

# BORDERLANDS AND ACCOMMODATION: SPANISH SOLDIERS AND AMERINDIAN NATIONS IN LOUISIANA AND FLORIDA (1763-1803)

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 Soizic Croguennec<sup>1,2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The treaty of Paris at the end of the Seven Years war meant the addition of Louisiana to the Spanish Empire in 1763 while the treaty of Versailles at the end of the United States war of Independence marked the return of the Floridas under Spanish control, thus making the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the largest expansion of the Spanish Empire in North America. Yet this large territory was only of marginal importance in the Spanish imperial structure even as it did represent a real geopolitical interest due to being essential for the control of the Gulf of Mexico and the protection of New Spain against growing British ambitions. This focus on the geopolitical and military function of Louisiana and Florida explains a very pragmatic management of the borderlands and lack of real economic and human investment by the Spanish crown. In this context, the outermost territories in close contact with both the confines of the Anglo-American colonies and the Native communities were places in which individual and collective survival was a constant struggle. The judicial and military records present in the *Papeles de Cuba* section of the *Archivo de Indias* offers a wide range of agencies, behaviors and strategies, revealing a permanent process of accommodation, negotiation, traffic and mobilities that create a remarkable social and identity fluidity. In the borderlands, the line between what was legal and what was illegal, or between loyalty and treason, was a very narrow and porous one.

## KEYWORDS

Spanish Louisiana – 18th century – frontier – Amerindians – smuggling – army.

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1 Université de Guyane, UR MINEA 7485. Cayenne – French Guiana.

2 Doctorate in History from University of Toulouse 2. Currently an Associate Professor at the Université de Guyane. Contact: [soizic.croguennec@univ-guyane.fr](mailto:soizic.croguennec@univ-guyane.fr).

# ACOMODACIONES FRONTERIZAS: SOLDADOS ESPAÑOLES Y POBLACIONES INDÍGENAS EN LUISIANA Y FLORIDA (1763-1803)

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## RESUMEN

La adición de la Luisiana a los territorios hispanoamericanos con el tratado de París en 1763 y la recuperación de las Floridas con el tratado de 1783 significaron la mayor expansión del imperio en América del Norte. Estos espacios sólo tenían una importancia marginal en el dispositivo imperial, pero poseían un interés geopolítico esencial en el sentido de que permitieron el control del golfo de México y la protección de la Nueva España contra las ambiciones británicas y estadounidenses. Tal función geopolítica y militar explica una gestión pragmática de los territorios fronterizos y una inversión económica como humana limitada. En este contexto, los espacios más alejados, al contacto del mundo angloamericano e indígena, aparecen como lugares donde la sobrevivencia individual y colectiva es una lucha permanente. De este modo, la documentación judicial y militar que se puede encontrar en el Archivo de India revela las oportunidades de acomodación, negociación, tráfico y movilidades que crean una gran fluidez social e identitaria donde la frontera entre lo legal y lo ilegal, la lealtad y la traición parece muy porosa.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Luisiana española – siglo 18 – fronteras – poblaciones indígenas – contrabando – ejército.

## Introduction

“By the dawn of the twenty-first century, national boundaries had become an increasingly confusing, fluid, and even intangible phenomenon. In an age of mass migration, globalization, and instantaneous communication, the once familiar and seemingly lines drawn around the maps of nation-state had taken on an air of unreality as it became progressively easier for individuals and businesses to cross (or to violate) them, while at the same time it became harder and harder for governments to justify and to police them<sup>3</sup>.”

Following the disaster of the Seven Years War (1756-1763), Louis XV and the duke of Choiseul had to face its impact on the French colonial empire in the Americas. The treaty of Paris in 1763 marked the end of the French presence in North America: Great Britain gained Canada while Spain received the vast expanse of Louisiana<sup>4</sup>. Such a deal enabled France to get back what truly mattered, its possessions in the Caribbean, heart of the flourishing Atlantic trade<sup>5</sup>. From that point of view, the sacrifice of Canada and the cession of Louisiana to Spain as a sign of dynastic solidarity and a compensation for the loss of Florida were a small price to pay<sup>6</sup>. Thus, started an imperial game of musical chairs that saw the configuration of colonial Northern America change at a quick pace following the evolution of the geopolitical balance of power between the Spanish, French and Anglo-American powers.

The Spanish Crown did not rush to take possession of a territory in which its main interest was essentially of a geopolitical nature. The idea of a “poisoned gift”<sup>7</sup> was very present in Jerónimo Grimaldi’s

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3 STAGG, J. C. A. *Borderlines in Borderlands. James Madison and the Spanish-American Frontier, 1776-1821*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009. p.1.

4 HAVARD, Gilles; VIDAL, Cécile. *Histoire de l’Amérique française*. Paris: Flammarion, 2008, Collection Champs Histoire, p. 663-669.

5 VILLERET, Maud. *Le goût de l’or blanc: Le sucre en France au XVIIIe siècle*. Rennes: PUR, 2017.

6 JIMÉNEZ, Alfredo. *El Gran Norte de México. Una frontera imperial en la Nueva España (1540-1820)*. Madrid: Editorial Tébar. p. 137.

7 JIMÉNEZ, Alfredo. *Op. Cit.* p. 444.

mind during the peace negotiations. The Ambassador declared indeed that he accepted the conditions of the Treaty of Paris in the name of his King “even if he knew perfectly that [they] only acquired a yearly burden of 300 000 piastres, in return for the negative and distant advantage of possessing a territory so that another does not possess it<sup>8</sup>”. However, despite its lack of economic prospects, Louisiana was still considered a key geopolitical block against growing British ambitions in Northern America and to protect the frontiers of New Spain. A little less than twenty years later, Louisiana’s geopolitical importance in the Spanish imperial structure was confirmed when it served as a rear base for Bernardo de Gálvez’ offensive against British positions in Florida. When both West and East Florida returned under Spanish control at the end of the United States war of Independence in 1783, the Spanish empire in Northern America reached its maximum expansion (see document 1 below).

### ***Document 1: Colonial musical chairs in Northern America***

However, Spanish dominion over Louisiana over the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is easy to gloss over because of its ephemeral nature. As David Narrett wrote, “Spain had imperial dominion over Louisiana during the years 1763-1803, but it was only minimally a colonizing nation in the region<sup>9</sup>.” Indeed, the very term of “Spanish Interregnum” used to describe this period enhances the idea of a transitional time, between the French period and the purchase of Louisiana by the United States in 1803. Following Grimaldi’s reticence, historiography insisted on the inability of the Spanish crown to properly colonize Louisiana and Florida. Confronted by the Turnerian construction of the inevitable expansion of the United States in the West, the Spanish period was analyzed through the prism of failure and general decadence.

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8 ANDREU OCARIZ, Juan José. *Luisiana española*. Zaragoza: Talleres Editoriales Librería General, 1975. p. 28.

9 NARRETT, David. *Adventurism and Empire: the Struggle for Mastery in the Louisiana-Florida Borderlands, 1762-1803*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014, p. 1.

“Southern borderlands history as applied to Louisiana and the South was in effect a muted version of the Turner thesis that implicitly accepted the notion of inevitable Anglo-American expansion into West Florida as a harbinger of the development of various cultures in the U.S. South. [...] All too often studies using mostly local sources emphasizes the French and American periods with little or no reference to the Spanish occupation<sup>10</sup>.”

Arguably, as Sylvia Hilton wrote, the focus on the geopolitical and military function of both Louisiana and Florida explained a very pragmatic management of the borderlands and the lack of real economical and human investment by the Spanish crown<sup>11</sup>. Pragmatism did not mean absence of experimentation and investment, though. Louisiana and Florida became a major recipient of the *situado* system<sup>12</sup> at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>, which enhanced their economic and financial appeal to Anglo-American merchants (see document 2 below).

## **Document 2: *Situado* from New Spain in the Great Caribbean 1750-1799<sup>14</sup>**

Furthermore, administrators like Martín Navarro proposed original ways to populate the region, imagining the formation of a multicultural society loyal to the Spanish crown, fed by foreign mi-

10 McMICHAEL, Andrew. *Atlantic Loyalties. Americans in Spanish West Florida 1785-1810*. Athens and Londons: The University of Georgia Press, 2008. p. 2.

11 HILTON, Sylvia. *Spanish Louisiana in Atlantic Contexts: Nexus of Imperial Transactions and International Relations*. In: VIDAL, Cécile. *Louisiana: Crossroads of the Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, p. 68-85.

12 The *situado* was one of the corner stones of the Spanish Empire in the sense that it created a form of economic solidarity between the richest provinces, such as New Spain, and the most fragile ones, such as Louisiana or Florida. In other words, thanks to the *situado*, the empire sustained itself.

13 MARICHAL, Carlos; SOUTO, Matilde. *La Nueva España y el financiamiento del Imperio Español en América: los situados para el Caribe en el siglo XVIII*. In: MARICHAL, Carlos; GRAFENSTEIN, Johanna (von). *El secreto del Imperio español: los situados coloniales en el siglo XVIII*. México: Colegio de México, 2012. p. 61-94.

14 Ibid.

gration<sup>15</sup> while the governor Bernardo de Gálvez launched the *Batalón de Luisiana* project to encourage Canarian colonization<sup>16</sup>. If New Orleans benefitted from administrative and political structures<sup>17</sup> and found its place as a “crossroads of the Atlantic World<sup>18</sup>” during the Spanish period, the outermost territories in close contact with both the confines of the Anglo-American colonies and the Native communities were places in which individual and collective survival was a constant struggle. To understand the delicate balance of these borderlands, the judicial and military documentation present in the *Papeles de Cuba* section of the *Archivo de Indias* in Seville is a particularly effective tool as it sheds a light on the daily proceedings of a conflicted frontier society. The present analysis rests on a growing sample of criminal cases led against Spanish soldiers garrisoned in frontier forts such as San Esteban Tombeché (Tombigbee) and Natchez. The studied cases range from desertion to plain murder through to trafficking and, beyond their first and obvious narrative interest, open the door to “fragments of life gathered in this vast sanctuary of dead yet spoken words<sup>19</sup>.” Through the different witness accounts collected by the Spanish military justice, it is possible not only to gain access to the masses of “silent voices” – soldiers, *presidarios*, Indians, maroons – but also to get a better understanding of the dynamics of a complex border society thanks to a wide range of agencies, behaviors and strategies, that reveals a permanent process of accommodation, negotiation, traffic and mobilities. In other words, what this paper proposes is a social and cultural history of the borderlands between the colonial Spanish Empire and the young United States in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these

15 AGI, Papeles de Cuba, 2351, Ramo 13, Martín Navarro, Reflexiones políticas sobre el estado actual de la provincia de la Luisiana.

16 DIN, Gilbert. *The Canary Islanders of Louisiana*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana state university press, 1988.

17 DIN, Gilbert; HARKINS, John. *The New Orleans Cabildo: Colonial Louisiana's First City Government, 1769-1803*. Baton Rouge, London: Louisiana State University Press, 1996.

18 VIDAL, Cécile. *Louisiana: Crossroads of the Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

19 FARGE, Arlette. *La vie fragile. Violences, pouvoirs et solidarités à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986. p. 7.

borderlands, fluidity defines the process of social and identity construction, and the line between what was legal and what was illegal, or between loyalty and treason, was a very narrow and porous one.

### *Disputed lands at the confines of the Spanish empire*

From the signature of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Spanish Louisiana occupied a strategic place in the continental game of chess in Northern America, at the heart of opposing dynamics. In order to better understand these dynamics, it is important to “transcend nation-centered blind spots and approach new understanding of how space and society have developed throughout Latin America<sup>20</sup>.” From a Spanish point of view, the newest addition to the Empire had to serve as a buffer area to protect New Spain – and its silver mines – from growing Anglo-American ambitions. Thirty years earlier, the founding of the colony of Georgia in 1732 by the philanthropist James Edward Oglethorpe was the first step of a clear strategy that aimed at reinforcing the British presence in the South East of Northern America:

“He even prided himself that, if the product of this donation augmented by the funds that could be obtained from charitable generosity was dedicated to the foundation of a Colony in the southernmost parts of Carolina that still were deserted, it would be easy to seize Spanish Florida, then to disturb endlessly the French in Louisiana & maybe chase them away<sup>21</sup>”.

In other words, access to the Mississippi valley and the control of the Gulf of Mexico was of the utmost importance for two competing imperial powers that aspired to assert their geopolitical dominion and widen their commercial network between North America and the Caribbean. At the end of the Seven Years War, many British

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20 BLANC, Jacob; FREITAS, Federico (ed.). *Big Water. The Making of the Borderlands between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018. p. 6.

21 BUTEL-DUMONT, Georges-Marie. *Histoire et commerce des colonies angloises dans l'Amérique septentrionale*. Londres, 1755. p. 311.

adventurers gravitated even more decisively towards the Mississippi valley and the port of New Orleans, keen to make profit from the gain of Florida, encouraging the French to resist the change of colonial rule. Many reports were sent to London to seek support for ambitious designs in Louisiana<sup>22</sup>. The main goal was the creation of strategic spaces which Anglo-Americans could slip into to gain access to the markets of New Spain. David Narrett quotes the Scot John Campbell in these terms:

“The Spanish Americans consider gold and silver as very valuable commodities, yet they are extremely willing to barter them for other commodities, which they have not, and which would be more useful to them than large heaps of either of these metals<sup>23</sup>”.

In these borderlands characterized by scarce populations and a mostly virtual colonial control, attracting French settlers from Louisiana to newly acquired Florida was also an important objective in British minds. Therefore, migration to Western Florida was discreetly encouraged by British authorities. Orders were given to local administrators “not to refuse reasonable Protection to such persons, as may voluntarily and without Invitation come from New Orleans to West Florida<sup>24</sup>”. However, the British did not go as far as supporting the French revolt of 1768 and the Spanish administration took roots after Alejandro O’Reilly’s intervention in 1769<sup>25</sup>. The region remained a point of contention between the Anglo-Americans and the Spanish for the next couple of decades, even more so after the recapture of Florida by Bernardo de Gálvez during the United States War of Independence. The main dispute revolved around the northern limits of West Florida, Spain claiming a limit above the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel whereas

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22 NARRETT, David. Op. Cit., p. 55.

23 John Campbell, *An Account of the Spanish Settlements*, quoted in NARRETT, David. Op.Cit., p. 21.

24 NARRETT, David. Op. Cit., p. 55.

25 HOFFMAN, Paul. *Luisiana española*. Madrid: Editorial MAPFRE, 1992. p. 126-128.



the United States insisted on the 31<sup>st</sup> parallel until Pinckney's Treaty in 1795 established the new border along the 31<sup>st</sup> parallel.

### **Document 3: West Florida and East Florida in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century**

In other words, the evolution of West Florida between 1763 and 1795 followed the pattern described by Jeremy Aldeman and Stephen Aron, from “borderland” – a disputed territory – to “bordered lands”<sup>26</sup>. In that regard, the region of Natchez was particularly disputed, caught between the Spanish administration and a growing Anglo-American population whose allegiance was fluctuating<sup>27</sup>, as we can see from the conspiracy led by the anabaptist Barton Hannon in 1797<sup>28</sup>. Denounced by the catholic Stephen Lynch, the Virginian was accused of leading a potential revolt of the Anglo-American population against the Spanish administration<sup>29</sup>. It is important to note here that the Spanish crown authorized the installation of Anglo-Americans in Florida and Louisiana under the condition that they would convert to Catholicism as proof of allegiance. The majority kept to their protestant faith, imposing a *de facto* religious diversity on Spanish land<sup>30</sup>. The fact that Stephen Lynch and other witnesses denouncing Barton Hannon described themselves as catholic in their testimonies reveals the complexity of the game of allegiance at play in the region of Natchez. In other words, the situation at hand here was far more complex than a simple confrontation between Spanish administration and an Anglo-American population longing to join the nascent United States. Indeed, the fault lines were numerous, depen-

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26 ALDEMAN, Jeremy; ARON, Stephen. From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History. In: *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999). p. 814–816.

27 McMICHAEL, Andrew. Op. Cit. p. 68.

28 AGI, CUBA, 163A, Criminal contra el sectario anabaptista nombrado Janah (Barton Hannon) acusado de revoltoso y sedicioso contra el gobierno.

29 AGI, CUBA, 163A, Criminal contra el sectario anabaptista nombrado Janah (Barton Hannon) acusado de revoltoso y sedicioso contra el gobierno. f. 431v-432r.

30 HOFFMAN, Paul. Op. Cit. p. 245.

ding mainly on personal strategies and loyalties. In that case, it seems like religious allegiance – and what it reveals about the individual’s desire to play the Spanish card through conversion or not – played a decisive role in the way the local population positioned themselves in the midst of the imperial rivalry between the Spanish crown and the United States in the complicated context of the years separating the signature of Pinckney’s Treaty in 1795 and the establishment of the Mississippi Territory in 1798. Such opposing dynamics and rivalries suppose that the historian adopt a transnational perspective to be able to go beyond the “limitations of national narratives<sup>31</sup>” and insist on the “specificities of crossroads<sup>32</sup>”.

Beyond the particular case of Natchez, tensions rose at the very end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the South East of Northern America as both the Spanish crown and the young United States started to push harder to gain advantage in the disputed region of West Florida. J. C. A. Stagg wrote:

“The governors of Louisiana and West Florida continued to invite Americans into their territories, and after 1792 Baron François Hector de Carondelet in New Orleans, in particular, became unusually aggressive in stepping up Spain’s policy of cultivating southern Indian nations in order to counter the efforts of newly appointed federal Indian agents to place these nations under the protection of the United States. At the same time, conflicts between the governments of East Florida and Georgia, also centering on the Creek Indians, intensified and were compounded by the inability of the affected authorities, American or Spanish, to reach understandings about how to handle other issues, such as the return of escaped slaves, criminals, and military deserters<sup>33</sup>.”

The borderlands between Florida and Georgia were indeed an interstitial space between two rivalling empires where subaltern populations – Native Indians, maroons, deserters – could exert agency.

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31 BLANC, Jacob; FREITAS, Federico (ed.). *Big Water. The Making of the Borderlands between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018. p.7.

32 BLANC, Jacob; FREITAS, Federico (ed.). *Loc. Cit.*

33 STAGG, J. C. A. *Op. Cit.* p. 10.

In these far-off lands, colonial or state control was tenuous at best. In Richard White's words, "this is an imperialism that weakens at its periphery. At the center are hands on the levers of power, but the cables have, in a sense, been badly frayed or even cut. It is a world system in which minor agents, allies, and even subjects at the periphery often guide the course of empires<sup>34</sup>". At the extreme periphery of Spanish and US territories, the borderlands between Natchez and Saint Augustine constituted a zone of refuge for the most marginalized populations keen to disappear and seek "anonymity at the end of the world<sup>35</sup>." That is what the Spanish soldier José María Aldana sought when he deserted from the fort San Marcos de Apalache in 1800 and established himself in a maroon community<sup>36</sup>.

### *Individual and collective strategies*

Studying borderlands means a reversal of traditional perspective and placing distant societies at the center to reexamine the relationship between "center" and "periphery". Indeed, the evolution of borderlands as a whole is as much the consequence of the balance of power between neighboring states as the result of local communities' dynamics: network building, competition for resources and political rivalries nurture a complex tangle of loyalties and identity constructions<sup>37</sup>. That is why the notions of agency and social cohesion in borderlands communities are essential to study them as actors whose individual or collective strategies contribute to shape the frontier. In the disputed territory of West Florida at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of loyalty was a fluid one and, as Andrew McMichael de-

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34 WHITE, Richard. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lake region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. Kindle version. Location 507.

35 ALBERRO, Solange. *Zacatecas, zona frontera, según los documentos inquisitoriales, siglos XVI y XVII*. *Estudios de Historia Novohispana*. Vol. VIII, 1985. p. 162.

36 AGI, Cuba, 163A, *Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana*. f. 975.

37 BERTRAND, Michel; PLANAS, Natividad. *Les sociétés de frontière, de la Méditerranée à l'Atlantique (XVI<sup>e</sup> – XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*. Madrid: Editions de la Casa de Velázquez, 2011.

monstrated in 2008<sup>38</sup>, largely dependent on personal intent to instrumentalize the borderlands dynamics and better one's social and economic position. As Sylvia Hilton wrote, populations in Spanish Louisiana and Florida – Spanish, Anglo-Americans and Native Americans alike – were “both able and willing to modify their identities and loyalties. Nationality was only one of the components of a personal sense of identity, and individuals might consider changing it voluntarily for many different reasons, usually connected with expectations of personal gain or self-interest of some sort<sup>39</sup>.”

In that regard, José María Aldana's desertion in 1800 is particularly interesting<sup>40</sup>. Of course, he was not an isolated case. The harsh conditions of service, the constant danger from pirates or Native American attacks, the low pay, the sheer isolation in distant and perilous borderlands all contributed to erode the soldiers' sense of loyalty to the Spanish crown and enhance their sense of self-preservation. Numerous cases of soldiers gone rogue can be found in military archives and cover a wide range of transgressions and treasons. Some were quite straightforward desertion: Domingo Calderín was accused of stealing and forging papers to desert from the fort where he was stationed in East Florida in 1804<sup>41</sup>. Other cases were more akin to breach of duty and cowardice: Pedro Camacho was accused of leaving his post and seeking refuge in a nearby church<sup>42</sup>. Some desertion attempts were individual efforts, like in the case of José María Sánchez<sup>43</sup> or Antonio Hernández<sup>44</sup>. Sometimes it was even entire groups

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38 McMICHAEL, Andrew. Op. Cit.

39 ALLEN SMITH, Gene; HILTON, Sylvia L. *Nexus of Empire: Negotiating Loyalty and Identity in the Revolutionary Borderlands, 1760s-1820s*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010. p. 5-6.

40 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. AGI, Cuba, 166, Declaraciones en la causa de José María Aldana desertor.

41 AGI, Cuba, 163-B, Causa contra el pito Domingo Calderín por presunta falsificación de documentos, robo e intento de deserción.

42 AGI, Cuba, 164A, Copia de la sumaria formada contra Pedro Camacho, soldado del regimiento fijo de la Luisiana, acusado de abandonar la guardia y refugiarse en una iglesia

43 AGI, Cuba, 164B, Compulsa de la causa criminal contra José María Sánchez, soldado del Regimiento de Infantería de Luisiana, acusado de deserción.

44 AGI, Cuba, 164A, Causa criminal contra Antonio Hernández, acusado de deserción.

that tried their hand at escaping from service to seek refuge in the wilderness<sup>45</sup>. Most of the attempts were simple cases of self-preservation, soldiers who tried to escape and find a new life for themselves. That said, in the case of José María Aldana or José Sandoval, desertion came with a whole process of switching loyalties. José Sandoval was indeed accused not only of desertion but also downright treason as he seemingly tried to join “enemy nations” and “took arms against” his own nation<sup>46</sup>. The case of José María Aldana is even more detailed and compelling in the sense that the different testimonies gathered by military justice paint a complex and nuanced picture of the stakes involved in survival, individual as well as collective, in the distant borderlands of San Marcos de Apalache.

In 1800, that region, located in Northern East Florida, was subject to different kinds of threats. Beyond the Creek tribes’ looming presence, and more especially the Muskogeas<sup>47</sup>, the Spanish forces in San Marcos had to contend with not only the growing pressure from neighboring Georgia but also the presence of pirates. The raids lead by the renowned William Augustus Bowles<sup>48</sup> are a recurring theme in the archives. For instance, the Irish lieutenant Eduardo Macabé/Edward McCabe, serving the Spanish crown, was confronted by pirates during a spying mission in 1801<sup>49</sup>. The following inquiry into the failed mission revealed a rather fluid and heterogeneous society. During the operation Eduardo Macabé was helped by an adventurer

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45 AGI, CUBA, 170A, Información sobre Ramon Rodríguez y Felipe Plaza, procesados por fuga y asilo de la inmunidad eclesiástica. AGI, Cuba, 164B, Información contra José Hilario Fiallo, soldado del Regimiento de Infantería de Luisiana, acusado de cómplice en deserción con otros. AGI, CUBA, 170A, Información sobre Ramon Rodríguez y Felipe Plaza, procesados por fuga y asilo de la inmunidad eclesiástica.

46 AGI, Cuba 165A, Criminal contra José Sandoval soldado de la 6ª compañía del citado batallón, acusado del delito de deserción a países enemigos y haber tomado las armas contra la misma nación, la tarde del 4 de octubre de 1801

47 The Creeks and the Muskogeas pertained to the larger group of Southeastern cultures that populated the area between present Florida and the Mississippi valley. Among those, the Chicasaws and the Choctaws had been the French’s traditional allies in Louisiana while other tribes like the Creeks maintained a diplomatic balance between the Spanish and English in the Floridas.

48 McMICHAEL, Andrew. Op. Cit. p. 81.

49 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Sumaria información contra el teniente de milicias Eduardo Macabé.

from Maryland, Santiago/James Campbell, who had been recruited in the Bahamas to go and assist William Vossler/William Bowles – described as an “Indian prince” during his attempt at building an independent “state of Muskogee” – with the benediction of the king of Great Britain<sup>50</sup>. Campbell was originally tasked by Vossler/Bowles with the mission of intercepting Macabé and stealing the letters he had with him but decided to switch sides and help the Spanish against the pirate<sup>51</sup>. Such a convoluted itinerary from Baltimore to San Marcos de Apalache via the Bahamas revealed a constant sense of adaptation for “personal gain” with little regard to traditional loyalty. If the Irish Eduardo Macabé/Edward McCabe, from the Natchez area, remained faithful to the king of Spain after Pinckney’s Treaty in 1795 – following the long tradition of the Irish Wild Geese – Santiago/James Campbell displayed a much more personal and individualistic sense of survival. The deserter José María Aldana seemed to follow a similar pattern, in the similar context of Vossler/Bowles’s attacks against Spanish forces in 1800. The pirates, allied to the Creek tribes, captured San Marcos de Apalache that year, forcing the governor of Pensacola to lead troops to recapture the fort. During the attack, José María Aldana not only deserted but also participated actively in the defense of the fort against the Spanish troops. Various fellow soldiers described him wearing war paint<sup>52</sup> and firing a canon<sup>53</sup> before leaving the fort with Vossler/Bowles’s men, vanishing into the wilderness for a few years.

Several points deserve to be stressed upon. Firstly, it is interesting to note that José María Aldana’s treason was accompanied by his physical transformation. Not only did he fight against the Spanish troops, but he also fully embraced the Indian warrior code, wearing war paint. This action is significant. Doing so, Aldana distanced himself from his former comrades, displaying his changed loyalty for

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50 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Sumaria información contra el teniente de milicias Eduardo Macabé. f. 889v.

51 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Sumaria información contra el teniente de milicias Eduardo Macabé. f. 890.

52 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 968v.

53 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 972r.

everybody to witness - Spanish, pirates, and Native people. It might also suggest a certain familiarity with Native American culture, or even some affinity that echoes with the process of *Indianization* described by Salvador Bernabeu, Christophe Giudicelli and Gilles Havard in 2012<sup>54</sup>. However, despite his spectacular display, Aldana joined neither the pirates nor the Creek tribes. Instead, he settled in a community of Native Americans and maroons for a couple of years. As in the case of Palmares in Brazil or the region of Essequibo-Venezuela studied by Bram Hoonhout and Thomas Mareite<sup>55</sup>, these communities were an ideal refuge for all kinds of marginalized individuals at odds with colonial authorities from both sides of the border. In that regard, the confines of West Florida, where the Spanish control was tenuous at best, represented an ideal territory for fugitive slaves that fled the plantations in Georgia and South Carolina. Indeed, even before the Spanish attack to recapture San Marcos de Apalache, José María Aldana's loyalty as a soldier was visibly fragile. Witnesses heard him talking to Vossler/Bowles's men – in English – and expressing seditious sentiments<sup>56</sup>, and asking the pirate leader to give him a rifle so that he could fight alongside his men<sup>57</sup>. One could see plain opportunism and survival strategy on Aldana's part. In a context in which a Spanish fort can be captured by pirates and Native tribes, one way to survive could be to follow the balance of power and align oneself with the perceived strongest side. In that case, individual survival trumped loyalty: Aldana, a soldier with ten years of service under him<sup>58</sup>, might have reached his breaking point and decided to start

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54 BERNABÉU ALBERT, Salvador; GIUDICELLI, Christophe; HAVARD, Gilles (coords). *La indianización. Cautivos, renegados, "hommes libres" y misioneros en los confines americanos s. XVI-XIX*. Madrid: Doce Calles, 2012.

55 HOONHOUT, Bram; MAREITE, Thomas. Freedom at the fringes? Slave flight and empire-building in the early modern Spanish borderlands of Essequibo–Venezuela and Louisiana–Texas. In: *Slavery & Abolition. A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*. Volume 40. 2019 – Issue 1. p. 61-86.

56 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 969r.

57 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 971v.

58 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 966r.

a new life. Whether Aldana fully adhered to the English pirates' views in their criticism of the Spanish crown or simply instrumentalized the situation for his benefit is difficult to assess, but it is interesting to note that he made use of the confusion to "take his liberty back"<sup>59</sup>. His service records reveal indeed the image of a rather disobedient soldier who had already quit his post without permission back in 1795<sup>60</sup>.

Aldana's intention was obviously to disappear forever and build a new life away from the Spanish military. However, this plan was brutally interrupted in 1802 when he was captured by two Miccosukee tribesmen and brought back to San Marcos de Apalache. One of his captors declared:

"[that] he knew José María Aldana whom he brought as a prisoner [...] because the commander of this fort offered him a reward of ten pesos he just received, [he declared] that it had been difficult to apprehend said deserter [Aldana] because he lived with a black woman and the blacks from Miccosukee defended him"<sup>61</sup>.

Safolotke and Sacayake had known Aldana for quite some time but still decided to capture him to get a reward of ten pesos. Through these two young men (aged respectively 22 and 26), we can see the level of agency they could display in these disputed borderlands in which neither the Spanish nor the Anglo-Americans really possessed the advantage. In fact, one could argue that the local Native tribes were the main actors in the area, managing their relationships with the various rivalling forces according to their own agenda<sup>62</sup>. The deserter Aldana, at odds with Spanish colonial authority, was tolerated until bringing him back to San Marcos became more advantageous.

59 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 973r.

60 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 967r.

61 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Compulsa del proceso formado contra el soldado del 2º batallón José María Aldana. f. 975v.

62 See the politics of the Creek chief Alexander McGillivray in the 1780's. NARRETT, David. Op. Cit., p. 209.



Such action, as we can see in Safolotke's declaration, was met with resistance, which shows that Aldana had managed to take root in the community, at least in some part of it. However, in spite of his apparent integration, the deserter's stay was obviously conditional on his hosts' good will and the state of their diplomatic relations with the fort of San Marcos.

### ***Borderland networks and accommodations***

The fundamental "misunderstanding" between the deserter and his temporary hosts is very evocative of the "misunderstandings" that Richard White established as the basis for the creation of a "middle ground" in the Great Lakes region<sup>63</sup>. In this regard, the inquiry into Aldana's desertion and treason helps to depict a nuanced view of these borderland societies shaped by a complex and fluctuating tangle of strategies and agencies, at an individual and collective level. At the very heart of this system, we can find an essential compromise between colonial powers and Native communities as Richard White wrote:

"This accommodation took place because for long periods of time in large parts of the colonial world whites could neither dictate to Indians nor ignore them. Whites needed Indians as allies, as partners in exchange, as sexual partners, as friendly neighbors<sup>64</sup>".

In the complex and ever-changing world of the borderlands, inter-community relationships went far beyond colonial conflict. The anthropologist James Clifford proposes a reticular analysis that enables a more nuanced view of colonial societies:

"Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other or resistance to the other. [...] Yet what if identity is conceived not as [a] boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging

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63 WHITE, Richard. Op. Cit.

64 WHITE, Richard. Op. Cit. Location 498.

a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological<sup>65</sup>”.

The daily interactions and choices helped shaping a multicultural and multilingual world that was accepted *de facto* by a very pragmatic Spanish administration<sup>66</sup>. In that regard, it is interesting to note how the judicial records – civil and military – mirrored the heterogeneous society of Spanish Louisiana and Florida. The sample presented in the document below shows how Spanish justice had to adapt to the diversity of populations under its rule and accept different forms of oath depending on the status of the different witnesses.

#### ***Document 4: Multicultural society and oath in judicial documentation<sup>67</sup>***

In such a context, mediation was omnipresent, and those who could understand and speak several languages occupied a key position to make daily proceedings possible. That is why the Spanish administration relied heavily on official interpreters – most of them French – that maintained the cohesion of local societies (see document 5 below).

#### ***Document 5: Interpreters in Spanish Louisiana and Florida<sup>68</sup>***

When official interpreters were not available – especially in the most remote locations – civilians who could speak several languages stepped in their place. That is the case of the clerk Beli Amble/Willy

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65 CLIFFORD, James. *Malaise dans la culture*. Paris: ENSBA, 1996 quoted in WHITE, Richard. Op. Cit. Location 467.

66 USNER, Daniel, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. p. 45.

67 Document elaborated from AGI, Papeles de Cuba, 163A, Autos criminales contra los presidiarios Francisco Caparza, José Aguiar, José López, José Morales y Domingo Pineda sobre la muerte violentada al de igual clase Manuel Morales / AGI, Papeles de Cuba, 163A, Testimonio de las últimas diligencias en el lance ocurrido entre el Capitán del Regimiento de Luisiana D. José LeBlanc y D. Arturo Morgan / AGI, Papeles de Cuba, 163A, Criminal contra el soldado Miguel Serrano / AGI, Papeles de Cuba, 163A, Criminal contra el marinero Manuel González.

68 AGI, Santo Domingo, 2605, Hojas de servicio de empleados de Real Hacienda.

Hambly who acted as an interpreter for Santiago/James Campbell when he was interrogated in the context of the inquiry into Eduardo Macabé/Edward McCabe<sup>69</sup>. Likewise, Juan Sandoval, from New Spain, was chosen as *ad hoc* interpreter because he could speak the Myscoge or Muskogee/Creek language:

“The interpreter of the Myscoge nation who possesses our language appeared. [He was] Juan Sandoval from San Miguel el Grande in the kingdom of New Spain and said he could speak Spanish and the Muskoge idiom, by virtue of which he was appointed as interpreter<sup>70</sup>”.

Multiculturality did not stop at language and religion but also affected every level of material culture in borderlands. In that regard, the case against sergeant Bartolomé López in 1791 is particularly interesting as it puts into light many facets of frontier life<sup>71</sup>. Situated in North West Florida, the fort of San Esteban Tombecbe / Tombigbee was recaptured by the Spanish after Bernardo de Gálvez’ offensive against the British and the restoring of Spanish authority in the region after 1783. However, most of the Anglo-American population that had settled in West Florida remained after the transition of power. As in the case of San Marcos de Apalache in 1800, San Esteban Tombecbe was a particularly isolated military stronghold in the middle of a region dominated by Native tribes and Anglo-American settlers. Sergeant Bartolomé López worked as the storekeeper of the fort, in charge of managing the stock – food and weapons – and sharing out the rations to the soldiers. An inquiry into his behavior started when soldiers began to complain about the dwindling rations<sup>72</sup>. When interrogated, Bartolomé López invoked his good faith:

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69 AGI, Papeles de Cuba, 163A, Sumaria información contra el teniente de milicias Eduardo Macabé, f. 889r.

70 AGI, Papeles de Cuba, 163A, Compulsa del proceso contra el soldado José María Aldana, f. 975r.

71 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Sumaria contra el sargento Bartolomé López sobre haberle acusado no dar la ración justa a la tropa del destacamento del fuerte de San Esteban.

72 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Sumaria contra el sargento Bartolomé López sobre haberle acusado no dar la ración justa a la tropa del destacamento del fuerte de San Esteban. f. 294r. / AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Copia de la sumaria formada contra el sargento B. Lopez. f. 404r.

“Asked where he got the scale and the weights that served at the store = he responded that he got the scale from a local dweller called Magro and that he received the weights from the store in Mobile. Asked why he did not ask for a scale or “pesas de cruz” in Mobile to share out the rations because the English and French pound was stronger than the Spanish one = he responded that he addressed a report to don José de Vil Goustin when he was in command and that he [Goustin] had reported it to Mobile<sup>73</sup>”.

From his declaration, the problem of dwindling rations stemmed from a genuine mistake. Since he did not have the required equipment, Bartolomé López sought some help from the local population, which was a logical move given the degree of isolation of the fort. As a result, he ended up distributing smaller rations. At first sight, if we take the cultural complexity of the region, it is quite easy to accept the sergeant’s explanation. From this point of view, it would be a simple case of cultural “misunderstanding” revealing that, maybe, Bartolomé López was ill-equipped to navigate the region where he was stationed. However, other elements of the inquiry offer another interpretation of the case. Indeed, different reports redacted by the commanding officer Francisco Cervone revealed that the stocks of corn, and more worryingly, of gunpowder had decreased as well<sup>74</sup>. Moreover, the officer observed that more and more native tribesmen had come and visited the fort since Bartolomé López had started managing (or mismanaging) the stocks<sup>75</sup>. These facts help to paint another picture entirely, that of an “instrumentalized misunderstanding”. From this point of view, the mistake about the weights – genuine or not – gave Bartolomé López the means to start what seemed to be an illegal but lucrative trade. In that case, the sergeant and the Native people dealing with him acted as partners in a deal that be-

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73 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Sumaria contra el sargento Bartolomé López sobre haberle acusado no dar la ración justa a la tropa del destacamento del fuerte de San Esteban. f. 400r-

74 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Sumaria contra el sargento Bartolomé López sobre haberle acusado no dar la ración justa a la tropa del destacamento del fuerte de San Esteban. f. 291.

75 AGI, Cuba, 163A, Causas militares, Sumaria contra el sargento Bartolomé López sobre haberle acusado no dar la ración justa a la tropa del destacamento del fuerte de San Esteban. f. 292r.

neficiated both sides and relied on the isolation of this borderland region.

## Conclusion

At the crossroads between antagonistic and competitive imperial powers, the disputed borderlands of West Florida constituted a space of constant negotiation and accommodation. The purpose of the present paper was to show how loyalty was mostly adaptative and responded to the necessities of complex individual and collective strategies. Admittedly, both the Spanish crown and the United States government shared the common goal of affirming their military presence and geopolitical influence in the area. In that regard, the definition of the northern limits of West Florida by Pinckney's Treaty in 1795 was revealing of a growingly unsteady balance of power and fed the narrative of a "manifest destiny" qualifying the "inevitable" expansion of the United States to the detriment of a failing and decaying Spanish Empire<sup>76</sup>. However, at the local level, a more nuanced picture can be drawn: changing focus to a micro-level enables the historian of the borderlands to try and go beyond a rather teleological narrative of American success and Spanish failure. The analysis of daily life in the borderlands through judicial records shows the major role of local societies in the shaping of these regions. Indeed, borderlands were as much a local affair as national or imperial ones. As such, they offered spaces of opportunities in which local communities could exercise their agency as rational actors whose actions and strategies contributed to shape the region. They were a refuge zone for the marginalized – maroons, renegade soldiers, and pirates – that made profit of the remoteness and the consequent lack of effective control. It was particularly true for the Creek people who were able to remain a major actor in the region, using imperial rivalries to their advantage, switching alliances when it was most strategically convenient. Sometimes enemies, sometimes allies, business partners most of the time, the Creek tribes were a central actor in the region as long

<sup>76</sup> McMICHAEL, Andrew. *Atlantic Loyalties. Americans in Spanish West Florida 1785-1810*. Athens and Londons: The University of Georgia Press, 2008. p. 2.

as imperial rivalry defined the region. The situation changed drastically after Spain retreated from these regions, leaving the United States to take control of the southeast of Northern America. As Richard White wrote in the case of the Great Lakes:

“The real crisis and the final dissolution came when Indians ceased to have the power to force the whites onto the middle ground. Then the desires of whites to dictate the terms of accommodation could be given its head. As a consequence, the middle ground eroded. The American Republic succeeded in doing what the French and English empires could not<sup>77</sup>.”

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77 WHITE, Richard. Op. Cit. Location 561.

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