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Request to the King - Petition of Widows and Orphans of Fort Caroline

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Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Request to the King, Anonymous



- Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve: Fort Caroline National Memorial: Reconstruction of the fort

In the early morning of September 20, 1564, the Spanish attacked Fort Caroline, a French stronghold on the eastern Florida coastline near present day Jacksonville. Sparing approximately 60 women and children, the Spanish transported these captives to Puerto Rico. Eventually some returned to France where a petition, penned by an anonymous hand, appealed to King Charles IX for retaliation against the Spanish. The petitioners condemned the injustice and barbarity of the Spanish, pleaded for the king to intervene, and implored the restorative French right to the Florida province.

Several copies of the petition were made and distributed, not only to the king, but also to other French nobility as a call for action. An original manuscript is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris although other 17th century editions can be found in Theodor De Bry's 1591 Brevis Narratio Part II, Chauveton's 1579 De Gallorum Expeditione in Flotidam, and at the end of his translation of Benzoni's Historia del Mondo Nuovo. The text was translated by A.E. Hammond

in 1960. Its intention, known as the *Epistola supplicatoria (Humble Petition)*, was either a piece of political propaganda or a religious appeal to benefit the Huguenots. The French women, orphans, and families of the slain sought aid, protection and revenge from the King.

Edited by Valerie Lanham, University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

Further Reading:

Bennett, Charles E. *Laudonniere & Fort Caroline: History and Documents*. Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 2001. Print.

Hammond, E.A. "A French Document Relating to the Destruction of the French Colony in Florida at the Hands of the Spanish, 1565." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 39:1 (July 1960). 55-61. Print.

Holmes, Abiel. *The Annals of America: From the Discovery by Columbus in the Year 1492, to the Year 1826*. Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown, 1829. Print.

Sparks, Jared. *The Library of American Biography*. New York: Harper, 1848. Print.

Winsor, Justin. *Narrative and Critical History of America*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884. Print

Anonymous. "Request to the King, made in the form of a complaint, by the widows, little orphans, friends and blood and marriage relations of those that have been cruelly invaded by the Spaniards, in Antartic France, which goes by the name of Florida" [Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris]. Transl. A. E. Hammond, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 39 (July 1960). 55-61. Reprinted in Charles E. Bennett (ed.), *Laudonnière and Fort Caroline*. Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 2001. 165-70.

To the King

Sire, there is an endless number of poor and miserable people, widows and orphans, all your subjects and vassals, who tearfully throw themselves at your majesty's feet, with the entire obedience and natural submission which they owe you and bring to your excellency and highness pitiful tale of their most just complaints and grievances: or rather the sad spectacle and visible image of their fathers, husbands, children, brothers, nephews, cousins and relations by marriage, up to some eight or nine hundred men, to the last in this land of Florida, by Captain Petremelonde [Menéndez] and his Spanish soldiers. The more as this outrage is already odious enough and all too villainous by itself, and as the blood of your poor subjects, thus treacherously shed, cries to God for vengeance. It behooves your majesty, Sire, to consider, if you please, that he has made you sovereign King and granted you the obedience of so many people to govern them with good laws and to uphold and defend them. Therefore the poor supplicants have no other recourse, after God, but to implore your aid and protection and most humbly entreat your majesty to succor, raise and sustain them: at the very time when the wound of their anguish is still bleeding. In short, to

assist them with the same gentleness and consolations, as the embrace of a father to his own children, or the master's good face to his loving and faithful servants: and, in fact, their complaints are not less worthy of compassion and pity than the cruelty of the Spaniard Petremelande is contract to all war practices, and to all laws and decrees that have been received either from God or from men. And to explain it to you in full, your majesty, Sire, knows well that your aforesaid subjects were sent by you in this land of Florida, under your authority and by your express command, and by virtue of your letters patent, in the form of commission and leave, carried by Jean Ribaud: the aforesaid vessels have arrived in the aforesaid place in the land of Florida, were furiously invaded by five Spanish boats, the largest of which was eight hundred tons, the second two hundred tons and the others average tonnage. The people on board these vessels took first of all the fort which had been built in your name by the French: and the men, women and children found inside, the aforesaid fort were murdered and maimed by the aforesaid Spaniards without mercy. On the contrary, they displayed the pierced bodies of the little children held on the point of their pikes and secondly, they killed the aforesaid Captain Jean Ribaud, and all his company of seven to eight hundred men, in spite of the assurance and pledge they had given to spare their lives, having bound their hands and arms behind their backs, calling your subjects wicked, scoundrels, knaves and French thieves, and all this in the presence and under the eyes, of the aforesaid Ribaud who, through horror of the aforesaid massacre, wanted to come near the aforesaid Petremelande to place himself under his protection, and nevertheless, the said Petremelande repelled him and had him killed instantly by one of his soldiers, who struck him a blow through the body with his dagger from behind, from which blow the aforesaid Ribaud fell to the ground, and once fallen, the aforesaid soldier struck him another blow through the body from in front, so that the aforesaid Ribaud remained dead on the spot, and, which done, the aforesaid soldier cut off his head, shaved his beard and split the head of the aforesaid Ribaud in four quarters, which were stuck on top of four pikes in the centre of the place where the other French people had died. Finally, the aforesaid Spanish captain sent a letter to the King of Spain, and enclosed in it the hairs of the beard of the aforesaid Captain Jena Ribaud, in such a way that the aforesaid Spanish Captain Petremelande and his men, insulating with such brazen acts the servants of so powerful and renowned a King, want make it plain that they set very little store by honour, and fear even less the meeting of a mighty master. Your majesty, besides, knows that, to complete the triumph of wickedness and increase the outrage of such an execrable crime: even after death fun was made of, and mockery bandied at, the head and beard of him who was no less a person than your lieutenant-general, and the paper of a letter was used as a dish to make a gift of the hair of his beard. It is, however, incredible that there should be a Christian, or even pagan, King or prince ready to own the aforesaid Petremelande after such a cruel and barbarous deed, surpassing the rage and fury of Lions and Tigers, and the more execrable as it was performed in a period of complete peace, truces and a friendly meeting arranged, while there was no war declared by you on any other nation or principality whatsoever, and nevertheless the Spaniards have set their hands upon places and people: which in no way belong to other than your Sceptre and crown: unless Petremelande chose to say that the strength of a foreigner can prevail against the King, to usurp what is yours, or to appropriate the power to command in your stead, or to give himself the authority of the letters and to take upon himself to punish and correct those that God has entrusted to you as subjects, with such a treasured wealth of submission, obedience and natural affection towards you, that they would rather die a thousand deaths, than deign to entertain the idea of changing masters, or voluntarily submitting to the yoke of another principality. If, therefore, Petremelande is disowned, his master has only to say that he is having, or will let you

have, justice done, with such satisfaction and reparation as you are entitled to: in addition, forsaking and handing over to you the jurisdiction and possession of this land of Florida, which has long been acquired, occupied and held by your subjects in your name and under the title and authority of your Sceptre and crown, taking also into consideration that your aforesaid subjects have not been deported or relegated there as fugitives or deportees, but sent as ambassadors, officers and ministers of your majesty and as such recognized and owned by your letters patent commissioning the aforesaid Ribaud, held and acclaimed to act in these matters in the same capacity as you yourself, and no matter how atrocious such an indignity is by itself, yet it is made worse when left unpunished, and the dishonor is increased and the scandal carried further when the murderers, violators of public faith, have their malice fed and sustained with impunity and can freely exercise it. Which your mansuetude, Sire, never allowing, will take up the quarrel of your poor subjects, thus unjustly outraged to the detriment of all laws, the bonds of all human society, and break the divine order so thoroughly that the aforesaid Petremelande would, through his cunning, have all occasions for modesty lost, when patience is tried to the extreme.

The Carthaginians and African peoples have been strongly blamed for breaking their pledges in spite of all assurances given whenever this was advantageous to them. The Romans so faithfully observed theirs that they would keep them even to their enemies. Would to God that the same tribute could be paid today to Petremelande and his fellow countrymen, who have made so light of their promises and assurances and hypocritical solemn oaths impiously calling upon the name of God as though to make him a party to their treacherous disloyalty. If at times God uses the wicked ones, and allows them rope to give the full measure of their wickedness, as he did the Cananeans, he is not, however, subject to the strength of men, and, being stronger than them all, he fortifies the weaker and keeps us ceaselessly alive to our duty, that the thought of his gentleness and mercy does not make us forget the rigour of this justice and vengeance. So much so that, as in the same act, the crime of men is revealed, and the justice of God made manifest, so the warning befits them, that, it is said, God works in the hearts of the wicked as he pleases, yet pays each of them back according to their demerits.

To the King again.

Sire, you have heard what lamentations and regrets, what tears, or rather what dying sighs accompany the said memory of our misery and misfortune, the pitiful account of Petremelande's audacious and scandalous enterprise, the marks of his injustice and tyranny condemned by all laws; the tokens and memorials of his infidelity and treason, the intolerable contempt he showed for your authority and grandeur: in short, the murders and cruelties perpetrated against your servants and subjects, all or most of them virtuous and brave captains, men of honour and good repute, who would have acted as a living rampart around your majesty, and as frontiers to hold back all of the enemies of your state. By which if there were ever humanity, compassion and mercy on record, the supplicants hope that our God in his goodness will so fill your heart with these, that your majesty will let himself be touched by our just grievances and pitiful complaints, will espouse our cause to see justice done, and, to that end, will extend to us his favour and protection, which will be a pious work, worthy of your calling, and a manifestation of charity towards your poor subjects and faithful servants, with a view to assuaging the bitterness of their afflictions and

bearing witness to their innocence to the whole of Christendom, which will make you beloved and hailed by all nations, not only as a King, but also as a father to your people.