

*Florida Entanglements:*

The 1791 William Augustus Bowles Rebellion

by

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## **Abstract**

Florida emerged from the Revolutionary War “entangled.” A pawn of the United States, British, and Spanish, Florida might have been nominally aligned politically, but was essentially a cultural and social borderland existing on the edge of empire. Historians have successfully traced individuals in Florida to demonstrate the influence of non-British Colonists living in the South during the Revolution and Early Republic. This approach uses case studies to illustrate the challenges faced, some of which include economic independence versus interdependence, loyalty, citizenship, and international diplomacy. William Augustus Bowles is one such individual who stood “entangled” in Florida, between greater Caribbean, Atlantic and global forces.

Deserting from the British during the American Revolution, Bowles fled to the Florida interior where he remained hidden from the historical narrative until he writes a letter to the Spanish King declaring an independent Creek state. In this 1791 letter he names himself Director General and demands sovereign rights. The Spanish send troops to quash the rebellion, arrest Bowles and subsequently transport him to Cadiz to stand trial. Bowles Florida rebellion represented the diverse interests of Creeks and Europeans living among natives caught between the Spanish, British, and Americans in late eighteenth-century. This paper will explore this fascinating “entanglement” and illustrate the fluid nature of citizenship during the Age of Revolution.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Sitting in a Spanish prison in 1792, William Augustus Bowles must have marveled at the journey his life had taken. During the American Revolution a decade earlier, Bowles led a group of Creek warriors against the Spanish at Pensacola. After the war, he escaped Florida and fled to the Bahamas where he befriended its governor and ardent Loyalist, Lord John Dunmore. The two men commiserated over Britain's near complete expulsion from North America and together they drafted a plan to regain some of the empire lost in the American Revolution, or at least regain economic control for British interests in the Southern Borderlands.

These plans led Bowles to London where he and five Creek chiefs petitioned King George III to drive "the Spaniards from the whole country of the Floridas and New Orleans."<sup>1</sup> In London, Bowles advocated for an independent Creek state in Florida, a state that would favor British interests. While Bowles and Dunmore disapproved of Spanish control of Florida, they were more interested in capitalizing on the lucrative Indian trade in Spanish Florida and the southeastern United States. The plan to establish an independent Creek state in Florida was part of Dunmore's and Bowles's broader strategy to establish free trade between Nassau and Florida. The two men believed opening trade between British Nassau merchants and the Creek in Florida would benefit both groups. Unfortunately for Bowles, the plan failed when he attacked the Panton, Leslie, and Company store in West Florida. Subsequently the Spanish captured him in 1792 and shipped him to Spain for trial. As Bowles stared at the stone

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<sup>1</sup> Petition of William Bowles, January 3, 1791; Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 238-239.

walls of Cádiz's *cárcel real*, the city's royal prison, his proposed independent Creek state lay in ruins, Spanish agents still controlled the Indian trade, and his British supporters had seemingly abandoned him. Yet despite his failure, Bowles envisioned a return to Florida and the success of his plans.

Bowles's 1791 rebellion brings to light numerous issues in the Southern Borderlands in the late eighteenth century. A number of scholars have explored the history of Bowles's adventures in Florida between 1785 and his final capture in 1803. A careful examination of the rebellion reveals the Creek and other Southern Borderland inhabitants' economic connections across the political borders of competing empires and the permeability of imperial boundaries under the economic pressures of trade. Bowles's Loyalist sentiments and feelings toward his adopted Creek family influenced his actions, and with the help of other British refugees, he intended to open trade between Nassau, Bahamas, and the Florida Creeks in Florida. Bowles indicated the Creeks were unwilling to rely solely upon the Spanish agents in East and West Florida, chiefly the British traders Panton, Leslie, and Company. Bowles focused much of his efforts on breaking the Panton, Leslie, and Company monopoly, as it was the primary impediment to Creek trade. In his letters from jail, he consistently argued for trade privileges and autonomy for the Creeks, portraying himself as the Creek exponent among the Imperial powers in the Southern Borderlands.

During the early years of the American Revolution, Creeks living in the territory near Pensacola took Bowles into their community.<sup>2</sup> While among the Creeks, Bowles "lived in the Indian manner," and took a wife, who gave birth to a son he named "little Billy."<sup>3</sup> In accounts written after the Revolution, Bowles described the deep emotional

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<sup>2</sup> J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *William Augustus Bowles: Director General of the Creek Nation*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), 13; Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, Loc. 5732.

<sup>3</sup> Theda Perdue, *"Mixed Blood" Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 3. The term "live in the Indian manner" was a popular term in the late eighteenth

connection he felt toward his life with the Creeks as “a situation so flattering to the independence natural in the heart of man.”<sup>4</sup> The Creeks adopted him during the Revolution, Bowles claimed. The veracity of his adoption is hard to verify as the Creeks and other natives had fluid and temporary definitions of citizenship for Europeans and others.<sup>5</sup> Citizenship among the Creek often relied upon how outsiders served tribal interests. Bowles’s exact status in Creek society is questionable, but he described his relationship as “doubly united to them, both from inclination, and the ties of blood; and his children were living pledges of... fidelity.”<sup>6</sup> During the American Revolution, Bowles created deep familial attachments that connected him to the Creek community throughout his life.

The American Revolution changed the boundaries of North America’s competing empires. Those, including Bowles, who resided in the borderlands regions forged new lives within those boundaries. Several scholars who study the years after the American Revolution have turned to Bowles to understand the varied reactions and responses from the people caught in the political shift. Loyalists who did not return to Britain maintained their loyalty and created new strategies to exercise that loyalty. Maya Jasanoff proposes a term to describe the motivations of these Loyalists, “the Spirit of 1783.”<sup>7</sup> This spirit embodied the desire to expand the British Empire under a strong

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century. It is noted young boys often fantasized about living freely, going and doing what one wanted, and Bowles was surely living that fantasy when he set out into the Florida frontier at fourteen. Wright, 13. “Little Billy” Bowles went on to become Chief Bowles of the Cherokees in Texas.

<sup>4</sup> *Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles, Esquire, Ambassador from the United Nations of Creeks and Cherokees to the Court of London* (London, 1791), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2015), Kindle edition, Loc. 5731. While DuVal mentions his citizenship, Wright does not mention it in his detailed account. Perdue, “*Mixed Blood*” Indians, 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles*, 13. This account was derived from interviews with Bowles and is generally accepted as his own version of his life.

<sup>7</sup> Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles*, 12. The similarities between the “spirit of 1783” and the “spirit of ’76” are striking.

centralized government with a commitment to liberty and humanitarian ideals.<sup>8</sup> Jasanoff argues that Bowles's and Lord Dunmore's desire to expand the empire under the British government is evidence of the "Spirit of 1783." Jasanoff claims these desires manifested in both men's plan to create a multi-ethnic community united under Crown protection. Their combined vision was a place for British subjects and natives, similar to the system that emerged in India.<sup>9</sup>

Jasanoff's work builds on J. Leitch Wright, Jr.'s earlier biography of Bowles. Wright presents Bowles as an unwavering Loyalist, motivated more by king and country to fight against the Spanish and less from personal interest or to benefit the Creeks. Wright's biography tends to glorify Bowles's actions in Florida, depicting him as a heroic figure. In this narrative Bowles is the undeterred British loyalist, determined to reclaim British honor by establishing a British-Creek protectorate in Florida. However, both Jasanoff and Wright oversimplify Bowles's interests in Florida by reducing him to a purely political figure. Both works understate the economic competition for the Indian trade among British merchants in Nassau and the additional economic pressures from United States merchants and governments to gain the Indian trade and Indian lands. Bowles intended to create a situation that would be mutually beneficial to the southern Indians, particularly the Creek, and British merchants operating from Nassau. Bowles's plan was to return the Creeks to the British sphere of economic influence, ending the Spanish influence exercised through Panton, Leslie, and Company.

Bowles and Lord Dunmore employed adventurism and intrigue, a form of diplomacy by other means and political strategies, in their Florida plans. Adventurers such as Bowles were people independently engaged in commercial endeavors or

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 241-242. While this may seem implausible, Bowles's Loyalist contemporaries in Bengal were carrying out exactly that plan. Robert Clive through the East India Company brought Bengal into British hegemony. Plans similar to Bowles's in India merit a comparative work of Muscogee and Bengal.

<sup>9</sup> Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 236. Several works almost underplay Lord Dunmore's role in Bowles's Florida plan. Given his history as presented here, further research into Dunmore specifically and the Florida plan is worth pursuing.



ventures. Intrigues were the competing agendas or strategies of imperial and native powers carried out through men like Dunmore. David Narrett explores the changing boundaries in the borderlands through the practices of adventurism and intrigue.<sup>10</sup> The idea of adventure and intrigue is particularly applicable in Bowles's plans for Florida. Bowles intended to promote a business venture, establishing free trade between the Florida Creeks and Nassau's merchants. Narrett characterizes Bowles as a British adventurer because of his actions on behalf of British merchant interests in Nassau. This view does not account for his connections to the Creeks. In essence, Bowles was not just an English adventurer but also a Creek adventurer. Bowles's interview from London in 1790 and his letters while imprisoned in Spain reiterate his loyalties to the Creeks *and* to the British Crown.<sup>11</sup> His economic plan was not purely for the benefit of British merchants, but also to gain a more favorable trade situation for the Creeks. The Spanish government limited the Indian trade between Florida and Nassau through Panton, Leslie, and Company. Bowles hoped to eliminate Panton, Leslie, and Company's monopoly and to establish free ports to allow all Nassau merchants to trade with the natives in Florida and the Southeast. This goal set Bowles against Spain's sovereignty in Florida.

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<sup>10</sup> David E. Narrett, *Adventurism and Empire: The Struggle for Mastery in the Louisiana-Florida Borderlands, 1762-1803* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles*, 13; Letter from Bowles to Aranda, Cádiz, dated June 18, 1792, *Archivo Historico Nacional*, Consejo 21067, No 507. Bowles is consistent in his assertions that his actions are on behalf of the Creeks throughout the archival record.



**Figure 1.** The American Indian Nations

Source: Justin Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of North America Vol. VII* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888) 448 Credit: Courtesy of the private collection of Roy Winkelman.

Imperial control of East and West Florida depended upon support or compliance from the region's indigenous people. The largest indigenous group at the time of Spanish control following the American Revolution was collectively referred to as the Creek. The term Creek described a diverse group of natives that lived in the Southeast. The Creeks are most often divided into two groups, the Upper and Lower Creeks. The Upper Creeks lived in the areas of present-day Alabama that consisted of approximately forty towns, with most residents speaking the Muskogean-related Alabama and Kosati dialects. Lower Creeks lived in the present-day areas of Georgia and Florida that consisted of approximately twenty towns, whose residents spoke Hitchiti but also

included were speakers of Muskogean and Yuchi.<sup>12</sup> For the purpose of this study, both groups will be collectively referred to as the Creeks as this term is most often used in Spanish and British sources. Towns in the Upper and Lower Creek territory traded with the Spanish in Pensacola and the British in Charleston.<sup>13</sup> Maintaining Creek cooperation depended upon the flow of material goods from Europe. From the sixteenth century forward, Spanish Florida governors used European goods as gifts to establish alliances with local native leaders. In 1764, British officials continued this practice after they took control of Florida following the Seven Years War. Both imperial governments depended upon European merchants to supply these goods. The flow of goods to natives, known as the Indian trade, attracted numerous European merchants to Florida and the southeastern British colonies.

However, following the transfer of Florida from British to Spanish control, Spanish governors lacked a network of merchants in the territory and struggled to maintain control of the Indian trade. Creeks lived and traded in and outside of Spanish Florida. This movement created a problem for the Spanish and Americans governing in the region. The Spanish government needed to control the Indian trade within Florida but had little ability to prevent the natives from traveling across the border to trade with Americans in nearby Georgia or the British in the Bahamas. Inhabitants of the borderlands, such as the Creeks, experimented with new ways of working within the imperial boundaries but in a situation that provided for their own interests. Kathleen DuVal debates independence versus dependence, the challenge of governance faced by nations in the borderlands. For Spain, the United States, and Britain, the central problem of governance was the question of how to control the population and at the

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<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Braund. *Deerskins & Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 29-30.

<sup>13</sup> John Walton Caughey. *McGillivray of the Creeks*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press in cooperation with the Institute for Southern Studies of the University of South Carolina, 2007), 23-25.

same time provide the sufficient freedom to pursue their own interests. The Spanish Crown had to balance Creek autonomy with economic dependence to ensure Spain's continued control of Florida. Following the transfer of Florida to Spain after the American Revolution, Spanish Florida governors authorized a de facto monopoly in the Florida Indian trade, giving the Creeks access to European goods limited through one contracted agent, a British merchant, under Spanish control.<sup>14</sup> At its core, Bowles's rebellion in 1791 represents the Creek challenge to their dependency on Spain through its agent, British traders Panton, Leslie, and Company.

Panton, Leslie, and Company was a firm comprised of Indian traders who operated in South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida at the end of the American Revolution. When the Spanish regained control of Florida in 1783, the company negotiated an advantageous trade position in East and West Florida. William Panton and John Leslie began their business in the Indian trade in South Carolina and Georgia in 1775 just prior to the start of the American Revolution. William Panton met with East Florida Governor Patrick Tonyn in late December 1775, when Tonyn appointed William Panton's trading firm as the primary merchant to manage the Indian trade.<sup>15</sup> Panton, Leslie, and the other partners in the firm were all British Loyalists. However, the American Revolution made it difficult for British merchants to remain in business.<sup>16</sup> As the Revolution progressed, most of the firm's partners relocated to East Florida to avoid being arrested as Tories, traitors to the patriot cause. Throughout the conflict, William Panton supplied both the Indians and the British with a variety of products including

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<sup>14</sup> DuVal, *Independence Lost*, Loc. 6064. Bowles's failure may be due to his inability to recognize the natives' desire for true independence from all things European, including the European market economy of the Atlantic world.

<sup>15</sup> William S. Coker, and Thomas D. Watson. *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Panton, Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847* (Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1986), 26-27.

<sup>16</sup> Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders*, 34-35.

food, cloth, weapons, and munitions.<sup>17</sup> During the closing months of the war, Panton joined his operation with John Leslie to form Panton, Leslie, and Company.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the war, the two men had been supplying the Indian trade on behalf of the British for nearly eight years. Not wanting to abandon their business, they made the decision to remain in Florida following the territorial transfer to Spain.

Spanish officials needed to maintain the Indian trade to ensure the support of the natives in East and West Florida. During the transfer process, Patrick Tonyn made overtures to the Spanish government on behalf of Panton, Leslie, and Company. He argued that the company's presence was necessary to the well-being of the Indians in order to prevent them from trading with the nascent United States.<sup>19</sup> One of the firm's members, Thomas Forbes, met with the Spanish Ambassador in London to extoll the firm's assets in East Florida, specifically the Indian demand for English-made goods and the firm's existing infrastructure and network to export deerskins back to England. Both Tonyn and Forbes stressed to the Spanish Crown the important role of Panton, Leslie, and Company in maintaining Creek loyalty. The reward came in 1783 when Bernardo de Gálvez, Spanish governor of Louisiana, granted Panton, Leslie, and Company a temporary license to trade in Florida. However, the agreement included some caveats, including a requirement to begin selling Spanish-made goods to the Indians.<sup>20</sup> While the license allowed the firm to continue operations, it was not permanent and was hardly favorable to the firm's existing British trade connections. William Panton desired an exclusive trading relationship with the natives, similar to the one enjoyed under the British.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 39. Panton provided more than just goods to the British in East Florida; he also provided intelligence on forts in Havana, Spanish warships, and troop movements.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>20</sup> Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders*, 60.

Following the British withdrawal from Florida, Panton began a long process to regain a de facto monopoly in the Indian trade. In East Florida, the new Spanish Governor, Vicente Manuel de Zéspedes, acknowledged that the greatest concern of his administration was to maintain Indian loyalty. Panton, Leslie, and Company provided the needed Indian gifts on credit to the Spanish government. Impressed by the men, Zéspedes agreed to advocate for their permanent license to conduct the Indian trade on Spain's behalf in East Florida. Additionally, he allowed them to use the firm's British connections in Nassau and the Bahamas to provide the needed goods. In exchange for the license, the company agreed to be loyal to the Spanish Crown and only use British goods when absolutely necessary, and only in the Indian trade.<sup>21</sup> Zéspedes drafted a memorial to Spain's King Carlos III detailing the agreement. Further, he emphasized Panton's relationship with the *mestizo* Creek chief, Alexander McGillivray. Panton's relationship with the Creek leader began prior to the war in Charleston, and McGillivray became a powerful ally in conducting business with the southeastern Indians. The arrangement under Zéspedes in East Florida was extremely favorable to Panton's company; unfortunately, gaining control of the Indian Trade in West Florida proved to be much more complicated.

Establishing a trade agreement in West Florida was difficult for Panton, Leslie, and Company. As part of their arrangement in East Florida, the company negotiated a passport to trade at the fort on the St. Marks River on Florida's west coast. The agreement gave the firm an entry to West Florida, but it was a tenuous position as Spain's royal officials in Madrid transferred St. Marks to West Florida. Panton's agreement was with the East Florida governor, potentially negating the passport to trade at the St. Marks River. Adding to Panton's difficulty, West Florida Governor, Esteban Rodríguez Miró, desired to place the Indian trade in the control of Spanish merchants.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

Fortunately, Alexander McGillivray convinced Miró of the threat posed by American traders to the Indians in West Florida. Pantón, Leslie, and Company persuaded Miró to allow the firm a temporary license to trade in West Florida. However, he also gave licenses to another British trading firm, Mather, Strother, and Company.<sup>22</sup> Spain's reluctance to include non-Spanish merchants in the Indian trade was not the only challenge facing the Indians and Pantón, Leslie, and Company. The United States posed an increasing threat to Spain, the Indians, and the company.

United States's land claims in the Southeast destabilized the Indian population and threatened Spain's influence over the Indians in East and West Florida. Between 1785 and 1787, the governments of Georgia and North Carolina made extremely aggressive land claims in the Southeast, including parts of Florida. In response, McGillivray mobilized a force of Creek Indians to resist the Georgian claims to their land and demanded gunpowder and weapons from Spain. Spanish officials in Florida, eager to stay out of the conflict, initially refused McGillivray's request, a decision that effectively halted Spanish trade with the Creek. McGillivray attempted to trade directly with British merchants in Nassau through the port on the St. Mark's River. He asserted that the British gave the Creek control of the St. Marks River and therefore its use as a free port was part of Creek claims honored during West Florida's transfer to Spain. McGillivray threatened that without such concessions the Creek might have to sign a peace settlement with the United States. Miró was concerned about unrestricted British trade and the loss of Creek support. Pantón, alarmed by the possibility that other Nassau merchants would circumvent his own relationship with the Creek, urged Miró to resume the Indian trade and to support the Creek. Miró consented and agreed to provide

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<sup>22</sup> Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders*, 65-70.

munitions.<sup>23</sup> The West Florida governor contracted Panton, Leslie, and Company to deliver gunpowder and arms to the Creek.

As a result, Miró conceded the necessity of maintaining peaceful trade ties with the Creek. In a 1788 memorial to the Crown, he supported Panton, Leslie, and Company's favorable trade status. Their position in the Indian trade was fragile, but Panton and company were closer to a de facto monopoly in the Florida Indian trade. As the United States's land claims threatened Spain's relationship with the Creeks, Bowles began his own operations in Florida.

Bowles's exploits in Florida are chronicled in a recent work by Gilbert Din. This detailed biography of Bowles relies on Spanish sources to understand Bowles's time in Florida between 1791 and 1803. Din's approach is markedly different from Wright's earlier biography, which relies primarily on British sources. Din criticizes Wright's work as it portrays Bowles as the de facto leader of the Creeks and creates an image of Bowles as a "larger-than-life" person.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, Din's use of Spanish sources leads him to a different conclusion, one in which Bowles emerges as a "malicious interloper" and a self-serving man who destabilized Spanish Florida. Din portrays Bowles as a man whose interests are British and who served the British Empire at the expense of the Creeks, not as a leader of the Creeks.

Din's work covers Bowles's entire time in Florida and the Gulf Coast from the American Revolution through Bowles's final arrest in 1803. His analysis of Bowles rests on three factors: Nassau merchants' ambition to recover the Indian trade; Indian desire for access to cheap English goods; and the general enmity between Spain and Great

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<sup>23</sup> Coker and Watson, 117. Miró claimed the munitions were to allow the Creek to defend themselves from bears (Eighteenth century plausible deniability).

<sup>24</sup> Wright., *William Augustus Bowles*, 29-35.



Britain in the late eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Din's work depicts the Floridas, and the entire Gulf coast region, in a state of flux, as Great Britain, France, and Spain transferred control of the region amongst themselves. Bowles took advantage of this situation for his own financial benefit and that of his British allies in Nassau.

According to Din, Bowles was a destabilizing influence in the political situation between the Creek, Spanish, and British in the Southern Borderlands. Bowles's plans did little to unite the Creek to challenge the economic and cultural forces changing their world. Rather, Bowles created divisions among the various tribes of the Southeast that resulted in more suffering than relief. Din further argues that Bowles began the upheaval fundamental to the change in the Creek Nation and precipitated the end of Spanish control of Florida. Bowles's actions to create an independent Creek state ultimately failed, and began the process of more powerful forces entering and competing with a declining imperial Spain. Creek trade and their political alliances during the late eighteenth century were transitional. Trade in deerskin and traditional commodities declined as their value dropped in the Atlantic economy.<sup>26</sup> In response, native leaders searched for new ways to profit from the situation between the new United States, Spain, and Britain. Men such as Alexander McGillivray were leading Creeks into land trades with the United States and creating political alliances with its government. According to Din, Bowles was the "harbinger" of things to come for a weak Spain with too many domestic and international complications, a process that would finally result in the transfer of East and West Florida to the United States in 1819.

Din's conclusions about Bowles relied upon descriptions from Spanish commanders during their encounters with the adventurer. Spanish opinion of Bowles

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<sup>25</sup>Gilbert C. Din, *War on the Gulf Coast the Spanish Fight against William Augustus Bowles* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 228-229.

<sup>26</sup>Kathryn Braund. *Deerskins & Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 56.

was not favorable, and it is unlikely it would be, given the threat Bowles posed to Spanish rule. Numerous political and economic agents operating in Florida and the southeastern United States threatened Spanish control of Florida between 1783 and 1819; Bowles was one of the agents who destabilized Spanish control. Based upon Din's comprehensive study of Bowles's entire time in Florida, it may be correct that Bowles marked the beginning of Spain's gradual loss of control of East and West Florida. Between Bowles's initial attempts at rebellion in 1788 and his final capture in 1803, Spain struggled to maintain friendly relations with the Creek, the United States and the British. However, Bowles's initial ventures in Florida in 1788 through 1791 did not produce this effect, nor was this the intention of Bowles's strategy in 1791.

Bowles's Florida strategy was to establish free trade between the Creek and the British in Nassau. Focusing on Bowles's plans in Florida, he adapted his plan between 1788 and 1792 as the situation changed due to politics and for pragmatic reasons. Contrary to Din's analysis, Spanish court records do not depict Bowles as solely a tool of the British Empire. The documents demonstrate his actions between 1791 and 1792 as the combined economic interests of the Creek in the Floridas and the British in the Bahamas. Spanish sources provide a detailed record of *el aventurero Inglés* (the English adventurer), as Spanish letters often referred to Bowles. These records detail Bowles's 1791 rebellion, his 1792 capture, and his subsequent trial in Spain from 1792 to 1793. The documents reveal the impetus for Bowles's plans and the reasons the Spanish imprisoned him were greater than that of a simple criminal offense. A careful analysis of these documents illuminates how Bowles and other British Loyalists, Creeks, and the Spanish attempted to negotiate and navigate free trade opportunities between Nassau and the Floridas.

Before his landing in West Florida in 1791, Bowles wrote numerous letters to Spanish officials, including the letter to the king of Spain with his declaration of

independence for the State of Muscogee.<sup>27</sup> The letters from Marquis del Campo, the Spanish ambassador to London, illustrate Bowles's intentions and the opinion of Marqués del Campo regarding Bowles's initial request for free trade and seaports for the Creeks.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, letters exchanged between the Captain General of Cuba, Luis de Las Casas, and the Conde Floridablanca illustrate Spain's desire to maintain Creek amity and the debate about how to best handle the Indian trade in West Florida.<sup>29</sup> Bowles's attack on the Panton, Leslie, and Company store is a clear indicator of an economic plan for free trade versus a purely political rebellion against Spanish rule. After the capture of the Panton store, Spanish opinion of Bowles quickly changed from him as a legitimate envoy of the Creeks to that of a criminal, or worse, rebel. The José de Evia logs and letters to Las Casas on Bowles's capture and arrest elaborate the sudden shift in opinion.<sup>30</sup> Evia's logs offer his views regarding the quandary of how to handle trade between the Creeks and Nassau and Bowles's role in that trade. Following his capture, Spanish authorities transferred Bowles to Spain to stand trial. Records from Bowles's trial in Cadiz in 1792-1793 include court reports and correspondence that demonstrate Spain's economic policy within West and East Florida and the region's trade with the British.<sup>31</sup> Most importantly these records contain numerous letters from Bowles himself, outlining his strategy and justification for the independent Creek state and his attack on

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<sup>27</sup> "Letter from William Augustus Bowles to King Carlos IV" (April 15, 1791), *Archivo General de Simancas*: Est,Leg,8148.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Marqués del Campo to Floridablanca, London, April 15, 1791, *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Est., leg. 3889bis, exped. 10, no. 8. Included are copies of correspondence from Bowles and details of the meetings Campo held with Bowles. These letters also indicate Campo may not have agreed with the official Spanish policy in West Florida.

<sup>29</sup> "Letter from Las Casas to Floridablanca, nos 16 reserved and 18, Havana" (March 28 and April 21, 1792), *Archivo General de Simancas*, Est,Leg,6916, exped. 50.

<sup>30</sup> Logs from Evia's diary in February 1792. *Archivo General de Simancas*, Est,Leg,6916, exped. 50.

<sup>31</sup> No 507. *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Consejo 21067. Din consults one document in this entry. Wright consulted a few letters from Bowles but did not address the court records. It is possible both Din and Wright consulted copies in a different archive or at the time the documents were separated from the entire bundle of court records. The entire bundle contains over six hundred pages.

the Panton store.<sup>32</sup> Bowles repeatedly claimed he acted on behalf of Creek economic interests and these interests were his own, not merely those of Britain.<sup>33</sup> Contained in this correspondence is one document illuminating the Creeks' position. In October 1792, the court received the summary of a "talk" by the Creek chiefs at Coweta. They implored the King of Spain to release Bowles, adding that they wished to "hold the Spaniards by one hand and the English in the other."<sup>34</sup> Records from Bowles's arrest and transfer to Spain, including the correspondence from Bowles, form the greater foundation of my study of Bowles's 1791 rebellion. They reveal the shift in his plan between its development in 1788, its alterations between 1788 and 1791, and its execution in 1791.

Bowles's goal in West Florida was to establish free trade between the Creek and the British. To achieve this goal, he developed a plan in 1788 that evolved as the political and economic situation changed throughout the years preceding his arrest in 1791. Bowles's Creek and British interests were the motivating factors for his original plan to open trade between West Florida and Nassau. In 1788, he attempted to bring goods to the Indians from the Bahamas, relying on his Creek connections in West Florida and British merchants in Nassau. His goal was to create competition for the Panton, Leslie, and Company monopoly. However, his efforts failed due to a lack of planning and poor strategy. This failure forced a change in strategy. Between 1788 and 1791, Bowles gathered Creek support in Florida and lobbied for official British support in London. He attempted to use escalation of the Nootka Sound Crisis between Spain and Great Britain to leverage his goal of free trade. The resolution of the potential conflict diffused this strategy. Left with little official support from Great Britain, Bowles modified his strategy but persisted in his plan to establish an independent Creek state and turned

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Bowles to Floridablanca, dated June 18, 1792, No 507. *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Consejo 21067. Letter written while on board the ship *Mississippi* bound for Cádiz, Spain.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Bowles to Aranda, Cádiz, dated June 18, 1792, No 507. *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Consejo 21067.

<sup>34</sup> "To his Catholic Majesty of Spain, A Talk from the Kings, Chiefs, & Warriors of the Creek Nation," dated October 24, 1792. Estado 3889bis, expediente 10, no. 56.

to Spanish support. This evolution depended on Creek sovereignty to open free ports on the Florida coast to trade with British Nassau. Initially he opted to avoid an armed conflict with the Spanish military and began building the first port. In early 1792, a lack of supplies, coupled with Bowles's rash behavior, prompted him to change plans and attack the Panton, Leslie, and Company store on the Wakulla River. In this effort, he attempted to end Panton, Leslie, and Company and Spain's exclusive trade relationship with the Creek. Beginning with his first operations in Florida in 1788 and until his arrest in 1792, Bowles's goal was consistent, free trade for the Creek. As he attempted to achieve this goal, his plans and strategy evolved to fit the conditions presented to him.

Bowles was not simply a "malicious interloper" or British Loyalist. He viewed himself as an economic agent or exponent through his familial connections. His primary motivation was free trade for the Creeks in West Florida. The Creek wanted inclusion in the British trade out of personal necessity, and Bowles developed plans to create a situation best suited to what he believed were Creek interests. Spain wanted to maintain the existing restricted economic relationship with the Creeks. Bowles desired free trade for the Creek and to break the Panton, Leslie, and Company's monopoly over the Indian trade. This economic relationship between Creeks and the Spanish resulted in Bowles' Florida operations. He wanted an open economic relationship across the imperial boundaries. Spanish Crown officials pushed in one direction, Creeks pushed in another, and Bowles's rebellion in 1791 illuminated exactly where these interests clashed.

## Chapter 2: Free Trade between Florida Creeks and British Bahamas

Bowles's original strategy in East and West Florida was to provide competition in the Florida Indian trade. This strategy evolved during Bowles's time in Florida during the American Revolution and the postwar years in the Bahamas. Over the course of the war, Bowles's loyalties grew to include loyalty to Great Britain and the Creek Indians. Bowles was a British soldier and a self-proclaimed Creek warrior and leader. Following the war, the Creeks struggled to define their own trade and territorial rights in the contested space between Spain, the new United States, and the British Bahamas. Bowles's initial plan in West Florida sought to protect the economic interests of the Creek and the British as he moved between both communities in the years immediately after the American Revolution.

William Augustus Bowles was born in Frederick, Maryland, in 1763, an auspicious year marked by the end of the Seven Years War. The British capture of Havana, the fall of the French Fort Pitt, and the Treaty of Paris caused wild celebration in Maryland and elsewhere in the colonies. British patriotism ran high in the postwar years. Bowles was born into this atmosphere. His youth was idyllic; he spent his free time hunting and fishing in the surrounding countryside. He grew up in a privileged family, which afforded him numerous luxuries such as a classical education that included literature, mathematics, music, theater, and art. His father, Thomas, was a recent immigrant from Britain and a respected member of the community.<sup>35</sup> Thomas funded the school his son attended, and for a short time, he was the town's schoolteacher. In the

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<sup>35</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 4-7.

years leading up to the Revolutionary War, Thomas agreed with many of the patriot sentiments regarding unfair taxation. However, he believed calls for independence in 1775 went too far against the king, and he earned the branding of “Tory.” His property and family prevented him from joining the British army, but his son, William, could represent the family’s opposition to the rebels. In 1777, at age fourteen, William Bowles set off to join General Howe’s forces in Philadelphia.<sup>36</sup>

During the early years of the American Revolution, Bowles was a loyal soldier in the British army. Initially he began his service in General Howe’s army at Philadelphia. However, within a few months, a Maryland Loyalist regiment formed. In the newly formed regiment, Bowles earned an officer’s commission as ensign due to his father’s upper-class status. He first saw military action in Pennsylvania and was part of the British retreat from Philadelphia to New York in June 1778.<sup>37</sup> Fearful of Spain’s entry into the war, British commanders worried about the vulnerability of Jamaica and Britain’s other Caribbean possessions, including East and West Florida. In late Fall, the Maryland Loyalists were dispatched to Kingston to reinforce its garrison. Shortly thereafter, the British army became convinced of Spain’s impending entrance into the war and decided to send additional troops to defend Pensacola. Bowles’s Maryland regiment received this assignment.<sup>38</sup>

During much of the American Revolution, Bowles did not serve in the military but instead lived among the Creek in West Florida. His time in Florida began in 1778 when he arrived in Pensacola. The majority of his regiment was sick with yellow fever. Those who survived the illness merged with the Loyalist Pennsylvania regiment. Prior to mustering in Pensacola, the remaining officers from both regiments argued over who

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<sup>36</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 4-7.

<sup>37</sup> While in New York, Bowles developed a passion for theater and enjoyed the cultural influences of London brought by the occupying officer corps.

<sup>38</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 7-11. Wright’s work on Bowles’s career in the British Army is detailed and relies on British sources to track his movements during the war.

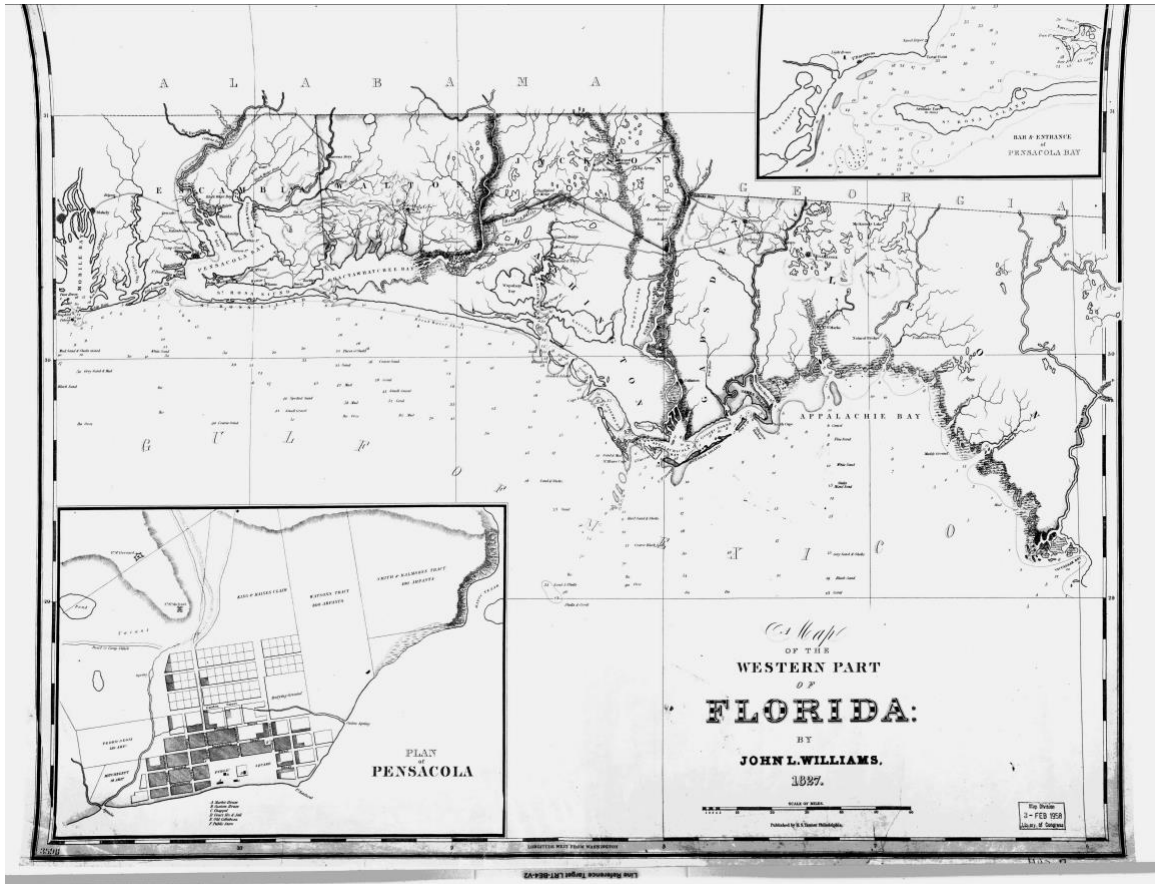
would lead the combined regiment. It was during this chaotic transition that Bowles left the army. Scholars dispute the exact nature of his departure and the reasons for it. Writing from London years later, Bowles recounted the story: he claimed his superior intellect invited jealousy from a superior officer, who then tricked Bowles to abandon his guard post, and as a result, he was “induced to resign his commission.”<sup>39</sup> However, there are multiple accounts of his departure. One story recalls that Bowles surrendered his commission and then insulted an officer as he departed. Yet another version claims he was court-martialed for neglect of duty. These divergent accounts became more common as the stories were used either as support of or as a means to slander Bowles. Stories like Bowles’s own depict him in a positive manner and shift the blame for his departure on an individual officer. The more serious claims of court-martial most likely originated among his detractors either in the army itself or later in the Bahamas.<sup>40</sup> Verifying any story as accurate is next to impossible due to the lack of available records from Pensacola during the war. Regardless, his departure from the army distills down to Bowles acting in his own interest, leading to his first foray into the wilderness of West Florida’s rivers, wetlands, and coast.

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<sup>39</sup> *Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles*, 8. This account is most likely a propaganda piece as Bowles dictated the details of his life to its author.

<sup>40</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 11-12. Jasanoff, *Liberty's*, 238-239. DuVal, *Independence Lost*, Loc. 5731. Wright provides the most positive account, although, given the detail of other parts of his career, it is odd he does not have exact information regarding Bowles’s departure. Jasanoff states he was “struck from the roles” following a fight with a superior. DuVal goes even further arguing that he was “dishonorably discharged,” citing British sources after the war. These varied accounts are part of the Bowles mystery. He was an enigmatic figure causing controversy among all those who met him.





**Figure 2.** Map of the Western Part of Florida

Source: Map of the Western Part of Florida by JL Williams, 1827. Map. Phila.: HS Tanner, 1827.

Creeks living in the territory near Pensacola found the young Bowles wandering the coast, half-naked. Perhaps out of curiosity or sympathy, they took him into their community. He came to live with a lower Creek family, the Perrymans, not far from where the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers meet to form the Apalachicola.<sup>41</sup> During these early years among the Creeks, he started a family and had his first son, “little Billy.” He also took a second wife, Mary, who maintained his home in Florida for the next twenty years.<sup>42</sup> Several years later during an interview in London, Bowles described the deep emotional connection he felt toward his life with the Creek as “a situation so flattering to

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 13. Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, Loc. 5732.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 13. “Little Billy” Bowles went on to become Chief Bowles of the Cherokees in Texas.

the independence natural in the heart of man.”<sup>43</sup> In the same London interview he claimed it was during these years in Florida that the Creek adopted him, and he described his relationship as “doubly united to them, both from inclination, and the ties of blood; and his children were living pledges of... fidelity.”<sup>44</sup> These statements demonstrate Bowles felt a deep connection to the Creek even if they did not fully reciprocate. Natives during this period often adopted Europeans as citizens, but the degree to which they were included in Creek society varied among tribes and villages. Further complicating the definition of citizenship was the purpose or need that Europeans fulfilled. Some Europeans obtained citizenship through marriage, others received citizenship as an honorific to encourage peaceful relations or to facilitate trade.<sup>45</sup> In this context, Bowles’s citizenship could simply be a matter of marriage to a member of the Creek village or a means to bind the British to the Creek for trade purposes. Even though Bowles was a runaway, he still offered the Perrymans and other Lower Creek insight into British Pensacola.

Bowles’s exact status in Creek society is debatable. Scholars such as Wright and Jasanoff cast him as a leader of the Creek and accept his claim of Creek citizenship to bolster their narrative of Bowles. Din reached a decidedly different conclusion, arguing Bowles’s citizenship claim carried little if any meaning for the Creek. Each scholar accepts or denies his citizenship status as it fits their argument. As previously mentioned, the Creek and other natives had varying definitions of citizenship.<sup>46</sup> Despite these divergent opinions of Bowles’s citizenship, his familial attachments connected him

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<sup>43</sup> *Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles*, 13. During Bowles’ time in London in 1791, he became a minor celebrity and gave an interview which was later published in various newspapers in London.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* This account derived from interviews with Bowles and is generally accepted as his own version of his life.

<sup>45</sup> Perdue, *“Mixed Blood” Indians*, 72. Each Creek village incorporated foreigners as necessitated by their individual needs and purposes. Some were made citizens, entirely integrated into the village and received its full protection. Others held a preferential or respected status, one that signified their relationship to the village, and this status could change as it fit the needs of the village.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

to the Creek community and contributed to his plans to open the Indian trade between Florida and the Bahamas.

Europeans such as Bowles were part of a cultural exchange that had developed over the preceding three hundred years and resulted in major changes that occurred during the eighteenth century. Claudio Saunt explores the changes in the economic practices of the Creek and argues that in the decades following the American Revolution there was a fundamental change in Creek Society caused by the international trade in deerskin and Creek involvement in the emerging market economy. The shift was towards increased accumulation of property, including land, slaves, and European manufactured goods, such as cloth and guns.

Alexander McGillivray, the *mestizo* Creek chief, exemplified this shift, as he owned multiple plantations and slaves.<sup>47</sup> The limited availability of manufactured goods from the Spanish led the Creeks to look to the British for those supplies. Bowles and other British merchants living among the Creeks brought British goods into Creek communities and were welcomed even after the British withdrawal that followed the war.<sup>48</sup> Traditional Creek values that had included common property, respect for clan or tribal organization, and government by consensus were on the decline. More Creeks were turning to a plantation economy and the benefits of property ownership. New methods of Creek organization, such as the National Council, asserted the rule of the few over the older consensus models.<sup>49</sup> Including Europeans as members of the village or tribe was part of this shift. Europeans, like Bowles, provided avenues to manufactured goods from Europe and ways to protect territorial claims. Conversely, Bowles's family connections invested him in the Lower Creek community, and his family's economic

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<sup>47</sup> Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63-70.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

concerns were in part Creek economic concerns regarding shifts in trade and the emergence of a new plantation economy.<sup>50</sup> Opening trade between Florida and the Bahamas would help his family and, by extension, the Creek village of which he was a part.

Despite Bowles's home among the Creeks, he was still British and fought to defend British Florida. In 1779, Spain entered the American Revolution and planned to invade West Florida. Warned of the impending attack, the British asked for Creek assistance at Mobile Bay. Among the men who arrived to aid in the British defense was Bowles. He led several Creek warriors in the battle against the Spanish, and witnesses reported he was one of the last to surrender. For his actions on the field at Mobile and his alliance with the Creeks, Bowles earned reinstatement into the British Army as an officer. He joined the British retreat to Pensacola, where they awaited the next Spanish attack.

In March 1781, Spanish General Bernardo Gálvez invaded Pensacola with a force of eleven hundred men. Aided by the Creek, British forces resisted the Spanish invasion for more than a month but ultimately surrendered Pensacola and eventually all of West Florida. The surviving British forces evacuated to New York. In order to receive the financial benefit of his army commission, Bowles needed to remain with the British Army, and so after five years in Florida, he returned to New York.<sup>51</sup> Bowles did not see action again during the war. In October 1781, British General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, effectively ending the American Revolution and war. The immediate postwar years began an uncertain time for Bowles and thousands of Loyalists in New York and

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<sup>50</sup> Perdue, *"Mixed Blood" Indians*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas E. Chavez, *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An Intrinsic Gift* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 192-194. Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 14-15. Spanish ships transported the British soldiers to New York by way of Havana. Bowles would have seen the Castillo del Morro in Havana, not knowing then it would be the site of his death almost twenty years later.

throughout the British colonies. Bowles and others were compelled to create new lives as the political boundaries of North America were shifting once again.

The British defeat at Yorktown in 1781, and the subsequent Treaty of Paris in 1783, marked the end of Bowles's life as a soldier and the beginning of his adventure and intrigue in the Caribbean. After the war ended, Bowles remained in New York to secure payment for his commission. The Treaty of Paris transferred East and West Florida from Great Britain to Spain. The transfer made Bowles's return to Florida and to his Creek family a difficult proposition. His officer's commission entitled him to a land grant after the war, which he took in the Bahamas. He was not the only Loyalist who fled to the islands off the Florida Coast. There, he joined thousands of British refugees from South Carolina, Georgia, and East and West Florida. Bowles arrived in the port of Nassau in the fall of 1783.<sup>52</sup> While Bowles and others tried to build new lives under British rule in the Bahamas, still others remained in Florida. Some Loyalists, such as William Panton, established new relationships with the Spanish governments of East and West Florida.

Many Loyalists chose to accept the Spanish monarchy and negotiated new business arrangements with the Spanish Crown. Individual economic interests produced flexibility in people's allegiances in the post war years. This semi-fluid loyalty was still at work many years after Bowles's time in Florida. Loyalists, such as William Panton, found stability in working with the Spanish officials in East and West Florida. According to Andrew McMichael, West Florida's settlers remained loyal to the Spanish Crown primarily because it maintained their businesses and protected their property rights.<sup>53</sup> In the case of William Panton, Spain's governors in East and West Florida needed his

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<sup>52</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 17. Bowles's land grant was for five hundred acres on the Island of Eleuthera.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008), Loc. 83.

assistance in the continued operation of the Indian trade. McMichael's conclusion supports a concept of flexible boundaries and identities. People moved freely across imperial boundaries to conduct business, and often their loyalty to a government followed their individual economic interests. Specifically, British businessmen such as Panton still operated in East and West Florida across the imperial boundary with the British Bahamas. Panton's supply of manufactured goods came from England through the port at Nassau, and his competitors in the Bahamas envied his relationships in Florida which eventually grew to form a de facto monopoly in the Florida Indian trade.<sup>54</sup>

Miller and Bonamy, just one of the established Nassau merchant firms, were eager to access the Indian markets in Spanish East and West Florida. These merchants found an ally in Bowles, and together they challenged Panton and his suppliers in the Bahamas. Following the American Revolution, two factions developed in Nassau: the "Conchs," as the original inhabitants were known, and the new Loyalist refugees. Conchs found the recently appointed governor of the Bahamas to be one of their greatest champions. Following his appointment as governor in 1787, Lord Dunmore, the former governor of Virginia, hoped to find new lucrative opportunities in the Bahamas.<sup>55</sup> Part of Dunmore's economic plans for the Bahamas included free trade. In 1788, he successfully petitioned Parliament to make Nassau a free port, open to vessels from nations other than Britain. Older Bahamian trading firms, such as Miller, Bonamy, and Company, aimed to take advantage of that status by trading with Spanish merchants from Cuba and Florida. However, they faced competition from the newly established Loyalists in the Bahamas, such as Panton, Leslie, and Company.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *Creeks and Seminoles: The Destruction and Regeneration of the Muscogulge People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 26-27 & 50-51.

<sup>55</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 23-24.

<sup>56</sup> Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders*, 45.

William Panton effectively eliminated his competitors through his negotiations of trade privileges with the Spanish governors in East and West Florida. This de facto monopoly created jealousy among the original settlers and resulted in a division among merchants in the Bahamas. Dunmore professed neutrality but generally supported Miller and Bonamy and the Conchs, as he too wished to profit from the Indian trade in East and West Florida.<sup>57</sup> Nassau merchants hoped to operate legally in the Indian trade through the open ports that Dunmore helped to secure in Parliament. In 1788, Bowles offered Dunmore and the Nassau merchants a plan to circumvent Panton, Leslie, and Company and open trade in Florida.

Dunmore and Bowles created a plan for West Florida for different reasons. Bowles intended to open the trade between Nassau and the Creeks. While attempting to secure his land and employment in the Bahamas, Bowles traveled back to West Florida in 1785 and reestablished his family connections to the Lower Creek community. According to Bowles, his village appointed him as chief in 1787 to help the Creek secure higher prices for their deerskins and secure better access to British-made goods at lower prices.<sup>58</sup> Bowles formed a plan to supply his Creek family and neighbors with goods from Nassau, thus providing competition to Panton, Leslie, and Company.<sup>59</sup> His plans aligned with Dunmore's own plans before the two ever met in Nassau.

Dunmore had designs in Florida dating back to the close of the war. He envisioned a Loyalist asylum, a place for Britain to strike out and take the Mississippi Valley from the Spanish. Originally this plan involved East Florida as a British colony and contained large numbers of British loyalist refugees that had fled to Florida during the war. East Florida's transfer to Spain following the war hampered Dunmore's plan but did

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<sup>57</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 24-29. Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, Loc. 4781. Narrett, *Adventurism and Empire*, 211-212. Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Bowles later used this role as means to gain support for his proposed Creek state.

<sup>59</sup> DuVal, *Independence Lost*, Loc. 5747. Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 24.

not end it. Dunmore still saw potential for his plan in the large number of British refugees who remained in both East and West Florida and the natives, such as the Creek, who still depended on British trading firms such as Panton, Leslie, and Company.<sup>60</sup> Bowles's and Dunmore's plans were beginning to align. They planned to open the Florida Indian trade to more British merchants, thereby expanding British influence in Florida and opening the path to Florida's return to the British rule.<sup>61</sup> Both men saw the potential for profit by increasing trade through Nassau but, to achieve that goal required help from the natives in Florida.

Bowles needed support from other Creek leaders for his Florida plan. Bowles turned to the *mestizo* Creek chief, Alexander McGillivray, who had risen to prominence after the Revolution. McGillivray grew up in a Creek community with his Creek mother and with his Scottish father in Charleston, where he received a European education. After the war he became a prominent owner of several plantations and numerous slaves. Several scholars, including Saunt, Braund, and DuVal, identify McGillivray as a part of a Creek transition toward a plantation agriculture and increased slave ownership.<sup>62</sup> He represented this shift because he owned large tracts of land in Creek territory in Florida and Georgia and traded with both Spanish and American merchants. His mixed cultural background and education made it easy for him to speak on behalf of the Creeks in a way Europeans understood. The Spanish, British, and American officials believed he spoke on behalf of all the Creek. He formed and led the Creek National Council, a group that conducted diplomacy with both Spain and the United States.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> J. Leitch Wright, Jr., "Lord Dunmore's Loyalist Asylum in the Floridas." *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (1971): 370-79.

<sup>61</sup> Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 235-241.

<sup>62</sup> McGillivray is ever present in Creek scholarship and is the subject of numerous studies regarding the Creek. Each scholar mentioned included the idea McGillivray represents the shift away from semi-nomadic agriculture and hunting, toward sedentary plantation agriculture and property ownership.

<sup>63</sup> Saunt, *A New Order*, 38-63. There is a prodigious amount of primary source documents created by and about Alexander McGillivray. This evidence has led to his title as the "Greatest Creek Chief," curious given he was only half Creek, which demonstrates the fluid nature of Creek identity.



Aside from his dealings with imperial governments, McGillivray also worked with the numerous Indian traders who operated among the Creeks, specifically William Panton. The two men most likely met before the Revolution during their time in Charleston.<sup>64</sup> Following the war, the Spanish East Florida governor emphasized the relationship between Panton and McGillivray in his endorsement of Panton's license to conduct the Indian trade on behalf of Spain. Unofficially, Panton, Leslie, and Company made McGillivray a silent partner in their company. In exchange, McGillivray promised Panton Creek cooperation and threatened the Spanish government with Indian rebellion if they did not grant favorable business terms for Panton, Leslie, and Company.<sup>65</sup> The exact nature of this partnership between McGillivray and Panton was unknown to Bowles who had his own history with McGillivray.

Bowles sought McGillivray's support because of his position among the Creeks and his relationship with the Spanish. Bowles and McGillivray first met during the American Revolution at the defense of Mobile Bay and the two men likely crossed paths again in Pensacola. McGillivray led a group of warriors to aid the British against the Spanish. After the war, the two most likely reconnected when Bowles's returned to Creek territory after the war. During a conference of Creek villages at Coweta in 1787 Bowles recruited McGillivray in his plans to open the Florida Indian trade to British merchants.<sup>66</sup> Bowles implored the Creek chiefs that were assembled at Coweta to support his endeavor to deliver more supplies at lower prices than Panton could offer. Bowles's timing was precipitous as relations between the Americans and Creek had become especially dire. Following the independence of the United States, numerous

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<sup>64</sup> Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders*, 65-66. Panton was older than McGillivray, but his position as clerk and more importantly, a Scotsman, would have led to encounters between Panton and fellow Scotsman, Lachlan McGillivray, Alexander's father.

<sup>65</sup> Saunt, *A New Order*, 76-77.

<sup>66</sup> Creeks regularly met at Coweta to confer on issues that might affect all the Creek people.

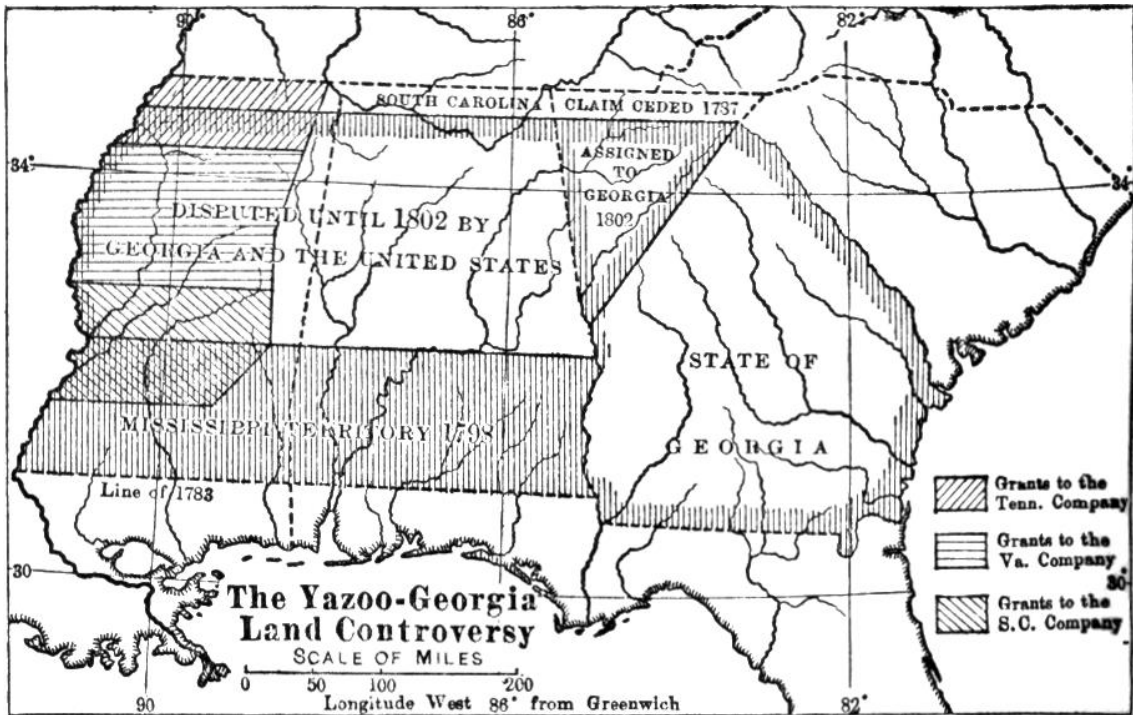
states made claims to lands as far west as the Mississippi River, large tracts that included territory held by the Choctaws, Cherokees, and the Creek.

The legality of these claims were of questionable, but the governments of Georgia and North Carolina were prepared to enforce them. Some of the lands Georgia claimed were Creek hunting grounds, land that was part of Spanish West Florida. McGillivray had mobilized the Creek to resist American claims.<sup>67</sup> Unwilling to start a war with the United States, Spanish Florida officials refused requests from McGillivray for guns and powder. McGillivray and the Creek needed trading partners unencumbered by the Spanish. Panton, Leslie, and Company's agreements with the governments of both East and West Florida prohibited the sale of weapons without Spanish approval. Despite McGillivray's relationship with Panton, he still needed weapons to resist the Americans, which made Bowles's offer of direct support from Nassau irresistible. The need for more supplies, specifically arms to fight against the encroaching Americans, swayed the various chiefs and they accepted Bowles's plan to bring goods from Nassau.<sup>68</sup> Convinced he had Creek support, Bowles returned to Nassau to initiate his plan.

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<sup>67</sup> Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders*, 73-76.

<sup>68</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 29-30. Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 25-26. Compared to Alexander McGillivray, Din's analysis of Bowles is extremely negative compared. Specifically, Din discredits Bowles as poor leader because he lacks familial connections to the Creeks, his connections to Nassau merchants, and his ego and extroverted character. There is little critique of McGillivray in this manner.



**Figure 3.** Lands Claimed by the State of Georgia  
 Source: Johnson, Allen (1915). *Union and Democracy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Bowles's strategy was to take advantage of the Creek's need for a supplier to compete with Panton, Leslie, and Company in the Indian trade by connecting the Creek in West Florida with British Loyalists in the Bahamas. While it is tempting to argue his plan was purely opportunistic, it was more than opportunism or timing. Bowles's plan emerged from a combination of personal experiences and the events that began and followed the American Revolution. His history in Florida during the war led him to the Creek communities in West Florida. He met Alexander McGillivray while fighting the Spanish in Mobile. Following the war, he connected with Dunmore and the Nassau merchant community. Each of these influenced Bowles's plan, but the Creek's need for munitions against the Americans accelerated Bowles's plan into action. Bowles drew from his connections between Florida and the Bahamas to open the Indian trade to new suppliers.

Lord Dunmore, Miller, and his associates backed Bowles's first attempt to trade in Florida. Upon Bowles's return to Nassau from Florida, Miller promptly outfitted two small vessels and loaded them with trade goods and munitions. Bowles promised the Creek chiefs he would return with two hundred soldiers to protect his trade operations and to demonstrate his commitment to them. However, mustering that many soldiers proved problematic. Few men in the Bahamas had any interest in a potentially dangerous operation in Florida.<sup>69</sup> Bowles recruited fewer than forty soldiers to aid his operation, even after Dunmore conscripted several soldiers from Nassau's prison. Bowles claimed to have the support of the entire British government but in reality only had the support of Dunmore. In an effort to add credibility to his claim of government support, Bowles wore a British officer's uniform.

Bowles's entire plan at this point was to start trading with the Creek as quickly as possible. However, there seemed to be little strategy to carry out that plan. He intended to meet with his Creek contact in East Florida.<sup>70</sup> There he planned to leave some supplies behind and trade as much as possible with any natives he encountered. Then he would lead his expedition across Florida to meet with his family at their village near Apalachicola. Once there, he would trade the remaining goods before rendezvousing with a ship to return to Nassau. At the end of August 1788, Bowles set sail for the Florida Coast to launch his grand plan in Florida.

Bowles landed on the Indian River south of St. Augustine where he met with his East Florida contact as planned. There, he attempted to convince the Indians they encountered to trade horses for cloth, but few proved able, as they did not have horses and willing to trade anything of value for Bowles's merchandise. Bowles became frustrated and blamed the nearby Panton, Leslie, and Company operations for his

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<sup>69</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 27-29. Bowles promised eight dollars per month, a "share of the booty", three hundred acres and horses to the men he recruited. Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 33-39.

<sup>70</sup> Bowles's contact was the *mestizo* Creek leader and trader, John Galphin.

inability to trade with the native Indians. Perhaps to vent his frustrations, Bowles briefly debated whether to attack Panton's store on the St. Johns or Wakulla River.<sup>71</sup> While he wavered, Spanish officials at St. Augustine received intelligence of Bowles's plan and dispatched soldiers to arrest him and his followers. After hearing reports that Spanish soldiers were approaching, most of Bowles's men deserted and eventually surrendered to the Spanish garrison at St. Augustine.

Lacking manpower, Bowles's first expedition had collapsed without achieving its goals of trading with the Creek or of supplying munitions to the Creek in West Florida. Alone, Bowles ventured across the Florida peninsula toward the Apalachicola River and his Creek allies. There he still enjoyed support among West Florida's Creek population, many of whom awaited his arrival. Following this initial failure, a disappointed Bowles returned to Nassau without accomplishing either of his objectives.

Bowles's first plan failed primarily because it did not capitalize on his strongest asset in Florida, his family and their village on the West Coast. Rather, he started his venture in East Florida and in doing so wasted time, energy, and most importantly the support of the few men he recruited from Nassau. These men deserted early in the expedition, and without support, getting to the West Coast proved difficult. Further, he could have used the supplies that he intended to trade on the East Coast to strengthen his position with the Creek near his family's village near the Apalachicola River. This area is where most of Bowles's claimed support resided. It may have been better to use this as a base of operations and then if successful in West Florida, venture into East Florida. Rather than being patient and cautious, Bowles was rash in his strategy to start in East Florida. He acted too quickly upon returning to Nassau in July 1788 and he did not take adequate time to build a force of men to support his operation. Additionally, he was so eager to start trading that he sailed to meet the nearest natives to Nassau, in this

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<sup>71</sup> A debate he would resolve in a subsequent strategy.

case Creeks in East Florida. Following his arrival in East Florida, he lost what support he had by debating whether to attack Panton, Leslie, and Company's stores. While he wavered about which store to attack, his men abandoned him and surrendered to the Spanish soldiers at St. Augustine.

Undeterred by this initial setback, Bowles and his Creek allies still desired to reestablish trade ties between West Florida and Nassau. Bowles regrouped after his failed first expedition and worked to gather support for his plans from both the British and the Spanish government. Bowles believed success required greater support than he had found in the Bahamas or in West Florida. A new plan would call for more formal support and organization, both of which he hoped to gain through diplomacy with the governments of Spain and Great Britain.

### Chapter 3: Sovereign State of Muscogee

Bowles returned to Florida in January 1789, this time directly to the Apalachicola River and his supporters in West Florida. While in West Florida, he began to formulate a new plan. This time he would attempt to secure official approval for a Creek state from Britain and, if that failed, he would turn to Spain. He began with his Creek base and used several *mestizo* chiefs to aid in gaining official support from Britain. Hedging his bet on British support, Bowles also began courting Spanish officials. Following his failure in 1788, his new plan evolved in order to capitalize on the volatile political disagreement between Britain and Spain over the territory in the Northwest.

Bowles's new plan was more audacious; it called for the creation of an independent Creek state with free trade privileges and ports along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. Allies to Great Britain, the Creeks were possible tools with which to strike at Spain in the event of hostility between the two Atlantic powers. Unfortunately for Bowles, Britain and Spain resolved their dispute and forced Bowles to soften his stance against Spain and advocate for a Creek state that would be beneficial to both Spain and Britain. While the overall plan was more ambitious than his first attempt in Florida, it still held free trade between Nassau and the Creek at its core. Armed with this new plan, Bowles set out to create the new Creek state, Muscogee.

After returning to West Florida in 1789, Bowles worked to secure the base of his Creek support and began to gather broader political support from both Britain and Spain. At Coweta, he met with leaders of the Lower Creeks and the Seminoles. There he announced his plan for creation of an independent Creek State to the Creek leaders who

had gathered. He argued that a free Creek state could trade with whomever it wished, free from the restraints of the Panton, Leslie, and Company monopoly. The Creek could use ports along both coasts of Florida to reach Nassau or Cuba, whichever was the most beneficial to them. While Bowles advocated his new plan, it is difficult to assess how well the Creek leaders that gathered at Coweta received it. There is no record of the Creek response. The only confirmation of support is his recruitment of five *mestizo* Creek chiefs.<sup>72</sup> He convinced these men to join him on a trip to London to petition the king for official support.<sup>73</sup> At the same time he was soliciting for British support, Bowles began to advocate for Muscogee with Spanish officials as well.

Bowles saw the value in recruiting the Spanish government to his cause. Specifically, he wrote to the East Florida Governor, Manuel Zéspedes, and Spanish Secretary of State, Conde de Floridablanca. Through his correspondence, Bowles attempted to sway their opinions about the need for free Indian ports in western Florida to provide competition to Panton, Leslie, and Company. In a 1789 letter to Floridablanca, he warned that Spain was losing its influence among the Creeks and counseled that increased trade with Nassau would keep them in the Spanish sphere of influence.<sup>74</sup> Bowles's plans for the Creeks had evolved into a greater plan for an autonomous indigenous polity with free trade with Nassau.

At this time, Bowles began to identify himself with the title "Estajoca," or Director General of the Creek Nation. Wright claims that the title represents the support of the Creeks, while Din dismisses the idea that an outsider could possess that level of

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<sup>72</sup> There is no mention in the scholarship or historical record of why he chose *mestizo* chiefs. It could be a merely pragmatic decision because they spoke English and could communicate with the British. However, without any evidence, it is speculation.

<sup>73</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 30.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Bowles to the Conde de Floridablanca, New Providence, August 30, 1789, *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Est., leg. 3889bis. Bowles to Manuel Zéspedes, Nassau, August 30, 1789. PRO CO 23/15. Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 40.



influence.<sup>75</sup> In reality, Bowles did not have the complete support of the Creek people, so this title was certainly an exaggeration.<sup>76</sup> Regardless of its efficacy, under this self-assumed title, he and a small group of *mestizo* Creeks set off for London to gather support from the British Crown for an independent Creek state in West Florida.

Bowles's trip to London coincided with an international crisis between Spain and Great Britain. While he made arrangements to procure a ship for his journey, the Spanish seized a British vessel off the coast of Vancouver. Known as the Nootka Sound Crisis, this seizure was at the center of a conflict over Spanish and British sovereignty in the northwest. The dispute steadily escalated toward war as neither nation could settle the controversy.<sup>77</sup> Potential conflict between Spain and Britain would benefit Bowles's case for support in Florida. If war became Britain's only course to resolve the Nootka Sound Crisis, Bowles could rally valuable Indian support against the Spanish in Florida. Bowles attempted to negotiate using the potential for Creek support against Spain in exchange for British acknowledgement of Muscogee. Exploitation of the Nootka Sound Controversy aided Bowles as he made his way to London.<sup>78</sup>

Gathering British support en route to London, Bowles and his *mestizo* Creek allies traveled to Quebec before arriving in England in late 1790. They departed from Nassau in a vessel procured by Miller and set out to meet with Canada's governor, Lord Dorchester. Upon their arrival, Dorchester listened to Bowles's plans and weighed them against the potential for conflict with Spain. Not wanting to lose the opportunity to use Bowles in a coming war against Spain, Dorchester forwarded Bowles's plans and his

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<sup>75</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 38. Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 29.

<sup>76</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 38. Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 29. Wright describes Bowles's relationship with the Lower Creeks and Seminoles as actual leadership. Din vehemently disagrees with Wright's assumption and states it is not possible for a European to be a true native leader.

<sup>77</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 34-35. Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 46-47. Both authors agree Bowles's plans benefited from the potential war between Britain and Spain brought on by the Nootka Sound Crisis.

<sup>78</sup> Spanish diplomatic records of the Nootka Sound Crisis and Bowles occupy several of the same legajos in the Archivo General de Simancas. The concern for Bowles and the issues with Great Britain were occurring simultaneously.

potential usefulness to the British government at Whitehall.<sup>79</sup> In support of Bowles and his cause, Dorchester procured a vessel and sent Bowles and his companions along to London.

Bowles arrived in London in early 1791 at the pinnacle of the crisis between Britain and Spain, a propitious time for his proposed enterprise. His arrival created a public stir and he quickly became something of a celebrity.<sup>80</sup> Wherever he went in the city, he garnered attention due to his Indian style of dress and his entourage of Creek chiefs.<sup>81</sup> The Nootka Sound crisis had brought Spain and Britain to the brink of war and Bowles used this to his advantage during his negotiations with Home Secretary William Windham Grenville. Bowles insisted that he could lead a Creek army to conquer West Florida and Louisiana, and from there, Mexico. In exchange for this support against Spain, Bowles asked for British acknowledgement of his plans to establish an Indian state in West Florida.<sup>82</sup> His claims regarding his ability to lead the Creeks in Florida enhanced his celebrity in London. The city's inhabitants marveled at the Englishman in native dress and delighted in the prospect of an Indian army fighting for Great Britain against the Spanish.<sup>83</sup> Bowles's celebrity and the controversy over Nootka Sound were aligning in his favor, and he was quick to reap any benefits from the British government.

Bowles's popularity earned him some support from Lord Grenville, but unfortunately, it ended there. Grenville saw the value in Bowles and his Creek followers, so he aided Bowles in gaining an audience with the king to petition for Crown support. However, before Bowles's presentation, Spain conceded to British demands in the Northwest, and the Nootka Sound Controversy dissolved. For Bowles, the agreement

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<sup>79</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 44-45

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49

<sup>81</sup> It was during his time in London the iconic portrait of him was painted and he gave the details of his life that appear in the *Authentic Memoirs of William August Bowles, Esquire, Ambassador from the United Nations of Creeks and Cherokees, to the Court of London*.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Bowles to Lord Grenville, Adelphi, January 7, 1791, *Archivo General de Indias*, PC, leg. 2372.

<sup>83</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 48-49.

was a disappointment. With renewed peace between Spain and Britain, the king refused to grant Bowles an audience. The British crown could not move in a way that contained the slightest hint of disrespect to Spain, meeting with Bowles, who openly advocated conflict with Spain, would be an insult to the Spanish and threaten the newly forged peace. Bowles's hopes of royal assistance were gone, at least officially. However, unofficially Grenville could still offer Bowles some tacit support.

Although he was unable to gain the full backing of England from the British Crown, Bowles did secure a small victory. He managed to convince Grenville to acknowledge the ability of Creek vessels to enter the port of Nassau freely, giving unspoken recognition to his plans for an independent Creek state. However, this was the limit of Grenville's support. Embarrassed by Bowles's presence in London in light of the new peace with Spain, Grenville paid for passage of Bowles and his companions back to Nassau.<sup>84</sup> Having failed to gain the official British support he desired, Bowles reversed his opinion of the Spanish and turned to them for aid, hoping to salvage his plans by gaining the support of the Spanish ambassador in London.

The Marqués del Campo, the Spanish ambassador to Britain, met with Bowles several times before he departed for Nassau. In his letters to the Conde de Floridablanca, Campo stated that he met with Bowles to assess the nature of the man. Over the course of three meetings, Bowles and Campo discussed the need for additional trade with the Indians of East and West Florida. Disregarding the official stance of the Florida governors, Campo agreed with Bowles that there was a problem in the Floridas and that free trade was preferable to the limited monopoly of Panton, Leslie, and Company. Bowles claimed it was through his leadership that he kept the Creeks from rebelling against the Spanish. Campo challenged the legitimacy of Bowles's leadership of the Creeks in Florida, and further questioned the actual power the natives held

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<sup>84</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 34-36; Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 48-53.

against the Spanish. Campo ultimately acknowledged that outside of the Spanish forts, Indians controlled East and West Florida. Furthermore he agreed that trade between the Creeks and Nassau was viable, even if that trade was illegal. Campo wrote to Floridablanca that he doubted that Britain would support Bowles, but the economic problems in West Florida were real.<sup>85</sup> Bowles's meeting with Campo resulted in no actual acknowledgement of his plan for free Creek ports. This proposed plan would effectively circumvent Spanish control of the Indian trade in Florida. Unbeknownst to Campo, Bowles intended more than just free ports; he envisioned the creation of an independent Creek state.

Bowles's plan evolved into more than just free trade for the Creek, he wanted outright sovereignty from Spain to secure Creek economic independence. Angered by his inability to gain Campo's support, coupled with his failure to gain official support from King George or Lord Grenville, Bowles decided to act on his own. He declared his intentions in a 1791 letter to Spanish King, Carlos III. The letter amounted to a declaration of independence for the Creek state of Muscogee. It requested open seaports as well as affirmation of Creek ancestral lands. Bowles specifically called for the free use of seven hundred miles of coastline, "the benefit of navigation of their seas," and two ports, one in Apalachicola and the other at Cape Florida. Bowles threatened to "make instant war" if Spain did not comply with his demands.<sup>86</sup> While the declaration called for sovereignty and the rights of a free nation, its fundamental purpose was economic freedom. Ports and navigation rights would have allowed the Creek to trade freely with any other nation besides Spain, specifically the British in the Bahamas. This

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from Marqués del Campo to Floridablanca, London, April 15, 1791, *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Est., leg. 3889bis, exped. 10, no. 8. All three meetings are detailed in this letter in addition to Campo's reaction to Bowles's request and an appraisal of Bowles. Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 36-38; Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 54.

<sup>86</sup> "Letter from William Augustus Bowles to King Carlos IV" (April 15, 1791), *Archivo General de Simancas*: Est, Leg.8148. This letter was in effect a Declaration of Independence for the Creek state of Muscogee. Numerous copies exist in the Spanish Archives, but the original is housed in the General Archive of Simancas.

new plan for Creek sovereignty, free trade on a broad scale recognized from both Spain and Britain. He already possessed permission from Grenville for Creek vessels to enter Nassau now he needed to secure freedom from the Spanish to trade between Florida and Nassau.

Sailing from London to Nassau in 1791, Bowles's plan solidified. He desired to free the Creek from the Spanish monopoly embodied through Panton, Leslie, and Company; force Spain to acknowledge the Creek's right to free trade; and to establish the free ports he requested on the Florida Gulf Coast. If the Spanish Crown failed to give in to his demands, Bowles and his followers were prepared to fight. Just as during his first attempt in 1788, Bowles had a plan but lacked a sound strategy to execute it. He returned to Nassau and immediately began preparations to return to West Florida.

Bowles arrived in Nassau in June 1791 and began the first steps toward an independent state of Muscogee. Lord Dunmore was inspired to support Bowles upon hearing of Grenville's authorization of free trade that gave tacit approval to the sovereign Creek state.<sup>87</sup> At Dunmore's suggestion, Nassau merchants, Miller and Bonamy, supplied Bowles with dry goods to trade and supplies to establish a trading operation on the Florida Gulf Coast. Perhaps indicative of Bowles's ambition was the creation of a flag for his planned Creek state. Announced in the *Bahama Gazette*, "A new flag was displayed here on Wednesday, that of the Creek nation, worn by the vessel carrying General Bowles and the Indian Chiefs to the American continent."<sup>88</sup> This new flag took advantage of Grenville's permission for Creek vessels to trade in Nassau. Furthermore, it distanced Bowles from Great Britain and, more importantly, from Lord Dunmore, should this second venture end in ruin. Had he flown the British flag, his subsequent

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<sup>87</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 48-55.

<sup>88</sup> James Corbett David. *Dunmore's New World: The Extraordinary Life of a Royal Governor in Revolutionary America--with Jacobites, Counterfeiters, Land Schemes, Shipwrecks, Scalping, Indian Politics, Runaway Slaves, and Two Illegal Royal Weddings* (University of Virginia Press, 2013), Kindle edition, Loc. 3491-3493.

actions could have started another conflict between Spain and Great Britain. With the new Creek flag flying from his ship, Bowles set sail for Florida to reunite with his supporters at Apalachicola.

Bowles's second operation in Florida began in late August 1791, and he quickly set out to establish the new polity of Muscogee through trade between Florida and Nassau. He stopped first in East Florida at the Indian River where he offloaded a small portion of the cargo. Bowles hoped his Creek supporters in East Florida would establish the second of Muscogee's two free ports.<sup>89</sup> Unlike the 1788 venture, Bowles did not remain in East Florida and quickly continued toward West Florida with the remaining cargo. Upon arriving at the mouth of the Apalachicola River, Bowles took a small skiff with some supplies upriver to a Creek settlement, home to his wife and children. He instructed the schooner with the remaining cargo to stay near the river delta and await his orders.<sup>90</sup>

However, remaining in the river delta was not safe. News of Bowles's arrival reached the Spanish garrison at New Orleans, which dispatched boats with swivel guns to intercept him. The schooner's crew offloaded a small amount of cargo near the mouth of the river before sighting a Spanish boat and fleeing to Nassau.<sup>91</sup> Unaware of the schooner's return to Nassau, Bowles instructed his Creek supporters to begin building a trading outpost east along the nearby Ochlocknee River. Limited supplies slowed his progress, and many of his Creek followers grew impatient. Despite the supply issues, Bowles's operation was underway and soon he established a foothold in West Florida.

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<sup>89</sup> While Bowles hoped these supplies would be the beginning of the East Coast port of Muscogee, it never materialized. There is no record of what became of the supplies and without resupply or orders from Bowles, his supporters in East Florida made no attempt to establish trade with Nassau on their own. Most importantly, Pantón, Leslie, and Company had a strong presence in East Florida, especially in the area around St. Augustine. It is reasonable to assume his supporters had less need of Bowles and his supplies.

<sup>90</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 41.

<sup>91</sup> "Interrogation of David McClisch," Manuel Gayoso, Antonio López de Armesto, New Orleans, December 29, 1791, MPA SD vol. 3, ff 778-85 from Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 41.

Bowles's success in Florida depended on support from the Creeks and other West Florida chiefdoms. During his lengthy absence from Florida, a rival for authority among the Creeks, Alexander McGillivray, faced challenges to his power from many of the Creek villages, especially those in West Florida. McGillivray's trouble stemmed from the 1790 Treaty of New York, which ceded Creek land along the Georgia border to the United States. In exchange for his support of the treaty, McGillivray received a commission of brigadier general and a commensurate salary.<sup>92</sup> Word of McGillivray's interests in the treaty's approval dismayed almost all the Creek villages involved, and ultimately they rejected the treaty. As a result, McGillivray's reputation suffered, and Bowles was quick to take advantage of the situation.

Shortly after his arrival in West Florida, Bowles departed for Coweta, the traditional meeting place for tribal leaders. He hoped to gain support from the tribal leaders for his independent Creek state. At Coweta, Bowles denounced McGillivray, specifically his association with the United States and with Panton, Leslie, and Company. A few Creeks who remained unconvinced by Bowles's argument remained loyal to McGillivray and walked out. However, in general, Bowles was well received, and many Creeks supported his call for the creation of Creek ports and free trade with British Nassau. This support was firmly dependent upon trade with Nassau and access to the cheaper supplies offered by merchants such as Miller and Bonamy.<sup>93</sup> McGillivray's support was declining. Bowles left Coweta with the support of the Creek based upon his promise to establish Muscogee.

Creek support for Bowles is the subject of numerous debates. Claiming the reports of Creek support are anecdotal, Gilbert Din argued Bowles had little to no support and acted on his own interests. Other historians, such as Maya Jasanoff and

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<sup>92</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 40.

<sup>93</sup> David, *Dunmore's New World*, Loc. 3491-3493.

James Corbett David, speculate that Bowles's actions alone are evidence of an attempted multi-ethnic community.<sup>94</sup> The archival evidence indicates the latter. The Spanish reports written shortly after his arrival confirm Creek support for Bowles. The Spanish commander at Fort San Marcos, Captain Luis Bertucat, met with a Creek chief from the nearby Chehaw village at the time of Bowles's landing. The chief demanded to know why the Spanish had dispatched soldiers to search for Bowles. In Bertucat's estimation, the search for Bowles visibly upset the chief, and this confirmed Bowles's support by local Creek. Additionally, Bertucat alleged the native and *mestizo* guides that were hired to find Bowles led the Spanish in circles, stalling in order to send Bowles a warning.<sup>95</sup> Equally suggestive of Bowles's support, McGillivray sent several of his own relatives to kill Bowles. However, they allegedly fell under Bowles's sway and stayed to support his plans.<sup>96</sup> While Bowles's own beliefs about his cause are debatable, these accounts provide evidence of Bowles's connection to the Creek and their support of his plan for Muscogee.

During the early months after Bowles's arrival in West Florida, Spanish leadership in New Orleans and at Fort San Marcos changed, an opportunity that Bowles exploited to his advantage. Colonel Francisco Luis Héctor, Barón de Carondelet, replaced Esteban Miró as the Governor of New Orleans. Carondelet just arrived in New Orleans and was unfamiliar the territory. Specifically he did not fully comprehend the tenuous position of the Spanish government between the territorial ambitions of the nascent United States and the Creek desire to protect their own territorial claims. Given his lack of experience, several subordinates advised him to proceed with caution in regards to Bowles's operation in Florida for fear of upsetting the Creeks. Unsure how to

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<sup>94</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 228-229. Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 236. Narrett, *Adventurism and Empire*, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Bertucat to O'Neill, no. 63, San Marcos de Apalache, November 14, 1791, MPA, vol. 3, ff. 769–78, and published in Wright, "Luis Bertucat," 55–62.

<sup>96</sup> McGillivray to O'Neill, n.p., October 28, 1791, attached to Miró to Las Casas, New Orleans, November 28, 1791, and McGillivray to Pantón, n.p., October 28, 1791, both in AGI, PC, leg. 1440.



act, in January 1791 Carondelet summoned Arturo O'Neil, governor of Pensacola, to New Orleans to discuss the situation.<sup>97</sup> The delay in action on Carondelet's part allowed Bowles precious time to secure his support among the Creeks and to begin building at the Ochlocknee River site. Closer to Bowles at Fort San Marcos, Captain Francisco Guesy replaced Bertucat as commandant. The Spanish governor of Pensacola cautioned Guesy to treat Bowles carefully as he had a large Indian following. Moreover, he advised Guesy to treat the Indians with "sweetness and prudence," given Bowles's presence.<sup>98</sup> Bowles tried to convince the new commander that he represented the Creek people and presented no threat to Spain.<sup>99</sup> Inexperienced in the field, Guesy did not pursue hostilities against him or his followers because of Bowles's perceived support. Rather, he authorized Bowles to "live where you want, and while you behave you will not be persecuted or extorted by Spain."<sup>100</sup> Despite the warning, Bowles refused to behave and soon lost the advantages he gained from the changes in command.

It was at that moment Bowles made his greatest error in judgment, the attack on the Panton, Leslie, and Company store on the Wakulla River on January 16, 1792. Up to this point his actions all appear to support the creation of Muscogee, but the decision to attack the Wakulla River store marks changes to both his plan and strategy. The attack and subsequent events are a marked change to the 1788 plan for the independent Creek state. Before moving on to the attack and how it marked a change, an analysis of Bowles's plan and strategy to this point is instructive when considering its next evolution.

Muscogee, the independent Creek state, was the prevailing feature of Bowles's plan following the first failure in 1788. It contained the elements of free trade that he attempted to achieve earlier but was more ambitious. In his effort to establish Muscogee,

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<sup>97</sup> White to the Governor of Louisiana, Pensacola, April 21, 1792, AGI, PC, leg. 225A.

<sup>98</sup> O'Neill to Guesy, Pensacola, January 4, 1792, AGI, PC, leg. 224A.

<sup>99</sup> Bowles to Guesy, n.p., January 4, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

<sup>100</sup> Guesy to Bowles, Fort San Marcos de Apalache, January 4, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50; Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 44-47.

Bowles attempted to establish a sovereign state, independent from Spain, with free ports on the East and West coast of Florida that could trade openly with Nassau. This plan was born out of Bowles's 1788 failure and emerged almost immediately after it.

Between 1789 and 1791, he tried to gather support from the British and Spanish governments. However, these overtures met with little success and Bowles returned to Nassau. Inspired by Lord Grenville's permission for Muscogee to trade in Nassau, Bowles received two supply ships from Miller and Bonamy to try again in Florida. This time he declared his intentions to Spain and set out for Florida to establish the free Creek ports on the east and west coasts. The plan for Muscogee evolved from that of an armed ally of Great Britain in a war with Spain to a native sovereign state with free ports. While still considered hostile to Spain, the Creeks would not openly attack Spain or its agents. The lack of open hostility to the Spanish or their allies is the key difference between before the attack on Panton's store and after. Bowles's plan moved from seeking peaceful unarmed autonomy from Spain to attacking its agent, Panton, Leslie, and Company and by extension, Spain.

Bowles's strategy to bring Muscogee into existence between the 1788 failure and the attack against Panton, Leslie, and Company was far more successful than the previous 1788 strategy. It was more effective because he executed a strategy to strengthen official support. Bowles made an envoy to the King of England for support. Although he failed to see the king, he received tacit support through Grenville's permission to trade in Nassau. Furthermore, he reached out to the Spanish Crown through the ambassador in London, Campo, and the crown's chief minister Conde Floridablanca. While neither man gave Bowles permission or support, he attempted to build support from both. His major support from the Creek, and from 1788 to 1791, he gathered and increased it, specifically from the five *mestizo* chiefs that accompanied him

to London and then at the Coweta Conference in 1791 when the majority of Creek chiefs agreed to his proposal.

By the time of his return to Florida in 1791, Bowles's plan was significantly more measured and cautious than in 1788. Realizing that his greatest assets was the support of the Creek in West Florida, he based his second operation from Apalachicola. Upon arriving in Florida, he did not initially aggravate Spanish officials and instead he set to work almost immediately to build facilities for the free ports of Muscogee. Had he stayed on this course and not attacked the Panton, Leslie, and Company store, this second plan may have been more successful. However, he chose to attack the store, a decision that marked a change to both his plan and strategy.

## Chapter 4: Rash Decision and Collapse

Muscogee was intended to be a sovereign state capable of trading with Nassau freely through its own ports. It was the embodiment of Bowles's original plan for free trade but on a grand scale. Unlike the 1788 plan that was hastily-conceived, the Muscogee strategy was developed carefully over two years and through building diplomatic relations with both Spain and Britain. Any gain as a result of those efforts were lost when Bowles attacked the Panton, Leslie, and Company store on January 16, 1792. Bowles's decision to attack marked a new plan to replace Panton, Leslie, and Company by force, a plan with extremely poor to no strategy to achieve its objectives. It was in part an outgrowth borne from the jealousies of the Nassau merchants towards Panton, Leslie, and Company and in part it was Bowles's urgent need to provide supplies for his Creek allies. Most importantly, this plan was hasty and ill conceived.

Bowles's attack on the Panton store on the Wakulla River was a terrible error in judgment. Nassau merchants had not dispatched another supply ship and one was not due until March. Bowles needed materials to build his trading port on the Ochlocknee River and supplies to appease his Creek supporters' demand for trade goods. Without a steady supply of material from Nassau, Bowles required the goods in the store and could not afford competition from Panton, Leslie, and Company that could undermine his Creek base. Beginning in 1789, Bowles's letters to the Spanish royal officials in Spain, Havana, and St. Augustine, repeatedly threatened Panton, Leslie, and Company.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Bowles to Floridablanca, 30 August 1789, C.O. 23/ 15/ 251. See also Bowles to the Governor of St. Augustine, 21 August 1789, C.O. 23/ 15/ 247– 48; Bowles to the Governor of Havana, 21 August 1789, C.O. 23/ 15/ 244– 46.

William Panton felt so threatened by Bowles that he placed a two thousand dollar bounty on Bowles's capture or death. Upon learning of the bounty, Bowles immediately dispatched troops to attack Panton's store.<sup>102</sup> While Bowles had ample cause to attack a Panton store prior to the bounty, he interpreted the bounty as a personal attack and turned against the nearest Panton target he could find, the Wakulla store.

Bowles attacked the Panton store to remove it as competition and secure supplies for his Creek supporters. He visited the Wakulla store on numerous occasions prior to the attack, and had even dined with the storekeeper, Edward Forrester.<sup>103</sup> Amicable relations with the storekeeper provide evidence that the attack was a departure from his previous plan. He tried to persuade Forrester to join his cause, but it was only when faced with a shortage of supplies and the additional grievance that the bounty represented that he chose to attack. The attack itself was bloodless; no harm came to Forrester as he surrendered his keys and the store to Bowles and his men. They immediately began to distribute weapons, munitions, and other sundries, totaling in excess of fifteen thousand dollars. Not all of Bowles's followers agreed with his decision to attack the Wakulla store. One member of his wife's family, Thomas Perryman, refused to participate, convinced that Bowles had gone too far attacking Panton, Leslie, and Company.<sup>104</sup> Thomas and Bowles did not speak again, a harbinger for the future of Bowles's new plan.

After capturing the Panton warehouse, Bowles supplied his men and reinforced his site on the Ochlocknee. He seized twenty-seven tons of deerskins, guns, various provisions, and three thousand pounds of gunpowder. He distributed the arms to his Creek warriors and sold the dry goods at a twenty-five percent discount from Panton's

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<sup>102</sup> David, *Dunmore's New World*, Loc. 3504.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 66.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

prices.<sup>105</sup> In addition to the small British contingent from Nassau, Spanish reports indicated there were two hundred Creek and Seminole warriors at the site, totaling well over two hundred men.<sup>106</sup> The size of his force, coupled with his weapons and munitions, deterred the Spanish garrison at Fort San Marcos and the remaining Panton employees from confronting Bowles. Taking the Panton store had secured the support of his Creek followers and strengthened his immediate position but at an incredible cost.

The consequences of the attack destroyed Spanish goodwill toward Bowles and his Creek supporters. They now considered Bowles a criminal. Guesy immediately dispatched twenty-three soldiers to capture the adventurer.<sup>107</sup> Upon finding Bowles, they discovered him with an armed group three times the size of the Spanish force. They halted and returned to Fort San Marcos empty-handed. Spanish reinforcements were not called for as the governor of New Orleans already sent a ship to the area before word of the attack had reached him. Bowles's decision to attack the Panton store proved costly although he did not realize it at the time. Up to that point, his operation in West Florida was surely a cause for suspicion by Spanish officials in Florida, but his support by the Creek protected him from arrest. The attack made him an immediate threat to the status quo of Panton, and Spanish officials in Pensacola and New Orleans could no longer tolerate his behavior.

In early February 1792, Carondelet dispatched a ship from New Orleans to prevent Bowles from trading with Nassau. Intelligence sources in Nassau warned Carondelet of a ship soon to depart, with Bowles on board, for the West Florida coast. Carondelet sent a heavily-armed schooner to the Apalache coast with orders to intercept the British merchant ship and, if possible, bring Bowles to New Orleans. Up to that point,

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<sup>105</sup> Wright, *William Augustus Bowles*, 65-70

<sup>106</sup> "Diary of events from the departure from New Orleans on the commission the Governor charged me with," hereafter abbreviated as Hevia Diary, February 15–18, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50. Hevia did not provide accurate dates for many events in his diary and in his letters. Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 48-49.

<sup>107</sup> Guesy to O'Neill, San Marcos de Apalache, January 30, 1792, AGS, SM, leg. 6916, exped. 10

Spanish officials, such as the Conde de Floridablanca, had been unclear as to how to proceed with Bowles. Carondelet, out of curiosity, wanted to meet with Bowles to assess the man himself. Hoping to entice Bowles into a meeting, Carondelet's offer read, "you can embark with all security on His Majesty's schooner *Galga*. Its commander is José de Hevia, captain of the New Orleans port, who has orders to treat you with distinction during the voyage to this city, where I anxiously await you."<sup>108</sup> Of course, he made this offer prior to learning of the attack, a crime he could not tolerate. Departing from New Orleans, Hevia's original orders were to reinforce Fort San Marcos and prevent the British merchant ship from reaching the Florida coast. If possible, he was to capture Bowles and bring him back to Carondelet in New Orleans. Upon reaching the Apalache Coast and learning of the attack, Hevia fully intended to capture Bowles.

The Spanish schooner, *Galga*, with Hevia and his men, arrived on February 18, 1792, nearly a month after Bowles's capture of Panton's warehouse. Upon arriving in the Apalache Bay, Hevia appraised the situation and developed a new plan to capture Bowles. First, he intended to carry reinforcements for Fort San Marcos. However, upon entering the bay, he learned of Bowles's reinforced position and thus developed a duplicitous plan. He would use the letter from Baron de Carondelet to lure Bowles to his ship or the fort and then seize him. Hevia sent a message to Bowles that Conde Floridablanca had answered his letter and directed Hevia to discuss trade issues with him. He added the two should meet at Fort San Marcos. If Bowles wished, he would even transport him back to New Orleans to speak with the governor. All Hevia needed now was for Bowles to fall for the ruse.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Carondelet to Bowles, New Orleans, February 2, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50. The lieutenant's name is spelled as both "Hevia" and "Evia."

<sup>109</sup> Hevia to Bowles, no. 4, on the *Galga* at the entrance to the Apalache River, February 22, 1792, attached to Hevia Diary, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

Bowles received Hevia's message and almost immediately went to confer with him unaware Hevia intended to arrest him. Hevia's offer flattered Bowles by playing to his ego and desire to be dealt with as a statesman representing Muscogee. Despite the attack, Bowles wanted Muscogee recognized by Spain. Hevia's lie about Floridablanca undoubtedly enticed the adventurer to leave the safety of his men. Beginning in 1789, Bowles wrote numerous letters to Floridablanca as part of his earlier plan to gain legitimacy for Muscogee.<sup>110</sup> Floridablanca was the key Spanish official to negotiate for an independent Creek state and Bowles believed Spain was finally treating him as a head of state. He responded to Hevia's message that he would meet with him at Fort San Marcos on the morning of February 24.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, Hevia unloaded his supplies and troops at the fort and deployed his own grenadiers and the armed schooner to strategic locations to prevent Bowles from escaping. Bowles set out for Fort San Marcos and what he imagined was the beginning of Muscogee.

Hevia watched as Bowles arrived across the river from the fort on February 25. Incredibly, Hevia estimated the size of the force accompanying Bowles at nearly one thousand men. He sent a message to Bowles inviting him into the fort accompanied by twenty of his followers. In an act of bravado and trust, Bowles brought only his four best warriors.<sup>112</sup> Upon Bowles's arrival at the fort, Hevia and Bowles ate lunch and began discussing Bowles's plans. Hevia lied to Bowles, telling him he agreed with many of Bowles's ideas, but lacked the authority to finalize any arrangements. Hevia offered to bring Bowles to New Orleans immediately and showed him Carondelet's letter. Bowles agreed but requested to return to his camp to prepare. Hevia insisted they must depart

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<sup>110</sup> Letter from Bowles to the Conde de Floridablanca, New Providence, August 30, 1789, *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Est., leg. 3889bis.

<sup>111</sup> Bowles to Hevia, no. 5, "From my camp," February 22, 1792, attached to Hevia Diary, in AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

<sup>112</sup> Bowles's stature and dress notably impressed Hevia, specifically his half-Indian, half-European garb.



immediately for fear Bowles would not return.<sup>113</sup> Bowles consented to stay. He dispatched his warriors back to camp with news of his imminent departure and instructions for his second in command.<sup>114</sup> Hevia's plan worked. He captured Bowles without a single shot fired.

Despite his instructions, Creek warriors waited for Bowles a short distance from Fort San Marcos and their continued presence alarmed the Spanish military officials. Guesy, the fort commander, estimated the number of warriors at over two hundred.<sup>115</sup> His own garrison numbered fewer than fifty men. He petitioned Hevia to station ten grenadiers to the fort. Hevia declined, insisting that he needed every soldier he had to deter the Indians from kidnapping his prisoner. On February 29, Hevia and Bowles sailed for New Orleans. As they made their way to the *Galga*, Bowles's Creek supporters pleaded with Hevia to release their leader, promising to return the stolen Panton merchandise. Hevia refused, and four days later, he arrived in New Orleans with his prisoner.<sup>116</sup>

New Orleans Governor Carondelet met with Bowles in New Orleans and treated him as a gentleman before shipping him to Havana. Intrigued is the best description to summarize Carondelet's impression of Bowles. In letters to Las Casas and Floridablanca, Carondelet described his meeting with Bowles. The governor noted Bowles's striking appearance and native attire but, for the sake of decency, he gave Bowles new clothes to cover the half-clothed man. Carondelet and Bowles discussed Spain's relationship with the Creeks, the trade monopoly of Panton and Company, Alexander McGillivray's poor leadership, and relations with the United States. Bowles

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<sup>113</sup> Hevia to Bowles, San Marcos de Apalache, February 24, 1792; Hevia Diary, February 25, 1792, attached to Hevia Diary, in AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

<sup>114</sup> Bowles's speech to the Indians, Fort San Marcos, February 29, 1792, AHN, Consejo, leg. 21067, no. 507.

<sup>115</sup> This number is down from the previous estimate of a thousand, which was most likely an exaggeration.

<sup>116</sup> Guesy to Hevia, San Marcos de Apalache, February 27, 1792, and Hevia to Guesy, San Marcos de Apalache, February 27, 1792, attached to Hevia Diary, in AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

passionately pleaded his Creek cause to Carondelet. Carondelet even conceded that the Panton company monopoly was problematic, but he would not condone direct British trade with the Creeks. Instead, he suggested an alternative to Bowles, free trade through the port of New Orleans. Despite Carondelet's proposal, Bowles demanded free trade for the Creeks and angered the governor. Carondelet treated Bowles with respect while in his custody but viewed the man as a threat to Spain's relationship with the Creeks and other Florida Indians.<sup>117</sup>

Carondelet recognized the threat Bowles posed to Spain's control of Florida Indians and shipped him to Havana. Carondelet sent Bowles and his observations of the entire situation to his immediate superior, the captain general of Cuba, Luis de Las Casas. Unlike the pleasant treatment shown by Hevia and Carondelet, Bowles's immediate jailing in the dungeons of El Morro Castle in Havana demonstrated the gravity of his situation. Bowles protested the conditions and demanded to meet with Las Casas, but the captain general refused to discuss Creek affairs with him. He declared Bowles's entire operation in Florida a criminal act against the Spanish Crown and denigrated him as nothing more than a renegade leader of an isolated band of thieves. Moreover, Las Casas charged Bowles with conspiring with the British government through the Bahamian governor, Lord Dunmore.<sup>118</sup> Fearing Bowles's escape and return to Florida, Las Casas shipped him to Cadiz, Spain, to stand trial for his crimes and marking the end of Bowles's third plan in Florida.

Bowles's plans from the first attempt in 1788, through his arrest in 1791, evolved through three unique phases. The last iteration of his plan was rash and ill-conceived. The bounty placed by William Panton and Bowles's lack of supplies led to his decision to

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<sup>117</sup> Carondelet to Las Casas, New Orleans, March 13, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50; Carondelet to Floridablanca, New Orleans, May 22, 1792, MPA, SD, vol. 4, ff. 121–33.

<sup>118</sup> Las Casas to Floridablanca, nos. 16 reserved and 18, March 28 and April 21, 1792, respectively, both in AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

modify the plan for Muscogee and capture the Panton, Leslie, and Company store. From the time of the attack his focus became two parts: establish Muscogee and supplant Panton, Leslie, and Company. The plan failed because it attacked Panton, Leslie, and Company, Spain's agent in the Indian trade. Bowles was hostile toward their beginning with his first plan in 1788 and complained often of the challenges posed by having only one supplier for the Indian trade in Florida. His attack of the Wakulla River store resulted in his plan's failure because it was an impulsive act with poor or no strategy.

Bowles built his previous plan for Muscogee on a strategy to avoid direct confrontation with the Spanish in Florida. However, his attack against Panton, Leslie, and Company was indirectly an attack on Spain. Panton, Leslie, and Company was Spain's representative in the Florida Indian trade. Bowles's letters often mention the problem posed by the limited trade monopoly held by William Panton and his associates. Any action against Panton's company was an action against the limited trade opportunities of the Creek. His first plan in 1788 was partially a failure due to the incident when he debated about which Panton, Leslie, and Company store in East Florida to attack. Just as the indecision in 1788 showed a lack of strategy, attacking the store in 1792 was reactionary, not strategic. This attack was an act of violence that Spanish officials could not ignore. Prior to the attack, Bowles was mere an annoyance and a threat to the Spanish, but a threat unrealized. He was now a danger to the existing relationship between the Creek and Spain through Panton, Leslie, and Company. Bowles's capture was further proof that he replaced his near complete lack of strategy with ego and reaction. Bowles's ego prompted him to attack the Panton store over the bounty and to walk into Hevia's trap without resistance. He rightly viewed the bounty as a personal attack, but his decision to attack the Panton store immediately, rather than pursue other options, demonstrated poor planning. Similarly, his decision to walk into Hevia's camp without any support from the numerous Creek warriors at his command

was poor strategy at best and an act of ego at worst. This third iteration of his plan against Panton, Leslie, and Company was a return to the original jealousy and emotion that prompted his first plan in 1788 but still an attack against the limited trade arrangement forced upon the Creek by Spain. Just as with the first plan, this resulted in failure. Although unsuccessful, Bowles's plans were far from complete. He continued to espouse his ideas about a free Creek state to anyone who listened. Even from jail, Bowles began to plot his return to Florida.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Bowles's 1791-1792 rebellion lasted a little more than four months. Following his imprisonment in Havana, on April 24, he began the six-week journey aboard the Frigate *Misisipí* to stand trial in Cadiz. During his time on the ship, he was given free movement and was accompanied by a very important passenger, the former Governor of Louisiana, Esteban Miró. Miró convinced Bowles to write an autobiography. Miro translated the autobiography and added his own impressions of the adventurer. In his narrative, Bowles continued to claim his role as the leader of the Creek nation and the need for the Creek people to trade freely. Miró's added notes described Bowles as affable and intelligent.<sup>119</sup> Miró forwarded this account onto Madrid when the ship arrived in Cadiz on June 18.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, Bowles was held in the city's royal prison as he awaited trial.

News of Bowles's attack on the Panton store and subsequent arrest arrived in Spain before Bowles himself did. The governors of East and West Florida, New Orleans, Havana, and the London ambassador all forwarded their files about Bowles to Spain.<sup>121</sup> The Council of State reviewed the information on Bowles, and on June 25, King Carlos IV gathered his ministers to discuss their prisoner. The king directed the Conde de Aranda to review the documents and determine Bowles's sentence.<sup>122</sup> All were unaware Bowles had already arrived in Spain.

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<sup>119</sup> "Bowles's autobiography," on board the frigate *Misisipí*, May 26, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

<sup>120</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 56.

<sup>121</sup> Campo de Alange to the Conde Aranda, Aranjuez, May 4, 1792; and Aranda to Campo de Alange, Aranjuez, May 24, 1792, both in AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

<sup>122</sup> Council of State, Aranjuez, June 25, 1792, Carlos IV et al; and royal order to Aranda, Aranjuez, June 26, 1792, both in AGS, GM leg. 6916, exped. 50.

Over the months that followed, Aranda interrogated Bowles in Madrid before deciding his fate. Ultimately, Aranda concluded Spain could not execute Bowles without potentially upsetting the British.<sup>123</sup> Bowles remained imprisoned for nearly a year before the Council of State decided to incarcerate him permanently in the Philippines. Shipped to Manila, Bowles arrived in November 1794. However, his stay was short-lived. Within two years, he had been shipped from the islands for defiance of orders, and was to be returned to Madrid for further sentencing. Incredibly, Bowles escaped Spanish custody en route to Spain, ending up in London at the end of 1798. Before long, Bowles was making yet another plan for Florida using the renewed conflict with Spain in 1796 as justification for support. He had waited six years and traveled halfway around the world to formulate yet another plan in Florida. He returned to Florida one more time and in 1800 launched another rebellion. It would be his last attempt before his final capture and death in Havana in 1803.

Bowles's earlier plans were unified by a desire to create a free trade opportunity for the Creek. His first attempt in 1788 was a simple attempt to bring manufactured goods and weapons from Nassau to Florida. It ended in failure following the desertion of his British supporters in East Florida. Bowles's strategy was rushed and failed to capitalize on Creek support in West Florida. His second attempt was grander and far better planned. From 1788 to 1791, he attempted to gather official support for a sovereign Creek state, Muscogee, in West Florida. He traveled to London, and although he did not receive official support from Crown, he gained the tacit approval for his operation through permission from Lord Grenville for Creek ships to trade in Nassau. Furthermore, he tried to convince the Spanish Ambassador in London that allowing the Creek to establish their own ports along the Florida coast would benefit Spain. While

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<sup>123</sup> Secretary of the Council of the Indies, Madrid, September 22, 1792, AHN, ESt., leg. 3889bis, exped. 10, no. 44.

unsuccessful in gaining Spanish permission, he used Grenville's tacit approval of the Creek state to gain additional Creek support at the Coweta conference in 1791 and began construction of the ports in West Florida. This second plan was underway when Bowles effectively abandoned his plan and attacked the Panton, Leslie, and Company store on the Wakulla River. This marked a third version of his plan. Panton, Leslie, and Company was Spain's single licensed agent in the Florida Indian trade. Bowles's third plan sought to remove them from competition. It was a rash strategy motivated by Bowles's personal outrage over the bounty placed by William Panton for Bowles's capture. While the Panton, Leslie, and Company was the main target of Bowles, it was not his sole intention to break them. This was an attack on Spain's commercial agent in Florida and by extension an attack on Spain itself. Consequently, Spain subsequently captured Bowles and removed him from Florida. During each plan, Bowles used the opportunities available to him.

Other scholars have characterized Bowles's early plans as malicious or as the creation of a British-protected, multi-ethnic community. Din's characterization of Bowles as the "malicious interloper" is overly aggressive and does not account for his consistent motivation of free trade.<sup>124</sup> Instead, he argues Bowles intended to destabilize Spanish control of Florida and doubts the level of Creek support for the operations. Conversely, Wright and Jasanoff both overestimate his Creek support and simplify his actions as those of a British loyalist.<sup>125</sup> Neither of these interpretations accounts for Bowles's own accounts that focus on free trade. His letters from the period consistently reference free trade. This trade would benefit the British in Nassau, and while Bowles never disavows his British citizenship, he writes almost exclusively about the benefit this trade would provide to the Creek. As he attempted to gather British support in 1791 while in London,

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<sup>124</sup> Din, *War on the Gulf Coast*, 228-229

<sup>125</sup> Wright *William Augustus Bowles*, 13; Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles*, 241-242.

he used the backdrop of the Nootka Sound Controversy between Spain and Britain as a reason for British support. His letters during this period clearly indicate his British sympathies and are at times openly hostile toward Spain, its control of Florida, and Spain's agent, Panton, Leslie and Company. However, threaded in every argument he makes to both the British and Spanish Crowns is advocacy for Creek trade. This is what other interpretations of Bowles's attempted plans between 1788 and 1792 overlook. Bowles's actions are not simply British loyalism or an attack on Spain. Rather his various plans in Florida underwent an evolution as circumstances in Florida and the Atlantic changed. Each plan failed for different reasons; regardless, William Augustus Bowles was a consistent advocate of free trade for the Creek.



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