

MINORCANS AND THE CARLO FORNI REBELLION AT THE TURNBULL COLONY, AUGUST 19, 1768

By Robert Phillip Jones



Artist concept Carlo Forni

Prologue

Andrew Turnbull's colony was promoted as a promising agricultural enterprise in East Florida, which would allow colonists to earn their freedom through indentured servitude. However, the reality upon arrival was starkly different from the promises made. Turnbull had recruited a diverse group of Mediterraneans—Minorcans, Greeks, Italians, Corsicans, and others—promising land, fair treatment, and prosperity. For many, this was a welcomed lifeline, given the economic hardships of the time. However, Turnbull's colony was not a "Greek utopia" he advertised so often nor an equitable settlement. Instead, because of circumstances beyond his control, it became a site of exploitation.

Once the Minorcans arrived in New Smyrna, they were subjected to brutal living and working conditions. The tropical climate was harsh; there was a rebellion, and a hurricane occurred within a few months. Unfamiliar diseases, like malaria and dysentery, were rampant. They faced backbreaking labor in clearing the land and planting indigo, as well as food for the colony. Food shortages, inadequate shelter, and harsh oversight added to their suffering, which lingered from the 70-day voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.

The colonists were drawn from different cultures and languages, creating tension but also opportunities for solidarity in shared suffering. The Minorcans and Italians, in particular, may have formed bonds during their time waiting in Minorca, where marriages and friendships had already been forged. These existing social networks likely contributed to the quick organization of the rebellion.

Turnbull's overseers ruled with an iron fist. Physical punishment and other forms of cruelty were commonplace, and the colonists were likely beginning to realize that they were effectively enslaved, rather than being treated as indentured laborers with the prospect of eventual freedom. This breach of trust would have created a volatile situation.

The colonists, particularly the Italians and Greeks, may have arrived already disillusioned by the delays, hardships, and mistreatment they endured during their voyage to Florida. They had spent months in transit, with some ships being blown off course. By the time they reached New Smyrna, many were likely exhausted and questioning Turnbull's leadership. The Greeks and Italians, who had formed relationships

in Minorca before departure, likely exchanged stories of Turnbull's broken promises. These shared grievances could have served as the foundation for the rebellion.

Forni, an Italian, may have stepped forward as a leader due to his own dissatisfaction and his ability to rally others. Italians made up a significant portion of the first wave of colonists and may have felt a sense of responsibility or leadership over the larger group of Mediterranean immigrants. Forni's status as one of the earliest arrivals may have earned him a position of informal authority or trust among the Italians and Minorcans. Additionally, the Italians' extended stay in Minorca before the voyage to New Smyrna allowed them to form bonds with the Minorcans. These relationships may have allowed Forni to mobilize not only his fellow Italians but also a broader coalition, including the Greeks, who shared his discontent. The Italians likely felt a unique sense of betrayal, as they had been among Turnbull's first recruits.

Mental abuse, starvation, and forced labor under Turnbull's overseers was likely the flashpoint. The colonists' indignation would have been further stoked by the abuses of the chief overseer, John Cutter, whose death in the rebellion suggests he was a particularly hated figure. Turnbull's rigid system left little room for dissent, meaning violence may have seemed like the only way to resist.

The Greeks and Italians came from regions with histories of resistance to oppression. Italians, for instance, were no strangers to rebellion against landlords and exploitative systems. Forni and his supporters may have been inspired by cultural traditions of standing up against unfair treatment. The rebels' plan to sail to Havana highlights their belief that escape was possible. Havana, under Spanish control, may have seemed like a safe haven where they could seek protection. It is possible that the arrival of the final ships by August 10 brought news or rumors of ships leaving nearby ports, which may have catalyzed the plan to revolt.

Italians in the Mediterranean were often accustomed to navigating power dynamics under foreign rulers (Spanish, Austrian, or French), and Forni's plan to sail to Havana suggests he was a strategic thinker. This quality could have further solidified his role as a leader. Italians may have been viewed as more assertive or ambitious compared to the Greeks or Minorcans, which could explain why Forni took charge.

The rebellion at Turnbull's New Smyrna colony was a desperate attempt by mistreated Italian and Greek colonists to reclaim their freedom. It arose from abuses, broken promises, and the unbearable conditions of the colony. Carlo Forni's leadership may have been driven by a combination of personal ambition, a sense of betrayal, and the Italians' status as early arrivals who bore the brunt of the colony's hardships. While the rebellion ultimately failed, its swift organization and intensity reflect the untenable circumstances faced by the colonists and their resistance to oppression.

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The cache of letters written by Governor James Grant and Dr. Andrew Turnbull offers valuable insight, from their points of view, into the history of the New Smyrna colony and life in East Florida during the 18th century.¹ The Dundee Archive letters, written mostly by two prominent Scotsmen, provide perspectives shaped by years of experiences and their positions of authority and privilege. While these important letters shed light on colonial administration, economic ambitions, and the challenges of bringing 1403 immigrants to Florida, it reveals little about the lived experiences of the colony's Minorcan

¹ [The-Letters-Of-Dr-Turnbull-pdf-SEARCHABLE.pdf](#)

laborers or the broader realities of life under the overseers' watch. The letters are real but seem biased against anything Spanish or Catholic.

This omission is significant, as the Minorcans—the largest group of white people brought to America during the colonial era²—played the central role in the colony's development. Arriving as indentured laborers from the Mediterranean, primarily from the isle of Menorca, they endured grueling conditions, harsh treatment, and a system that left little room for justice. The letters of Grant and Turnbull, focused on colonial progress and economic output, largely ignore the hardships, cultural practices, and resilience of the Minorcans. Catholicism, a cornerstone of Minorcan identity, is similarly overlooked, despite its importance as a source of community and strength during this difficult period. In all the letters from the Dundee Archive, Catholic is mentioned one time and it is spelled wrong (Catholicks) in that one instance.³

The University of North Florida hosts an outstanding website⁴ that organizes the Grant letters from the James Grant of Ballindaloch Papers. These letters provide valuable insights into the British occupation of East Florida from 1763 to 1783, offering accounts written by Governor James Grant, Andrew Turnbull, and other prominent officials. However, these documents reflect the perspectives of two Scotsmen, Grant and Turnbull, and other British colonial leaders. They fail to provide sufficient detail about the treatment of the Minorcans or the specific events surrounding what led up to the Carlo Forni rebellion.

To understand the full story of New Smyrna and East Florida in the 18th century, we must move beyond the narrow lens of colonial leadership. While Grant and Turnbull's accounts are invaluable, they are incomplete. Incorporating the voices of Minorcans, as well as the perspectives of women, young people, overseers, Father Pedro Camps, and other marginalized individuals offers a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of life in the New Smyrna colony. By acknowledging these biases and seeking out untold stories, we honor the contributions and struggles of all who shaped this chapter of history. The Minorcans, including the 964 who are buried somewhere in the soil of New Smyrna Beach, were neither faceless nor nameless. Finding a grave will prevent them from being remembered as mere statistics. It is against this backdrop that the account of the Carlo Forni Rebellion unfolds.

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The Rebellion

The rebellion led by Carlo Forni at Turnbull's New Smyrna colony on August 19, 1768⁵—less than two months after most of the indentured servants had arrived—reveals the profound despair, betrayal, and mistreatment the Italian and Greek colonists must have endured. To comprehend how such a large-scale uprising could have been organized and executed so swiftly, it is essential to examine the circumstances surrounding the colony's establishment, the dire conditions faced, and the leadership dynamics within the diverse group of immigrants.

² Philip D. Rasico-*The Minorcans of Florida-Their History, Language and Culture*. Page 1, 1st sentence.

³ Andrew Turnbull letter to Governor James Grant-St. Augustine, May 30, 1769 <https://minorcans.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-Letters-Of-Dr-Turnbull-pdf-SEARCHABLE.pdf>

⁴ [Letters to James Grant – Florida History Online](https://history.domains.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/projects-project-b-p-html/projects-grant-index-html/) <https://history.domains.unf.edu/floridahistoryonline/projects-project-b-p-html/projects-grant-index-html/>

⁵ Patricia C. Griffin-Mullet *on the Beach-The Minorcans of Florida 1768-1788*. Page 32

There is some historical inconsistency regarding the date of the Minorcan arrivals in connection to the rebellion. Turnbull writes Sir William Duncan that, *“the last ship, the Charming Betsey, had arrived in St. Augustine and was putting passengers ashore at the settlement on August 20th.”*⁶ Of course this could be a typing error as Beeson writes the last colonist arrived in New Smyrna on August 10, 1768.

A newspaper article notes the time the last ships arrived. *“The 23d (July) put into Georgia, having been blown off St. Augustine, the brig Hope, Captain Livingston, and the snow Friendship, being part of a fleet of 8 sail, last from Gibraltar, with 1500 Greeks, Italians, and Mahonese on board, brought over by Dr. Andrew Turnbull, for his intended new settlement, in East Florida. It is said, that two brigantines of said fleet have got into St. Augustine; and that the vessel in which Mr. Turnbull himself was, had bore away for this port.”*⁷

This newspaper account suggests that two of the vessels, *Hope* and *Friendship*, arrived in Georgia on July 23rd. It also indicates that Turnbull was aboard one of the vessels that had been blown off course. If they departed Georgia within a matter of days, it seems likely they would have reached St. Augustine and then New Smyrna in early August. Whether the last colonist arrived on the 10th or the 20th is unclear. However, if any vessels had landed during the rebellion or the day after, it seems that such an event would have been mentioned in the letters or in a report sent to London.

An account of the rebellion that appeared in Scotland puts it in some context, but still does not tell the whole story. It reads: *“AMERICA. St. Augustine, August 30. All the vessels belonging to Dr. Turnbull's fleet being arrived at St. Augustine, with 1400 Italians, Minorcans, and Greeks, in order to settle the lands on the Musquito-river, they proceeded under the direction of Mr. John Cutter to that place, with which many of them being greatly dissatisfied, they formed a design of returning to their own country; to accomplish which, on the 18th of August, about 250 of the Greeks and some Italians rose upon and confined all the Englishmen that were among them; and having armed themselves, they seized the schooner Baliner, (belonging to Mr. Torrans, of Charles Town, Merchant) Evan Stokes master, which had been employed in carrying provisions to the settlement: they also seized Mr. Turnbull's store, from which they loaded the schooner with goods, intending to proceed to the Havannah. Next day, they attempted to take possession of the schooner East-Florida packet, Capt. B. Barton, who was in the river about 20 leagues south of St. Augustine, waiting for a wind to get over the bar; but he, getting notice of their design before they came up, scuttled the vessel, took out some necessaries, left her, and went over the bar in his boat. They were within 200 yards of the schooner when Capt. Barton left her, but she having been the day before ballasted with sand was so full of water before they got on board that they could do nothing with her. They intended likewise to have seized a ship lying off the Musquito harbour, Capt. Duncan, but the wind not being fair prevented them. Early on the 21st, Governor Grant sent two armed sloops full of men, and Capt. Rainsford with 50 more marched by land, who all arrived next day in time to prevent them from getting the schooner over the bar. Before the soldiers arrived, Mr. Turnbull, with a few English, had found means to get possession of his store, and had killed several of the mutineers. On the appearance of the vessels and troops, they immediately quitted the schooner, and betook themselves to the bushes and*

⁶ Andrew Turnbull to Sir William Duncan St. Augustine, August 20, 1768 [The-Letters-Of-Dr-Turnbull-pdf-SEARCHABLE.pdf](#)

⁷ *Williamsburg Virginia Gazette*, August 04, 1768 Pg. 6, Williamsburg, Virginia, US

*other hiding places, but were soon quelled. These mutineers were mostly Greeks, with a few Italians, **but not one Minorcan was concerned with them*** (Emphasis added by author).”⁸

This written account indicates that a group of the colonists were "greatly dissatisfied" as soon as they saw what lay before them and wanted to leave. It identifies John Cutter as the overseer or manager in charge. He must have done something immediately upon taking command to provoke the men, as he was targeted to be killed. During the rebellion, John Cutter had his ear and three fingers cut off and was stabbed in the groin which was reported many places including in Savannah and Charleston newspapers.

This account confirms August 18th as the date the rebellion began and states that, of the 250 people involved, most were Greeks and "*some Italians.*" However, it is notable that the rebellion was led by Carlo Forni, an Italian, not a Greek.

Of great importance—and something that should have been appreciated and rewarded by Turnbull—was the fact that "*not one Minorcan was concerned with them.*" The Minorcans did not participate in the rebellion. Why they didn't is open to speculation. There are no letters written by the Minorcan colonists while at the Turnbull colony that have been found. After the rebellion, it is doubtful that Turnbull would have allowed letters to be sent back to Minorca.

Why Carlo Forni and others rebelled might have been triggered by a specific incident—such as a particularly brutal punishment or a failure to provide food. There must have been some kind of unacceptable action on the part of the overseers to push the men to rebellion. These kinds of flashpoints are common in uprisings.

The only account of a member of the jury and an eye witness to the trial of the three men that were eventually convicted and sentenced to death was written by Bernard Romans.⁹ The account is two pages long but is significant to understand what the rebellion caused. It was Romans accounts of Turnbull that inspired Carita Doggett to write her book in defense of her ancestor, Dr. Andrew Turnbull. Making Romans remarks part of this essay brings out many details that might otherwise be lost to history.

Bernard Romans wrote: "*At a few miles from the bar is the situation of the town or settlement made by Dr. Turnbull for Sir William Duncan, himself, and perhaps more associates; this town is called New Smyrna from the place of the doctor's ladies' nativity. The settlements around this famous town, extend considerably along the banks of the lagoon, large quantities of very good indigo have been made here. If my reader is inquisitive to know why I called this famous, I answer on account of the cruel methods used in settling yet, which made it the daily topic of conversation for a long time in this, and the neighboring provinces.*

About 1500 people, men, women and children were deluded away from their native country, Where they lived at home in the beautiful cornfields and vineyards of Greece and Italy, to this place, where, instead of plenty, they found want in the last degree, instead of promised fields, a dreaded wilderness; instead of grateful, fertile soil, a barren, arid sand; and in addition to their misery, were obliged to indent

⁸ *The Caledonian Mercury (Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland)* · Wed, Nov 16, 1768 · Page 1

⁹ Bernard Romans-A concise natural history of East and West-Florida. Pages 267-273. [A concise natural history of East and West-Florida - Google Books](#)

https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_concise_natural_history_of_East_and_We/GpI5AAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false

themselves, their wives, and children for many years, to a man who had the most sanguine expectations of transplanting Bashawship from the Levant.

The better to affect his purpose, he granted them a pitiful portion of land, for 10 years, upon the plan of the feudal system; this being improved and just rendered fit for cultivation, at the end of that term revert to the original grantor, and the grantee, may, if he chooses, begin a new state of Vassalage for 10 years more. Many were denied even such grants as these, and were obliged to work in the manner of negroes, a task in the field; their provisions were at the best of times only a quart of maize per day, and 2 ounces of pork per week; this might have sufficed with the help of fish which abounds in the lagoon, but they were denied the liberty of fishing, unless they should not labor enough, inhumane taskmasters, were set over them, and instead of allowing each family to do with their homely fare as they pleased, they were forced to join all together in one mess, and at the beat of a vile drum, to come to one common copper, from whence their homony was laid out to them; even this coarse and scanty meal was through careless management, rendered still more coarse, and through the knavery of the proveditor, and the pilfering of a hungry cook, still more scant.

Masters of vessels were forewarned from giving any of them a piece of bread or meat. Imagine to yourself an African, (an expert hunter) who had been long the favorite of his master, through the importunities of this petty tyrant sold to him - imagine to yourself one of a class of men, whose hearts are generally callous against the softer feelings, melted with the wants of some of these wretches giving them a piece of venison, of which he caught what he pleased, and for this charitable act, disgrace, whipped, and course of time used so severely, that the unusual servitude soon released him to a happier state; again behold, a man obliged to whip his own wife in public, for pilfering bred to relieve her helpless family; then think of a time, when the above small allowance was reduced to half, and see some brave, generous, seaman charitably, sharing their own allowance with some of these wretches, the merciful tars suffering abuse for their generosity, and the miserable objects of their ill-timed pity, undergoing bodily punishment, for satisfying the cravings of a long, disappointed appetite, and you may form some judgment of the manner in which New Smyrna was settled.

Mr. Joseph Purcell, an excellent young man, who was draftsman to our department, a Menorquin, who with his family, came over at the same time with these people, but happily, withdrew from the yoke, could never speak of this without tears; he had been several times, and I witness to this distress, and told me, that he knew many among the unhappy sufferers, who were comfortably established, did Europe, but by great promises deluded away; and O' Florida! were this the only instance of similar barbarity which now has seen, we might draw a veil over the scenes of horror; Rolles Town, Mount Royal, and three or four others of less note have seen too many wretches fall victims to hunger and ill usage, and that a period of life with health and strength generally maintain the human frame in its greatest vigour, and seem to ensure longevity.

Rolles Town in particular has been the sepulcher of above 400 such victims. Before I leave this subject, I will relate the insurrection to which those unhappy people at New Smyrna, or oblige to have recourse, and which the great ones stiled rebellion. In the year 1769, at a time, when the unparalleled severities of their taskmasters, particularly one Cutter (who had been made a Justice of the Peace, with no other view than to enable him to execute his barbarities in a larger extent, and with the greater appearance of authority) had drove these wretches to despair, they resolved to escape to Havannuh; to execute this, they broke into the provision stores, and seized on some craft lying in the harbour, but were prevented

from taking others by the care of the masters. Destitute of any man fit for the important post of a leader, their proceedings were all confusion, and an Italian of very bad principles, who was accused of a rape on a very young girl, but I have so much note, that he had formally been admitted to the overseers' table, assumed a kind of command; they thought themselves secure where they were, and this occasioned a delay, 'till a detachment of the ninth regiment, had time to arrive, to whom they submitted, except one boat full, which escaped to the Florida Keys; but it was taken up by a providence man; many were the victims destined to punishment; as I was one of the grand jury, which set 15 days on this business, I had an opportunity of canvassing it well, but the accusations were of so small account that we found only five bills; one of these was against a man for may in the above, said Cutter, whom, it seems, they had pitched upon as the principal object of their resentment, and curtailed his ear, and two of his fingers; another for shooting a cow, would be a capital crime in England, the law, making it such was here extended to this province; the others were against the leader, and three more for the burglary committed on the provision store; the distresses of these sufferers touched us so, that we almost unanimously wished for some happy circumstances that might justify our rejecting all of the bills, except that against the chief, who was a villain.

One man was brought before us, three or four times, and at last was joined in one accusation with the person who named Cutter; yet no evidence of weight appearing against him, I had an opportunity to remark by the appearance of some faces in court, that he had been marked, and the grand jury disappointed the expectations of more than one great man.

Governor Grant pardoned two, and a third was obliged to be the executioner of the remaining two. On this occasion, I saw one of the most moving scenes I ever experienced; long and obstinate was the struggle of this man's mind, who repeatedly called out, that he chose to die, rather than be the executioner of his friends in distress: this, not a little perplexed Mr. Woolridge the sheriff, until at length the entreaties of the victims themselves, put an end to the conflict in his breast, by encouraging him to act. Now we beheld a man thus compelled to mount the ladder, take a leave of his friends in the most moving manner, kissing them the moment before he committed them to an ignominious death. I have dwelt the longer on this subject, because the native prejudice of vulgar Englishman, has represented the misfortunes of these wretches in too black a light. It is sad that Dr. Stork, who was near the spot when the insurrection happened, died with the fright, and Cutter sometime after died, a lingering death, having experienced besides his wounds, the terrors of a coward in power, overtaken by vengeance.”¹⁰

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Turnbull, in particular, offers minimal information about the rebellion when writing to his financial backer, Sir William Duncan. It is clear that Governor Grant was concerned about the potential for exaggerated reports in the newspapers,¹¹ fearing that such news could discourage further immigration to East Florida. This lack of detailed accounts highlights the challenge of fully understanding the Italian and Greek experiences and the motivations that fueled their resistance. No Minorcans participated in the rebellion.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Governor James Grant to Sir William Duncan St. Augustine, August 30, 1768- <https://minorcans.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-Letters-Of-Dr-Turnbull-pdf-SEARCHABLE.pdf>

¹² *The Caledonian Mercury (Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland)* · Wed, Nov 16, 1768 · Page 1

An important fact is shared concerning the Greek priest Turnbull brought with him. *“The Greek priest was forced onto a boat with some other Greeks with whom the boat sunk and the priest was drowned.”*¹³ Chances are many of the Greeks sought rest and peace of mind at Father Camps Catholic Church.

A most significant outcome of the rebellion was quickly recognized by Turnbull, who wrote: *“Though this affair carries a loss with it, yet I think it a kind of lucky accident to the colony for at present it not only clears us of villains but it will keep the others in awe for the future.”*¹⁴

The fear of public punishment at the whipping post likely weighed heavily on the minds of every colonist after watching the punishment meted out with the whips. Furthermore, the rebellion probably caused the overseers from South Carolina to become even harsher.

Turnbull says a couple of important things in his comments, *“All that tribe of pilferers I think of punishing here. As to the plotting men, I send six of them prisoners with Captain Rainsford to take their tryals, and I hope that some of their bodies will be hung in chains in this river as pyrates. As to Carlo Forni, he is an execrable villain. When he was taken he came on shore to ravish two young girls.”* Turnbull had no hesitation in leaving the rotting bodies hanging in the wind along the Hillsborough River—a gruesome and horrifying sight, particularly for the Minorcan women and children. Andrew Turnbull to James Grant New Smyrna, August 25, 1768. Dundee Archives.

“Two of the mutineers were killed. One in retaking the store and another in pilfering from the Mahonese. Several are wounded but none mortally. The Greek priest was forced onto a boat with some other Greeks with whom the boat sunk and the priest was drowned. Some of the Corsican clan of Greeks were persuaded into the plot by their understanding Italian and were active in the mischief of destroying and plundering, but they were not arrived in this place when this was first thought of. Andrew Turnbull to James Grant New Smyrna, August 25, 1768 Dundee City Archive

July 27 addendum to “acquaint you that the last ship is arrived with the People in good health and Spirits, tho’ they have been now four months onboard without setting a foot on shore. The ship proceeds with them tomorrow to land them at the mouth of Hillsborough River.” Andrew Turnbull to Sir William Duncan-Dundee City Archive

Andrew Turnbull to Sir William Duncan St. Augustine, August 20, 1768. The last ship of the ships from Gibraltar had arrived in St. Augustine by this time and was putting passengers ashore at the settlement when Turnbull wrote this letter on August 20th. Turnbull planned to leave St. Augustine the next day “for the settlement where as yet everything goes on well, though we arrived here in the worst season of the year and in the most rainy weather imaginable. Which is not only inconvenient but has retarded our work.” Dundee City Archive

“I have desired Captain Rainsford to leave twenty men, as thirty of the mutineers were lurking about the Inlett. A detachment of six with a corporal may be necessary now and then to bring some of them in. We are nigh to three of them today. Poor Stork died yesterday morning about three hours before I got here. He seemed to be better when we left him, but they tell me that he fell into convulsions when the mutiny

¹³ Andrew Turnbull to James Grant New Smyrna, August 25, 1768. Dundee Archives.

¹⁴ Andrew Turnbull to James Grant New Smyrna, August 29, 1768. Dundee Archives

began and lost his senses two days afterwards.” Andrew Turnbull to James Grant New Smyrna, August 25, 1768.

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Wilbur H. Siebert encapsulated the rebellion with these words: *“Those able to work found grubbing out scrub palmettoes an arduous task, and in Turnbull's absence on August 19, 1768, Carlo Forni, one of the overseers, proclaimed himself leader of the Greeks and Italians, took possession of the storehouses and firearms, distributed liquor among his followers, loaded a vessel with supplies, induced about one hundred people to go on board, and waited for the tide to carry them out of the Inlet on their way to Cuba. The latter received the alarming news at eight o'clock in the evening of August 20, and by five the next morning had the East Florida packet and another vessel under sail with troops, provisions, cannon, and ammunition. Another detachment was sent overland. The vessels reached Mosquito Inlet on August 22 just as the mutineers' vessel was warping out. As soon as they saw they were blockaded a score of their principal men jumped into a boat, cut its rope, and rowed away.*

The approaching vessels fired, and the other mutineers, seventy-five in number, surrendered, and were taken ashore. The detachment arrived on August 25 and two days later marched for St. Augustine, leaving a sergeant and twenty men to guard the prisoners.

Forty of them were severely punished at New Smyrna. A few of the others were sent to St. Augustine for trial, as were also those who had escaped in the boat after their capture on one of the Florida Keys. Only two were executed.”¹⁵

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The historical accounts of the rebellion do not answer the question: why? Could it be that the Italians and Greeks were among the first to begin laboring in the forest? Could it be that, upon their arrival, they were subjected to brutal treatment from overseers who did not understand their language or culture? Could it have been that the harsh working conditions and the treatment by chief overseer John Cutter caused them to feel as though they were enslaved rather than fulfilling an agreed-upon contract of labor?

These Indentured servants entered into a contract to work for a specific number of years (typically 4–6 years) in exchange for passage to a new land, food, shelter, and a small parcel of land at the end of their contract where they would live free as British citizens.

The slaves purchased by Turnbull, on the other hand, were considered property rather than indentured servants. They had no legal rights, were owned for life, and their children were often born into slavery. There was no expectation of freedom or compensation. Thus, the Minorcans were in a temporary condition—after completing their contract, they were no longer bound to Turnbull. The slaves, however, were in a permanent, lifelong condition with no endpoint unless manumitted (freed by the owner), which was rare. Finally, the Minorcans, in theory, had legal protections and could sue Turnbull for mistreatment or breach of contract. Slaves, on the other hand, had no legal standing and could not bring claims against their owners.

¹⁵ Wilbur H. Siebert. *Slavery and White Servitude in East Florida, 1726 to 1776*- The Florida Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Jul., 1931), pp. 3-23.

Trying to figure out why the rebellion occurred at all—and why so soon after arrival—leads to several possibilities. Perhaps, upon arrival, the rebels immediately recognized themselves in a wilderness, isolated from society, and subjected to brutal overseers. This likely made them feel they had been tricked into a situation akin to slavery. The labor was grueling, especially as the colonists had to clear land, plant crops, and establish a plantation in the Florida wilderness. They were treated harshly by the overseers, with punishments for disobedience resembling those inflicted on slaves, which reinforced the belief that they were being treated as slaves rather than indentured servants.

They were isolated and under constant supervision, with no realistic means of escape. This absence of autonomy was another way their treatment mirrored slavery. Upon realizing they were effectively trapped and working without a right to a hearing, many would have felt betrayed and enslaved. The rebellion likely stemmed from their anger at the harsh and dehumanizing treatment by overseers. The wounding and later death of the chief overseer, John Cutter, indicates the depths of the Italians' and Greeks' anger and desperation.

The Minorcans were a more tightly knit group than the Italians and Greeks. They had been under the yoke of the British for years, living on Menorca, and may have felt a stronger sense of loyalty to each other, hesitating to risk division or violence. They may have viewed the rebellion as too risky or unlikely to succeed, and they may have hoped for better treatment or an eventual resolution of their grievances through other means.

The rebellion at Turnbull's plantation highlights the thin line between indentured servitude and slavery when systems of labor are abused. While indentured servitude was supposed to be a temporary, contractual relationship, the reality in New Smyrna made it indistinguishable from slavery in the eyes of the colonists. Their treatment, isolation, and the impossibility of escape led to this early rebellion—an act of desperation against what the Italians and Greeks saw as enslavement.

Although the “why” has not been fully answered, these thoughts are worth consideration.