The King’s Coffer. Proprietors of the Spanish Florida Treasury, 1565-1702 by Amy Bushnell

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Florida. A second volume, carrying the account up to the 1634 settlement between the Crown and the Menéndez heirs, is in progress and will be welcome.

Lyon has made us a further gift which, with characteristic modesty, he does not mention. His long years of research in the archives of Seville, Madrid, Simancas and Cádiz, have uncovered rich caches of Florida documents, including lawsuits, audits, ship manifests and notarial records, missing from the older collections. His generosity in pointing the way to these materials will in the long run prove as great a contribution to scholarship as his own excellent book.

Amy Turner Bushnell


This is an outstanding contribution to the scarce but expanding scholarly historical literature on Spanish Florida (which in reality is the Spanish Southeast of today’s United States previous to the arrival of the English).

We still lack much information on this period although documentation is abundant and properly gathered (in Gainesville) after many decades of searching, photostating and microfilming in overseas archives and libraries. Amy Bushnell is an able and enthusiastic user of this rich resource. Her gusto for original Spanish and French documentation is unmatched. Her talent to produce from this data a well organized and readable original topic is attested to by this, her first book. She has attracted attention before through her various research articles.

The center of Spanish Florida was St. Augustine, governed in the first two centuries by the royal Hapsburg dynasty’s bureaucracy – a very complex and entrenched system. This bureaucracy, narrow in vision, existed to protect and stimulate tangible wealth such as “bars of gold, silver coins, precious stones...” and shared power with the Church in the twin purposes of Spanish colonialism: to acquire material riches and to gain souls for the Catholic heaven.

The money, jewels, precious stones, bullion, income, expenses and contracts were handled by the royal officials of the treasury (The factor, contador, and tesorero). These existed in St. Augustine. Even expert historians of colonial Spanish America are often deficient in their knowledge of the duties, importance, behavior patterns and traditional actions of these officials. Very few, if any, studies have been made to describe the actual functioning and interaction of these officials in a particular administrative colonial post. Therefore the Bushnell study is of importance not only to the Florida history bibliography but also to that of all colonial Spanish America.

Dr. Bushnell deals with the Hapsburg administration from the establishment of St. Augustine until the coming of the Bourbon dynasty after the War of Spanish Succession, during which St. Augustine was besieged and destroyed. By giving us the story of these royal officials she
provides us with a fine sketch of St. Augustine during this period, because the three men all reached through family ties and activities into every aspect of St. Augustine and Spanish Florida.

The men who bought, acquired and inherited the jobs were generally mediocre, adept in surviving, often corrupt, living in a narrow society that offered little. Status meant petty advantages such as better furniture or silk shawls for the women. The research based on original documentation is flawless: the 140 pages of text are well organized and the author’s writing is clear, correct and lively. The notes, bibliography, and index are first-rate; the appendices and glossary useful.

Here then is a model of original work that adds value to local, state, regional and national history, and Latin American history as well. One rarely finds such a fine history book dealing with what is considered a dull subject. It is anything but dull.

Charles W. Arnade