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William Augustus Bowles on the Gulf Coast, 1787-1803: Unraveling a Labyrinthine Conundrum

by Gilbert C. Din

Colorful William Augustus Bowles has presented problems to historians for as long as they have written about him. He purposely promoted confusion about himself to inflate his personality and achievements, and historians unacquainted with his devious machinations made them worse by repeating them. One egregious error mixed him up with Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco), a nineteenth-century Seminole chief, and he sometimes was called Billy Bowles, a moniker absent in the multitude of contemporary documents written by and about him.¹ The most common mistake describes him as the director general of the Creeks. Though Bowles gained military sway over a group of Indians enticed by promises of arms and goods, he neither ruled formally over the Creeks, Seminoles, and other Indians of the American Southeast, nor achieved his cherished ambition of becoming their director general. Despite his failures, his boastful claims wrongly manipulated later credulous investigators into believing that he had succeeded. In opposition to his assertions, however, the Spaniards generated a plethora of records that accurately detailed

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1. A description of the real Billy Bowlegs is in John K. Mahon and Brent R. Weisman, "Florida's Seminole and Miccosukee Peoples," in *The New History of Florida*, edited by Michael Gannon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 196-201.

Bowles's escapades on the Florida Gulf Coast during his sojourns there between 1787-1792 and 1799-1803, when he attempted and failed to build the indigenous nation of Muskogee under his direction.² The Spaniards became his most ardent adversaries because he trampled on their lands trying to achieve his ends. They stoutly denied his pretensions and disparagingly labeled him an adventurer. Of the primary sources that discuss Bowles's activities, theirs are the most reliable since they distinguished their reality from his fantasy. As long ago as 1954, R. S. Cotterill acknowledged the value of Spanish records when he wrote, "Any account of Bowles not based on the Spanish archives is of little value."³

Understanding Bowles is complicated because he fabricated numerous stories about himself that obscured his true persona. Disentangling fact from fiction in Bowles's anomalous life has beleaguered historians inasmuch as many avoided the Spanish documentation and trusted Bowles's own published writings or utterances. But little of what he wrote or said can be trusted as factual. It was on just grounds that the Creeks labeled him "Oquelúsa Micco" (King of Liars), and contemporaries not in his camp wholeheartedly agreed.⁴ Bowles, nevertheless, had his own coterie of followers, then as now, who saw him through a different if not a deceptive prism.⁵

2. Among the historians who have erred on Bowles are Andrew McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 80-81; Jane G. Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 217; Jack D. L. Holmes, ed., *Documentos inéditos para la historia de la Luisiana, 1792-1810* (Ediciones José Porrua Turanzas, Madrid, 1963), 56, fn 47; Duvon C. Corbitt and John Tate Lanning, eds., "A Letter of Marque Issued by William Augustus Bowles as Director General of the State of Muskogee," *Journal of Southern History* 11 (May 1945): 258; Elisha P. Douglass, "The Adventurer Bowles," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series, 6 (January 1949): 3-23; Isaac Joslin Cox, *The West Florida Controversy, 1798-1813: A Study in American Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns-Hopkins Press, 1918), 140; and several works by J. Leitch Wright, Jr.; see, for example, *The Only Land They Knew: The Tragic Story of the American Indians in the Old South* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), 285.
3. R. S. Cotterill, *The Southern Indians: The Story of the Civilized Tribes before Removal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 79n.
4. Marqués de Casa-Calvo to the Captain General of Cuba, no. 10 reserved, New Orleans, May 10, 1800, Archivo General de Indias (Seville), Papeles procedentes de la isla de Cuba, legajo (hereafter abbreviated as AGI, PC, leg.) 154C.
5. Lyle N. McAlister showed the divided contemporary opinion about Bowles: "Among the host of adventurers, dreamers, filibusters and trouble-makers who have added drama to the pages of Florida history, William Augustus Bowles yields to none. Among his enemies, and these were in the majority, he was referred to epithets ranging from the relatively mild 'that fellow Bowles' to the more emphatic 'vagabond,' 'desperado,' 'Black Guard,' 'Captain Liar,'

One of Bowles's contemporaries, the merchant William Panton, knew him intimately as a commercial rival and made no bones about his personality. In 1792 Panton bluntly described Bowles to the governor of Louisiana and West Florida, the Baron de Carondelet:

[F]rom what I have heard of him his volubility of speech can only be equaled by his Empudence in uttering the grocest falsehoods, when it suits his purpose, & which he can express with a Countenance so open & composed, as to give the appearance of truth to the greatest lies and inconsistency's—deceit and dissimulation are the weapons in his hands by which he has risen into Notice, and there is no baseness that he will not comit to gain his point, & to gratify the unworthy malignity of Lord Dunmore Governor of the Bahamas, for whom I suspect he only acts as a tool in this business.⁶

An examination of Bowles's character from the perspective of two-hundred-year-old documents and written by people who knew him well leads to a number of conclusions: he was an ambitious and uninhibited extrovert with an inflated ego, oozed charm and braggadocio to disarm strangers and opponents, and possessed a grim determination to persevere in his objectives regardless of the odds or costs.⁷ Bowles zealously craved attention, importance, and authority, and he directed every activity in his adult life toward

and 'desperate vile adventurer.' Among the smaller number of friends and admirers, he was known variously as 'Beloved Warrior,' 'Captain,' 'General,' and 'Director General.'" McAlister, ed., "The Marine Forces of William Augustus Bowles and his 'State of Muskogee,'" *Florida Historical Quarterly* 31 (July 1953): 3. The status hungry Bowles bestowed on himself the ranks and titles he sported.

6. William Panton to the Baron de Carondelet, Pensacola, February 14, 1792, in D. C. Corbitt, ed. and trans., "Papers Relating to the Georgia-Florida Frontier, 1784-1800," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 22 (March 1938): 74-75. Bowles, similar to many other self-centered persons, tried to project himself as a successful and appealing personality and changed aspects of his life to fit his circumstance. As Allison Glock wrote about Tammy Wynette who also reinvented herself, "The lies were so thick and many that they became the truth, her life a story of her own creation." Allison Glock's review of Jimmy McDonough's *Tammy Wynette: Tragic Country Queen*, in the *New York Times*, March 3, 2010.
7. Among Spanish officials whom Bowles charmed were Governors Esteban Miró and the Baron de Carondelet of Louisiana and West Florida. He failed, however, with Captain General of Cuba Luis de Las Casas and the Spanish ambassador in London the Conde del Campo. Las Casas to the Conde de Floridablanca, nos. 16 reserved and 18, Havana, March 28 and April 21, 1792, respectively, Archivo General de Simancas (Simancas, Spain), Guerra Moderna (hereafter abbreviated as AGS, GM), leg. 6916, file 50. Also see below.

achieving those goals. Doing so, however, was not easy given his background. Equipped with the equivalent of an elementary-school education when he left home at age thirteen to serve the king in war, he turned autodidact when peace returned to broaden his horizons, and he soon applied his knowledge to advance his roguish endeavors. Possessing no more than scant personal resources, Bowles brazenly disregarded the truth and chose deception and audacity as the paths to pursue in life. Among the many examples of his dishonesty, he exaggerated British backing for creation of his Indian state of Muskogee (the Creek homeland), blew up his importance among the southeastern Indians and his success in winning their cooperation, and overstated his ability to secure gifts and arms for them from Nassau in the Bahama Islands.⁸ His shortcomings in these and other boasts earned him disparaging epithets from opponents and disillusioned followers.

Despite Cotterill's admonition mentioned above, few researchers have consulted the Spanish documentation about him, and none has explored the papers extensively. Instead, they mined only specific records on topics related to their narrow interests.⁹ Much of the misunderstanding about Bowles can be attributed to the writings of J. Leitch Wright, Jr. His *William Augustus Bowles: Director General of the Creeks*, now several decades old, is the sole modern book-length study on Bowles. However, it is based on the flawed premise that accepted Bowles as the director general of the Creeks. Wright weakened his

8. Gilbert C. Din, "War on the Gulf Coast: The Spanish Fight against William Augustus Bowles," a book-length manuscript; and Frederick Jackson Turner, ed., "English Policy toward America in 1790-1791, Part I," *American Historical Review* 7 (July 1902): 706-35, who unwittingly published several unreliable Bowles letters of 1791, written while the adventurer was in London misrepresenting himself and Muskogee. Turner described Bowles positively: "His memoirs give him a most romantic career, as portrait painter, actor and forest diplomat, and relate how he led the Indians in the English service in the final operations against the Spaniards of Florida, in the Revolutionary War." *Ibid.*, 708-709.

9. Articles on Bowles, and none of them recent, include McAlister's two works: "Marine Forces," 3-27, and "William Augustus Bowles and the State of Muskogee," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 30 (April 1962): 317-28; Lawrence Kinnaird's two articles: "The Significance of William Augustus Bowles' Seizure of Panton's Apalachee Store in 1792," *FHQ*, 9 (January 1931): 156-92; and "International Rivalry in the Creek Country: Part I. The Ascendency of Alexander McGillivray, 1783-1789," *FHQ*, 10 (October 1931): 59-85; Lawrence Kinnaird and Lucia Burk Kinnaird, "War Comes to San Marcos," *FHQ*, 62 (July 1983): 25-43; David H. White, "The Spaniards and William Augustus Bowles in Florida, 1799-1803," *FHQ*, 54 (October 1975): 145-55; Corbitt and Lanning, eds., "A Letter of Marque," 246-61; Samuel Watson, "William Augustus Bowles," *American Historical Magazine* 5 (1900): 195-99. See the notes below for more articles on Bowles.

study by using few Spanish documents, and many of them were Bowles's own letters that Wright accepted unquestioned. He further depicted Bowles sympathetically, interpreted records unabashedly to favor his subject, and seemed unaware that much of Bowles's writings, as well as the oldest works about him, could not be trusted.¹⁰

To understand Bowles and determine his rightful place in Gulf Coast history requires an examination of his life and an explanation how some of the worst distortions about him originated. To begin, he was born to an English family in Frederick, Maryland, perhaps on November 2, 1763.¹¹ A year after the outbreak of the American War for Independence, he enlisted in a Maryland loyalist infantry regiment and accompanied his unit in 1778 to reinforce the British garrison at Pensacola, West Florida. About a year later, Bowles became a regimental cadet before insubordination or ennui caused his dismissal or desertion (a common occurrence in all eighteenth-century armies), and he joined a group of Creeks headed by Setuthli Micco that was leaving Pensacola.¹² Nearby rivers that emptied into the Gulf

10. J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *William Augustus Bowles: Director General of the Creek Nation* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1967). In Wright's conclusion to his biography, he attempted to draw parallels between Bowles and Francisco Miranda, a renowned precursor in Venezuela's struggle for independence from Spain. Wright described Bowles as gregarious, versatile, and a natural leader, who evoked admiration and friendship or bitter denunciation. He further stated that Bowles used his talents fully, and "he played out the game until the end." In reality, his "talents" often led him astray, especially in 1803, when he refused to recognize his impending capture and imprisonment. *Ibid.*, 172-74.
11. Authors differ on dates for Bowles's birth. Corbitt and Lanning, eds., in "A Letter of Marque," 247, base their date of November 2, 1763, on nineteenth-century Maryland records, which seems a reasonable assumption. However, Arthur Preston Whitaker, in "William Augustus Bowles," *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 519, uses October 22, 1764, without providing a source.
12. Bowles was never an "ensign" in the navy as several authors have contended. Among writers who incongruously stated that he was in both the army and navy is Elisha P. Douglass, "The Adventurer Bowles," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 6 (January 1949): 3-4. The rank of ensign in his army regiment was akin to cadet. It was a designation the British army employed well into the nineteenth century. William Augustus Bowles, *Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles* (1791; New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), 2-13. Bowles did not become an officer at age fourteen; he was too young and inexperienced to suddenly be thrust into active service over older and more knowledgeable soldiers. He needed instruction first, and most cadets trained in their regiments. E. A. Jones, in his "The Real Author of the Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 17 (1923): 300-308, correctly points out that Benjamin Baynton interviewed Bowles for the book he soon published as the *Authentic Memoirs*. Never at a loss for words in interviews about his life, Bowles deftly crafted answers to fit his circumstance. Consistency was not in his lexicon, and his differing descriptions of the same events have added to the confusion about him.



William Augustus Bowles, 1763-1805.

of Mexico led up to the Creek homeland. The Lower Creeks lived mostly in towns scattered along the rivers of present-day western Georgia, while the Upper Creeks resided on the streams in modern eastern and central Alabama. During a two-year stint among the Native Americans, the precocious teenager became acquainted with their customs, languages, and women (he took wives among the Cherokees and the Lower Creeks).¹³

13. Wright, *Bowles*, 11-13. Creeks, or the many tribes and different language-speakers that comprised these groups, moved about over time. See Gregory A. Waselkov and Marvin T. Smith, "Upper Creek Archaeology," and John E. Worth, "The Lower Creeks: Origins and Early History," both in *Indians of the*

Bowles returned to army service at Pensacola in 1781, just in time to be captured upon its surrender to the Spaniards on May 9. The day before the British capitulation, he was promoted to the bottom rank of army officers in his Maryland regiment.¹⁴ Paroled quickly from a Havana prison camp with other prisoners from Pensacola, he sat out the rest of the war in New York City studying theatrics. When peace arrived, he became a half-pay British army officer, who performed no duties until he was recalled to active service and sailed to the loyalist refuge of Nassau in the British Bahamas.¹⁵

Bowles devoted the next four years to improving his interrupted education and deciding on a livelihood. The new United States, where his parents and siblings lived, no longer interested him. In Nassau, he read broadly on subjects such as history and literature, studied languages, and honed his theatrical and artistic skills. In addition, he visited Florida and renewed contact with the Creeks, an indication of his interest in the area and its people. In 1787 he made a momentous decision when he signed on as an agent, or possibly as a junior partner, with the Nassau merchant John Miller and Gov. John Murray of the Bahamas, the latter better known as Lord Dunmore. British merchants sought to open a regular commerce with the Creeks and Seminoles to compensate for the trade they lost when the Floridas returned to Spanish hands in 1783.¹⁶ His new employment took Bowles, who was acquainted with southeastern languages and claimed adoption by a minor Lower Creek chief, back to West Florida, where his talks and promises fired the imagination of the goods-starved Natives. Perhaps the warm reception he received stimulated his agile mind to start scheming about projects beyond the scope of his associates. In particular, he sought to organize Muskogee into an autochthonous nation, with

Greater Southeast: Historical Archaeology and Ethnohistory, edited by Bonnie G. McEwan (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 242-64, and 265-98, respectively; and Robbie Ethridge, *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

14. Bowles's autobiographical sketch, on board the frigate *Misisipi*, May 26, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, file 50.
15. *Ibid.*, Wright, *Bowles*, 7-18.
16. Nassau merchants, some of whom outfitted corsairs, suffered financial losses when Spain conquered Nassau during the American War for Independence, and they were anxious to recoup losses through a trade with the southeastern Indians, which the British also had lost on leaving Florida. James A. Lewis, *The Final Campaign of the American Revolution: Rise and Fall of the Spanish Bahamas* (Columbus, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 105-106.

himself in charge as its director general.¹⁷ To do so, however, first meant divesting Alexander McGillivray, reputed head of the Creek Confederation, of leadership, and given his popularity among the Upper Creeks, that was no mean task.¹⁸

With the defeat and departure of Great Britain from its former thirteen colonies and from East and West Florida, McGillivray realized that his people desperately needed a new arms supplier to enable them to resist American intrusion on tribal territory. Frontiersmen plied a relentless land-grabbing attack on them. Georgians behaved most aggressively and, beginning in 1783 and continuing for several years, negotiated fraudulent land cessions signed by one or two liquored-up and gift-laden chiefs who lacked the authority to act for the entire nation.¹⁹

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17. On the Creeks, see Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999); J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *Creeks and Seminoles: The Destruction and Regeneration of the Muscogulge People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); and José Antonio Armillas Vicente, "La Gran Confederación India: Interacción Hispano-Angloamericana con las naciones indias del Sudeste norteamericano a fines del S. XVIII," in *Estudios sobre la política indigenista española en América*, 2 vols. (Valladolid: Seminario de Historia de América, Universidad de Valladolid, 1976), 2: 249-66. Kinnaird, in "International Rivalry," 68-69, with material taken from Bowles's *Authentic Memoirs*, p.19, believed that on his first trip to Apalache in the eastern Florida panhandle, Bowles coerced the Spaniards at nearby Fort San Marcos to let him introduce a shipload of Nassau goods. However, Spanish policy would not permit it, Spanish records do not confirm the event, and the Spaniards were not so feeble as to allow it. Bowles's idea of creating Muskogee was not an original concept except for its indigenous inhabitants. The American West of that time (trans-Appalachia) witnessed several attempts at "nation building," such as Franklin, Cumberland, and James Wilkinson's effort to establish a separate polity in Kentucky. Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* 4th ed.; (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1974), 202-203, 226-27. The southeastern Indians never depended on Bowles for their own political formation.
18. On McGillivray, see John Walton Caughey, *McGillivray of the Creeks* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1938), 3-57; Arthur Preston Whitaker, "Alexander McGillivray, 1783-1789," and "Alexander McGillivray, 1789-1793," both in *North Carolina Historical Review* 5 (1928): 181-203 and 289-309, respectively; and Kinnaird, "International Rivalry," 59-85.
19. Bowles's 1792 autobiographical sketch; Caughey, *McGillivray*, 21-33; Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783-1812* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 14, 27-31, 38-42, 49-48. Randolph C. Downes, in "Creek-American Relations, 1782-1790," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 21 (June 1937): 142-83, and "Creek-American Relations, 1790-1795," *Journal of Southern History* 8 (August 1942): 350-73, typifies earlier American historians who viewed highhanded Georgia treaties as legitimate. More accurate is Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy*, 24-31.

When Georgia obtained the first treaty, McGillivray hurriedly sought out the Spaniards and negotiated an agreement of friendship and trade at Pensacola in 1784. Spain consented to provide the Creeks with manufactured goods and arms. However, weapons for these Natives began to dwindle three years later when armed clashes shook the tranquility of the Creeks' hunting domains nearest the Georgians. Gov. Esteban Miró of Louisiana and West Florida worried that providing arms might ignite a war with the United States, and he terminated further deliveries. But as fate decreed, Bowles appeared at that crucial juncture like a messiah preaching his ability to introduce cheaper goods and arms, although he brought few and was no more than a messenger for the Nassau merchants and governor who were anxious to extend their fortunes. In pursuit of his ambitions, Bowles soon claimed leadership over all southeastern Indians, but more realistically it extended only to loyal followers among the Seminoles and various Lower Creek towns. Arms and trade goods at bargain prices became the lures that attached them to Bowles, and the connection persisted through many thorny years before petering out. The Upper Creeks, among whom McGillivray possessed his greatest influence in the Indian confederation, only briefly fell into Bowles's orbit when the Spanish supply of weapons dried up. The chief terminated his association when he learned that Bowles schemed to wrest the reins of Creek leadership for himself and failed to deliver promised arms.²⁰

Bowles, meanwhile, had been encouraged by his initial visit to the Creeks and, in 1788, confidently plunged pell mell into the morass of southeastern intrigue with a filibustering expedition devoted to founding Muskogee. To do so, he had to oust Panton, Leslie and Company that with Spanish permission supplied British trade goods and arms to the tribesmen. However, Bowles's opéra bouffe-like thrust into the Florida wilderness quickly foundered because of his wretched leadership, his inability to recruit more than three dozen apathetic white volunteers, and the speedy desertion of most of them. More embarrassing, his indigenous cohorts failed to rise up in his behalf. Returning to Nassau, he and his part-

20. Whitaker, "McGillivray, 1783-1789," 200-202. Whitaker exaggerated Bowles's strength among the Natives. James W. Covington, in *The Seminoles of Florida* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1993), 18-25, summarized Bowles's involvement with the Creeks and the Seminoles, a divergent Creek group.

ners reassessed the means to achieve their ends and concluded that they needed substantial help, which the government in London might provide. Creeks had favored the British in the late war and presumably would welcome their return. Consequently, Bowles, accompanied by five "Indian chiefs" who were in fact English-speaking mestizos—two Lower Creeks and three Cherokees and not one of them a Seminole—planned a journey to England. The so-called chiefs would bear witness to his alleged status in the tribes and sway the London public with spectacular shows into supporting his projects. In this calculated way, Bowles hoped to gain British trade and protection.²¹

His party traveled first to Canada and then across the Atlantic in 1790. The passage coincided with the Anglo-Spanish Nootka Sound Controversy, a war scare that involved conflicting territorial claims in today's American Northwest that borders with Canada, and it momentarily helped him. But when the prospect of hostilities simmered down, the only concession he derived for ships flying his personally designed Muskogee flag was trade at Nassau that already was a duty-free port.²²

In 1791 Bowles returned to West Florida determined to destroy the Panton Company and seize control of the Southeast. Meanwhile, McGillivray had dishonored his standing within the Creek Confederation by signing the Treaty of New York in 1790 that ceded to the United States a large parcel of frontier land now in central Georgia and netted him an annual pension. For several months Bowles did little more than denounce McGillivray's failings. However, that changed in January 1792, when he and his allies sacked the undefended Panton trading post on the Wakulla River, four miles above Fort San Marcos de Apalache in the far eastern Florida panhandle. Although an easy victory for Bowles and his white and Indian minions, that unlawful act alarmed the Spaniards because more Natives stampeded into Bowles's camp. Quite by

21. Wright, *Bowles*, 26-35. On the Panton Company, see William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Borderlands: Panton, Leslie and Company and John Forbes and Company* (Pensacola: University Presses of Florida, 1986). Wright, in *Bowles*, 173, contended that his subject was "a natural leader." If this were true, Bowles would have been more successful in recruiting whites and Indians, but he failed, particularly when their divergent interests clashed.

22. William R. Manning, "The Nootka Sound Controversy," Part XVI of *Annual Report for the American Historical Association for the Year 1904* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1905): 279-478; Turner, ed., "English Policy," 711-35.

chance, Governor Carondelet already had sent a Spanish ship to Apalache with naval lieutenant José de Evia to invite Bowles to New Orleans to discuss his economic plans. Bowles wanted a port on the Spanish Gulf Coast where his partners would sell goods to the indigenous people. At Pensacola Evia learned about Pantón's plundered store and the estrangement of Indians. Capturing the bandit now became Evia's primary objective to quiet the restless tribes. On reaching Fort San Marcos de Apalache, the naval lieutenant, who lacked the armed force necessary to seize Bowles in the wilderness, expressed an avid interest in his trading schemes and invited him to the fort for talks. Evia granted him permission to enter the fort with a twenty-man bodyguard. But Bowles carelessly chose four warriors instead, and neither he nor they resisted when Evia swept him away to New Orleans. Why the worldly-wise adventurer, who practiced deceit as an art form, permitted himself to fall into Spanish hands is difficult to explain, given that he had sacked Pantón's store the month before. Perhaps his ego convinced him that his violent act had pressured the Spaniards into listening to his wiles for a rival trading post or a Muskogee state.²³

For the next seven years, Bowles was absent from the Gulf Coast, spending most of this time as a prisoner of state in Spain and

23. J. Leitch Wright, Jr., "Creek-American Treaty of 1790: Alexander McGillivray and the Diplomacy of the Old Southwest," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 51 (Winter 1967): 379-400; Capt. Gen. Luis de Las Casas to the Conde de Floridablanca, Havana, April 21, 1792, in *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 3 Parts, edited by Lawrence Kinnaird (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 3:27-34. The letter summarizes Bowles's activities between 1788 and 1792 from a Spanish perspective. AGS, GM, leg. 6916, file 50, contains documents on José de Evia's trip to Fort San Marcos, and many are published in Jack D. L. Holmes, *José de Evia y sus reconocimientos del Golfo de Mexico, 1783-1796* (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1968), 195-230. Whitaker, in "William Augustus Bowles," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner, 1929), 519-20, asserted incorrectly that Carondelet planned an "unsavory stratagem" to capture Bowles. Actually, Evia planned the arrest because he left New Orleans before Carondelet learned about the seizure of Pantón's store. Besides blatantly ignoring Bowles's criminal act as Spanish justification for his capture, Whitaker erred when he alleged that Folch first suggested a 4,500 peso (£1,000) reward for Bowles; however, Britisher Pantón was responsible hence the £1,000 figure. Whitaker also inserted unreliable information in his sketch about Bowles. Although Bowles was in Spanish custody in 1792, he was not treated like a criminal until reaching Havana. In New Orleans Carondelet housed him in the army barracks, ordered new clothes for him because he arrived wearing Indian rags, and permitted him to write letters. Carondelet to Las Casas, New Orleans, March 13, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, file 50; Carondelet to the Conde de Floridablanca, New Orleans, May 22, 1792, Mississippi Provincial Archives, Spanish Domination (hereafter abbreviated as MPA, SD), vol. 4, ff. 121-33.

the Philippines. After two years in Peninsular jails, a year-long voyage to the Philippines, and an initial fifteen-month imprisonment in Manila, the Spaniards turned him loose in the city. He had to support himself and was required to report daily to a magistrate. He exploited his quasi-freedom to torment officials with shocking letters, public denunciations in the streets, and impossible demands. His defiant racket eventually drew the ire of outraged superior authorities, and it goaded them into shipping him back to Spain in 1797, in another journey that consumed more than a year.²⁴

At a stopover on the west coast of Africa, the astute Bowles escaped from the prison of his ship, found refuge on another vessel, and plotted a course back to the Gulf Coast. Through unforeseen twists and turns, he landed on a ship sailing to England and wound up in London by fall of 1798. He had not forgotten his dream of building Muskogee and again began drumming up support for an Indian polity that he would control. He made preposterous declarations to the British government, which now was at war with Spain, about using his indigenous followers to capture the entire Spanish Gulf Coast from Florida to Texas, and perhaps Mexico, too. His lengthy absence from his warriors did not trouble him, but his boisterous assurances of their willingness to serve him failed to persuade cautious British officials. They merely provided him with transportation back to the Gulf Coast. In the process, the war brigantine *Fox* that carried him and his party from Jamaica in September 1799 wrecked in a storm on St. George's Island, a barrier island opposite the mouth of the Apalachicola River. Loss of the *Fox* destroyed most of Bowles's small cache of arms, munitions, and trade goods intended to rouse tribal warriors into rallying around him and his Muskogee flag.²⁵

24. "Dictate by the Attorney for the Council of the Indies on the Return to Spain from the Philippines of Bowles," Madrid, August 30, 1798, Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid), Estado (hereafter abbreviated as AHN, Est.), leg. 3889bis, file 10. See also other documents on Bowles in this file. Douglass, in "Adventurer Bowles," 18, believed that in the Philippines, the Spaniards offered Bowles "any position he wanted in the administration of Luzon." It was clearly a Bowles deception. Letters from Spanish officials in the Philippines do not uphold Douglass' absurd contention. Wright, in *Bowles*, 87-106, related the adventurer's travels, relying on his subject's letters.

25. Wright, *Bowles*, 94-115. Andrew Ellicott, in his *Journal of Andrew Ellicott* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), 226-34, recounts meeting Bowles on St. George's Island after his shipwreck. A week later, Ellicott informed Capt. Tomás Portell at Fort San Marcos of Bowles's presence on the island; it was the first news the Spaniards received that he had returned to the Gulf Coast.

During the next year, Bowles proceeded with his plans while he evaded the Spaniards who tried diligently to recapture him, but lacked the manpower to reach him in the hinterland. Meanwhile, Bowles again found general assistance among the Seminoles, opposition from the Upper Creeks, and a split between approval and condemnation among the Lower Creeks. He presumed to call himself a chief and the director general of the Creek Confederation, titles that enraged the Upper Creeks.²⁶ His sole victories in trying to realize his Muskogee plan came when he sacked Pantón's Wakulla store again and besieged Fort San Marcos in April 1800.²⁷

Shortly before the attack began, the Spanish galley squadron that protected the Gulf Coast seized the Nassau schooner *Hawk* that was bringing arms to Bowles on April 1, 1800. He used its capture to spur several hundred warriors and thirty white combatants, mostly sailors who had fled the mired *Hawk*, to support his declaration of war on Spain and lay siege to the fort two weeks later. Bowles severed its land and water communications with Pensacola and the galley squadron that stood guard off the mouth of the Apalachicola River for more Nassau ships. His blockade of the San Marcos de Apalache River allowed him to capture two vessels and prevent two craft that had reached the fort from leaving to warn the squadron. As the siege lengthened to five weeks, Spanish stores and munitions neared depletion. Unable to lift the siege and fearful of a massacre, Capt. Tomás Portell surrendered with terms on May 19. The agreement permitted him to leave with the fatigued garrison and civilian employees on the two vessels.²⁸ Superior offi-

26. The talk denouncing Bowles was made at Tuckabatche by Mad Dog (Efau Hadjo), speaker for the nation, and it is published in "A Talk of the Creek Nation Respecting William Augustus Bowles," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 11 (July 1932): 33-34. See also note 35.

27. Pantón lost \$16,054 on this occasion. Robert S. Cotterill, "A Chapter of Pantón, Leslie and Company," *Journal of Southern History* 10 (August 1944): 277.

28. Fort San Marcos de Apalache's weaknesses are examined from different perspectives in Gilbert C. Din, "In Defense of Captain Tomás Portell: An Episode in the History of Spanish West Florida," *Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos* 12, nos. 21-22 (2001): 143-58; and in Gilbert C. Din, "William Augustus Bowles on the Georgia Frontier: A Reexamination of the Spanish Surrender of Fort San Marcos de Apalache in 1800," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 88 (Fall 2004): 305-307. These studies show that Arthur Preston Whitaker's assessment of Bowles, Portell, and Fort San Marcos and its siege in 1800, in *The Mississippi Question, 1795-1803: A Study in Trade, Politics, and Diplomacy* (1934; Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962 rpt.), 169-76, is poorly researched and error-filled. Wright, in *Bowles*, 128-32, provides more information than Whitaker about the siege but accepts his specious interpretation of events.

cials at New Orleans and Pensacola, who without seeing the fort and habituated to protecting scarce royal funds, repeatedly had described its limestone walls as impregnable; despite their reassurances, the weather-beaten structure had countless defects. Bowles held his prize for a month before a Spanish assault with galleys under Lt. Col. Vicente Folch y Juan, commandant at Pensacola, expelled him and his followers in a two-hour combat on the afternoon of June 23, 1800.²⁹

Although Bowles roamed free through the West Florida wilderness for another three years his influence gradually receded. He failed to introduce sufficient goods and arms to satisfy Indian needs, waged a losing naval war with his corsairs against Spanish galleys, and slowly alienated Native American warriors with his endless fighting and unfulfilled promises.³⁰ His repetitive but often unrealized assurances that Nassau ships loaded with goods were coming to fulfill Indian desires validated his name of liar. The Peace of Amiens in 1802 denied Bowles aid from Nassau, and the admiralty court at the city hanged several of his pirates for seizing Spanish vessels. On August 20, a significant party of Seminole chiefs, accompanied by men, women, and children, concluded their hostilities against Spain by signing a peace treaty with Commandant Jacobo DuBreüil at Fort San Marcos, and more chiefs reaffirmed the peace in December. The shortage of goods and constant fighting had exhausted them. As Bowles's support shrank, his last Seminole followers surrendered him at the Upper Creek meeting place of the Hickory Ground during the annual Creek conference in May 1803. His captors then delivered him to New Orleans—traveling via Mobile, not Pensacola as it is often told—and collected a reward. The Spaniards transported him to Havana in June.³¹ In the Cuban capital, the forlorn Bowles gradu-

29. Din, "In Defense of Portell," 143-58. David Hart White, in *Vicente Folch, Governor in Spanish Florida, 1787-1811* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1981), 53-55, discusses Folch's capture of Fort San Marcos but incorporates errors from the works of Whitaker and Wright.

30. Gilbert C. Din, "Mississippi River Gunboats on the Gulf Coast: The Spanish Naval Fight against William Augustus Bowles, 1799-1803," *Louisiana History* 47 (Summer 2006): 277-308. Jacobo DuBreüil to Gov. Manuel Salcedo, August 30, 1802, in MPA, SD, vol. 7, ff. 604-21; "Preliminary Peace Treaty between the King of Spain and the Seminole villages of West Florida," Fort San Marcos de Apalache, August 20, 1802, AGI, PC, leg. 2367.

31. DuBreüil to Salcedo, no. 160, Apalache, December 25, 1802; "Agreement made at Fort San Marcos," DuBreüil *et al.* for the Spaniards and Oosuchi *et al.* for the Seminoles, December 25, 1802, both in AGI, PC, leg. 76. Various

ally came to grips with his desperate plight, the permanency of the granite walls and iron bars of his prison cell, and his dismal future. After two years, his despondency worsened, and he starved himself to death. He succumbed at the hospital of La Cabaña Castle, not at El Morro Castle, on December 23, 1805.³²

With Bowles's life reviewed, inaccuracies about him that have dominated the published historical literature and been replicated ad infinitum need to be sorted out to determine unequivocally who and what the man was. Only through a careful analysis can the genuine Bowles emerge from his fabricated masquerade.

The fundamental question to ask about him is: Was he really the director general of the Creeks, as J. Leitch Wright, Jr., in the subtitle of his biography about the adventurer boldly asserted and others repeated?³³ Wright appears to be topmost among the writ-

accounts explain Bowles's capture at Hickory Ground. John Forbes, in "A Journal of John Forbes, May 1803: The Seizure of William Augustus Bowles," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 9 (April 1931): 279-89, gave Benjamin Hawkins credit for it, but other people also were responsible, especially the mestizos Thomas Perryman and Jack Cannard. Manuel Salcedo to DuBreuil, New Orleans, October 3, 1803, AGI, PC, leg. 76; DuBreuil to Salcedo, no. 215, San Marcos de Apalache, August 5, 1803, attached to (Salcedo) to the Marqués de Someruelos, no. 440, New Orleans, October 11, 1803, both in *ibid.*, leg. 155B. See also Esteban Folch to Vicente Folch, Hickory Ground, May 29, 1803, *ibid.*, leg. 106A. Whitaker, in *Mississippi Question*, 174, sheds crocodile tears over Bowles's capture in 1803 and his surrender to the Spaniards. He asserts that the apprehension occurred on United States soil. Actually, it was Creek land, the capture had the approval of U. S. Indian Superintendent Benjamin Hawkins, and officials in Washington regarded Bowles as a rogue and desperado and were indifferent as to what the Spaniards did with him. José de Jáudenes and José de Viar to Luis de Las Casas, Philadelphia, July 16, 1792, AGI, PC, leg. 152A, explain the low opinion of Bowles in U. S. government circles. See also Isaac Joslin Cox, *West Florida Controversy*, 140-41.

32. Archivo Nacional de Cuba (Havana), Florida, leg. 5, file 1 (photocopies from the Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans), has a lengthy collection of documents that details Bowles's refusal to testify or take nourishment, his physical deterioration, and his final hospitalization; Whitaker, "Bowles," *Dictionary of American Biography*, 520.
33. Wright, in *Bowles*, 37-38, admitted that only rump councils of Seminoles and Lower Creeks did what Bowles wanted. For example, in 1789 at Coweta, a Lower Creek town, Lower Creeks and Seminoles commissioned Indians to accompany Bowles to London. Only two of the five who went in 1790 were Lower Creeks; three others were Cherokees who did not have their tribe's permission. The Seminoles, his staunchest allies, sent no one. Though Bowles was calling himself a Creek chief and "Director General of the Creek Nation," the latter title was not sanctioned by all Lower Creeks, let alone the entire nation. Seminoles and Lower Creeks permitted Bowles to behave idiosyncratically and call himself whatever he wanted as long as they obtained goods and arms at low prices.

ers who have accepted Bowles's exaggerations as accurate. This is unfortunate because from the viewpoint of the Upper Creeks and other members of the Creek Confederation, Bowles never held a leadership position of any kind nor was he ever chosen by an all-Creek council to such a post. Furthermore, he was never the director of the Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws as he sometimes contended. He once boasted to Spanish officials in Madrid that he had united these three tribes and the Creeks into a grand confederation.³⁴ However, proof that Bowles did so is lacking. On his return to the Gulf Coast in 1799 and proclamation that he was director general of Muskogee, the Upper Creeks heatedly reacted and denied ever having a white man as a chief, let alone as the head of the Creek Confederation. They emphatically repudiated his phony claims. Nevertheless, he clung to the self-imposed title of director general of Muskogee to the end of his life.³⁵

Furthermore, Bowles's Muskogee state never saw the light of day. Although he issued proclamations in October and November 1799, allegedly in behalf of his Native council, it consisted of only a small group of Seminole and Lower Creek chiefs who welcomed his return to the Gulf Coast. His proclamations announced the creation of Muskogee, decreed the expulsion of Spanish and American government officials from his new polity, and declared the establishment of three ports and fees for imported goods. However, none of these measures took effect. Except for his closest allies, Indians generally and Spaniards specifically labeled his posturing as bogus. His announcements, nevertheless, deluded some later readers into believing that he indeed had founded, and was the grand pooh-bah of, Muskogee.³⁶ But its establishment was difficult to effect because between 1799 and 1803 Bowles had enemies and often lived like a fugitive out of fear that friendly Indian towns could not protect him. Nonetheless Miccosukee, only about

34. Bowles to (the Spanish king), New Providence, August 21, 1789, and Bowles to the Conde de Floridablanca, New Providence, August 30, 1789, both in AHN, Est., leg. 3889bis.

35. "Creek Chief at Tuckabatche," November 25, 1799, enclosed in Marqués de Someruelos to the Marqués de Casa-Calvo, (Havana), January 8, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 154C, contains Mad Dog's denunciation of Bowles.

36. "Bowles Proclamation," Wekiva, October 26, 1799, *ibid.*, leg. 2371; "William Augustus Bowles, Director General of Muskogee," Headquarters at Wekiva, October 31, 1799, MPA, SD, vol. 6, ff. 842-43. Wright, in *Creeks and Seminoles*, 126, believed Thomas Perryman and Chief Kinache were the same person. They definitely were not.

thirty miles from Fort San Marcos and under the charge of Bowles's long-time ally Chief Kinache, did this off and on. Spanish troop shortages and trepidations about marching into an ambush in the darkensses of the forests shielded the town from attack. However, conditions changed by 1802, when many Seminole chiefs and people had wearied of the fruitless war, and they forced Kinache to withdraw his welcome. Bowles then spent more time at Estifungalga, a farther removed village that he described as his "capital."³⁷

Seminoles and Creeks varied in their support for Bowles. While Seminoles and several Lower Creek towns helped him, the more numerous Upper Creeks opposed him from 1789. Neither McGillivray's death in 1793 nor Bowles's reappearance on the Gulf Coast in 1799 changed the predominant Upper Creek opinion of him. Curiously, however, he enjoyed minor help from assorted English-speaking Anglo-Creek mestizos; even so, other mestizos, such as Thomas Perryman, Bowles's own brother-in-law, and Jack Cannard, a first-rate intermediary, worked assiduously against him. Pure-blooded Seminoles constituted his most stalwart followers and adhered more closely to tribal customs and traditions. This included hunting as the men's preferred economic activity, raiding for horses and cattle, and inconsequential warfare with inveterate enemies that provided honors and coups for victorious warriors. They disdained the pacific and sedentary occupations of agriculture, that was predominantly women's work, and cattle-raising that even Bowles favored because of the unpredictability of the hunt. They had not embraced the "new order of things" as Claudio Saunt describes the significant economic and social changes then challenging many of the traditional tribesmen.³⁸

Understanding the need for altering the Indians' economic livelihood, Bowles favored the introduction of white settlers during his last sojourn in the Creek country. On returning to the Gulf Coast in 1799, he stopped in Jamaica, where he tried to recruit French Saint Domingue refugees in need of a home, but they wisely declined to relocate until they received assurances of a peaceful

37. In 1802, Bowles was at Estifungalga, where he issued a "Proclamation" about his navy, Estifungalga, June 1, 1802, AGI, PC, leg. 2362. His navy at the time consisted of one small boat.

38. Saunt, *New Order*, 139-63; William H. Masterson, *William Blount* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 239. See also Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1976).

Native reception. While on the one hand, whites living in the Creek homeland perhaps would enable Bowles to manage the Indians more effectively, on the other hand, they would corrode indigenous society. He also promised free land to white loyalists in Nassau who resettled, and it resulted in occasional destitute and land-hungry folk arriving on the Gulf Coast to inspect the terrain he intended to grant them without Indian approval. Because these white men appeared late in his final stay in West Florida, Bowles abused many by drafting them into his armed ranks as raiders or onto his makeshift corsairs that often were captured Cuban fishing boats. By 1802 Bowles was fighting for survival, and it took precedence over everything else. Nevertheless, his white draftees deserted him as quickly as they could. Bowles's henchmen possibly shot some of them as they fled or after their capture as vivid warnings to others.³⁹

Bowles's outrageous behavior was visible during his visit to London in 1790-91, when he attempted to garner government assistance. Ever the showman, Bowles's schooling in theatrics had emerged earlier when he dramatically switched his attire to an improvised Indian costume to proclaim his alleged status as a chief. In London he paraded before the city's inhabitants as a prominent Native leader to grab the attention of key government personnel and convince them to accept his position and pronouncements as genuine. He granted newspaper reporters interviews to disseminate ideas he wanted publicized. Among his boasts that the city's papers duly printed was the claim that the Spanish ambassador had invited him and his cohorts to dinner and that he often dropped in unannounced at the embassy for chats. Actually, the ambassador, the Marqués del Campo (Bernardo del Campo), read in local newspapers about Bowles's arrival in London and attempts to win British backing for his malevolent scheme to turn Spanish territory in West Florida into Muskogee. Only after his effort to obtain British aid fizzled did the chameleon-like Bowles seek Spanish backing for Muskogee's formation, assuring that it would serve as a buffer state between American and Spanish soil. Of his three visits to the Spanish embassy, only the first was granted in response to Bowles's request and Campo's own curiosity.

39. "Interrogatories of Peter Sarketh and Francis Parker," Fort San Marcos de Apalache, August 2, 1802, MPA, SD, vol. 7, ff. 591-94 and 599-604, respectively. Bowles had promised each man five hundred acres. Wright, *Bowles*, 109-111.

Nevertheless, Bowles dropped in uninvited twice more, allegedly to bring important papers. The visits never included dinner. However, they convinced Campo that the white charlatan masquerading as an Indian was a rabble-rouser, and he urged his government to shun him.⁴⁰ On his second stay in London in 1798-99, Bowles avoided the Spanish ambassador and courted British sympathizers, but none possessed the money he desperately needed to promote his plans.

Nonetheless, the indefatigable plotter tenaciously wooed notice in London. In both trips to the British capital, he commissioned paintings of himself. The only known portrait is by Thomas Hardy, today in London's National Portrait Gallery. In that haunting and often-published likeness, the handsome Bowles posed grandly in indigenous regalia. He also granted a book publisher, Benjamin Baynton, interviews that were rapidly transformed into a Bowles autobiography. Immodestly, he dictated to Baynton the events and interpretations he wanted included.⁴¹ He did this again between 1798 and 1799, when he returned to London, and an anonymous author penned a synopsis of Bowles's life. Later historians often accepted the so-called facts in both books as truthful.⁴²

As a consequence of these and other writings, inaccuracies about Bowles's life abound. Sometimes they are glaringly obvious. For example, while on his way to Spain in 1792 on Esteban Miró's frigate *Misisipi*, at the former governor's request Bowles wrote a biographical sketch about himself. Miró naively expected honesty, but Bowles exploited the opportunity to alter his real life. He claimed that his English mother Eleanor was a quarter Indian from

40. Marqués del Campo to the Conde de Floridablanca, London, April 15, 1791, with Bowles's memorial addressed to the king enclosed, London, March 25, 1791, both in AHN, Est., leg. 3889bis; Wright, *Bowles*, 54, 183. Wright cites the London newspaper *Daily Advertiser* of March 17, 1791, as the source for the dinner at the Spanish embassy. Campo did not mention a Bowles letter written on January 26, 1791, from Adelphi in London, requesting that, should a message come from the first minister Conde de Floridablanca, Campo was to forward it to Bowles. Bowles's letter appears more for show to Whitehall than a genuine message to Campo. The letter is published in Turner, ed., "English Policy," 734.

41. Jones, "The Real Author of the 'Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles,'" 300-308. The second portrait of Bowles appears to be in private hands in Philadelphia.

42. *Public Characters of 1801-1802* (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), is a reprint of the original 1802 edition. American editions appeared immediately after the London publication.

the region of Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh), a fable probably first concocted while he lived among the Indians to establish a matrilineal connection with them; Creeks reckoned descent and authority through female lines. Bowles also declared in 1799 that as he crossed the Atlantic Ocean as a prisoner seven years before with Miró, who treated him as a passenger while at sea, he boldly leaped into tempestuous waters to rescue a sailor swept off the vessel by enormous waves. He miraculously overcame the ocean's powerful currents to reach the sailor and somehow returned to the ship with him. Despite the storm, the passengers allegedly were on deck and greeted him with lively applause as the crew hauled him on board.⁴³ His 1792 sketch for the former governor omitted this heroic tale because it never happened, and Miró, whom Bowles had befriended during the voyage, did not mention the incident.

Bowles's unrestrained appetite for spinning incredulous stories that both mesmerized and deceived listeners was a practice he sharpened to perfection. In England in 1798-99, he titillated audiences with spectacular stories detailing his teenage amours with indigenous maidens. More outrageous, he contended that, while confined in Madrid's jails six years before, officials in the Spanish government had pleaded with him to enlist in its service. They included politicians such as the Condes de Aranda and Floridablanca and the Duque de la Alcudia, who allegedly vied for his help to ensure them appointment to the coveted post of first minister in the government. With this contention, Bowles insinuated that he, whom the Spaniards had incarcerated as a felon, held the power to sway the king in the selection of the highest political official in the realm. However, he did not explain why the same government that courted him also would keep him locked up. Rejecting Spanish offers of freedom and employment, the sturdy Bowles chose continued confinement because his loyalty belonged unequivocally to the British nation. A massive flaw in this tale was that his stories and letters to this effect did not happen during his Spanish incarceration between 1792 and 1794 as he would have people believe. He could not have preserved the letters intact through stays in various prisons or on arduous journeys aboard different ships to and from the Philippines, especially when he lost

43. Douglass, "Adventurer Bowles," 17, who cited *Public Characters*, 356. In the latter work, Bowles provided the story of his alleged rescue of the sailor in 1792, and, after returning to the ship, he praised himself for his bold deed.

his possessions several times. Instead, he composed the epistles and yarns after his arrival in London in 1798 to demonstrate his allegiance to the British government and to secure favors.⁴⁴

Other similar deceptive tactics helped Bowles to a degree in the southeastern wilderness. Using psychological warfare, he flooded the woods with stories and rumors to throw his opponents off balance. For example, in 1801 he spread tales that Nassau was making 5,000 British army uniforms to be stored in the Florida Keys for soldiers coming to his aid. Other informants acknowledged a smaller number of uniforms that were intended for Indians who, when they attacked Fort San Marcos, would deceive the Spaniards into believing they were British. Of course, an attack with British-dressed warriors never happened. In another example of Bowles's cunning, in 1801 the commandant at San Marcos engaged an Indian to spy on Bowles's activities at Miccosukee. He went to the Seminole town and spent several days there. On returning to the fort, he announced that 1,200 Upper Creeks had gathered at Miccosukee with the intention of joining Chief Kinache in attacking San Marcos. This startling revelation troubled the Spaniards who long had believed the Upper Creeks to be friends. But they neither showed up at the fort nor at Miccosukee because the "spy" had been seduced by Bowles, and he misinformed the Spaniards. Nevertheless, for many months the ruse confused his opponents along the Gulf Coast. Bowles also unleashed rumors and falsehoods to delude the Spaniards with his whereabouts as he tried to move stealthily across the Floridas.⁴⁵ Indians often sped news and rumors through the woods.

Other uncertainties about Bowles include personal details surrounding his life. Authors have not agreed as to when he was born. It happened in either 1763 or 1764, in either October or November. Of the two years, 1763 appears the more likely, given

44. Manuel García to the Marqués de Casa-Calvo, San Marcos de Apalache, February 20, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 108; Wright, *Bowles*, 85-86. More reliable information about Spanish court politics can be found in Richard Herr, *The Eighteenth Century Revolution in Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 318-25; and Gabriel H. Lovett, *Napoleon and the Birth of Modern Spain*, 2 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 1: 8-9. On several occasions, the Spaniards in West Florida recovered Bowles's letters as they chased him. Many are preserved in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville.

45. DuBreüil to Folch, nos. 32 and 40, San Marcos de Apalache, June 16 and July 18, 1801, in AGI, PC, legs. 32 and 2362, respectively; James Durouzeaux to Folch, Coweta, July 14, 1801, *ibid*, leg. 54.

that it would make him thirteen when he joined a loyalist regiment in early 1777. He was not from wealthy Tory forebears, but from several generations of English book and map sellers before his father emigrated and eventually took up farming in Maryland. Bowles's literacy and perhaps his father's influence empowered his selection as a cadet (ensign) the next year. By his own admission, he attained the rank of officer on May 8, 1781. He wrote this down in his own hand in his 1792 autobiographical sketch, and it appears more credible than assertions proffered by persons who declared that he became an officer in his early teens. By May 1781, at age seventeen, he was an adult by the standards of the time. While the British government in all likelihood never promoted the half-pay officer again, this did not prevent Bowles from calling himself captain, colonel, and general, ranks he never genuinely attained except in his own Lilliputian army.⁴⁶

Several historians who have written on Bowles have lamented that this vibrant eccentric starved himself to death instead of dying gloriously in battle with a pistol or sword in hand.⁴⁷ Despite his participation in daring activities, such as his escape from the clutches of the Spaniards on the African coast, his efforts at recruiting a significant body of southeastern Natives for the establishment of Muskogee, and his five-week siege of Fort San Marcos that included fire-fights, sustainable evidence that he personally battled enemies is absent.⁴⁸ Examples of him loading and discharging pistols or muskets as bullets zinged past him in combat or of the swash-buckler wielding a cutlass as he boldly charged the enemy cannot be found. While he was present at Fort San Marcos when the

46. Wright, *Bowles*, 1-2. Among the writers who believe that Bowles became an officer at age fourteen is J. Leitch Wright, Jr., in "The Queen's Redoubt Explosion in the Lives of William A. Bowles, John Miller and William Panton," *Anglo-Spanish Confrontation on the Gulf Coast during the American Revolution*, edited by William S. Coker and Robert R. Rea (Pensacola: Gulf Coast History and Humanities Conference, 1982): 181.

47. Whitaker, *Mississippi Question*, 174; McAlister, "Bowles and the State of Muskogee," 328; Wright, *Bowles*, 174.

48. Bowles, in *Authentic Memoirs*, 28-29, alleged that he participated in an attack on the Spanish post called *La Aldea* (The Village), across the bay from Mobile, but his description of the encounter is not accurate. He also stated, in *ibid.*, 35-36, that he was near a British redoubt filled with munitions that exploded killing nearly one hundred and wounding additional men from his Maryland unit. He, however, amazingly escaped serious injury. It was immediately after this devastating incident that he became an officer. The Spanish side of the clash at The Village is told in Jack D. L. Holmes, "Alabama's Bloodiest Day of the American Revolution: Counterattack at The Village, January 7, 1781," *Alabama Review* 29 (1976): 208-19.

Spaniards attacked the fort on June 23, 1800, he galloped away on a horse long before Spanish grenadiers debarked from galleys to storm the fortification. In doing so, Bowles set an example that his 120 defenders emulated after several terrifying shells exploded on the fort's walls. Flight for him was the better part of valor.⁴⁹

Finally, in all his activities on the Gulf Coast and in his attempts to establish Muskogee, Bowles received formidable assistance from Spanish weakness in the Southeast. That deficiency afflicted the rest of the Spanish empire as well.⁵⁰ Despite its declining power, Spain joined other conservative kingdoms to fight revolutionary and regicidal France between 1793 and 1795. Only a year after the battered monarchy dropped out of that losing conflict, it allied with the French Directory that had assumed charge in the Gaulic republic, a decision that renewed hostilities with Great Britain. The Peace of Amiens briefly interrupted the wars until 1803. These seemingly endless hostilities exhausted Spain's treasury and manpower, and troops, like funds, were channeled first to essential possessions. As an undeveloped colony and glaringly devoid of all but a handful of white inhabitants, West Florida experienced agonizing scarcities in money and soldiers. The Spanish struggle against Bowles, particularly between 1799 and 1803, severely strained West Florida's and Louisiana's sparse military resources.⁵¹

Bowles, however, also suffered constraints in his actions. He was dependent on not always reliable allies, who displayed scant interest in his political aspirations, and on meager supplies that grew slimmer as his fortunes deteriorated. Despite the Seminoles gradually abandoning him, Bowles stubbornly refused to recognize approaching calamity and remained as if riveted among them. Shortly before his arrest in 1803, he tried to project a positive façade and irrationally predicted that the Indian council at Hickory Ground determining his fate would instead elect him as its

49. Folch to Casa-Calvo, Pensacola, July 15, 1800, AGI, PC, leg. 154C.

50. Among the many works on the Anglo-Spanish conflict, see John Lynch, *Spain under the Habsburgs*, 2 vols. (2nd ed.; New York: New York University Press, 1981); Henry Kamen, *Spain in the Later Seventeenth Century, 1650-1700* (London: Longman, 1980); John H. Elliott, *Empires in the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006); and Thomas E. Chávez, *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An Intrinsic Gift* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

51. David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 271-98; Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution, 1789-1799* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 185-86, 207-08, 212-45.

head. His swagger convinced no one.⁵² Why he had not fled earlier for the safety of distant lands defies imagination, or possibly he realized that his crimes had converted him into a *persona non grata* and he had nowhere to hide. Consequently, he stayed and played out his perilous adventure to its bitter conclusion.

In assessing Bowles's presence on the Gulf Coast, several factors initially helped him to advance his ambitions. They included British merchants in Nassau eager to recover lost trade with the southeastern Indians, American intrusion on indigenous lands that necessitated weapons for an armed defense, Spanish debility, and European wars and colonial conflicts that redirected Spain's attention. However, Bowles's attempt to establish his Muskogee nation failed the first time because of Spanish success in capturing him shortly after he pillaged Panton's store. His destructive act cost the firm several thousand pounds in lost merchandise and hides, but many Natives felt alienated by Spanish rule because of Panton's trading monopoly and inflated prices for goods.⁵³

On Bowles's return seven years later, foreign wars and colonial disturbances continued to hamper Spain's ability to meet his challenge forcefully. Nevertheless, he also had major tribulations given that he had failed to align the components necessary for achieving victory. They included the reconciliation of rivals, the introduction of the abundant goods and weapons Indians coveted, and the termination of the turmoil that exhausted his Native American allies. Bowles could not convert an assortment of adversaries—Spaniards, Upper Creeks, and Americans and each with their own agendas—into friends nor could he secure their acceptance to Muskogee's establishment under his rule. Furthermore, he could not obtain recognition of his leadership from all the Indians he presumed to govern. These goals were demonstrably unachievable. And that was the rub: at no time did Bowles come close to attaining the consent of all these essential groups. Even Great Britain never fully embraced him. These obstacles meant that his likelihood of success from the time his venture began stood at next to none.⁵⁴

52. Forbes, "Journal of Forbes," 286-87.

53. Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders*, 51-56. The authors set the sum lost in the pillage at Panton's Wakulla store at about £2,800, or \$12,600.

54. Despite the Seminole agreement to Bowles's surrender, Wright, in *Bowles*, 172-73, contended that they still supported him in subsequent years. Contrary to Wright's assertion, conditions in West Florida quieted down greatly after

This scrutiny of Bowles's personality and activities as well as the conditions on the Gulf Coast between 1787 and 1803 places much about his life in bold relief. It further illuminates how he manipulated and distorted information about himself.⁵⁵ While Bowles's contemporaries generally were acquainted with him, as Panton's description above attests, subsequent generations through the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries lost touch with accurate details about him. Alas, later investigators never probed deeply even when they used occasional Spanish documents. Instead, they too often relied on the accessible contemporary English-language publications that contained the misleading stories that Bowles fed to British newspapers and book authors. By doing so, they unconsciously aided in spreading more widely the false images that Bowles had cultivated about himself decades earlier.⁵⁶

More realistically, the Spaniards at all times considered his activities as criminal because of his violent acts committed in their colony of West Florida. Similarly, most contemporaries saw him as an opportunist who stalked the Southeast seeking clout over a desperate indigenous community caught in the crosshairs of encroaching and intractable American adversaries. His primary objective always had been to seize leadership of the Creeks for his own purposes and for his Nassau merchant backers, whom he needed for the essential trade goods they provided. An accurate view of Bowles requires stripping him of all the claptrap he disseminated about himself and considering him for what he was—an adventurer who in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries strove to carve out an autonomous domain to satisfy his personal ambitions in notice, stature, and power. That was the real William Augustus Bowles, whose true life often has escaped historians because of the legacy of lies and deception he left behind.

Bowles's removal and support for him dwindled dramatically. However, Creek and Seminole unrest persisted because of American encroachment on their lands, and Bowles had done nothing to help the Indians in this regard.

55. Wright, in "The Queen's Redoubt," 190, made the shocking contention: "The Spaniards were never sure whether to take Bowles's arguments seriously and treat him as the true leader of the southern Indians—the State of Muskogee—or to accept Panton's denunciations that Bowles was a thief, that the Indians called him 'captain liar,' and that he should be disposed of like a common criminal." Contrary to Wright's assertion, the Spaniards knew precisely who and what Bowles was: He was not the leader of the southern Indians, his vision of Muskogee never achieved realization, Panton's and the Indians' designations for him were correct, and the Spaniards treated him for what he was, a criminal. Wright's statement reflects his deficient grasp of Bowles and sustains the chronic misperceptions about him.

56. Many of the articles on Bowles are cited above in note 9.