

1927

## Letter of James Monroe, Secretary of State, to George Matthews, April 4, 1812

James Monroe



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**JAMES MONROE, SECRETARY OF STATE, TO  
GEORGE MATTHEWS<sup>1</sup>**

Department of State  
April 4, 1812

G e n . George Matthews  
Sir,

I have had the honor to receive your letter of the 14th of March, and have now to communicate to you the sentiments of the President on the very interesting subject to which it relates. I am sorry to have to state that the measures which you appear to have adopted for obtaining possession of Amelia Island and other parts East Florida, are not authorized by the law of the United States under which you have acted. You were authorized by the law, a copy of which was communicated, and by your instructions which are strictly conformable to it, to take possession of East Florida only in case one of the following contingencies should happen: either that the Governor, or other existing local authority, should be disposed to place it amicably in the hands of the United States, or that an attempt should be made to take possession of it by a foreign power. Should the first contingency happen, it would follow that the arrangement being amicable would require no force on the part of the United States to carry it into effect. It was only in case of an attempt to take it by a foreign power that force could be necessary in which event only were you authorized to avail yourself of it.

In neither of these contingencies was it the policy of the law, or purpose of the Executive, to wrest the province forcibly from Spain, but only to occupy it

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<sup>1</sup> From the original, in Bureau of Index and Archives, Washington, D. C.

with a view to prevent its falling into the hands of any foreign power, and to hold that pledge under the existing peculiarity of the circumstances of the Spanish monarchy for a just result in an amicable negotiation with Spain.

Had the U. S. been disposed to proceed otherwise, that intention would have been manifested by a change of the law and suitable measures to carry it into effect, and as it was in their power to take possession whenever they might think that circumstances authorize and require it, it would be the more to be regretted if possession should be effected by any means irregular in themselves and subjecting the Government of the U. S. to unmerited censure.

The views of the Executive respecting East Florida are further illustrated by your instructions as to West Florida. Although the U. S. have thought they had a good title to the latter Province they did not take possession until after the Spanish authority had been subverted by a revolutionary proceeding, and the contingency of the country being thrown into foreign hands had forced itself into view, nor did they then, nor have they since, dispossessed the Spanish Troops of the Post which they occupied. If they did not think proper to take possession by force of a Province to which they thought they were justly entitled, it could not be presumed that they should intend to act differently in respect to one to which they had not such a claim. I may add that although due sensibility has been always felt for the injuries which were received from the Spanish government in the war, the present situation of Spain has been a motive for moderate and pacific policy towards her.

In communicating to you these sentiments of the Executive on the measures you have lately adopted for taking possession of East Florida, I add with

pleasure that the utmost confidence is reposed in your integrity and zeal to promote the welfare of your country. To that zeal, the error into which you have fallen, is imputed. But in consideration of the part you have taken which differs so essentially from that contemplated and authorized by the Government and contradicts so entirely the principles on which it has uniformly and sincerely acted, you will be sensible of the necessity of discontinuing the service in which you have been employed. You will, therefore, consider your powers as revoked on the receipt of this letter. The new duties to be performed will be transferred to the Governor of Georgia to whom instructions will be given on all the circumstances to which it may be proper at the present juncture to call his attention.

I am, Sir  
JAMES MONROE.