THE LEWIS SETTLEMENT
ON NEW RIVER
A Newly-Discovered Document

Richard K. Murdoch's article, "Documents Concerning a Voyage to the Miami Region in 1793," appearing in the Florida Historical Quarterly in 1952, and reprinted in volume 3, numbers 3 & 4 of the Broward Legacy, assembled several documents describing a Spanish reconnaissance of New River. This expedition was dispatched from St. Augustine by the Spanish Governor of East Florida, Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada, to investigate the reported presence of the Bahamian Lewis family on the river. The Lewis homestead, carefully described in the Spanish reports, was the earliest known non-Indian settlement in what is today Broward County.

The following document, which pre-dates those printed in Murdoch's article, consists of Quesada's preliminary report to his superior, Don Luis de Las Casas, Captain General of Cuba, discussing the whereabouts of the Lewis family, its status under Spanish territorial policy, and the possibility of seizing Lewis. It is here that Quesada states his intention of sending the expedition which Murdoch's article describes. The original English translation of this document is located in the papers of Richard Keith Call, territorial governor of Florida, in the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

To The Most Excellent Don Luis de Las Casas

From the Governor of Florida to the Captain General of Cuba
St. Augustine, January 13th 1793.

Most Excellent Sir — I received your Excellency's letter of the 3rd. inst. — The Englishman Sarles Lewis does not as stated in your letter of November 8th last reside on the river Gega which is at least 15 leagues South of the ym, and scarcely deserves to be called a river being merely a body of stagnant water never communicating with the sea unless after a long series of heavy rains. Lewis's establishment is on the Rio Nuevo (New River) at the mouth of which in November last was seen the Bilandre (small vessel) of which I spoke to your Excellency in my dispatch No. 302 dated September 26th, 1791 —

You ask whether Lewis dwells on our territory or on the Indian — according to the Treaty of limits concluded in 1765 between the English and Indians, by which I think we should be guided, the latter ceded to the former, not only the territory contained between the Sea and the bend of the San Juan, and that between the other view and the Santa Maria, but also the whole coast of the Peninsula as far up as the tide flows, that is to say, up to the point where the salt water meets the fresh in the rivers. Now Lewis lived 15 miles from the Sea, and the salt water reaches at the farthest only eleven; from which it would appear that this establishment was in the Indian country. But by reference to a map now before me, I find that it is situated between the Sea, and the Lake of Mayaco which certainly forms part of the San Juan; there is more over an opinion which was held by the English that the waters of the said Lake emptied themselves into the Gulf of Mexico in the Bay of Juan Ponce de Leon —

As to the effect that the seizure of Lewis would have on the Indians my own opinion is that, at first it would excite some clamor which would however gradually subside just as it did when I seized Bowles who certainly had much more influence over them than Lewis. It would however be better to treat privately beforehand with the principal chiefs of the Nation who might easily be induced by means of bribes not only to connive at it but even to deliver him up themselves.

I have some thoughts of sending a small vessel with proper persons on board who under pretence of hunting or watering may make inquiries and obtain an account of the exact state of things. I have however no intention of proceeding farther until I hear from your Excellency who Heaven preserve. To The Most Excellent Don Luis de Las Casas.

Endnotes

1. Don Luis de Las Casas was appointed Captain-General of Cuba, with headquarters in Havana, in 1790. During the second Spanish occupation of Florida, the governor of the colony of East Florida reported directly to the captain-general of Cuba.
2. Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada served as Governor of Spanish East Florida from 1790 to 1796.
3. The first name of the head of New River's Lewis family has been spelled Sarles, Sarile, Charles, and other variations in contemporary documents.
4. The river Gega, also spelled Jegia, Jaga, Gega, and Jeaga, appears on eighteenth century Spanish maps in the vicinity of today's Jupiter Inlet. As early as the sixteenth century, the name was applied to the Indians who lived between the Atlantic Ocean and the eastern shore of Lake Okeechobee. The name may also be related to "Jobe" or "Jove," designations for the same general region which also appear on early Spanish maps and from which are derived the English place names "Jupiter" and "Hobe Sound." The placement of the Gega to the south of the "Jobe" (Jupiter) Inlet on several Spanish maps, and Quesada's statement here of its "never communicating with the sea unless after a long series of heavy rains," indicate that it may describe Lake Worth.
5. "Ym" appears to be a variation of Yoa or Ais, a name given by the Spanish to the Indians who lived along the Indian River, and to an inlet connecting that river to the sea, probably near the present site of Fort Pierce.
6. The "Treaty of Limits" refers to the treaty signed November 18, 1765, at Picolata on the St. Johns River by James Grant, British Governor of East Florida, John Staart, British Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern District, and a number of Creek Indian leaders. The treaty defined British and Indian territory in East Florida.
7. The St. Johns River.
8. The St. Marys River.
9. This statement is clearly an exaggeration, since the Lewisie resided on the south bank of New River near today's William H. Marshall Bridge at Fourth and
Seventh avenues in Fort Lauderdale. Although the New River Inlet was, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, located at the approximate site of Sheridan Street in Hollywood, the distance up the river from the inlet to the Lewis home still only amounted to about eight miles.

10. The "Lake of Mayaro" here refers to Lake Okeechobee. At least as the 1820s, several maps depicted Lake Okeechobee as the source of the St. Johns River.

11. Some eighteenth and early nineteenth century maps show a variety of rivers running through southwest Florida from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf. Actually, the numerous rivers emptying into Ponce de Leon Bay are relatively short and have their source in the Everglades.

12. William Augustus Bowles, the Maryland-born adventurer who landed in Florida in 1788 and attempted to establish a sovereign nation among the Creek Indians there, had some connections to the Lewis settlement on New River. Bowles had given horses to Charles (or Charles Lewis, and Joseph Robinson, who lived at the Lewis home in 1789, was described as one of Bowles' "principal confidants." These connections, and the possibility that Lewis may have come to Florida with Bowles explain the Spaniards' concern at Lewis's presence in the otherwise remote and isolated New River country.

13. Quassia followed through with his intention, dispatching the schooner Juan Nepomuceno to New River on February 23. The schooner arrived at New River Inlet on March 9, crossed the bar and proceeded up the river the following day. For an account of this expedition and their findings at New River, see Richard K. Manahan, "Documents Concerning a Voyage to the Miami Region in 1793," Broward Legacy, vol. 3, Nos. 3 & 4 (Fall 1979), 32-37.

Back cover:

Broward County pioneer citizens and dignitaries gathered at the bandshell in Fort Lauderdale's Stranahan Park as part of the "River Revelry" celebration commemorating the city's twentieth anniversary, March 4, 1931. Left to right: Eva Bryan Oliver, Frank R. Oliver, Susie Bryan Craig, William J. "Cap" Reed, unidentified, Lucian Craig, A. D. Marshall, C. J. Coyle, unidentified, Walter R. Clark, Col. George G. Mathews, John Dent Kennedy, unidentified, Sam Drake, Margaret Oliver, W. O. Berryhill, George McQuarrie, B. A. Cromartie, Reed A. Bryan, unidentified, Ivy Stranahan, Frank A. Bryan, Beverly McQuarrie, Tom M. Bryan. Walter Clark and Margaret Oliver are dressed in costumes and seated on thrones as "King" and "Queen" of the event, in recognition of being considered the first white children born in Fort Lauderdale.