A Journey From St. Augustine to the New Smyrnea Colony

By Robert Phillip Jones

The thinnest sliver of the morning sun peeked above Matanzas Bay. Within minutes, the orange orb fully appeared signaling the beginning of another day — not just any day, but the day of my journey to New Smyrna, British East Florida. It was September 30, 1770.

After saying prayers, eating a breakfast of smoked mullet and tea, I picked up my saddle bags and headed to the stables on King Street to collect my horse. As I passed the City Gates, British sentries were performing the changing of the guard. Their handsome red-and-white uniforms were neatly pressed, and the bayonets on their muskets gleamed. Razor sharp and deadly, those blades were devastating at close range.

The bumpy, brick road shimmered faintly with morning dew, and thin curls of smoke drifted from breakfast fires in the numerous houses I passed. Fishermen laughed as they headed toward their boats, bound for another day of casting nets into creeks feeding the Matanzas River or gathering oysters and clams near the shore — they were always sweeter after a few cold days.

By the time I crossed the well-worn wooden span over the San Sebastian River, sails had already been hoisted on boats nearby. Esperanzo was saddled when I reached the stable whose owner, Billy Weatherby, knew I was about to make my first trip back to the colony in almost two years. The stallion was eager to go. He pawed at the ground and nudged me as if to say, "Come on, we've waited long enough."

I laid my leather saddlebags gently across Esperanzo's back, tucking a pistol on each side. Within a few minutes, we were on King's Road, bound for New Smyrna, a place I had not seen since October 1768.

The King's Road, worn more by foot and hoof than by carts' wheels, stretched past swamps and hammocks populated by massive oak trees and tall pines. The palmetto thickets were alive with birdsong and forest sounds along the road to Smyrnea. It would take me several days to reach the colony — longer if the creeks were high or fallen trees blocked the path.

As Esperanzo and I moved through the thick forest, taking care at each water crossing to look for alligators and snakes, memories began to stir: the desperation of my parents from the time we left Mahón until we reached America. The endless sun. The mosquito swarms in the millions.

My parents and I arrived in Smyrnea in July of 1768. I was 17. Mom and Dad died within six weeks after they became ill in the cramped quarters on the *Charming Betsey*. I had no other family, and after their burial in the San Pedro cemetery, Dr. Andrew Turnbull apprenticed me to a master British stonemason in St. Augustine. Part of me never left Smyrnea.

By midday on the third day of my travels, the forest began to thin. I could smell woodsmoke ahead. The sounds of hammers and voices drifted through the forest. Soon the road widened. Cleared fields stretched toward the horizon.

Orange trees lined the seven mile road. Smaller trees were staked upright to withstand the constant coastal winds. The aroma of the blossoms was overwhelming, almost holy. It was another sign of God's hand in this land.

Dr. Turnbull's great experiment was unmarked. There was no gate or sign, only a change in the character of the land. Trees had been felled and burned. Ashes had been spread across the ground to fertilize gardens and indigo, a practice used thousands of years earlier by Roman farmers to strengthen the roots of the plants.

Farther on, a road running the length of the colony turned to the east near the site of the San Pedro Catholic Church.

As I traveled south toward the town, I spotted the colony's first overseer's house- a wood, tabby structure. The overseers' houses were thirty-four feet by seventeen feet. It didn't seem like much space for a family, but it had a loft and a fireplace, which allowed cooking inside. Turnbull planned to build one overseers house for every ten palmetto huts along the river.

I began to see huts and was amazed by the sight of thriving gardens of corn, potatoes, peppers, garlic and herbs. A few chickens were about. Years ago, Mrs. Turnbull had given the Minorcans chickens many of which perished during a snowstorm and hurricane. There were mulberry trees behind all the houses and huts.

Farther down the trail, the foul smell reached me before the sight of the working indigo vats did. It crept in slow at first, then wrapped around me like a damp, sour blanket. It was the unmistakable stench of indigo — fermented leaves left to rot in the sun, mixed with the stink of swamp water and something worse, like spoiled cabbage and fish heads left too long on the dock.

Someone had once described — how the smell gets into your skin and stays there, no matter how many times you wash. He said that when he was first learning how to make indigo, he thought something had died in the vat.

The men beat the thick, dark liquid with paddles, while the women dragged bundles of indigo cuttings from the fields, the sun already hot on their backs. It was a hard, filthy job, but it was work — and work meant food. That's what they told themselves. It was the kind of labor that wore your body down and broke your spirit a little more each day. The blue dye it produced was worth a fortune to the men in charge.

A cluster of indigo vats and weathered storage buildings, had walls stained deep blue. At the edge of the indigo field, I saw men and women gathering the weed. Once bundled, the indigo was carried to a waiting cart that delivered it to vats further inland, away from the river. Farther down the road, I rode past another vat operation, this one next to the Hillsborough River, protected by a seawall and flanked by two nearby houses. Most of the indigo vats were near the river.

It was remarkable that so many of the palmetto huts were still standing two years later, considering the terrible weather the colony had endured since soon after we landed two years

earlier. I passed a few carts coming toward me and waved to people I recognized who I was with during the trip across the Atlantic on the *Charming Betsey*. They seemed happy to see me — probably surprised at how much I had grown, and how strong I had become from working with heavy coquina blocks.

I was now close enough to the chapel to see it clearly. I planned to rest there and, if possible, speak with Father Camps or Father Casanovas. They had officiated at the Requiem Mass when my parents died and were buried in the sacred ground behind the church. That was a tragic time; 450 Minorcans died between July 1768 and the end of the year. My parents, however, were not buried in a mass grave — there had been a lull in deaths for several weeks.

The San Pedro church was a short distance from the Hillsborough River. The church was originally built for a Greek Orthodox priest. Unfortunately, the priest drowned in August 1768 during the Carlo Forni rebellion. Father Camps was now pastor of what was renamed as the San Pedro Parish.

Two large mounds fronted an extensive communal garden south of the church. The town was further south.

I dismounted in front of the church. As I was tying Esperanzo to the hitching post, I heard a soft Catalan voice, “Hola, noi jove.”

I turned to Father Camps, already close enough to embrace. We hugged tightly. “Beneïció per a vós, Pare Camps,” I replied.

Without another word, we walked to the open field behind the church. It was surrounded by beautiful blooms of Coreopsis, Gaillardia, Hibiscus, and Oleander—flowers that bordered the entire acre where the cemetery lay.

The wooden cross in the ground where my parents were buried was still there. Father Camps and I knelt. He prayed for the repose of their souls, and for all souls of the faithful departed. I felt a slight breeze and also picked up on a message from mother, telling me they were alright and that I would be, too.

On our way back to my horse, Father Camps told me that over half of the colonists had died, mostly the oldest and youngest. Scurvy had taken them.

After a long visit, I left Father Camps and rode to the town, where I counted at least 23 structures. They were laid out in precise rows.

The town was headquarters for everything. Oxen pulled wagons loaded with timber and stone for a large building under construction. I passed the 80-foot hospital Dr. Turnbull had built shortly after his arrival. So many people were suffering from scurvy. I vividly remember the crying that echoed throughout the entire colony. Men carried their loved ones to the cemetery, wrapped in whatever cloth they could find. The wailing seemed endless. The screams and moans are sounds

I shall never forget. The number of deaths began to decline by mid-December in 1768, and were much lower in 1769—lower still this year.

The wharfs lay due east of the town. I spent several hours walking around them, shaking hands with people who remembered me and my parents. Several two-masted schooners were anchored in front of an uninhabited island rimmed with mangroves. One of the vessels was unloading provisions from Charles Town, as the colonists were not yet able to grow all their own food. Judging from the height of the corn in the gardens, they would be able to supply themselves soon.

As dusk settled in, I wanted to sleep near the water and take advantage of the evening breeze. I tied Esperanzo's reins to a low limb of an oak tree and brushed him down. Just as I was laying my blanket on the ground, Mrs. Andreu—a friend of my mother and father—approached and invited me to sleep in their hut. I told her it would be too much of a burden, but she insisted.

"The wind has been decreasing with the setting of the sun. What little breeze we had the past few nights was coming from the west and brought swarms of mosquitoes. You do not want to be outside," she said.

I was familiar with the mosquitoes in St. Augustine. When the wind blew across the marshes and creeks west of town, the air turned heavy with insect whine—so thick I felt their tap before the bite. So many times, while washing up, I'd slap my arm and left blotches of blood.

"Come inside, Felip," she said, lifting the flap of the palmetto hut. I hesitated, but she insisted, adding, "We keep a fire going just outside—it helps."

Her three children fed wet, green twigs into a fire that smoldered more than burned. The smoke warded off the mosquitoes but stung my eyes. Similar fires were burning outside all the huts. When the children came in, pulling the wooden-framed door shut, they lay down and were asleep in what seemed like only minutes. I lay on a woven mat nearby.

Somewhere in the distance, I thought I heard Father Camps chanting his evening prayers—but I knew I was too far from the church.

I returned to St. Augustine.