

STARS

Florida Historical Quarterly


Volume 49
Number 4 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol 49,*
Number 4

Article 6

1970

Lord Dunmore's Loyalist Asylum in the Floridas

J. Leitch Wright, Jr.

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Wright, Jr., J. Leitch (1970) "Lord Dunmore's Loyalist Asylum in the Floridas," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : No. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol49/iss4/6>

LORD DUNMORE'S LOYALIST ASYLUM IN THE FLORIDAS

by J. LEITCH WRIGHT, JR.*

TO THE ASTONISHMENT of many, Lord John Murray, fourth Earl of Dunmore, member of the House of Lords, formerly controversial colonial governor of New York and Virginia, became governor of the Bahama Islands in 1787. Immediately eyebrows were lifted and questions raised as to why the Earl had accepted the apparently insignificant governorship of islands whose total population, black and white, was not appreciably greater than that of Williamsburg when the colonial assembly had been in session. Dunmore had returned to America late in 1781 and had expected to resume his role as the Virginia governor in the wake of Cornwallis' victories; but the defeat at Yorktown was responsible for his arriving at British-occupied Charleston rather than the governor's palace at Williamsburg. Examining Dunmore's post-1781 career helps explain what eventually drew him to the Bahamas and also clarifies British policy toward the Floridas, Louisiana, and the entire Mississippi Valley in the 1782-1783 Paris peace negotiations.

The House of Commons early in 1782 adopted General Henry Conway's resolution to restrict military operations against the Americans to defensive measures. Dunmore shared the general view after the Yorktown debacle and after the adoption of Conway's resolution that at least most of the rebel colonies would in fact become independent. It made little difference whether Britain officially recognized this independence or not. Under these circumstances Britain had to contrive new policies, and Dunmore was determined to influence the thinking of the ministry, now headed by the Earl of Shelburne. Britain in 1782 was at war not only with the rebel Americans but also with Spain, France, and Holland. Conway's motion made reference only to the rebellious colonists; it said nothing about Spain. This Bourbon power had come into the war in 1779 and had

* Mr. Wright is associate professor of history at Florida State University.

DUNMORE'S LOYALIST ASYLUM IN THE FLORIDAS 371

waged an aggressive campaign against luckless British forces in America. She had won victories over the logwood cutters in the Bay of Honduras, had ejected British troops from the lower Mississippi, Mobile, and Pensacola, and had defeated a British expedition against Nicaragua. Dunmore argued, and there were many who agreed with him, that Britain, even after Yorktown, could partially rehabilitate her prestige at Spain's expense if she would begin another Central American campaign, if she would co-operate with rebelling Spanish Americans in South America, and especially if she would seize West Florida and New Orleans. There was nothing original about suggesting a campaign against West Florida and Louisiana, but Dunmore insisted that this proposal had added significance after the Yorktown surrender and the adoption of Conway's resolution.¹

The future status of the tens of thousands of loyalists who had openly supported George III came to the forefront after Cornwallis' surrender. Many of them could not return to their original homes-unless they enjoyed being tarred and feathered or otherwise mistreated. For better or worse the fate of the loyalists was linked with the fate of the Floridas. A majority of the loyalists, of course, was white, but when one viewed the southern colonies it was apparent that there were thousands of black faces among the loyalist multitude. Some of these Negroes were free and had gained their freedom by deserting their rebel owners, by fleeing to the British lines, and by serving the royal forces in various capacities. Other Negroes were slaves, property of loyalist masters. When one considered the loyalists and the Floridas after 1781, inevitably it was necessary to include the blacks.

No one was more aware of this than Lord Dunmore after he set foot in Charleston in December 1781. For years he had been intrigued by the military potential of the numerous American Negro slaves. When he had been in Virginia in 1775-1776 he had not hesitated in arming the slaves and promising them

1. Lord Dunmore to Lord George Germain, Charleston, March 30, 1782, Colonial Office Group, Class 5, Vol. 175, Public Record Office (transcript, Library of Congress). Hereinafter referred to as C.O. 5/175. Dunmore to Thomas Townshend, London, August 24, 1782, Sydney Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The author is indebted to Mr. William S. Ewing, curator of manuscripts at the Clements Library, for bringing to his attention the Dunmore letter of August 24.

their freedom: and his Ethiopian Regiment had been an important part of his tiny force while he remained in the Chesapeake area.² In South Carolina the ratio of blacks to whites—three to one or larger in the Low Country—was even greater than in Virginia and was an important reason why the Earl again championed organizing them into military units. He conferred with John Cruden, who as commissioner for seizure and custody of captured rebel property, was chiefly concerned with the disposition of the thousands of Negroes in and around Charleston. Their status was confused, but Dunmore and Cruden were in complete agreement as to what the Crown's policy should be: arm them, promise them freedom and land, and use them with effect as events dictated. If Britain were going to make a determined effort to retain South Carolina and Georgia in the final peace settlement, as at first appeared probable, the Negroes could render valuable service. If England were going to relinquish these southern colonies—and as time passed this seemed to be the drift of British policy—black soldiers still could be put to good use. Dunmore and Cruden argued that a loyalist force, of which armed Negroes would be an important part, would be almost strong enough to seize West Florida and New Orleans. Then the Floridas and Louisiana could become a sanctuary for both black and white loyalists who were willing to fight to make it so.³

Major General Alexander Leslie, senior military commander in the South, and most British authorities in South Carolina heartily agreed with Dunmore and Cruden about arming the Negroes and pressed the home government to implement this policy.⁴ Dunmore sailed from Charleston to New York around April 1, 1782, and spent several months there before returning to Britain. Both in New York, where he conferred with the new commander in chief, Guy Carleton, and in London he

-
2. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1961), 19-32.
 3. Dunmore to Henry Clinton, Charleston, February 2, 1782, C.O. 5/175; John Cruden's proposal . . . for employing 10,000 black troops, Charleston, January 5, 1782, *ibid.*; Dunmore to Germain, Charleston, March 30, 1782, *ibid.*
 4. Alexander Leslie to Clinton; Charleston, March 1782, Sir. Guy Carleton (British Headquarters) Papers (microfilm, Florida State University Library, Tallahassee; P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville), no. 4331. Hereinafter referred to as Carleton Papers.)

DUNMORE'S LOYALIST ASYLUM IN THE FLORIDAS 373

renewed his appeals.⁵ Cruden, who remained in Charleston, did the same thing, not only while he was in Charleston but also after the evacuation of that city when he and thousands of loyalists moved to East Florida.⁶ Though Cruden and Dunmore subsequently fell out over other issues, the one thing they always concurred in was the utility of founding by force, diplomacy, or intrigue, a refuge for loyalists, black and white, in the Floridas and Louisiana. This settlement could be an outright British colony, autonomous within the Spanish empire or independent.

When Dunmore and others advocated a campaign against West Florida and Louisiana they were more directly concerned with matters other than the Negro loyalists. Many who rallied around Dunmore were royal officials and planters in the former British province of West Florida who had good reason for wanting to see the British flag wave over Pensacola, Mobile, Natchez, and New Orleans. An example is Robert Ross, former merchant-planter on the Mississippi, who made his way to Charleston after the Spanish conquest of West Florida. He won the confidence of General Leslie, Dunmore, Cruden, and John Graham, Indian superintendent for the western division, and when they urged Whitehall to authorize a campaign against the Spanish gulf coast provinces, they drew heavily on the detailed information furnished by Ross.⁷

Ross hoped Dunmore would lead a powerful loyalist force against Spanish possessions. Merchants and planters like Ross, former West Florida office holders, from the governor and council on down, and southern Indian superintendents were not only the ones who bombarded Whitehall with requests that Britain seize

-
5. Clinton to James Moncrief, New York, April 15, 1782, Carleton Papers, no. 4400; Dunmore to Townshend, London, August 24, 1782, Sydney Papers.
 6. John Cruden to James Clitherall, St. Augustine, April 27, 1783, Carleton Papers, no. 7566; Clitherall to Cruden, St. Augustine, May 31, 1783, *ibid.*, no. 7834; Cruden to Earl of Dartmouth, St. Marys River, East Florida, *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Dartmouth* (Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Fourteenth Report*, Appendix [London, 1895]), II 483.
 7. Robert Ross to Dunmore, Charleston, March 3, 1782, C.O. 5/175; Observations on the Importance of Louisiana to Great Britain . . . by Robert Ross, Carleton Papers, no. 5937; John Graham to Sir Guy Carleton, St. Augustine, October 20, 1783, Carleton Papers, no. 5936; Jack D.L. Holmes, "Robert Ross' Plan for an English Invasion of Louisiana in 1782," *Louisiana History*, V (Spring 1964), 161-77.

at least West Florida. The most active in promoting a campaign against the Spainards were influential speculators in western land, like Alexander Ross, Moses Franks, Adam Christie, John Murray (Dunmore's son), John Miller, and John F. D. Smyth, most of whom had been associated with Dunmore before the Revolution in Mississippi Valley land speculation and had collaborated with him in Virginia at the outset of hostilities in unsuccessfully trying to put down the rebellion.⁸ Again, as in Virginia in 1775-1776, they wanted Dunmore to be their military leader so that they could continue unabated their land speculations.

When one talked about speculating in western lands, Dunmore was in the vanguard. The rebels had confiscated almost 4,000,000 acres which he claimed, most of which were in the Ohio Valley. A loyalist state on the gulf coast might allow Dunmore to reimburse himself; indeed he and his associates of the Illinois-Wabash Company and similar companies might be able to resume control of their confiscated western lands.⁹ There were relatively few whites west of the Appalachian Mountains, and Dunmore reasoned that if there were a loyalist colony in the lower Mississippi Valley and another in Canada then Britain might soon regain control of the intervening area. He and his fellow land speculators might resume their labors temporarily frustrated by the Revolution. In 1782-1783 the status of West Florida and the entire Mississippi Valley was up in the air, and it was possible that Spain, who already had Louisiana on the Mississippi's western bank, would end up with much or all of the territory bordering the eastern bank up to or possibly beyond the Ohio River. When spokesmen for unnamed British

-
8. Thomas P. Abernethy, *Western Lands and the American Revolution* (New York, 1937), 17, 93-94; John Ferdinand Dalziel Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America*, 2 vols. (London, 1784), II, 227-69; Percy B. Caley, "Dunmore: Colonial Governor of New York and Virginia" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1939), 417.
 9. For Dunmore's claims to western lands and his connection with land companies, see Schedule of Losses Sustained by the Earl of Dunmore, Audit Office Group, Class 13, bundle 78. Public Record Office (photostat, Library of Congress): Indian deed to Earl of Dunmore, *et al.*, Past Saint Vincent, October 18, 1775, *American State Papers. Documents Legislative and Executive. Of the Congress Of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, 1832-1861), *Public Lands*, II, 119-20; Caley, "Dunmore: Colonial Governor of New York and Virginia," 161, 182-83, 202-03, 292-93, 416-17; Abernethy, *Western Lands and the American Revolution*, 56, 73, 87-90, 105, 113-15, 119.

loyalist suggested to the Spanish ambassador in London that Spain should encourage an almost autonomous loyalist settlement on the lower Ohio vaguely under Spanish influence, one could assume that some of these unnamed loyalists were Dunmore's associates.¹⁰

Throughout 1782 and for most of 1783 Dunmore, Cruden, loyalist land speculators, and assorted West Florida refugees bombarded the government with memorials and petitions. Shelburne was sympathetic to the concept of acquiring West Florida and possibly Louisiana, either by force or diplomacy. The Spanish government, and at least some English authorities would willingly swap Gibraltar for these colonies.¹¹ Shelburne, his chief representative negotiating with the Americans in Paris, Richard Oswald, and a small minority in Britain, were influenced by Adam Smith's doctrine of laissez faire. Oswald foresaw eventual British domination of Mississippi Valley commerce by merchants based in Canada and on the lower Mississippi. Britain at first would monopolize the Mississippi Valley fur trade, and, as whites inevitably settled west of the Appalachian Mountains, Britain-and not France-could manipulate both their commerce and their politics. Oswald hinted Britain might direct western dissatisfaction with the eastern seaboard into proper channels, and the aftereffects of Yorktown might not be as disastrous as initially feared.¹² Oswald, like Thomas Townshend and Henry Strachey, who were also directly involved in the peace making, had extensive land holdings in East Florida, though there is no way to gauge how much this influenced their recommendations to the British ministry. In any case, Oswald, who earlier had flirted with giving Canada to the Americans, quickly came around to Dunmore's point of view concerning

-
10. Bernardo del Campo to Conde de Floridablanca, London, August 9, 1783, in Tohn W. Caughey, ed., *East Florida, 1783-1785. A File of Documents Assembled, and Many of them. Translated by Joseph Byrne Lockey* (Berkeley, 1949), 139.
 11. George III to Lord Grantham, St. James, December 19, 1782, in John Fortescue, ed., *The Correspondence of King George the Third from 1760 to December 1783*, 2 vols. (London, 1927-1928), VI, 192; Ignacio de Heredia to Conde de Aranda, London, January 6, 1783, in Caughey, ed., *East Florida Documents*, 46.
 12. Richard Oswald to Townshend, Paris, October 5, 1782, Shelburne Papers, William L. Clements Library, 70; Oswald to Henry Strachey, Paris, December 4, 1782, *ibid.*

the Mississippi Valley and the Floridas.

Because the arguments of Dunmore, Oswald, and even the American negotiators¹⁴ had merit and because Anglo-Spanish hostilities did not diminish after Yorktown, the Shelburne ministry considered it likely that Britain would attack and control West Florida, and possibly New Orleans, before the definitive peace was signed. This helps explain the curious provision in the preliminary Anglo-American peace treaty that West Florida's northern boundary would be the parallel intersecting the mouth of the Yazoo River if Britain acquired this province in the definitive treaty but merely the thirty-first parallel if Spain retained it.¹⁵ The British and American diplomats in Paris, along with Dunmore, assumed, or at least hoped, that West Florida's boundary would be the Yazoo line when the formal peace treaties were signed. This meant that Britain would have regained West Florida, after which she, in contrast to Spain, would allow the Americans free navigation of the Mississippi.

Contrary to the expectations of Dunmore and the Paris diplomats, West Florida and the mouth of the Mississippi remained in Spanish hands. This was the situation in 1783 confronting Dunmore who found himself unemployed and pressed to meet the financial demands of his large family. After having lingered some months in Charleston and New York, he returned to Britain somewhat discouraged, resumed his seat in the House of Lords, and took over more direct management of his Scottish estate. But though he had abandoned America, he had not renounced his dream of making the Floridas and even Louisiana a loyalist haven. The veteran Dunmore knew that, although the United States's western boundary was the Mississippi, in fact it was Indians hostile to the Americans who occupied the extensive area between the Appalachian Mountains and the

-
13. Address of British subjects resident in East Florida to Patrick Tonym, St. Augustine, February 15, 1785, in Caughey, ed., *East Florida Documents*, 522; Charles L. Mowat, *East Florida as a British Province, 1763-1784* (Gainesville, 1943; facsimile edition, 1964), 60-61.
 14. The Americans wanted West Florida restored to Britain because Britain would allow them free navigation and the Spainards **would not**. Oswald to Townshend, Paris, October 2, 1782, Shelburne Papers, 70; Richard B. Morris, *The Peace Makers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York, 1965), 221-26, 232-37, 344-45.
 15. Anglo-American Preliminary Articles of Peace, Paris, November 30, 1782, in Hunter Miller, ed., *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, 8 vols. (Washington, 1931), II, 101.

Mississippi. He believed, as *was* commonly assumed in Europe, that the United States would soon break up. He rejoiced when Britain, contrary to the peace treaty, retained forts in the Old Northwest on American soil, and he was optimistic that Britain could retain her influence not only in the Old Northwest but in the entire transmontane region. In short it is apparent that after his return to Britain he was not primarily concerned with local politics and his election as a Scottish peer, or with supervising his estates, but with championing his old plan of founding a loyalist haven in the Old Southwest. This project had numerous advantages, not the least of which was that it might allow the Scottish laird to redeem his 4,000,000 acres or to secure their equivalent.

Because Spain acquired both Floridas in the 1783 treaty, Dunmore obviously could not go there immediately. But the Bahama Islands, whose original population had been increased by an influx of restless loyalists were close by and could serve the same purpose in maintaining British influence in the Old Southwest as Canada did in the Old Northwest. He became governor of the Bahamas in 1787, and promptly set about establishing a loyalist colony in the Old Southwest. Encouraged by his fellow speculators in western lands, like Alexander Ross, John F. D. Smyth, and Moses Franks, or West Florida loyalists like John Miller, Robert Ross, and Adam Christie, most of whom were on the Bahamian Council or held other office, Dunmore urged loyalist filibusters to make military-commercial expeditions to the mainland. Of these, William Augustus Bowles was the most outstanding.¹⁶ Again and again Dunmore entertained delegations of southern Indians at Government House in Nassau, gave them presents and commissions in the name of their British father, and reported to Whitehall how anxious these natives were for the British to return and how they would willingly cede valuable lands. Using either his own vessels or those of former West Florida merchants now based in Nassau, the governor tried to maintain a direct commerce with the

16. J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *William Augustus Bowles, Director General of the Creek Nations* (Athens, 1967), 27-70; Lawrence Kinnaird, "The Significance of William Augustus Bowles' Seizure of Panton's Apalachee Store in 1792," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (January 1931), 158-61.

southern Indians, by-passing the Spaniards.¹⁷ There probably was something to the reports that Dunmore had solicited Warren Hastings's support in encouraging thousands of colonists to settle in the Old Southwest with or without the approval of the United States and Spain,¹⁸ and that Dunmore considered sending one of his sons to the mainland to head an independent loyalist-Indian state.¹⁹ In 1790, at the height of the Nootka Crisis and the prospect of an Anglo-Spanish war, Dunmore was convinced that the Floridas and New Orleans would come under British control, and he envisioned the Union Jack waving throughout the Mississippi Valley. To his chagrin, the belligerents resolved the controversy and subsequently formed an alliance to combat French Republicanism. During the brief interval of the Anglo-Spanish alliance from 1793-1796 the British home government discouraged Dunmore's aggressive conduct toward the Floridas, and Dunmore, attempting to take advantage of the friendship of Britain's new ally by soliciting special trading concessions for himself and friends, was rejected by the Spaniards who, for the best of reasons, distrusted him.²⁰

The British government suddenly recalled Dunmore in 1796, and the reasons are not entirely clear. His administration in the Bahamas had been as dissentious as his earlier one in Virginia, and repeated charges of corruption and nepotism may have had their effect.²¹ Possibly, as Dunmore charged, his old political enemy, the Duke of Portland, who had just joined the ministry, was responsible for his recall.²² More likely, how-

-
17. Numerous references to Dunmore's Florida ventures are in Colonial Office Group, Class 23, vols. 31-32, Public Record Office. Hereinafter referred to as C.O. 23. See also East Florida Papers, Library of Congress; microfilm, Florida State University Library, 114J9.
 18. Manuel de Zéspedes to Antonio Valdes, St. Augustine, October 18, 1788, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, estado, legajo 3887, expediente 1, doc. 144 photostat, Library of Congress); Warren Hastings to Dunmore, London, January 24, 1788, Dunmore Family Papers, III, 99, E.G. Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.
 19. Alexander McGillivray to William Panton, Little Tallassie, November 28, 1792, in John W. Caughey, *McGillivray of the Creeks* (Norman, 1959), 347.
 20. Henry Dundas to Dunmore, London, October 16, 1793, C.O. 23/32; Duke of Alcludia to Marques del Campo, San Ildefonso, August 6, 1794, Archivo General de Simancas, estado, legajo 2624 (Spanish transcript, Library of Congress).
 21. Michael Craton, *A History of the Bahamas* (Collins, 1962), 173-80.
 22. Dunmore to William Pitt, Manchester St., October 7, 1797, Gifts and Deposits Group, Class 30-8, vol. 131, Public Record Office.

DUNMORE'S LOYALIST ASYLUM IN THE FLORIDAS 379

ever, his daughter's clandestine marriage to the Duke of Sussex, George III's son, which provoked the monarch and which George III had annulled, led to Dunmore's abrupt dismissal.²³ But one thing is certain; from immediately after Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, and until his recall, Dunmore's ambition, motivated both by genuine sympathy for the loyalists, black and white, and by self-interest, was to establish and direct a pro-British loyalist-Indian state in the Old Southwest at the expense of Spain or the United States or both and to link it with the British in the Old Northwest and Canada. Dunmore was not the only one who considered the status of the Floridas and the Mississippi Valley unsettled, as the diplomatic maneuverings at the time of the Nootka Crisis, the Genêt episode, and the Blount conspiracy testify. But the plans that he, Ross, Cruden, and General Leslie discussed in Charleston in 1782, along with the schemes of British diplomats involved in the Paris peace negotiations, go a long way toward explaining what motivated Dunmore in his post-Revolutionary career. If the Earl had had his way, transports bearing black and white British soldiers would have appeared off Amelia Island, the Apalachicola River's mouth, Pensacola, Mobile, and New Orleans long before 1814-1815.

23. Great Britain, Privy Council. Copy of council minutes on enquiry regarding marriage of Prince Augustus Frederick and Lady Augusta Murray, January 27 and 28, 1794, Melville Papers, Clements Library; *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXIV (January 1794), 87.