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George Mathews and John McKee: Revolutionizing East Florida, Mobile, and Pensacola in 1812

By J.C.A. Stagg

It has become conventional to regard the East Florida revolution of 1812 as a singularly colorful and controversial episode in the history of the early republic. Its colorful aspects have lent themselves to the writing of fast-paced narratives that make for good reading because its organizers—United States government agents George Mathews and John McKee—brought to the performance of their duties roughly equal proportions of outright illegality, low intrigue, and not a little incompetence. The revolution they staged has always been controversial because it has been difficult to escape the conclusion that it embodied the desire of the administration of James Madison to enlarge the nation by actively subverting the Spanish regime in East Florida.¹ It is now reasonably clear that the actions of Mathews and McKee in Florida and on the Gulf Coast between 1810 and 1812 departed far more from the policies of the administration than they fairly reflected them.

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1. The classic study is Rembert W. Patrick's *Florida Fiasco: Rampant Rebels on the Georgia-Florida Border 1810-1815* (Athens, GA, 1954). It should be supplemented with James G. Cusick's *The Other War of 1812: The Patriot War and the American Invasion of Spanish East Florida* (Gainesville, FL, 2003). For a more popular and dramatic account, see Joseph B. Smith, *The Plot to Steal Florida: James Madison's Phony War* (New York, NY, 1983).

If that is the case, then how might historians explain why the president's agents behaved in ways for which they lacked authorization?² Were they simply carried away by an excess of zeal in their efforts to secure East Florida for the United States or were there other factors that influenced their conduct as well? And might those other factors have had some bearing on the decision of the administration to repudiate the revolution in April 1812? New light can be thrown on these questions by some hitherto neglected evidence, principally an unknown letter written by William Harris Crawford to Mathews and some previously unexamined correspondence between Mathews and McKee.³ Considered together, these sources make it possible to present a very different picture of the East Florida revolution than the one with which we are now familiar.

The first step on the road to the revolution that started on Amelia Island in March 1812 occurred on 20 June 1810 when Secretary of State Robert Smith requested Crawford, the senior United States Senator from Georgia, to find an agent to go into East Florida for the purpose of gathering information on "the several parties in the Country" and to spread the administration's message that should the local settlers declare their independence from Spain, "their incorporation into our Union would coincide with the sentiments and policy of the United States."⁴ Historians have always assumed that Crawford selected Mathews for this task without difficulty and that the agent then began to orchestrate a revolution in accordance with the instructions he received from the senator.⁵ Crawford's hitherto unknown response to Smith's

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2. For an extended discussion of the relevant historiographical issues, see J.C.A. Stagg, "James Madison and George Mathews: The East Florida Revolution of 1812 Reconsidered," *Diplomatic History* 30 [2006]: 23-55.
 3. The letter by William Harris Crawford was one he wrote to Robert Smith on 27 July 1810 (Miscellaneous Mss, Robert Smith, Library of Congress). His identity as the author has remained unknown because Crawford omitted to sign the letter before sealing it. The letters between Mathews and McKee can be found in the John McKee Papers, Library of Congress. No study of the East Florida revolution has ever cited this collection, perhaps because its contents, having been badly damaged by fire, are very difficult to read and cannot, in all cases, be fully deciphered.
 4. Smith to Crawford, 20 June 1810, Domestic Letters of the Department of State, RG 59, National Archives.
 5. See, for example, Patrick, *Florida Fiasco*, 3, 7; and Smith, *The Plot to Steal Florida*, 69-70, 78-79 where Smith remarks that "no document exists that tells what circumstances threw George Mathews into William Crawford's way, or explains specifically how it was that Mathews understood the president's view so well."

letter of 20 June tells a different story, however. The senator did not read the letter until 23 July and his first reaction was to report that he could think of no-one in the southeastern counties of Georgia who might be willing to undertake the assignment, and certainly not to risk their health in Florida “at this season of the year.” And because the matter was of “so much importance and delicacy,” Crawford believed that it was “absolutely necessary” for him “to see and converse with the man to be employed” before he could make a decision.

The senator’s difficulties were not resolved until he received an unexpected visit from George Mathews, a former three-term governor of Georgia (1787-88 and 1793-96), who since that time had moved to Mississippi Territory where he led, as Crawford remarked, “an erratic life.”⁶ After Crawford had sounded him out, Mathews eagerly embraced the mission, not only because he agreed with the administration’s view that East Florida should become part of the United States but also because he was bound for Florida anyway to purchase “a tract of country . . . in the vicinity of St Marks” from John Forbes and Company, the British firm of Indian traders whose agents had been operating in the borderlands under license from Spain since 1783.⁷ Crawford did not provide the State Department with any additional details about Mathews’s proposed purchase, but it is reasonable to assume that if the tract indeed was located near St. Marks that it would have been carved out of the grants of land the Lower Creeks and Seminole Indians had made to John Forbes personally between 1804 and 1810. Forbes had received these grants in return for the assistance he had rendered to the Indians in facilitating land sales to the United States that paid off their tribal debts. Forbes

6. There is no biography of Mathews, but see G. Melvin Herndon, “George Mathews: Frontier Patriot,” *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography* 77 [1969]: 307-28. Mathews had harbored unsuccessful ambitions to become territorial governor of Mississippi, and throughout his life he was frequently involved in land speculation, including the Yazoo land frauds of the 1790s in Georgia when, as governor, “he outdid all of his predecessors in signing illegal land warrants” (see C. Peter Magrath, *Yazoo: Law and Politics in the New Republic: The Case of Fletcher v. Peck* [Providence, RI, 1966], 3, 6, 7).

7. Crawford to Smith, 27 July 1810. For the history of John Forbes and Company, see Arthur P. Whitaker, *Documents relating to the Commercial Policy of Spain in the Floridas, with incidental reference to Louisiana* (Deland, FL, 1931) and William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Pantón, Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847* (Pensacola, FL, 1986).

intended to sell parts of his grants to speculators and to settle other portions of them with immigrants, some of whom were to be drawn from the Loyalist community in the Bahamas and others who were to come from Europe, including Forbes's homeland of Scotland. He may also have contemplated bringing in slaves as well.⁸ To secure these grants, Forbes sought confirmation of his title from the Spanish authorities, who gave it subject to the proviso that he could not alienate land from them without their "express consent."⁹

How much progress Mathews made with John Forbes when he visited Florida in the late summer and fall of 1810 is difficult to determine. Neither the personal papers of Forbes nor the records of his company throw any light on that problem.¹⁰ All that can be said is that Crawford informed Smith that Mathews would go first to Pensacola in West Florida—where he probably intended to sign a contract with the Forbes agent John Innerarity, Jr.—after which he would meet with the Spanish governor, Juan Vicente Folch, from whom he would "procure letters of recommendation to the governor, and principal men of East Florida" prior to seeking them out in St. Augustine some time after mid-September 1810.¹¹ It is also reasonable to assume that Mathews might have hoped to obtain the consent of the governor of East Florida, Enrique White, for any land transactions he was planning with Forbes. Events did not go according to plan, however. Mathews never reached Pensacola where his entry to the town was prevented "by the prevalence of a contagious fever."

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8. Forbes sketched out his vision for the future of Florida in his 1804 *Description of the Spanish Floridas* (William S. Coker, ed., Pensacola, FL, 1979), 19-34. For additional details, see Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands*, 248-53, and also James F. Doster, *The Creek Indians and Their Florida Lands 1740-1823*, 2 vols. (New York, NY, 1974), 1: 275-96. On Forbes's attempts to settle his grants in 1810, see Alexander H. Gordon to John Innerarity, Jr., 1, 8 September 1810 in William S. Coker, comp., *The Papers of Panton, Leslie, and Company* (microfilm edition; 26 rolls, Woodbridge, CT, 1986), roll 18; and also John C. Upchurch, "Aspects of the Development and Exploration of the Forbes Purchase," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 48 [1969]: 120-21.
 9. See the documents printed in Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke, comps., *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative, and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, DC, 1834-56), *Public Lands* 4: 163-66.
 10. The papers of John Forbes are deposited in the Mobile Public Library. For the company papers, see Coker, *The Papers of Panton, Leslie, and Company*.
 11. Crawford to Smith, 27 July 1810.

He did, nevertheless, meet with Folch in Mobile, only to learn that the governor had no interest in discussing schemes for the transfer of Florida to the United States.¹² That being the case, it is unlikely that Mathews obtained the letters of recommendation he desired. Even so, he pressed on to St. Augustine where he attempted to meet with White. He was dissuaded from doing so by Andrew Atkinson, the son of a prominent South Carolina planter and merchant residing on the St. Johns River, who told the agent that if he ever opened his mouth to White, he would “die in chains in the Moro Castle” (in Havana) and “all the devils in hell” would not be able to save him.¹³ Despite that setback, Mathews, while he was in East Florida, implemented the instructions he had received from Crawford to the extent of holding conversations with some leading settlers he believed sympathetic to his mission.¹⁴ He then traveled to Washington to report his findings.

Arriving in the nation’s capital in January 1811, Mathews met with John McKee, formerly a United States agent to the Choctaw Indians, who had just made an urgent trip from Mobile in December 1810 to deliver letters from Folch to the administration. The governor, who had earlier refused to discuss the future of Florida with Mathews, had changed his mind following the successful revolt of the American settlers at Baton Rouge in September 1810. He now feared that the remaining Spanish outposts in West Florida, Mobile and Pensacola, were about to be overwhelmed by filibusters and he offered to surrender those places to the United States, provided the administration would guarantee the integrity of the province as a whole against the encroachments of the rebels.¹⁵ On learning of Folch’s offer, Smith proposed that Mathews be sent back to the Gulf Coast to negotiate with the governor and that McKee accompany him as his

12. Crawford to Smith, 1 November 1810, Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State, RG 59, National Archives.

13. See the testimony of George J. F. Clarke in *United States vs Francisco and Peter Pons*, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts of the General Accounting Office, RG 217, claim no. 73, 347, National Archives.

14. Clarke to Enrique White, 7 January 1811, East Florida Papers, bundle 198C16 (microfilm edition), Library of Congress.

15. Folch’s letters to the State Department are printed in *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*, 3: 398-99. For a recent account of the West Florida rebellion, see David A. Bice, *The Original Lone Star Republic: Scoundrels, Statesmen & Schemers of the 1810 West Florida Rebellion* (Clanton, AL, 2004).

secretary.¹⁶ The prudent provision for McKee's services may have resulted from Crawford's July 1810, warning to the State Department that the "orthography" of Mathews was "proverbial among us" and that to provide him with a personal secretary might have been the easiest way for the administration to obtain "a Key" to his forceful, but unorthodox, writing style.¹⁷ McKee rejected this assignment. Reporting back to James Innerarity (brother of John) in Mobile, he penned a letter, dripping with sarcasm, that described how the "flattering" reception he had met with in the capital might have led a man "of more ambition & credulity" than himself "to expect great things" before he bluntly told his hosts that "money" was "the subject of [his] story." If he received "enough of that," he wrote, the administration could keep its "honors for those who are more ambitious of them."¹⁸

What might McKee have meant by such remarks? Aside from the fact that he disdained the role of a mere secretary, they suggest, at the very least, that his immediate priority was to obtain reimbursement for the sum of \$500 he had expended on the hire of horses and the protection of a soldier while traveling from the Gulf Coast to deliver Folch's letters to Washington.¹⁹ In the longer run, though, McKee's goal was to regain some form of public employment, preferably as agent to the Choctaw Indians, from which position he had been removed by the Jefferson administration in 1802, possibly for suspected involvement in the Blount Conspiracy of 1797.²⁰ Since then, McKee had been engaged in a

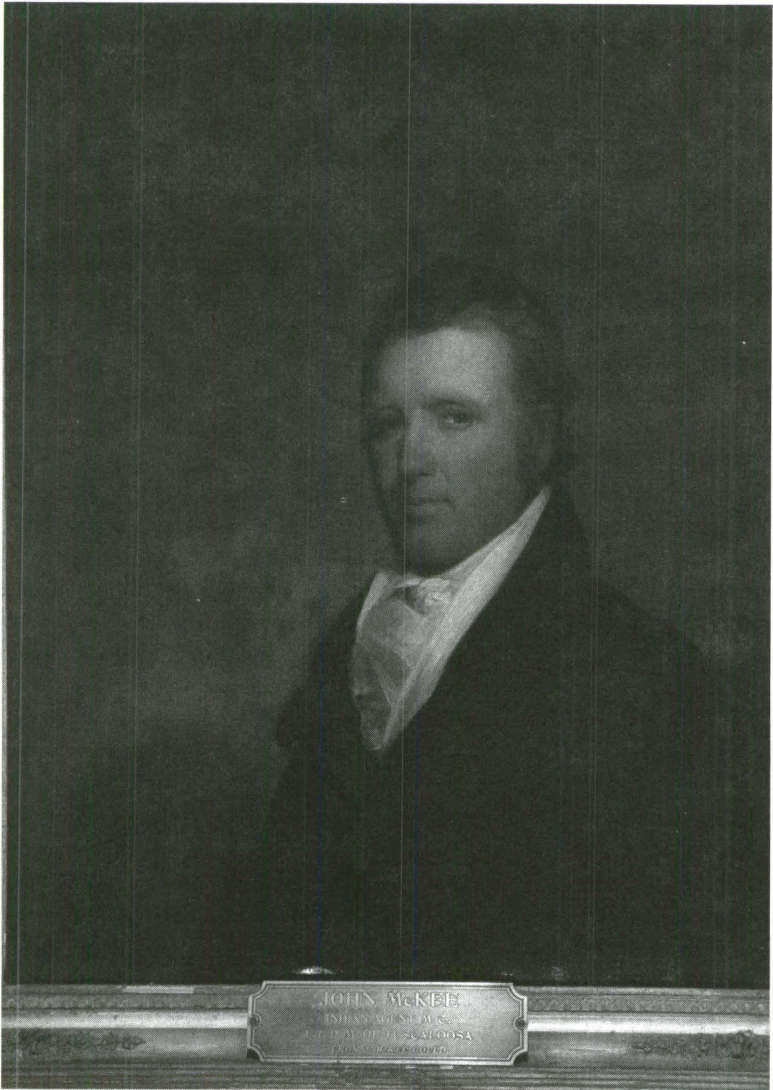
16. See Smith to James Madison, [17 January 1811], Robert A. Rutland et al, eds., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, 5 vols to date (Charlottesville, VA, 1984-2004), 3: 122-23.

17. Crawford to Smith, 27 July 1810. Ralph Isaacs was eventually appointed as a secretary for Mathews.

18. McKee to James Innerarity, 17 January 1811, printed in the *Florida Historical Quarterly* 16 [1937]: 130.

19. On 28 January 1811 McKee submitted a request to the State Department seeking reimbursement for \$500.00. The Secretary of State approved the payment (see McKee to Smith, 28 January 1811, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts of the General Accounting Office, claim no. 26, 533).

20. For McKee's removal, see Henry Dearborn to John McKee, 21 May 180[2], McKee Papers. The standard authorities on the Blount conspiracy—William H. Masterson, *William Blount* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1954) and Buckner F. Melton, *The First Impeachment: The Constitution's Framers and the Case of Senator William Blount* (Macon, GA, 1998)—make no mention of McKee, but the contents of a surviving folder of his correspondence with Blount in the McKee Papers leaves no doubt that the agent was closely involved in every aspect of Blount's affairs.



Portrait of John McKee painted by William E. West. *Image courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.*

variety of enterprises, including acting at times as a representative of John Forbes and Company to the Choctaw Indians, and he had also contemplated forming partnerships with Forbes to purchase Indian lands on the Apalachicola River with the “special

permission & authority of the Spanish Government.”²¹ For those reasons, it was not altogether surprising that McKee, after his arrival in Washington, informed James Innerarity that he had written to Forbes while en route to the capital and had received a reply from him, sent from Charleston. Forbes’s letter from Charleston has not been found, but it seems clear McKee hoped that Forbes would come on to Washington, presumably to discuss business matters of mutual interest with him and the administration.²²

Further to that point, McKee also mentioned to James Innerarity that he had “a few skirmishes” with members of the administration about the supposed “Anglocism” of his “house” before he succeeded in placing it in “a proper point of view,” namely that John Forbes and Company should be regarded as “honest peacable English merchants & men of Honor above being intriguers or spies for any Government—and without any strong prejudices against ours.”²³ Mathews, presumably, would not have disagreed with that claim—after all he had his own plans for business with the company—but the administration may have been less concerned about the “Anglocism” of John Forbes and Company than McKee had feared. Despite the fact that the company was staffed by Loyalists and under contract to Spain, the earlier experiences of the Jefferson administration in its dealings with the Southern Indians had demonstrated that their indebtedness to the company was not necessarily a very serious problem. The easiest way for the Indians to repay their debts to Forbes was to make land cessions to the United States, and John Forbes himself had, on occasion, rendered important services to the administration in its treaty negotiations with the Southern tribes. Viewed in that light,

21. Robert S. Cotterill, *The Southern Indians: The Story of the Civilized Tribes before Removal* (Norman, OK, 1954), 119, 148. See also “Memorandum for Col. McKee,” dated 16 June 1809 at Pensacola (Coker, *The Papers of Panton, Leslie, and Company*, roll 17). For evidence that McKee’s interest in lands on the Apalachicola included partnerships with Forbes, see James Innerarity to McKee, 2 August 1811, McKee Papers. Other letters from Innerarity to McKee, dated 6 November, 8 and 23 December 1811, are further proof of a close business relationship between McKee and Forbes (*ibid.*).

22. McKee to James Innerarity, 17 January 1811. It should be remembered that the Choctaws, like the Lower Creek and Seminole Indians, owed substantial debts to both the United States and to John Forbes and Company and that some of McKee’s business affairs may well have remained inextricably entangled with those of the Choctaw Nation (see Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands*, 227-28, 271).

23. McKee to James Innerarity, 17 January 1811.

the company had been a useful instrument for American policy makers, and it was by no means impossible that its agents, in the event of any future conflict with Spain, could continue to play a positive role by helping to ensure the neutrality of Indian tribes that were still numerous and powerful along the southwestern frontier.²⁴

There is no evidence that Forbes came to Washington as McKee had hoped, but there is no doubt that the administration was well apprised of their concerns when it decided, on 26 January 1811, to entrust Mathews and McKee with a joint mission to Folch to negotiate the agreement the governor had proposed in December 1810. That decision was also taken to give effect to the “No Transfer Resolution” passed by Congress on 15 January 1811, under the terms of which it became American policy not to acquiesce in the transfer of any Spanish-American territory to another European power. In the event of any attempted occupation of the Gulf Coast by such a power, the resolution, supplemented by subsequent legislation, gave Mathews and McKee authorization to preempt it by employing the armed forces to “pre-occupy” the territory in question. Alternatively, should any of the “local” authorities in the region offer to deliver their territory to the United States, the agents were permitted to accept it on behalf of the administration. The primary purpose of this policy was to ensure that the United States could take peaceable possession of all of West Florida after Folch had agreed to deliver it, but the agents also had the discretion to apply it to East Florida, should the circumstances there warrant it.²⁵

As far as East Florida was concerned, though, it was not the intention of the administration that Mathews and McKee should organize a revolution to create a new “local authority” to deliver the province to the United States. The information Mathews brought to Washington in January 1811 made it clear that the local

24. Cotterill, “A Chapter of Panton, Leslie, and Company,” *Journal of Southern History* 10 [1944]: 275-92. One of the earliest advocates of the idea that the Southern Indians could redeem their debts to John Forbes and Company by selling land to the United States was, in fact, John McKee (see Dearborn to W.C.C. Claiborne, 11 June 1802, Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816* [6 vols.; Jackson, MS, 1917], 1: 158-59).

25. Smith to Mathews and McKee, 26 January 1811, Domestic Letters of the Department of State. For the “No Transfer Resolution,” see John A. Logan, Jr., *No Transfer: An American Security Principle* (New Haven, CT, 1961), 111-22.

settlers themselves believed they could accomplish this task once they had learned that Cádiz had fallen to the French armies that had been besieging it since February 1810. That development, should it occur, promised not only to end the resistance in Spain to the French invasion and the usurpation of Joseph Bonaparte but also to sever the last remaining link between metropolitan Spain and its American colonies. As these expectations came to pass, the administration assumed that the duties of the agents, along with those of the American army and navy forces on the north side of the St. Marys River, would be either to offer the East Florida rebels moral support—as they seized the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine “by surprise” as the means of staging their own revolution—or to prevent a foreign occupation by either France or Great Britain. But no matter what the circumstances proved to be, neither the settlers nor Mathews expected any serious resistance from the local authorities after the fall of Spain itself. As the latter reported to the State Department, Governor White could command only “about two hundred and fifty soldiers” in the entire province and there was no Spanish naval force to speak of.²⁶

No part of these highly contingent schemes could be carried into effect. Cádiz never fell to France, and Folch, after receiving orders from Havana to defend his province to the last, reneged on the offer he had made through McKee in December 1810. There was nothing the agents could do when they met with him in March 1811 to persuade him otherwise.²⁷ In response, McKee retired to the U.S. military post of Fort Stoddert, just above the boundary line on the 31st parallel. There he reported on developments in the vicinity of Mobile Bay to the State Department for the next twelve months. Mathews, on the other hand, remained for a while in West Florida where he tried to gain a better understanding of Folch’s erratic behavior in the belief that the governor would eventually have no choice but to relinquish the province to him.

26. For further discussion and documentation on these matters, see Stagg, “James Madison and George Mathews,” 35-36.

27. Folch to McKee, 27 February 1811, enclosed in Thomas H. Cushing to William Eustis, 4 March 1811, Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered Series, C-396 (5), RG 107, National Archives. See also Mathews and McKee to Folch, 22 March 1811, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, legajo 1569, Archivo General de Indias (copy in the Library of Congress) and Folch to Lieut. Col. Richard Sparks, 22 March 1811, McKee Papers.

Mathews also made a reconnaissance of the region in case the United States should have to undertake military operations there. At the same time, he did a little business by pursuing a claim to some “negroes” in whom he had an interest, but there is no evidence he attempted to secure the land that he had been contemplating purchasing from Forbes.²⁸ And after learning that Enrique White had died in St. Augustine in April 1811, Mathews, on 19 May, set out for St. Marys on the Florida-Georgia border where he arrived on 9 June. For the next two weeks, he was immobilized by illness, but when he had recovered sufficiently to resume his mission he found that the situation in East Florida was not what he had anticipated.²⁹ Indeed, almost every circumstance he had reported to the State Department at the beginning of the year was now changed.

One problem was that White’s interim successor, Juan José Estrada, was no improvement on White. Not only was he not disposed to discuss the future of his province but he had also persuaded some of the potential rebels with whom Mathews had met in 1810, notably John Houstoun McIntosh and Fernando de la Maza Arredondo, to promise they would remain loyal to Spain.³⁰ That Cádiz had not yet fallen—and seemed unlikely to do so any time in the near future after the newspapers throughout June and July 1811 had reported a string of defeats for the French army in Spain—undoubtedly made this task easier for the governor.³¹ Worse, Mathews received reports that Estrada might reinforce St. Augustine with a regiment of black troops supplied by Great Britain from Jamaica, and the agent feared that their arrival would strengthen Spanish authority to the point that it would become difficult for the local settlers to overthrow it. An equally serious blow to Mathews’s hopes was that the local economy, stimulated in no small part by British merchants using St. Marys as a base to

28. McKee to Smith, 10 April and 1 May 1811, Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida, RG 59, National Archives.

29. Mathews to James Monroe, 28 June 1811, Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida; and Ralph Isaacs to McKee, 28 June 1811, McKee Papers.

30. See the testimony of James Hall in *United States vs Francisco Xavier Sánchez*, Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts of the General Accounting Office, claim no. 74, 969.

31. See the reports of the French defeats in Spain printed in the *Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger* on 23, 30 May, 1, 4, 27 June, and 11, 13, 16 and 20 July 1811.

smuggle goods into the United States, was booming and no-one seemed disposed to risk the status quo. Consequently, much of the sentiment in favor of a change in regime that Mathews had reported to Washington in January 1811 had now disappeared.³²

Mathews fretted over these matters for the next several weeks. He went into East Florida to obtain further information but learned little that was reassuring. Even as he was able to discount the rumors about an "African" regiment from Jamaica, he was reinforced in his conclusion that the balance of forces inside the province was tilted against a successful local revolution. His response was to ask the administration to send him arms, swords, and artillery to Point Petre so that he now could assist the settlers in making that revolution "with a fair prospect of success" and without his appearing to commit the United States as its sponsor. That request, mailed to Washington by letter on 3 August 1811, never reached the capital, and Mathews, in desperation, made a hasty visit to Crawford in mid-October to give him another copy before the senator departed for the first session of the Twelfth Congress that Madison had summoned for the first week in November.³³ But while in East Florida, Mathews had received additional news about possible developments in the province that threatened to jeopardize both its future value to the United States as a part of the Union and to Mathews personally as a location for any business dealings he might have with John Forbes and Company.

32. Mathews to Monroe, 28 June 1811. For the argument that the loyalty of East Floridians to the Spanish regime was further reinforced by Estrada's ability to respond effectively to hurricane damage in the province, see Sherry Johnson, "The St. Augustine Hurricane of 1811: Disaster and the Question of Political Unrest on the Florida Frontier," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 84 [2005]: 28-56.

33. Mathews to Monroe, 3 August and 14 October 1811, Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida. For further discussion of these matters, see Stagg, "James Madison and George Mathews," 43-45.

34. Some of the details of Keene's career, which included his seduction of Luther Martin's fifteen-year old daughter as well as charges that he violated the Embargo and was guilty of treason against both Spain and the United States, can be found in his apologia *A Letter of Vindication to His Excellency Colonel Monroe, President of the United States*, by Richard Raynal Keene, *Colonel in the late Constitutional Service of Spain* (Philadelphia, 1824), 3-47, supplemented by *An Appendix, intended to illustrate the merits and objects of A Letter of Vindication, addressed to the President of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1825). His petition for a grant in East Florida was dated 4 August 1809 and its goal was to make an experiment in settling American families in the province to exploit its potential for growing cotton and developing a naval stores industry. These

At the center of these new developments was the rumor that the *Cortes* in Cádiz had recently conveyed “all the vacant & unlocated land in E. & W. Florida” to Richard Raynal Keene, the troubled (and troublesome) son-in-law of Luther Martin of Maryland, who, after failing to establish himself satisfactorily in the Orleans Territory, had become a Spanish subject and petitioned the Captain-General in Cuba for an extensive grant of land between the Bay of Tampa and San Marcos de Apalache.³⁴ That news, Mathews told the State Department, was causing much discontent in St. Augustine, and the agent also transmitted a document from a pseudonymous source claiming that if the petition were to succeed, the United States stood to lose land worth as much as \$20 million in the event of Keene retaining his properties after Florida had been taken into the Union.³⁵ What Mathews would have found personally alarming, though, was the news that Keene’s petition sought all vacant land in Florida “whether ceded or unceded by the Indians.” That meant—if the land Mathews sought from

activities, Keene stressed, would be complementary to, and not in competition with, the economic interests of Cuba and West Florida (see the documents attached to Enrique White’s 3 November 1809 letter to the marqués de Someruelos, *Papeles Procedentes de Cuba*, legajo 1567). Keene did not obtain approval for any land in East Florida, but in 1815 he petitioned, apparently successfully, for a grant in Texas “of a greater extent than [that] of the two largest states of [the] Union” to establish “an Irish Catholic colony in Spanish America” (see Keene’s *Memoria presentada á S.M.C. el SeÑor Don Fernando VII, sobre el asunto de fomentar la poblacion y cultivo en los terreros baldíos en las provincias internas del reyno México* [Madrid, 1815] and *A Letter of Vindication*, 5).

35. Mathews’s pseudonymous source signed himself as THEMISTOCLES AT MAGNESIA, and his communication, dated 21 September 1811, was enclosed in Mathews’s 14 October 1811 letter to Monroe (Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida). According to Plutarch, the Athenian Themistocles, after his victories over the Persians, was banished to Magnesia where he lived out the remainder of his days, though not without being subjected to pressures from both the Greeks and the Persians that he should chose sides when they renewed their wars (see *Plutarch’s Lives*, ed. John Dryden; [6 vols.; London, 1758], 1: 280-321). That might suggest that the identity of the Mathews’s pseudonymous source was James Hall, an American doctor who had taken up residence in East Florida from where he had been expelled by the Spanish authorities in September 1810 for his seemingly divided loyalties (see Hall’s testimony in *United States vs Francisco Xavier Sánchez*; also Mary M. DuPree and G. Dekle Taylor, “Dr. James Hall, 1760-1837,” *Journal of the Florida Medical Association* 61 [1974]: 626-31). Hall was also reported as having met with Mathews on his first visit to East Florida in the fall of 1810 to plan how the province might become independent from Spain (see Clarke to White, 7 January 1811, as cited in n. 14).

Forbes was part of the land the latter had received from the Indians—that the agent’s prospective dealings with Forbes could now be at serious risk. It was, perhaps, always something of a gamble that the Captain-General in Cuba would have permitted Forbes to alienate any of his Indian grants to an American. He would have been even less inclined to do so after the 1810 revolt of the settlers in West Florida and almost certainly not to so prominent an American as Mathews, who was notoriously unsympathetic to Spain and whose presence at St. Marys in 1810 and 1811 only made sense to the Spanish authorities on the assumption that he had been sent there to provoke further rebellions.³⁶

There was only one truly effective solution for this problem, and Mathews and his pseudonymous source did not hesitate to point it out. As the agent’s informant put it, if the people of East Florida proclaimed themselves to be an “independent sovereignty” and joined the United States, they might declare that “no grants should be valid, but such as were granted for Head rights to persons residing in the Country.” That would exclude Keene and his grants while leaving much of the remaining land in Florida available for the United States to receive as “a valuable property.” But, as Mathews’ source warned, unless he, as a commissioner for the United States, and the commanding officer of the American forces at Point Petre received “instructions to afford the friends of our Country at least an indirect aid, no change will take place in E. Florida.” Mathews reinforced this message by predicting that Spanish approval of Keene’s venture would help undermine confidence in its “weak & tottering” government and “produce sentiments highly favorable to our Government.” He also stressed the defects of the Spanish forces at St. Augustine, now said to be only 150 men strong and which might be easily subdued as they were “destitute of good ammunition.”³⁷ Of the consequences of a suc-

36. While governor of Georgia between 1793 and 1796, Mathews had been slow to respond to Spanish requests for assistance on border problems, particularly those relating to dissidents and rebels against Spanish rule who had fled to the United States (see Richard K. Murdoch, *The Georgia-Florida Frontier, 1793-1796: Spanish Reaction to French Intrigue and American Designs* [Berkeley, CA, 1951], 1-11, 128, 136-40). For evidence of Spanish suspicions about Mathews’s activities in St. Marys, see William Craig to Juan José Estrada, 5 August 1811, East Florida Papers, bundle 147D12; and Luis de Onís to Eusibio de Bardaxi y Azura, 8 September 1811, Correspondence of the Spanish Legation in the United States, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Estado, legajo 5637 (microfilm copy, Library of Congress).

37. See n. 35.

cessful revolution for Mathews's personal business interests, the agent, perhaps not surprisingly, said nothing.

Yet there is little reason to doubt that Mathews remained interested in his venture with John Forbes, even as it continued to languish. In February 1812, Forbes sent McKee a letter from Nassau. Among other matters, its contents hinted that McKee might take a spell from his official duties to make a tour of some of the company's properties on the Gulf Coast and possibly even make a purchase from James Innerarity. Forbes admitted, however, that his own plans, including that of settling "a small Village on the Apalachicola" from the West Indies, had been delayed and that they would be "a work of time." He had applied to the governor of Cuba for the necessary permission but worried that "our friend" Juan Ventura Morales, the Intendant for the Spanish crown residing in Pensacola, would interpose his authority to deny it.³⁸ Forbes also feared that his plans to move settlers (i.e., slaves) from the West Indies to Florida could be prevented under "the late additions made to the Abolition Act."³⁹ Consequently, he confessed to being somewhat gloomy about his company's longer-term prospects under Spanish rule and stated that he would even "rejoice" at the possibility of seeing Florida pass under American control. He then told McKee that through a friend he had recently received assurances from Mathews that the company's "establishment in East

38. As Intendant, it was Morales's task to protect the financial interests of the Spanish crown, but in the course of pursuing his duties he became the most unpopular Spanish official on the Gulf Coast (see Jared W. Bradley, ed., *Interim Appointment: W.C.C. Claiborne Letter Book, 1804-1805* [Baton Rouge, LA, 2002], 495-98). Forbes was right to worry that Morales might look into the matter of land grants to foreigners, which the Spanish authorities had been trying to restrict ever since the 1804 Kemper rebellion in West Florida (see Andrew McMichael, "The Kemper 'Rebellion': Filibustering and Resident Anglo-American Loyalty in Spanish West Florida," *Louisiana History* 63 [2002]: 161-62). Morales was also scrutinizing Keene's request for a grant—which almost certainly promised to conflict with the land claimed by Forbes—when he reminded the Captain-General in Havana of the relevant regulations in response to his request for an opinion on "the petition of Don Ricardo Raynal Keene, asking to buy lands" (see Morales to the marqués de Someruelos, 14 August 1811, Coker, *The Papers of Pantón, Leslie, and Company*, roll 18).

39. The 1811 Slave Trade Felony Act, passed by Parliament to supplement the 1807 law abolishing the slave trade within the British empire, made it a felony, punishable by transportation, for British subjects to trade in slaves anywhere (see *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates* [36 vols.; London, 1806-20], XIX [1811]: 233-40).

Florida would meet with every protection in the event of that Province being occupied" by the United States.⁴⁰

This was no idle remark and McKee knew it. After requesting arms and ammunition from Washington in August 1811, Mathews had gone ahead with plans for a revolution in East Florida, despite the fact that the administration had neither sanctioned his scheme nor even bothered to acknowledge the letters in which he continued to advocate its merits.⁴¹ At the same time, he also began to lay the groundwork for the overthrow of the Spanish authorities in both Mobile and Pensacola, realizing that it had become pointless to expect Folch to deliver the residue of West Florida to him once the governor had been summoned to Havana to account for his conduct in 1810.⁴² Accordingly, Mathews wrote to McKee in September 1811, urging him to attach two local Roman Catholic priests, Fathers James Coleman and Francis Lennon, "to our cause." The "holy Fathers" should be convinced, Mathews wrote, that the time had arrived for them to cease serving as "very able props to a tottering government." Mathews assumed that the priests could be persuaded to switch their loyalties from the Spanish regime once they understood "the superior advantages they would enjoy under a government conducted upon principles of rational liberty & calculated to ensure social happiness." If that prospect should not be sufficiently attractive, though, he suggested there were "other inviting allurements" that might be useful in getting the priests to see that they could make "God's word a sinecure" under American rule as well as they could under the

40. Forbes to McKee, 28 February 1812, McKee Papers. McKee does not appear to have purchased any property at this time, but he did sell a "negro," Jim, to Robert Rudolph, the Forbes representative in Charleston. On the bill of sale, "McKee" and "Charleston" were deleted and "Innerarity" and "Pensacola" were added (see Coker, *The Papers of Panton, Leslie, and Company*, roll 18). Forbes and Company, however, was expanding its operations in East Florida and had recently sought a lot on which to build a warehouse in Fernandina (see William Lawrence to White, 13 February 1811 and Lawrence to Estrada, 20 November 1811 [ibid.]).

41. For the significance of the administration's failure, or refusal, to communicate with Mathews after January 1811, see Stagg, "James Madison and George Mathews," 46-47.

42. By March 1811, the governor of Cuba had reprimanded Folch for his dealings with the Americans and relieved him of his command. In the fall of 1811 Folch went to Havana to prepare for a court martial and he returned to Spain in January 1812 (see David H. White, *Vicente Folch: Governor in Spanish Florida, 1787-1811* [Washington, DC, 1981], 104-5).

Spanish regime. Exactly what Mathews had in mind here is unclear. He declined to go into further detail in case some “impertinent curiosity” might make off with his letter.⁴³

Mathews, nevertheless, continued to keep McKee posted about his preparations in East Florida. These did not go smoothly, as historians have long known, and by November 1811 Mathews had again become so unwell that his secretary, Ralph Isaacs, told McKee that he feared for the life of “the old general.”⁴⁴ But Mathews persevered and on 6 March 1812—eight days before he attacked Fernandina on Amelia Island with his hastily improvised Patriot Army—he wrote again to his fellow agent, stating that by the time he received this letter, a revolution would have taken place and East Florida would have become “an Independent nation.” Among the first acts of that new nation would be the appointment and recruitment of men “for revolutionizing Pensacola & Mobile or reducing them by force.” Mathews announced that he would accompany this army on a march “through the Creek nation of which they will be apprised but not of the Motives, but will suppose they are to protect our citizens on Mobile.” In conjunction with that operation, McKee was directed to go into Pensacola to use his “influence with Fathers Coleman

43. Mathews to McKee, ca. 7 September 1811, McKee Papers. The dateline on this letter, as well as some of its contents, has been damaged by fire, but the surviving internal evidence is sufficient to establish both its approximate date as well as its purpose. Francis Lennon (or Francisco Lennán) had been a Roman Catholic priest in Francisville, West Florida, from where he had fled to Pensacola after the uprising at Baton Rouge in September 1810. He was still in Pensacola in the spring of 1811 when Mathews and McKee met with him and suggested to the State Department that it would be “sound policy as well as justice to invite him to return & to make a provision for his support.” Exactly where Lennon’s political loyalties lay is unclear—his behavior during the 1810 West Florida rebellion suggested they were with Spain—but Mathews and McKee, who claimed to have long known him, believed otherwise, remarking that the priest had “uniformly discovered a friendly disposition towards the United States” (see Mathews and McKee to Smith, 24 April 1811, Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida; also Bice, *The Original Lone Star Republic*, 139, 166, 188, 197).

44. The contents of these letters were often more general than they were specific about Mathews’s activities in St. Marys over the fall and winter of 1811-1812 (see Mathews to McKee, [ca. 1 October 1811] and Ralph Isaacs to McKee, 14 November 1811, both in McKee Papers). There also survives in this collection a badly burned fragment, very likely dating after November 1811, in which Mathews informed McKee that affairs in East Florida remained in the state they were in when Isaacs last wrote to him. Matters were said to be “in a train for a <illegible> but the prospect not immediate. . . .” For secondary accounts of Mathews’s difficulties in raising the Patriot Army for the revolution, see Cusick, *The Other War of 1812*, 83-143, and Patrick, *Florida Fiasco*, 70-113.

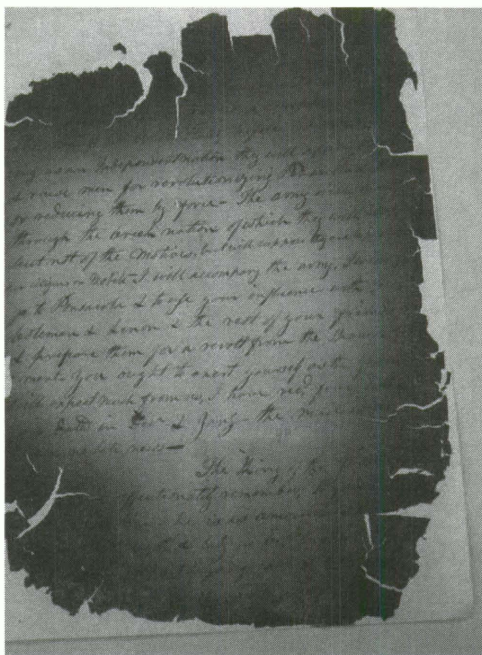


Image of the burned letter from Mathews to McKee dated 6 March 1812. *Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

& Lenon & the rest of [his] friends & prepare them for a revolt from the Spanish government.” He was, Mathews stressed, to “exert” himself “as the Government will expect much from us.”⁴⁵

McKee did not receive this letter until 1 April 1812. For the next few weeks, he pursued a somewhat devious course. He went to Mobile where he found the inhabitants—mainly “Spaniards and French creoles”—“but little inclined to a change.” They continued to hope for receipt of the long promised supplies of men and money from Mexico and Cuba and should these arrive, there would be, McKee conceded, “new and great difficulties.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, McKee seriously doubted that Spain could rescue Florida by these

45. Mathews to McKee, [6 March 1812], McKee Papers. The dateline and the addressee of this letter have been burned, but it is in Mathew’s hand and is clearly the letter McKee acknowledged receiving from Mathews on 1 April 1812 (*ibid.*). Further evidence of Mathews’s intention to attack Pensacola after the fall of St. Augustine was provided by Andrew Ellicott, after he had visited Georgia, to Timothy Pickering on 17 May 1812 (Timothy Pickering Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society).

46. McKee to Mathews, 1 April 1812, McKee Papers.

means now, and provided that Mathews succeeded in his plans to “revolutionize” East Florida, he felt confident that he could contact his friends, including Perez Moro, the second-in-command of the garrison in Mobile, to bring about a change in government in the remaining Spanish portions of West Florida.⁴⁷ He then sent an artful letter to James Innerarity, mentioning reports that Amelia Island had been delivered to the United States and that an army of 600 men was marching on St. Augustine. “Where these things are to end,” he wrote in mock surprise, “God knows.” Pointing out that Spain could no longer defend Florida and appealing to Innerarity’s humanitarian instincts, he asked him to use his influence with the Spanish authorities in Mobile to see if they would meet him “on the ground proposed by Governor Folch” in December 1810.⁴⁸

In making that proposal to the Spanish, McKee declared his willingness to “consult their interests & honor as well as the interest of their Sovereign” and he was sure that he would “have the means of reconciling all with the security of the U.S.”⁴⁹ Nothing came of these initiatives,⁵⁰ but the selective way in which McKee reported them to the State Department proved very interesting. Most of the communications he sent to Washington from Fort Stoddert after April 1811 either recounted rumors that were never to be substantiated or, more often, reported that there were no developments worth reporting at all.⁵¹ Indeed, things did seem to be so calm in the region

47. McKee to Mathews, 10 April 1812, *ibid.*

48. McKee to James Innerarity, 8 April 1812, *ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

50. James Innerarity’s responses to McKee’s overtures, dated 11, 20 and 30 April 1812 (McKee Papers), have survived, but they have been too badly burned for their contents to be fully deciphered. It would seem that Innerarity believed that the Spanish could not be dislodged from East Florida, at least not for as long as they were able to retain St. Augustine, and for that reason he was probably doubtful there could be any change at Pensacola and Mobile. When he did learn of the events of March 1812 in East Florida, the fragments of his letters suggest that he was highly indignant, and he denounced the “imbecility & duplicity” of the scheme as being worthy of the mind of Jefferson. How far he believed McKee had been implicated in the East Florida revolution is unclear.

51. McKee also sent similar reports to Mathews, as on 4 December 1811 when he wrote that “so barren is this place of incident of interest to you that I would not write were it not important to you that I am still waiting, anxiously waiting, for orders. The Dons are as silent as death and as poor as poverty, looking sometimes towards their own country, sometimes to Congress for their fate . . .” Those of them who had “property and connections to bind them to the soil,” he added, “discover great anxiety & hope sincerely they will soon be relieved” (McKee Papers).

between Pensacola and Mobile that in January 1812, the Secretary of State sent McKee a letter terminating his mission to the Gulf Coast and directing him to notify the governor of Orleans Territory accordingly.⁵² In March and April 1812, however, McKee informed the administration about possible discontent among the Creek Indians, sent an account of the impending arrival of a new Spanish governor to replace Folch, described how the local Spanish population was inclined to remain loyal to the mother country, and only in passing did he mention to the Secretary of State that he had made “another effort to renew negotiations with the Spanish authorities on the basis of Governor Folch’s letter to your predecessor (Decr. 1810).” “Should St. Augustine however be revolutionized,” he wrote, “these people may perhaps be brought to act.” Undoubtedly, McKee hoped that a change would take place, but entirely excluded from these letters any reference to the steps he and Mathews had been taking to “revolutionize” Mobile and Pensacola, as well as St. Augustine.⁵³

On 25 March 1812, one week after Mathews had obtained the surrender of the Spanish garrison at Fernandina, he sent McKee a copy of the treaty he had negotiated on that occasion.⁵⁴ It was not a lengthy document and contained only six articles, among them being one that ceded East Florida to the United States which, in turn, promised to protect it as an “integral part” of the Union. The United States also undertook to guarantee all existing Spanish land titles and offered land to all participants in the revolution as well as pay and employment in the U. S. Army to those Spanish officers and soldiers who might wish to seek such benefits. More unusual was a clause in the fourth article stipulating that ports in East Florida were to remain open to Great Britain until at least May 1813.⁵⁵ That provision undoubtedly would have had its uses in rec-

52. Monroe to McKee, 2 January 1812, Domestic Letters of the Department of State. McKee did not receive this letter until 14 May 1812 (see McKee to Monroe, 20 May 1812, McKee Papers).

53. McKee to Monroe, 25 March and 15 April 1812, Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida.

54. Mathews to McKee, 25 March 1812, McKee Papers. The enclosed draft treaty was docketed as “A contemplated Scheme of terms held and proposed by the U.S. to the inhabitants of E. Florida.” Mathews mailed another copy of this treaty to Monroe on 21 March 1812 (see Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State).

55. The draft treaty contained the date May 1813. In writing to Madison three weeks later, however, Mathews argued that the period should be extended for a further year, until May 1814 (see Mathews to Madison, 16 April 1812, *Madison Papers: Presidential Series*, 4: 327).

onciling the local merchants and planters, whose prosperity was heavily dependant on British trade, to the change in government. In light of the fact that throughout 1811 Mathews had urged the administration to sanction his desire to overthrow the Spanish regime in order to exclude British influence from East Florida, it was also somewhat anomalous.⁵⁶ One of its consequences would have been to have allowed John Forbes and Company to have continued their business activities in the province, and Mathews justified his decision here on the grounds that it would permit the Indians to receive “necessary supplies” from “the House of Panton & Forbes.”⁵⁷ Mathews also told McKee that he had already taken steps to inform Forbes in Nassau of developments in East Florida, and more importantly, he drew McKee’s attention to the fifth article, which committed the United States to the reduction of Mobile and Pensacola to ensure the security of East Florida. He then repeated his earlier directive that McKee “exert” himself to prepare for the events contemplated in that article and to leave “no means untried” for their accomplishment.⁵⁸

The revolution Mathews launched in March 1812 failed, and it did so, in no small part, because of the eventual inability of the Patriots to capture St. Augustine and thereby destroy the ultimate source of Spanish authority in East Florida. What historians have not understood, however, is the role that Mathews’s plans for the reduction of Mobile and Pensacola played in the decision of the Madison administration to disavow the revolution in April 1812. The events that led to that outcome were set in motion by Mathews himself when he sent his 6 March 1812 letter to McKee to the

56. For Mathews’s wishes to this effect, see his letters to Monroe of 28 June, 3 August, and 14 October 1811 (Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida). The best study of the trade through Amelia Island is Christopher Ward, “The Commerce of East Florida During the Embargo, 1806-1812: The Role of Amelia Island,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 68 [1989]: 160-79.

57. Mathews to Monroe, 21 March 1812 (Miscellaneous Letters of the Department of State).

58. Mathews to McKee, 25 March 1812, McKee Papers. The wording of the fifth article stipulated: “Whereas the Government at Pensacola and Mobile will probably be excited to great irritation in consequence of this revolution and as they border upon tribes of Indians who might be engaged in acts of hostility their revolution is rendered indispensable for the security of East Florida, and we inhabitants of East Florida having prior to this cession proceeded to raise an army and to appoint officers for the revolution of said places, and having rendered ourselves incompetent to it by yielding up our funds to the U States, the U States doth agree to carry the same into full effect unless in their wisdom it shall be deemed injurious to the province or to the U States.”

Creek agency on the Flint River in Georgia to be forwarded to McKee at Fort Stoddert.⁵⁹ At that time, he also sent a personal letter to the Creek agent, Benjamin Hawkins, along with another from his secretary, Ralph Isaacs. Hawkins duly forwarded the letter for McKee on 18 March, but he also reported its contents to Washington when he mailed his next letter to the War Department on 23 March. Here Hawkins related the details of Mathews's plans to "revolutionize" East Florida and to follow that event with the reduction of Mobile and Pensacola by marching an army through the Creek country to "protect the white people on Mobile from any injury from the revolt of Florida." The Indians were to be told that "East Florida has pursued the example of the United States and declared themselves independent of Spain, and the Spanish officers will want them to take part against the people of East Florida." It was to be Hawkins's task to persuade the Creeks not "to engage in white people's quarrels in the same land" and thus save "the frontiers of Florida from their inroads." At this juncture, Hawkins assumed that Mathews would be acting in accordance with instructions he had received from Washington and he promised that he would "in all things cooperate with the General." He reminded the Secretary of War, though, that he had received no orders from him in relation to Mathews's mission.⁶⁰

Hawkins's letter reached Washington on 4 April 1812. Its arrival was a critical factor in Madison's decision to repudiate Mathews and his revolution, as can be seen from the following cir-

59. The cover of Mathews's 6 March 1812 letter, though damaged by fire, was docketed by Hawkins as being received at the Creek Agency on 18 March. It was then sent to McKee at Fort Stoddert.

60. Benjamin Hawkins to Eustis, 23 March 1812, docketed as received on 4 April 1812 with a clerk's endorsement: "states the substance of a Letter from Gnl. Mathews" (Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered Series, H-185 [6]). When Hawkins wrote that he would co-operate with Mathews, he was assuming that the agent had not been responsible for organizing the seizure of Amelia Island. After learning of the extent of Mathews's role in the revolution, however, he changed his mind, writing to the agent to express his fear that he had "greatly exceeded [his] powers." Indeed, Hawkins continued, "it has been hinted to me that you have originated the whole movement of the Patriots and that you even attempted to aid them with a part of the troops of the United States in disguise." Furthermore, Hawkins protested, it is said that "an agent or spy of Mr. Forbes has been present and made acquainted with every occurrence. If this is true, I think the government will be greatly perplexed by the transaction" (Hawkins to Mathews, 12 April 1812, Charles L. Grant, ed., *Letters, Journals, and Writings of Benjamin Hawkins*, 2 vols., [Savannah, GA, 1980], 2: 606-607).

cumstances. On 14 March 1812, as he was preparing to attack Fernandina, Mathews sent the State Department a rambling and incoherent letter in which he explained that he was about to exercise “as sound a discretion as [his] judgment was capable of” about “the intent & meaning” of his 26 January 1811 instructions. What Mathews did not make plain in this letter was his intention to overthrow the Spanish regimes in both East and West Florida by force. Instead, the letter implied that East Florida had already declared its independence and that Mathews had been engaged in a fruitless effort to obtain ammunition and troops from the U.S. Army commander at St. Marys, Maj. Jacint Laval, to “preoccupy defend & hold” the province “by force” against a foreign invasion. Mathews provided almost nothing in the way of hard evidence to substantiate these claims and the greater part of his letter was a catalogue of angry complaints against Laval, whose refusal to supply ammunition and men for the invading Patriot Army had, in effect, deprived him of the capacity to commence his revolution by seizing the Spanish fort at St. Augustine. Being unwilling to abandon his plans at that point, Mathews had decided to attack Fernandina instead.⁶¹

It cannot be determined exactly when Mathews’s 14 March letter arrived in Washington. Letters usually took from sixteen to twenty-one days to reach the capital from St. Marys, but it is unlikely that the State Department had received Mathews’s letter by 1 April.⁶² Even if it had done so, any reader of its contents, in the

61. See Mathews to Monroe, 14 March 1812, Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Florida. The letter alluded to an East Floridian declaration of independence, but it contained no copy of that document nor did it provide any account of how it had come into being. A report that a regiment of black troops from Jamaica was bound for East Florida came from Henly Wylly, a half-pay British officer, in conversations with Mathews and the leader of the Patriot Army, John Houstoun McIntosh. Wylly refused to put his claims in writing for the Americans, but in a 10 March 1812 letter to McIntosh—which Mathews enclosed to the State Department—he urged them “not to delay, *not for one day*, the accomplishment of their object.” Wylly’s story, which was no more substantial than a similar claim on which Mathews had declined to act in the summer of 1811, has all the hallmarks of an attempt to persuade Mathews to commence the revolution in East Florida before his preparations for it had been completed. If so, the ruse was successful.

62. Mathews’s 14 March letter has no docket date, though that is by no means an unusual circumstance as State Department clerks were far less consistent than their War Department counterparts in recording the receipt of their correspondence. For further discussion of this point, see Stagg, “James Madison and George Mathews,” 48-49.

absence of other supporting information, would have been hard pressed to grasp exactly what Mathews was about to do. That the administration remained in the dark about Mathews's intentions at the beginning of the month also seemed apparent when the British minister, Augustus J. Foster, called at the State Department on 2 April to present overwhelming evidence from his correspondents in East Florida that Mathews had unquestionably seized the fort at Fernandina. In response, the Secretary of State, James Monroe, explained at great length that Mathews had no authority for such activities, but he would not promise a disavowal of them before he had received letters from the agent himself confirming Foster's claims.⁶³ It seems most likely, therefore, that Mathews's 14 March letter did not arrive before 4 April and that it did so at the same time as Hawkins's letter of 23 March. Hawkins's news immediately clarified what Mathews had left unsaid on 14 March while also lending plausibility to the claims made by Foster. The administration promptly took action by repudiating Mathews and transferring his duties on the Florida border to the governor of Georgia, David B. Mitchell, both decisions also being made on 4 April.⁶⁴ In Madison's eyes, Hawkins's account would have been incontestable proof that Mathews and McKee had now departed very far from both the spirit and the letter of their January 1811 instructions. Even worse was the fact that administration was reading about the plans of their agents to overthrow the Spanish authorities in Mobile and Pensacola for the first time. Once a full awareness of the situation had sunk in, repudiation of the East Florida revolution was the only option left—if the administration wished to avoid a series of developments that formed no part of its policies, most notably a war with Spain accompanied by an Indian war on the southern frontier of the nation on the eve of an impending war with Great Britain.⁶⁵

63. Augustus J. Foster to Lord Richard Wellesley, 2 April 1812, Foreign Office, series 5, vol. 85, Public Record Office (microfilm copy).

64. Monroe to Mathews, 4 April 1812, Domestic Letters of the Department of State, in which the Secretary of State acknowledged the receipt of Mathews's 14 March letter; and also Monroe to David B. Mitchell, 4 April 1812, Keith Read Collection, University of Georgia. For further discussion of the significance of the dating of these letters, see Stagg, "James Madison and George Mathews," 51-52 and n. 91.

65. That the administration had no desire to risk war with Spain was made plain by Monroe when he wrote to John Quincy Adams, the American minister in Russia, about the U.S. declaration of war against Great Britain as follows: "It

In conclusion, therefore, the hitherto unknown 27 July 1810 letter of Crawford to Robert Smith, supplemented by the unexamined letters between Mathews, McKee, and John Forbes in McKee's surviving papers, provide sufficient evidence to suggest that Madison's two agents on the Gulf Coast departed from their instructions between 1810 and 1812 not merely because of an excess of enthusiasm for the cause of taking Florida into the Union but also because their decisions were shaped by personal concerns arising from their business interests. Both agents, but Mathews in particular, attempted to implement their instructions to try and bring both East Florida and the residue of Spanish West Florida into the Union in ways that were intended to protect the interests of John Forbes and Company. And while the evidence suggests that Mathews had conceived his scheme to overthrow the government of East Florida before he knew about the threat posed by the petition of Richard Raynal Keene to both his interests and those of John Forbes, the prospect that Mathews might not be able to realize his goal of purchasing land from Forbes would have provided him with a strong motive to persist with his plans for a revolt in East Florida, even after the administration had declined to sanction it. It was this blending of their private concerns with their official duties that led Mathews and McKee to plot unauthorized and unsuccessful rebellions against the colonial regimes in both East Florida and West Florida, and in the case of the former the result was a fiasco that was to lead the United States into a brutal guerilla war that could not be terminated until the American and Patriot forces were withdrawn from the province in May of 1813. In that context, the misconduct of its agents was to cause the administration nothing but difficulties and embarrassments, as Madison himself remarked to Jefferson when he complained that in East Florida Mathews had played out "a tragic-comedy in the face of common sense, as well as of his instructions. His extravagances place us in the most distressing dilemma."⁶⁶

is not distinctly known what effect this measure may have on the Spanish Regency at Cadiz and on the Government of Portugal, but it is hoped it will produce no change whatever. It is for their interest as well as for that of the United States that we should remain friends" (see Monroe to John Quincy Adams, 1 July 1812, *Diplomatic Instructions of the Department of State: Instructions to Ministers*, RG 59, National Archives).

66. Madison to Jefferson, 24 April 1812, *Madison Papers: Presidential Series*, 4: 346.

For the agents, the results were more mixed. In Mathews's case, the East Florida revolution was a personal disaster. His repudiation at the hands of Madison so enraged and humiliated him that he threatened to return to Washington to embarrass the administration by exposing the underhanded aspects of his assignment. Fortunately for the president, he died in August 1812 before he could do so.⁶⁷ Nor did Mathews ever get to conclude his land transaction with John Forbes, though his failure to do so was hardly the first unsuccessful venture of this nature in his career. When his affairs were finally settled in the summer of 1813, the United States allowed his estate a balance of \$4,785.70 from the total costs of his mission with McKee, but by then that was cold comfort indeed.⁶⁸ McKee, on the other hand, did rather better. He went to Washington in the summer of 1812 to settle his and Mathews's accounts, from which he duly received the sum of \$2,483.72 in March 1813, in addition to the \$500.00 he had claimed in January 1811.⁶⁹ By August 1812, he had also been given "very strong assurances from high authority" that he would receive future employment in public service.⁷⁰ In April 1814 McKee was reappointed to the Choctaw agency, to replace the agent Silas Dinsmoor who had succeeded him in 1802. He was to serve in that capacity until 1821 when he resigned to take up new positions, first as the Register of the Land Office in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and then as an Alabama representative to the United States Congress.⁷¹

Appendix

[William Harris Crawford] to Robert Smith
Lexington 27th July 1810

Sir

Your letter of the 20th ult, with its enclosure reached this place on the 17th inst, but owing to my absence was not recd. until the 23d. Few men in this part of the State could be induced, at this sea-

67. Patrick, *Florida Fiasco*, 174-78.

68. For Mathews's accounts, see the claims numbered 26, 537 and 27, 051 in the Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts of the General Accounting Office.

69. For McKee's accounts, see claim no. 26, 544, *ibid.*

70. McKee to Edmund Pendleton Gaines, 14 October 1812, McKee Papers.

71. John Armstrong to McKee, 30 April 1814, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War: Letters Sent, Indian Affairs, RG 75, National Archives. For reasons that are unclear, however, the Senate was not to confirm the appointment until April 1818 (see *Senate Executive Proceedings*, 3: 139).

son of the year, to risk their health in that country. My acquaintance in the Southeastern counties is very limited, and in a case of so much importance and delicacy, it was absolutely necessary for me to see and converse with the man to be employed, before I could venture to fill the blank in the commission.

While endeavoring to select the man qualified to fulfil the expectations of the government, I recd a visit from Genl George Mathews formerly governor of this State, who for some years past has led an erratic life. Upon introducing the subject of the Floridas I discovered that his ideas perfectly coincided with those of the government, in relation to them, and the means proper to be employed in the present crisis. I learned from him, that he had been for some time, in treaty with the House of Panton & Forbes of Pensacola, for the purchase of a tract of country, owned by them in the vicinity of St Marks, and would shortly set out for the former place to close the contract. Upon sounding him, I found he would willingly undertake to execute the commission which the government had inclosed to me, but would not abandon his journey to Pensacola.

Notwithstanding the commission does not [con]template his visiting any part of West Florida until further instructions, the qualifications which he possesses for the execution of such an agency are so decidedly superior to those of any other man of my acquaintance, that I have ventured to fill the blank in the commission with his name.⁷² The circumstance of his contemplated purchase; his acquaintance with many of the principal Spanish officers, and especially with governor Foulk [Folch], from whom he intends to procure letters of recommendation to the governor, and principal men of East Florida; his being wholly unconnected with the government for the last ten or fifteen years, will, in my apprehension, greatly facilitate the execution of the trust reposed in him. He attaches great importance to the acquisition of the Floridas, & will be ambitious to promote their annexation to the United States.

His ideas are that the U.S. ought to risk a war with either France or Great Britain should either of them attempt to seize those provinces. I have filled the second blank with the highest

72. A copy of the instructions, dated 20 June 1810, which directed an agent to go into East Florida and West Florida as far as Pensacola but not into "the residue of West Florida" without further directions, may be found in Territorial Papers of the Department of State, Orleans Territory, RG 59, National Archives.

sum mentioned by you; Sensible indeed am I that that sum was no inducement with the Genl to enter into the views of the government.⁷³ The orthography of the Genl is proverbial among us, and his manuscripts some times require a Key, but when deciphered, are full of good sense, clear and forcible. He sets out for Pensacola in about a week, & will be at St. Augustin in six weeks from that time. If this arrangement should not meet with the approbation of the President, I can only regret, that he had not made the Selection himself.⁷⁴ The delay is the only difficulty in the case, & I feel confident the advantages which will flow from Genl. Mathews's appointment will abundantly compensate for that. I have just recd two letters from Fort St. Stephens which informs me that the people in that part of the territory are about to seize upon Mobile & Pensacola, and after they have taken them, intend to surrender them to the government.⁷⁵ The author of the letters, states, that he had prevailed on them, to postpone the enterprize, until he could obtain my opinion of its propriety. It would seem, that our citizens mean to supply the want of enterprize, so much complained of by some in the government. I answered the letters by the last mail, by saying, if the government meant, that those places should be forcibly taken, that it had the means in its own hands, & would not willingly be under obligations to a set of adventurers. I have the honor to be very respectfully Your most obt Servt

Library of Congress (Miscellaneous Mss, Robert Smith). Unsigned; in the hand of Crawford. Franked at Lexington, Georgia, on 30 July 1810 and in Washington, Georgia, on September 11. Docketed by John Graham as "Govr Mathews going into Florida."

73. The sum mentioned by the secretary of state was "three four or five dollars pr. Day, according to the talent & standing in Society of the person" (see Smith to Crawford, 20 July 1810).

74. In acknowledging Crawford's 27 July 1810 letter, Smith stated that he had forwarded it to Madison, who expressed himself to be "perfectly satisfied" with Crawford's decision, adding that it was "indeed a most fortunate circumstance that threw in your way Genl. Mathews, who well understanding the views of the executive, cannot but be happy in promoting them" (see Smith to Crawford, 2 October 1810, *Domestic Letters of the Department of State*).

75. These letters were apparently written by Joseph Carson, a member of the Legislative Council for the Mississippi Territory, and Lewis Sewall, Register of the Land Office at St. Stephens in Mississippi Territory (see Harry Toulmin to Madison, 28 July 1810, *Madison Papers: Presidential Series*, 2: 449). Although they have long since been lost, there can be little doubt that their contents were intended to inform Crawford about the plans of the so-called Mobile Society, headed by Joseph Pulaski Kennedy, to take advantage of the anticipated *demiAmerican Historical Review*