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ANDREW RANSON: SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PIRATE?

by J. LEITCH WRIGHT, JR.

THE LATTER HALF of the seventeenth century saw the swash-buckling heyday of piracy in the West Indies. Here, English, French, and Dutch buccaneers, and audacious seafarers claiming no nation, roamed the seas almost at will, delighting particularly in preying on galleons flying the Spanish flag and in sacking and ransoming cities along the Spanish Main. It is true that the policy of European nations was changing from encouraging or winking at buccaneer activities to supporting legitimate trade with Spanish America, and some serious efforts were made to curb these seagoing marauders. Nevertheless, this was of little consolation to the inhabitants of Panama, which was ravished by the Englishman Henry Morgan in 1671, or to those of Maracaibo, which was destroyed by the Dutchman l'Olonnais in 1667, or to those of Vera Cruz, which was surprised by the Frenchman the *Sieur de Grammont* in 1683. In this same period similar fates befell many other cities, and their hapless residents endured unspeakable indignities.

St. Augustine, though not so promising a prize as many other Spanish cities, was not overlooked by the buccaneers. Florida's principal city, situated athwart the Bahama Channel, was little more than a military outpost, guarding the return route of the annual plate fleet, and denying this strategic peninsular region to any foreign nation. Here agriculture did not flourish, no valuable metals or raw materials were produced or exported, and commerce was at a minimum. In fact, Florida was dependent on an annual subsidy or *situado* sent from Mexico to help defray the cost of government and to pay the permanently undermanned garrison. But because this city of about one thousand inhabitants with its stores, churches, and fort offered some chance for plunder, and because the city did not appear to be too difficult to surprise and overpower, the buccaneers several times included it on their pillaging itineraries.

The most devastating attack since the time of Sir Francis Drake was the raid by Robert Searles in 1668. Using pirate-infested Jamaica as a base, he and fellow Jamaicans had captured

Spanish supply vessels bound for St. Augustine. With their Spanish crews at pistol point still manning the ships, Searles and his men, safely hidden below deck, were able to slip into St. Augustine unnoticed. Florida's capital was completely surprised when Jamaican pirates emerged from these floating Trojan horses, and its inhabitants—men, women, and children—were killed indiscriminately. Some of the more fortunate escaped to the woods while even fewer made it to the fort. Though Searles lacked the heavy artillery to batter the fort, the town itself was at his mercy. House, churches, and public storehouses were looted, even sails were stripped from vessels in the harbor. At length, after loading their plunder and vowing to return, the unwanted guests departed.¹

As it turned out, Searles' men did not carry out this threat, but other corsairs of various nationalities continued to prey on both the Atlantic and the Gulf coasts of Florida. In 1683 the resourceful French buccaneer Grammont, with three French and as many English warships, caught the sentinels napping at Matanzas—the back door to St. Augustine—and barely missed surprising the city itself. Thwarted here, Grammont headed for Guale, where he terrorized Indian missions while refitting and re-victualing his ships.² Here the ships parted company, some returning to the West Indies, and at least one English vessel sailing to newly-founded Charleston.³ The threat to St. Augustine from this budding English colony in Carolina was as serious and, in the long run, more deadly than that of pirates.

Unquestionably this was a critical time for Spanish Florida. The decline of Spanish might and prestige in Europe was graphically portrayed in this remote province by a chronic lack of troops, munitions, and funds and frequently by the appointment of less able officials. Piratical raids and an aggressive English colony in Carolina contributed to Spain's misfortunes. And, as if to rub salt into an open wound, there was the attempted raid by Andrew Ranson, an English pirate—at least the Spanish Governor

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1. Francisco de la Guerra y de la Vega to Charles II, St. Augustine, Aug. 8, 1668, AGI 54-5-18, Connor Col., Library of Congress. Searles' alias was John Davis.
 2. Juan Marqués Cabrera to Charles II, St. Augustine, Apr. 8, 1683, Brooks Col., L. C.; *ibid.*, June 28, 1683, Sp. transcripts, L. C. Guale is the coastal region of Georgia.
 3. Auto de Ruego y Encargo . . . , St. Augustine, Oct. 23, 1684, AGI 58-2-6/5, Connor Col.

considered him so—which failed but which caused much excitement and bitterness.

Ranson, who added to the already considerable woes of Florida governors, was born in Newcastle, England, around 1650, the son of Edward and Barbara Ranson. Relatively little is known of his early life. He came to the West Indies in his early twenties. Either in England or in the West Indies he married and lived sometimes at New Providence Island, sometimes at Jamaica, and possibly elsewhere. Ranson was a seaman, but whether he was merely an honest mariner conscientiously plying his trade or a ruthless and experienced pirate would be a matter of heated controversy in the future. Ranson had made voyages to the Spanish Main, to Spanish West Indian islands, and in the late 1670's had been captured and imprisoned at Havana.⁴ The offense no doubt was smuggling. As will be seen, his subsequent career in Florida gives a rather curious twist to the pirate history of that province.

During the several years preceding 1684, Ranson and his wife were living at New Providence Island in the Bahamas. In that year, however, the Island's governor supposedly granted Captain Thomas Jingle of New England a letter of marque to raid Spanish possessions in retaliation for the recent Spanish attack on New Providence. At the last minute, Jingle's five vessels were joined by a recent arrival from Charleston, one of those which had participated in the attack on St. Augustine the preceding year.⁵ Then, with Ranson as steward aboard one of the vessels,⁶ all six set sail for the west coast of the Florida peninsula. It is impossible to trace their exact course, but while cruising they captured off the Florida Keys the Spanish frigate *Plantanera* sent from St. Augustine to Vera Cruz to collect the *situado*;⁷ they surprised a Spanish scout vessel sent out from Havana to seek information about pirates, perhaps themselves; and part of Jingle's party, led by Indians, marched inland on the Gulf Coast unsuc-

4. Testimonio de auto fhos sobre si debe o no gozar de la ymmunidad eclesiastica Andres Ranson . . . , AGI 58-2-6/30, St. Augustine, June 1, 1696, Connor Col.

5. Auto de Ruego y Encargo . . . , *op. cit.*

6. Declaración de Miguel Ramon, St. Augustine, Nov. 6, 1684, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

7. Auto de Pedro de Aranda y Cebellaneda, St. Augustine, Oct. 26, 1684, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

cessfully trying to surprise a nearby Spanish city.⁸ Five additional corsairs joined Jingle at Apalachee Bay, and it was quickly decided that their joint force was enough to overpower St. Augustine. Those Englishmen who had participated in the fruitless attack in 1683 undoubtedly helped formulate plans for this more ambitious raid. Even so, the elements did not favor the new design. A turbulent storm came up, scattering five vessels, and though the remainder were not far from St. Augustine, the diminished forces were reluctant to attack. At least for the time being they resolved to by-pass Florida's capital and to land elsewhere to procure desperately needed provisions.⁹

Therefore, about twenty-five miles north of St. Augustine, Ranson and his companions deftly put ashore in a small pirogue to secure meat and water and to glean any useful information about St. Augustine while the larger ships remained offshore to the north. These larger vessels were not unnoticed, however. Vigilant Spanish sentinels at the mouth of the St. Johns River had seen the six sails and hurriedly dispatched a messenger southward to warn their Governor. The messenger was intercepted by Ranson and his companions, and, with his arms tied behind him and a gun at his chest, questioned about obtaining provisions and about St. Augustine's defenses and resources.¹⁰

Unfortunately for Ranson and his companions, they had been seen landing by several Negroes tending cattle nearby. These Negroes found the deserted, camouflaged pirogue, removed the branches, smashed it with their hatchets, and stole the oars.¹¹ Although the Englishmen bemoaned the loss of their pirogue and naively believed a storm had battered it to bits, even worse things were in store. Over fifty soldiers sent out from St. Augustine arrived on the scene, and the English intruders had no choice but to surrender meekly. After having received rough treatment from the Spaniards, Ranson and the others were taken north to the mouth of the St. Johns where it was hoped they could lure ashore fellow shipmates. The ruse almost worked. With Ranson standing alone on the shore beckoning his comrades to land, and with

8. Declaración de Arsencio de Sora, Havana, Apr. 1, 1685, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

9. Auto de Ruego de Encargo . . . , *op. cit.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Auto de Cabrera, St. Augustine, Oct. 3, 1684, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

Spanish soldiers hidden nearby, a small English vessel came within "half a shot" of the awaiting Spaniards. But at the last moment, suspecting an ambush, it darted back to the larger ships awaiting offshore, and they promptly sailed away.¹² However, because of the swift approach of the Spanish infantry, other English seamen from the same group of ships who had landed around the mouth of the St. Johns, and had seized large amounts of maize and meat from the Indians, were forced to abandon their plunder and board their ships.¹³

The threat to St. Augustine had now abated. Her residents were able to breathe more freely and to dig up their buried silver. The Indians, hurriedly called in from St. Marks to aid in the defense, were no longer needed.¹⁴ The captured Englishmen were led back to the capital, and under intensive interrogation, freely supplemented by a few good turns on the rack, gave incriminating testimony. They readily disclosed that the eleven vessels gathered at Apalachee Bay had planned a descent on St. Augustine and that only a storm had thwarted their design—at least temporarily. A few admitted that they had participated in the unsuccessful attack on St. Augustine the previous year, others told what they knew of the newly-founded Scottish settlement of Stewarts Town, south of Charleston, many revealed the plans and whereabouts of notable pirates, and almost all named Ranson as their leader.¹⁵

Even without the damning indictments of his fellow crewmen, evidence against Ranson as an experienced pirate leader, and a rather brutal one at that, was overwhelming. The Spanish mariner, Miguel Ramon, now in St. Augustine after an arduous journey, furnished additional proof at the trial. He had been ordered, he said, by the Governor of Havana to reconnoiter the Florida coast beginning with the Keys and to be on the lookout for pirates who had recently passed Havana. Near Key Biscayne Ramon sighted pirate vessels, but in the resulting engagement Ramon himself was captured, and he and his crew were tortured for information about nearby towns, how much gold and silver they had, etc. While Ramon was being thus ill-used, another ship,

12. Testimonio de autos . . . sobre . . . Ranson, *op. cit.*

13. Declaración de Alfonso Pedro de Ojeda, Havana, Apr. 21, 1685, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

14. Joseph Fernandez de Cordova Ponce de León to Charles II, Havana, May 20, 1685, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

15. Auto de Ruego y Encargo . . . , *op. cit.*

piloted by Ranson, had come alongside, and Ranson had joined in the sport by repeatedly hitting Ramon with a stick until he was stunned and, for good measure, had threatened to cut his head off. Ramon, who was finally set free on the Keys and by a circuitous route made his way to St. Augustine, accused Ranson of being one of the most dangerous and experienced pirates in these parts.¹⁶ In addition to Ramon's testimony, Spanish crewmen of the *Plantanera* asserted that Ranson was one of those who robbed their ship and who in multifarious ways mistreated its crew.¹⁷

Governor Juan Marques Cabrera considered the evidence conclusive. Ranson's companions were sentenced to perpetual hard labor (later reduced to ten years) while Ranson as ringleader was condemned to be publicly garroted at the base of the gallows.¹⁸ Before the scheduled date of execution, he was confined in the chapel of the new and only partially completed Castillo de San Marcos. Despite his repeated protestations that he had been convicted unjustly, that he had come ashore under orders to kill merely a few wild cattle and to obtain water, and that he had surrendered willingly, preparations for the execution were methodically continued. In the short time remaining, Ranson, who was a Catholic, sought consolation from the Virgin Mary and from Perez de la Mota, chaplain at the castillo and Commissary of the Inquisition.

But the denials and beseechings of Ranson were to no avail; in October or early November, 1684, Spanish soldiers solemnly escorted him from the chapel to the gallows. Placed conspicuously at the foot of the gallows was the garrote, made even more forbidding by a silently awaiting executioner. A mixed gathering of soldiers from the presidio, Franciscan friars from the nearby convent, and inhabitants of the city mutely gazed with mixed emotions as the executioner, flanked by twelve soldiers, dexterously fitted the noose around this arch-pirate's neck and slowly began to twist the rope. One turn, two, three, four, five, six—the cords relentlessly tightened about Ranson's neck, his writhing body twisted and then slumped. In the background friars began to

16. Declaración de Ramon, *op. cit.*

17. Auto de Pedro de Aranda, *op. cit.*

18. Auto y sentencias . . . , St. Augustine, Oct. 21, 1684, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

chant and church bells began to toll for the departed soul. The work of the executioner had been well done, but, to make doubly sure, he gave the rope an additional turn—and it snapped! Ranson's limp body fell to the ground, and la Mota and other Franciscans quickly rushed to the scene. They examined Ranson and made the astonishing discovery that the chanting for his soul was premature: he was breathing!

This startling news spread quickly through the onlooking crowd, and above excited murmurings was heard an articulate cry, "a la iglesia," to the church. La Mota, believing a miracle had saved Ranson, nimbly climbed to the top of the gallows, exhorted three of his Franciscan companions to pick up the limp body and to take it to the nearby convent, and threatened the Spanish guard with God's wrath should they interfere.¹⁹ Before Governor Cabrera and the other dumbfounded spectators fully realized what was happening, Ranson was safely within the convent walls, fervently clutching a rosary, tears streaming down his cheeks.²⁰

There now began an acrimonious controversy, lasting many years, between Florida governors and church officials, as to whether Ranson was entitled to ecclesiastical immunity or whether he should be turned over to civil authorities who would carry out the death sentence or enforce some lesser penalty. Immediately after Ranson was carried to the convent, an official sent by Governor Cabrera appeared at the entrance where he was unequivocally denied custody of Ranson or, for that matter, even admittance to the convent itself.²¹ The Governor was threatened with excommunication should he in any way violate the immunity of the convent.²² Instead, Cabrera, venting his spleen where he unquestionably had authority, summarily discharged some of the soldiers who had been Ranson's execution guard and stationed others at the most distant and unpleasant posts.²³ He then pointed out to his superiors that this experienced and notorious pirate

19. Perez de la Mota to Charles II, 1692, AGI 58-2-6/23, Connor Col.

20. Testimonio de autos . . . sobre . . . Ranson, *op. cit.*

21. Memorial of la Mota, Madrid, June 8, 1692, AGI 58-2-6, Stetson Col., University of Florida Library.

22. Auto de Ruego y Encargo . . . , *op. cit.*

23. Charles II to Diego de Quiroga y Losada, Buen Retiro, June 10, 1688, AGI 58-2-6/13, Connor Col.; Auto de Cabrera, St. Augustine, Nov. 16, 1684, AGI 58-2-6, Sp. transcripts, L. C.

might flee the convent at a moment's notice and disclose to his nefarious comrades in Carolina how to seize St. Augustine. In reality, Cabrera intimated, Ranson was not a Catholic—had not his companions defamed the mission at the mouth of the St. Johns River and violated the images by cutting off their heads, hands, and feet? This heretic was not worthy of ecclesiastical immunity!²⁴ But the Governor was frustrated at every turn in trying to have Ranson released, and when Cabrera left Florida for good in 1687, the fugitive was still safely within the convent walls. After the new Governor, Diego de Quiroga y Losada, took office and after heated tempers had partially cooled, a somewhat more satisfactory agreement was reached. Work on the new stone Castillo de San Marcos had been going on since 1672, but still there was much to be done, and, as usual, materials and skilled artisans were scarce. Among his other talents, the resourceful Ranson was trained as a carpenter and an engineer. Quiroga was more than willing to grant Ranson safe conduct if he would live and work in the castillo as the other English prisoners had done before being sent to Spain. In the late 1680's, therefore, Ranson moved his residence from the convent to the castillo, the interior of which he had not seen since the trying days before his execution.²⁵

While Ranson was faring reasonably well and was successfully evading every attempt to have his sentence carried out, his benefactors, la Mota and the Franciscan friars, were deeply immersed in religious controversy still unsuccessfully trying to prove Ranson's deliverance a miracle. In fact, la Mota was summoned to Spain to present his case personally and no doubt to relieve tensions at St. Augustine as well. After a tempestuous voyage, the testy prelate reached Madrid in 1692. Here he presented a lengthy and, at times, moving, memorial to the Crown, maintaining that Ranson had landed not as a pirate but merely to procure provisions, that he was a devout Catholic who had zealously implored the protection of the Virgin Mary before his execution, and that the sound rope had miraculously broken when the sentence was being carried out. As material evidence la Mota produced the twisted, severed cord.²⁶ But all to no avail. He was unable to convince civil or religious authorities that Ranson's

24. Auto de Ruego y Encargo . . . , *op. cit.*

25. Quiroga to Charles II, St. Augustine, Apr. 1, 1688, AGI 58-2-6/6, Connor Col.

26. La Mota to Charles II, 1692, *op. cit.*

exceptional deliverance was divinely inspired. Though it cost them dearly,²⁷ the efforts of la Mota and his Franciscan cohorts did save Ranson's life. During the decade of the 1690's Ranson alternated between the castillo and the convent, but never again was he forced to look the silent executioner in the eye.

After 1700 there were far more pressing problems for Florida officials than who would have jurisdiction over the vexatious Ranson. True, there were no more pirate raids, and in reality the colorful age of piracy was rapidly coming to a close. The most threatening menace was the fact that once again Spain was at war with England, and once again Spanish possessions and shipping in the New World were subject to attack at a moment's notice. This was painfully verified in Florida when Governor Moore of South Carolina, with a combined force of militia and Indians, swept down on the peninsula, captured the city of St. Augustine, and then laid siege to the more formidable castillo. Sickness, lack of sufficient artillery, dissension in his command, and Spanish reinforcements, however, all proved the Carolinians' undoing. After burning the city, Moore and his disgruntled troops retreated northward.

During the crucial two-months siege of the castillo, Ranson, certainly no stranger there, once again lived within its massive cocina walls. Because the undermanned Spanish garrison was hard pressed merely to defend the castillo, there were no extra soldiers to guard Ranson and the other prisoners. To serve a double purpose—that of relieving Spanish troops from guard duty and of providing more manpower for the common defense—Governor José de Zuñiga y Cerda held out the prospect of freedom to prisoners who acquitted themselves honorably against the enemy. Ranson, along with others, willingly accepted the offer, and he served as interpreter, interrogating captured prisoners and in other ways aiding Zuñiga. Shortly after the siege was broken, the Governor acknowledged and praised the conduct of the prisoners and recommended that Ranson and others be granted their freedom.²⁸

27. At least two and probably more Franciscan friars were exiled from Florida because of their defense of Ranson. Memorandum for Franciscan Commissary, Madrid, Aug. 12, 1693, Stetson Col.

28. Auto de Zuñiga, St. Augustine, Nov. 10, 1702, AGI 58-2-8, Stetson Col.

Now the controversial, complicated career of Andrew Ranson, the last English buccaneer to plague St. Augustine, becomes hazy to the historian. It is probable that the King, in his relief over the deliverance of St. Augustine, approved granting the prisoners their liberty. Then Ranson, now in his fifties, perhaps returned to his wife in the West Indies, or possibly decided to spend his remaining days in Florida. All this, of course, is conjecture.

But one thing is certain. Ranson, who for almost two decades had been living in dread of having his death sentence carried out, by one means or another had escaped execution. On the other hand, la Mota never was able to convince authorities that Ranson's deliverance was a wondrous miracle wrought by divine hands. Indeed the evidence seems logical and conclusive that the rope used in the garrote was worn and defective and for this reason broke when too much tension was applied. Even so, one wonders whether Ranson, who had experienced hearing his death sentence pronounced, who had actually been escorted to his public place of execution, and who had felt the rope tighten around his neck until he lost consciousness, would concur in such a rational explanation.