Fort San Marcos de Apalache, January 19, two letters of February 12, March 3 and

intercept ships coming to aid Bowles. Within a few weeks, his vessels apprehended the Bahamian schooner *Hawk*, loaded with arms and Indian goods for the intruder.¹⁸

In April and May, the squadron sent several ships to San Marcos, but none returned. The reason was the siege that started on April 15 and continued until the fort surrendered on May 19. Bowles had received more arms from the Bahamas, and he again captured Panton's well-stocked trading post on the Wakulla River above the San Marcos fort. Contrary to Whitaker's unsupported assertion that communications persisted between the fort and galley squadron, the Spanish documentation reveals nothing of the kind.¹⁹ García remained ignorant about the siege at the fort while he waited at Apalachicola Bay for Bowles's ships to appear. After seizing the *Hawk*, García requested permission to leave his station to repair his leaky vessels in Pensacola, but Folch refused until the governor-general consented.²⁰

When, on May 19, Portell agreed to surrender the fort in return for Bowles allowing everyone at the fort to leave, except the Panton company slaves, compelling reasons, that Whitaker did not investigate, forced him to do so. Portell composed a diary of the siege that noted events on a daily basis. Because the fort was situated between two rivers--the Wakulla, which was the smaller stream on the northwest side, and the larger San Marcos (today St. Marks) on the northeast side, that merged immediately below the fort--only the fortress's north side fronted land. The besiegers quickly controlled it, leaving the defenders with exits from the fort only via the rivers. Bowles also posted warriors everywhere along the river banks around the fort. Despite Portell's efforts to recruit a soldier for one hundred pesos to slip through Indian lines to go to Pensacola for help, no one dared volunteer. Without a ship to alert the squadron, the fort was totally isolated.

9, 1800, respectively, all in AGI, PC, leg. 223B; Portell to Folch, San Carlos de las Barrancas, June 7, 1800, MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 185-186. Casa-Calvo, in his letter to the captain-general of Cuba, the Marqués de Someruelos, No. 1, New Orleans, October 22, 1799, AGI, PC, leg. 154B, commented on the few and small ships that Louisiana had for use along the Gulf Coast, which were easily captured. He called the galley *Leal* useless and inept. Because of leaks, its pumps operated almost constantly. As early as April 1798, Governor Gayoso stated that the *Leal* was unfit to go to sea and should be used only as an artillery battery in Pensacola Bay. [Gayoso] to Folch, New Orleans, April 3, 1798, AGI, PC, leg. 57. Casa-Calvo thus assigned a ship of little value to Fort San Marcos de Apalache. It reflects the relative unimportance of the fort in the minds of superior authorities.

18. García to Folch, on the *Leal* at Dog Island, April 12, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 58. On April 1, 1800, the squadron captured the New Providence schooner *Hawk* (*Gavilán*), commanded by John McCann, near the mouth of the Apalachicola River. It carried arms and goods for Bowles.

19. Instead of citing documents generated at the fort or by ship commanders during the siege, Whitaker relied upon the testimony of the discredited storekeeper Lorenzo Vitrian: "Expediente de Vitrian," in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba (Havana), Florida, legajo 4, expediente 1, on microfilm. Apparently, Whitaker did not know that Portell lacked a ship with which to communicate with the squadron.

20. [Folch] to García, [Pensacola], April 25, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 225A. Folch believed that New Providence in the Bahamas was sending three ships with aid for Bowles. To keep all his warships in tact, Folch sent García the ship *San Carlos* several days before to carry the squadron's mail. Folch to Casa-Calvo, No. 476, Pensacola, April 25, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 108.

Bowles's Indian supporters initially numbered 500 or more, but after the first exhilarating days passed, ennui settled in, and they dwindled to 300 as the others drifted back to their nearby villages. They, however, remained eager to return if the fort threatened to fall since they savored plundering it. Whites with Bowles ranged between twelve and twenty. They and the native warriors possessed only muskets, weapons Indians used in hunting. For that reason, superior Spanish officers had steadfastly disbelieved that natives could threaten the fort, even with white leadership. These superior officials, however, never fully comprehended the difficult problems that gripped the San Marcos garrison, even more so during the siege.²¹

Salient among them were physical and mental hardships. The siege persisted around the clock since musket fire from attackers rarely ceased. Spanish sentinels remained on duty incessantly, doubling and even tripling in number at night, to thwart a surprise assault. Artillerymen slept at their cannons. With the passage of time, the troops began to weary. Everyone at the fort longed for the naval squadron's return to lift the siege, and they became increasingly despondent when it did not. Perhaps that failure contributed to several soldiers deserting and joining Bowles. Desertion, a common phenomenon in armies, represented perhaps the greatest betrayal since these renegades could inform the enemy of the fort's weaknesses, including its pregnable walls.²²

The weaknesses were many. Four days after the siege began, the fort's supply of artillery fuses gave out. Cannons constituted Portell's primary defensive weapons because the natives harbored a mortal fear of them. The commandant improvised with fuses first made of tightly wrapped hair and later of linen. But at the end of the siege, the fort's deceptive storekeeper, Lorenzo Vitrian, advised Portell that only a three- to four-day supply of linen fuses remained.²³ Without artillery, the fort's defense became improbable. Other artillery concerns involved decrepit cannons and gun carriages and poorly trained artillerymen. Only one gunner among them had received formal instruction seven years earlier. Pensacola governors had not sent more skilled artillerymen to San Marcos because they, too, complained about their own shortages.²⁴ Given these problems, the garrison desperately needed rescuing.

Glimmers of hope loomed when ships appeared at the mouth of the river on three different occasions during the siege. Each time, the commandant tried to alert them to the attack by firing his cannons, but the crews of the ships ignored the warning shots. Instead, they proceeded upriver, swept along by the incoming tide that perhaps prevented the vessels from turning around. On April

21. Miró to José de Ezpeleta, No. 14, New Orleans, August 16, 1787, AGI, PC, leg. 1399; Miró to the Marqués de Sonora (José de Gálvez), No. 213, March 24, 1787; Miró to Ezpeleta, no number, October 24, 1788, both in AGI, PC, leg. 224A; "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 156-90. Everywhere in his diary, Portell recounted the many problems that confronted him.

22. "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 156-58.

23. *Ibid.*, ff. 162, 183; Garciny, "Defensa de Portell," Havana, November 10, 1804, AGI, PC, leg. 166. One can surmise that Vitrian wanted to leave Fort San Marcos and believed that surrendering would expedite the Spanish departure.

24. "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 183-84; Bertucat to O'Neill, San Marcos de Apalache, September 3, 1790, inserted in [O'Neill to Miró], Pensacola, September 11, 1790, AGI, PC, leg. 224A; and Vegas to Folch, No. 294, San Marcos de Apalache, January 21, 1797, AGI, PC, leg. 223A.

26, the royal supply schooner *San Marcos* arrived first. As it approached the fort, Indians unleashed a withering fusillade of musket fire, wounding crew members, including its skipper Ignacio Sierra. With great difficulty, the ship reached the safety of the fort's cannons, which prevented Indians from approaching closer. Ten days later, another two vessels came from the squadron. One was the gunboat *Aquiles*, which escorted the relatively unarmed merchantman *Santa Bárbara*. The *Aquiles* was a small warship whose armament consisted of a solitary cannon mounted in the prow and several swivel guns. It, however, suffered from weaknesses--leaks, a tiny crew, and an ineffective commander, Lt. Juan Bautista Mentzinger.²⁵ Upon encountering hostile gunfire, most crew members of both ships dove for cover, and few shot back at their adversaries scattered along the river banks. With many casualties, the *Aquiles* reached safety only because of the fort's cannons and a boat Portell dispatched to bring it in. Bowles, however, captured the *Santa Bárbara*, and its cargo of provisions, munitions, and Indian gifts helped him enormously. Indians killed many of its crew.²⁶

A greater windfall for the adventurer occurred on May 16, when the Pantón brigantine *Sheerwater*, unarmed for combat and with a diminutive crew, entered the river and proceeded upstream. Upon observing whites signaling from shore, the captain went in a boat to investigate, and Bowles's cohorts immediately seized him and his party. Enemy whites then rowed to the ship and surprised the remaining crew. The *Sheerwater* aided the adventurer greatly because, aside from Indian trade supplies, gunpowder, and muskets for the Pantón trading post above the fort, it carried 2 four-pound cannons on board. Whitaker later commented disparagingly that the cannons were two-pounders, but an inventory taken after the Spaniards recovered the fort and ship proves him wrong. Portell knew that the ship transported artillery, and their capture was calamitous to the fort's defense.²⁷

Although Portell possessed one ship after April 26 and two after May 6, he still confronted formidable obstacles in using them to warn the squadron. Navigating the rock-strewn and shallow San Marcos River required skill. Sierra, skipper of the *San Marcos*, had suffered two bullet wounds on the journey upriver. His injuries rendered him physically unfit to pilot a ship. When Mentzinger arrived at the fort on May 6, he had a small wound, and his ship's pilot had been killed. Although Portell attempted several times to persuade Mentzinger to employ the *Aquiles* in surprise assaults on Bowles's positions along the river, he steadfastly refused, alleging poor health. The lieutenant's actions frustrated Portell's efforts to lift the siege. After May 6, the adventurer used the *Santa Bárbara* and a chain of logs to blockade the river below the fort, where

25. Juan Bautista Mentzinger's service sheet is in Holmes, *Honor and Fidelity*, 208. Holmes listed him under militia officers, but Mentzinger had transferred to the Fixed Louisiana Infantry Regiment by a royal order of July 4, 1796. Barón de Carondelet to Juan Manuel Alvarez, No. 14, New Orleans, March 20, 1797, AGI, PC, leg. 225A. The galleys and gunboats were originally used on the Mississippi River. See Abraham P. Nasatir's description of them in the 1790s in his *Spanish War Vessels on the Mississippi, 1792-1796*. New Haven, Connecticut, 1968. 30-42.

26. "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vol. 7. 168-74.

27. Ibid. 179-82; "Inventario general del Bergantín represado en el Muelle de San Marcos de Apalache el día 23 de Junio último, titulado el *Sheerwater*," Folch *et al*, San Marcos de Apalache, July 11, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 54. This legajo contains many copies of inventories taken at the fort and on the ships Bowles seized after the Spaniards recovered them on June 23, 1800.

he posted many armed Indians.²⁸ Breaching the boom became a perilous enterprise, one that required ample soldiers, possibly more than Portell could spare from the fort's garrison. Moreover, if the attempt miscarried and the soldiers on the ship were lost, it might encourage Bowles to attack the weakened fortress sooner.

Signs that Bowles intended to assail the fort became painfully evident when Indians, working at night, opened two trenches within gunshot range. The trenches bordered the fort's north stockade, the only side that faced land, and protected the warriors in them. In addition, the natives constructed several ten-foot ladders, no doubt for scaling the stockade.²⁹ A nighttime attack could easily have succeeded because Bowles's Indians greatly outnumbered the fort's defenders. In the heat of battle, the indigenous warriors might wantonly massacre everyone they encountered, combatants and noncombatants alike. Portell knew that when the *Santa Bárbara* fell to Bowles, his native allies slaughtered and scalped members of its crew, most notably its owner and master Bernardo Miguez.³⁰

Among Whitaker's erroneous assertions, he alleged that the fort contained an ample store of supplies to endure a lengthy siege. He seemed, however, not to understand Portell's perspective which was based on storekeeper Vitrian's deceptive accounting. Whitaker also claimed that drinking water was plentiful even though not palatable. His superficial examination of the fort's records failed to grasp that water at, and around, the fort was polluted and caused dysentery among the soldiers, which, together with fevers, were common illnesses at the post. Commandants learned long before the importance of clean water that could be found at a spring up the Wakulla River. Lastly, it must be reiterated that the fort was neither invulnerable nor its defenses formidable.³¹

On the evening of May 16, the day Bowles captured the *Sheerwater* and found cannons on board, Portell summoned a council of war. Those in attendance included subordinate army officers, Lt. Bartolomé Pellerín, Lt. Juan Bautista Mentzinger, Sublt. Cayetano Payjón, and Sublt. Vicente Borges; the skipper Sierra; and the storekeeper Vitrian. The captain wanted to discuss the options they had if resistance continued and to learn his subordinates' opinions on what course of action to pursue. All the officers perceived the limitations of further resistance and that withdrawing was their only alternative. Several of them advised loading the two ships with the fort's personnel and battling their way down the river at night to safety. Portell initially supported their suggestion before rejecting it for several reasons. A nocturnal flight was fraught with danger. Preparations to leave would surely alert the enemy as to their intentions and exacerbate the struggle at the boom. Moreover, the two small ships would be crowded with soldiers, civilians, and slaves, making fighting difficult. While such a withdrawal reeked of gallantry and bravado, it would cost lives, possibly many, and held no assurance of success. Consequently, Portell dismissed it as not

28. "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vol. 7. 185.

29. Garciny, "Defensa de Portell," Havana, November 10, 1804, AGI, PC, leg. 166. Portell sent two officers and a party of soldiers to fill in the trenches and destroy the ladders. Although they did so, the Indians returned to dig out the trenches. "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vol. 7. 178-79.

30. "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vols. 7. 169-71.

31. Folch to Casa-Calvo, No. 547, Pensacola, July 31, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 108; Whitaker, *Mississippi Question*, 169. Although San Marcos commandants did not distinguish illnesses in their reports at the fort, sending troops for water was a good indication that dysentery was a problem. Documents also spell Miguez as Miguens.

the best alternative open to them.³²

In the end, the commandant reluctantly accepted negotiating with Bowles. It was better to do so before conditions within the fort deteriorated further and he lost bargaining leverage. For two days, discussions on Portell's demands and Bowles's concessions continued. Because the adventurer wanted the fort, he acceded to most demands. The formal surrender occurred on May 19, and the Spaniards left the fort two days later, after Bowles assured Portell that his native cohorts would not attack the ships as they descended the river. On May 23, Portell encountered García's squadron in Apalachicola Bay. Aboard the commandant's galley, the squadron and San Marcos officers held councils of war to discuss their plight. They declined to return to recover the fort immediately for several reasons: The ships needed repairs, food rations were insufficient to sustain a siege of the fort, and Portell had agreed not to fight Bowles again with the San Marcos troops until he returned to a Spanish port. Consequently, all the ships pressed on to Pensacola.³³

By June 1, the vessels approached Santa Rosa Island that formed part of Pensacola Bay. At first, the appearance of so many ships headed toward the bay puzzled Folch. When he learned that Fort San Marcos de Apalache had fallen and the garrison was returning escorted by García's squadron, his rage boiled over, and he immediately arrested all the officers who had been present at the fort. He jailed Portell at Fort San Carlos de las Barrancas, located several miles from the town and near the entrance to Pensacola Bay. It was there that the captain wrote out his diary of the siege and compiled other papers generated during that time, especially his dealings with Bowles. He naively believed that his explanation of the fort's deplorable conditions and the siege would vindicate the surrender. The enraged Folch, however, who regarded the capitulation of a subordinate post as a blemish on his honor, refused to condone any explanation. Earlier, after Bowles's reappearance in 1799, he had written to the captain general that the fortifications under his command faced no risks, adding, "It shall not be I who stains the Spanish flag with the horror of surrendering it to a vagabond accompanied by a multitude of barbarians without order or discipline." Despite his bluster, Folch neglected to assist Portell as much as he could have.³⁴

Before continuing with Portell, another Whitaker error deserves attention. The historian arrogantly alleged in his "truth of the matter" style that with the fall of Fort San Marcos, the Spaniards "were all in a dead funk," which is to say fear paralyzed them. He asserted that their immobility was shattered only when Thomas Ferguson, Bowles's scribe, fled from his employer, found refuge at Pensacola, and divulged the adventurer's feeble grasp on the fort. Whitaker wrote,

32. "Junta de Guerra," Fort San Marcos de Apalache, May 16, 1800, attached to Gilberto Guillemard to Casa-Calvo, New Orleans, January 9, 1801, both in AGI, PC, leg. 2367; "Diario de Portell," MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 179-80.

33. Letters exchanged between Portell and Bowles are in MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 69-78. Documents involving the surrender are in *ibid.*, ff. 81-85, 100-102. More documents on the surrender are in AGI, PC, leg. 2367. The councils of war held on the galleys on May 23, 1800, are in MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 113-23, 149-59.

34. Francisco DeVerges to Folch, San Carlos de las Barrancas, June 1, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 58; Folch to Casa-Calvo, No. 507, Pensacola, June 2, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 154C. The quotation is from Folch to the Marqués de Someruelos, No. 91, Pensacola, November 18, 1799, AGI, PC, leg. 225A. See also Folch to Casa-Calvo, Nos. 383 reserved and 534, Pensacola, January 9, and July 19, 1800, respectively, both in AGI, PC, leg. 225A.

“It was this authoritative revelation of Bowles’s weakness, not blind heroism, that launched the Spanish ships against the invader.” The historian further contended that Folch sailed against the adventurer on the very day Ferguson arrived.³⁵

All these assertions are patently untrue, however. Upon Portell’s arrival at Pensacola, Folch requested the governor-general’s permission to lead the expedition to recover the fort. Casa-Calvo denied it and, instead, began preparing ships and soldiers in New Orleans for that task. Lt. Col. Zenon Trudeau received command of the expedition. Earlier, in May, Casa-Calvo had sternly reminded Folch that, as governor of Pensacola, he was an administrator, not a field commander. Therefore, it was the governor-general who restrained Folch, not fear. But Ferguson brought other disquieting news that aroused Folch. Bowles had summoned whites from the Bahamas to strengthen his hold on the fort, and he intended to outfit Pantón’s swift copper-hulled brigantine *Sheerwater* as a corsair to terrorize the Gulf Coast. Folch, who earlier had wanted to rush to recapture Fort San Marcos, believed that these revelations now dictated disregarding Casa-Calvo’s previous order. Five more days elapsed before he readied his ships and men. He, of course, quickly recovered the fort on June 23, and Bowles and his Indians and whites fled for their lives into the wilderness.³⁶ Whitaker’s archival investigation somehow failed to uncover these, as well as other, events.

While Folch sailed off to Apalache, Portell and the other arrested officers spent the summer locked up in or around Pensacola. In the fall, the governor-general ordered their transfer to New Orleans. Folch treated them as hardened criminals, for which reason he posted a guard of soldiers on the ships that conveyed the officers to the capital. In New Orleans, they were watched closely but, perhaps, living accommodations improved. Governors in New Orleans had habitually kept officers accused of misconduct under house arrest and never threw them in prison as Folch had callously done.³⁷

35. Whitaker, *Mississippi Question*, 170, 171.

36. Among the many documents relating to Folch in Pensacola in June, see [Folch] to García, Pensacola, June 11, [1800]; [Folch to García], Pensacola, June 12, 1800; and two letters of Folch to Pedro Olivier, Pensacola, June 12, 1800, all in AGI, PC, leg. 225A; Folch to Casa-Calvo, Nos. 514 and 516, Pensacola, June 13 and 16, 1800, both in AGI, PC, leg. 154C; Bowles to John Hunter, Fort St. Marcus (*sic*), June 9, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 183B. In Folch to Pedro Olivier, San Marcos de Apalache, July 11, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 54, he acknowledged that he left Pensacola without the governor-general’s permission and was then returning to resume his duties. In Folch to Casa-Calvo, No. 532, Pensacola, July 15, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 154C, he reported his recovery of Fort San Marcos de Apalache.

37. On the jailing of Portell and Pellerín, see Francisco DeVerges to Folch, San Carlos de las Barrancas, June 2 and 14, 1800; Portell to Folch, San Carlos de las Barrancas, June 2, 3, 16; and Pellerín to Folch, Santa Rosa Island, June 12, 1800, all in AGI, PC, leg. 58. On the transfer of the arrested officers to New Orleans, see the instructions Folch issued to Sublt. Terencio Le Blanc, Pensacola, September 6, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 54. While there is no single document explaining that arrested army officers in New Orleans stayed at home, there are examples. See the house arrests of Lt. José Le Blanc, in Gilbert C. Din, *Francisco Bouligny: A Bourbon Soldier in Spanish Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1993), 186; and of Capt. Marcos DeVilliers, in Gilbert C. Din, “Gov. Manuel Gayoso de Lemos vs. Capt. Marcos DeVilliers: A Case of Insubordination or Non-

In the fall of 1800, witnesses began journeying to New Orleans to make depositions on the siege and surrender of Fort San Marcos.³⁸ In January 1801, the governor charged Sgt. Maj. Gilberto Guillemard of the Fixed Louisiana Infantry Regiment with gathering depositions and forming the case against Portell. Earlier, Casa-Calvo had questioned Folch on the wisdom of court-martialing the captain and other officers. When Folch insisted upon it, no one, neither the governor in New Orleans nor the captain-general in Havana, mustered the fortitude to stop the investigation and trial. The interrogation of witnesses and gathering of documents persisted for several years until Guillemard accumulated thousand of pages of evidence. Around 1803, Portell and the other accused officers moved to Havana because of the forthcoming transfer of Louisiana to France and the United States. Only three subordinate officers remained since Sublt. Cayetano Payjón appears to have been released from custody prior to 1802. He died in Pensacola that year.³⁹

In the fall of 1804, after more than four years, the case against Portell entered its final stage. On November 10, his attorney, Capt. Jaime Garciny, commander of the Sixth Company of the First Battalion of the Fixed Havana Infantry Regiment, presented his defense of the indicted captain. He noted the voluminous trial record entered into evidence and argued that, despite the specious appearance of Portell's guilt, a judicious examination of the events and records would evince otherwise. The attorney emphasized that the captain had done everything in his power, according to his talents, military knowledge, orders, and condition of the fort, to render an effective defense.⁴⁰

Garciny reminded the court of the fort's deteriorated condition, when Portell took command in February 1798. Engineer Juan María Perchet declared that the repairs of Capt. Luis Bertucat, an earlier commandant, had been inadequate.⁴¹ Upon assuming charge, Portell labored to his utmost to improve the fort and follow engineer Francisco de Paula Gelabert's instructions, employing his few soldiers as workers. When the siege began, Bowles prevented Portell from sending for help by both land and water. The squadron neglected to return and, despite the commandant's efforts to alert the ships which did come to the fort, they ignored his warning cannon shots. Portell encountered multiple obstacles in his five-week defense, during which time hope for rescue gradually faded. Garciny attributed the end of the fort's defense to the exhaustion

Enforcement of the *Fuero Militar* in 1798?" *Louisiana History* 43 (Summer 2003): 334.

38. Folch to Jacobo DuBreüil, Pensacola, October 29, 1800, with attached letter of DuBreüil to Folch, San Marcos de Apalache, November 28, 1800, both in AGI, PC, leg. 54; DuBreüil to Folch, No. 9, San Marcos de Apalache, November 30, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 58. In the last letter, the commandant mentioned that going to testify in New Orleans were Vitrian; Eugenio Sierra, the post surgeon; the interpreter Carballo, and two corporals. Witnesses continued to go to New Orleans for depositions in 1801 and 1802.

39. Papers from the investigation are located in both the AGI, PC, and in the Havana archives. They are not in order but scattered in several legajos in both archives. On Payjón, see [Manuel de Salcedo] to Folch, New Orleans, September 16, 1802, AGI, PC, leg. 59.

40. Capt. Jaime Garciny, "Defensa de Portell," Havana, November 10, 1804, AGI, PC, leg. 166.

41. Capt. Luis Bertucat was twice commandant of Fort San Juan de Apalache: in 1787 and again in 1790-91. Jack D. L. Holmes and J. Leitch Wright, Jr., have information on the captain in their "Luis Bertucat and William Augustus Bowles: West Florida Adversaries in 1791," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49 (July 1970): 49-62.

of artillery fuses, the fort's dilapidated condition, and lastly Bowles's capture of artillery aboard the *Sheerwater*. At the council of war held on May 16, the fort's subalterns weighed fighting their way out, but Portell quashed the idea as impracticable. He chose to surrender with the agreement that everyone at the fort leave on board the *San Marcos* and *Aquiles*.⁴²

After appraising the main points in Portell's defense of Fort San Marcos, Garciny examined legal reasons for the surrender. He dismissed the notion that Portell had violated army ordinances. Had the captain committed infractions and had the siege been short and the surrender indecorous, he deserved punishment. Garciny, however, insisted that Portell had defended the fort according to his means and without orders to hold it regardless of cost. He repeated for emphasis that resistance was not short and the surrender was neither improper nor breached army ordinances.⁴³

Garciny singled out for condemnation storekeeper Vitrian. His testimony figured prominently in the prosecution's case, and the attorney blamed him for the captain's four-year imprisonment. He vehemently denounced Vitrian's evidence as worthless because of his abysmal ignorance of military matters. He had deceived Portell with inaccurate information about essential military supplies, most notably that linen for fuses verged on exhaustion. Possibly Vitrian wanted the siege to end because, at the May 16 council of war, he was the first person to vote to surrender. Garciny branded Vitrian a criminal and declared that the New Orleans judge advocate (Nicolás María Vidal) and other judicial authorities recognized his disreputable qualities. Among them, Vitrian tried to persuade witnesses to testify to Portell's guilt in surrendering the fort. After leaving Apalache, the storekeeper persisted in his venom-filled accusations. Garciny attributed the commandant's plight to Vitrian's calumnious and malicious vilification. Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that a single quarrelsome and unethical civilian witness could convince military judges of Portell's guilt. No doubt, Folch's charges, about which Garciny remained silent, played a pivotal role in Portell's prosecution.⁴⁴

The attorney placed Fort San Marcos's defenders at 98, among soldiers, sailors, and civilians, of whom roughly 70 were soldiers, a number significantly smaller than Whitaker's figure of 106. Garciny also did not make allowances for illnesses or wounds among the defenders. Of the ninety-eight, ten labored in the hospital, fifteen guarded the gunboat *Aquiles* and nine the schooner *San Marcos*, two orderlies assisted Portell and relayed his instructions to the soldiers, and lastly twelve men worked in the warehouses and kitchen. These tasks left approximately fifty soldiers to defend the fort's walls and fire the cannons. Garciny argued that not all the fort's artillery

42. Garciny, "Defensa de Portell," Havana, November 10, 1804, AGI, PC, 166.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid. On Nicolás María Vidal, *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography: Ten-Year Supplement, 1988-1998*, Carl A. Brasseaux and James D. Wilson, Jr, Eds. Lafayette, LA, 1999. 235-36; "Servicios de Nicolás María Vidal, Teniente Gobernador de la Luisiana," in Biblioteca Nacional Madrid, Colección de documentos varios para la historia de la Florida y tierras adjuntas. Jack D. L. Holmes has an uncritical sketch of Vidal in his "*Dramatis Personae* in Spanish Louisiana," *Louisiana Studies* 6. 1967. 152-55. Vidal was born in Cartagena de Indias in 1736 and educated in Colombia, where the Spanish government employed him for about twenty years. He went to Louisiana in 1791, as government legal adviser (*auditor de guerra*). He died in Pensacola, West Florida, in 1806.

functioned properly or could be used and only one gunner had received formal training. Two Pensacola engineers had testified to the inadequacy of the cannons.⁴⁵

Although Portell surrendered the fort without suffering an artillery attack, Garciny contended that he was not ordered to defend it at all costs. Earlier, Governor-General Francisco Luis Héctor, Barón de Carondelet, had instructed the Fort San Marcos de Apalache commandant, that if circumstances compelled the fort to surrender, to do so. Garciny argued that the same army ordinance declared that, in cases in which towns, forts, or castles must capitulate, they should do so without the further loss of life. He insisted that Portell had surrendered honorably. Despite Folch's insistence in holding Portell responsible for capitulating regardless of circumstance, Garciny strongly denied the Pensacola commandant's allegations. Portell, the attorney persisted, had operated within his instructions, his military knowledge, and the fort's condition. He declared that the captain was an exact, vigilant, and zealous army officer, with fifty years (in 1804) of honorable service and lengthy and numerous campaigns in which he had never exhibited flaws. Witnesses at Fort San Marcos unanimously confirmed his constant service and equanimity under enemy fire. Furthermore, the Crown saw fit in October 1802 to promote him to lieutenant colonel, but its enactment had been suspended pending resolution of his cause. Garciny closed his peroration with a plea that Portell be found innocent.⁴⁶

The military tribunal in Havana, however, concluded otherwise. It found him guilty under mitigating circumstances and recommended his ejection from service. As was usual in such cases, the court's finding went to the Ministry of War for review, contrary to Whitaker's assertion of Portell's dismissal. Exactly what happened to the appeal in Madrid is unclear. What is known is that the ministry never issued a decision, since it neither upheld Havana's ruling nor found the captain innocent. While waiting for a determination from Madrid, the Crown freed Portell, returned him to service in Pensacola, and allowed him to retain his rank as captain. Nevertheless, his sentence hung over him like an albatross, and army authorities never entrusted him with another important commission or command. He died in Pensacola in early 1812, still in the army and still a captain.⁴⁷

45. Garciny, "Defensa de Portell," AGI, PC, leg. 166; Whitaker, *Mississippi Question*, 169. According to Folch, Portell had sixty-five soldiers, twenty-five sailors, and sixteen civilian workers and employees. Folch to Casa-Calvo, Pensacola, June 2, 1800, MPA, SD, Vol. 7, ff. 125-39.

46. Garciny, "Defensa de Portell," AGI, PC, leg. 166. Garciny did not provide more information on Carondelet's order to surrender if resistance became impossible. Nevertheless, in another official letter with instructions, Carondelet advised the command to abandon the fort if it could no longer be defended. Carondelet to Diego de Vegas, New Orleans, October 24, 1794, MPA, SD, Vol. 5, ff. 424-28. While the Crown withheld Portell's promotion, it did not stop Pellerín's promotion to captain in 1807.

47. See "Estado de la Fuerza," Pensacola, July 1, 1812, in AGI, PC, leg. 160B, which states that Portell had died and the companies he commanded lacked a captain. Portell's service sheets do not mention his court-martial, but that of Bartolomé Pellerín of 1815 does. In the notes section of his service sheet, it reads, "[Pellerín] had been tried for the surrender of Apalache, [and] freed until His Majesty approves [his sentence]." Pellerín service sheet, Pensacola, December 31, 1815, in AGI, PC, leg. 161A. Since a royal decision on the surrender of Fort San Marcos de Apalache had not

Portell's melancholy end was truly unfortunate. The army seemed incapable of resolving its quandary or admitting that subordinates had erred in prosecuting the captain, possibly out of deference to Folch, Portell's chief military antagonist. Although his abrasive personality endeared him to no one outside his family, Folch's career progressed slowly but upwardly. He remained governor of West Florida until 1811, and his promotions in the army continued as he rose to colonel in 1802, to brigadier general in 1811, and to field marshal in 1825.⁴⁸ Possibly the army believed Portell deserving of his imprisonment, trial, denial of promotion, and blemished reputation. Its unwillingness to decide, nevertheless, left him suspended in limbo, wistfully yearning for vindication of his honor, reputation, and military career that never materialized.

Additionally, for more than a hundred years, Portell remained buried, not only in Pensacola where he died, but in history since no one mined the records in the Spanish and Cuban archives that correctly preserved the events of 1800. Unfortunately, Whitaker became the first historian to write about this incident, and his interpretation, as demonstrated here, not only woefully skirted accuracy but was impregnated with bias. Contrary to his distorting version, Portell's surrender of Fort San Marcos de Apalache in 1800 was justifiable, as his attorney Garciny rightfully pointed out, and the capitulation never merited the opprobrium and condemnation assigned by Whitaker and the historians who followed in his wake.

arrived by 1815, it can be deduced that the issue had not been resolved in 1812, the year Portell died. It is ironic that the Crown withheld Portell's promotion to lieutenant colonel, but allowed Pellerin to be promoted to captain in 1807. At the same time, the Crown did not rule on Pellerin's involvement in the surrender of Fort San Marcos de Apalache.

48. White, *Vicente Folch*, unnumbered introduction, 70-71, 91, 102, 109. As White correctly points out, Folch was personally insufferable and tolerated only because of his willingness to act as he did in retaking Fort San Marcos de Apalache. Despite Folch's success, Casa-Calvo personally disapproved that he had acted without authorization. Among Folch's defects, he repeatedly tried to increase his authority at the expense of others. See Gilbert C. Din, *Francisco Bouligny: A Bourbon Soldier in Spanish Louisiana*. Baton Rouge, LA, 1993. 214-16.