

Historic Spotlight– Sir Nathaniel Johnson

By Margaret Middleton Rivers Eastman

Thanks to Dr. Henry Woodward's early explorations, English explorers and traders from Carolina established a trading network that extended to the Mississippi River. The French and Spanish were also vying for this vast wilderness, and war broke out in 1702. When notification of hostilities arrived in Charles Town, the Assembly voted to send an expedition to capture Spanish-controlled St. Augustine. Governor James Moore led a force that burned the town but did not take the Castillo before reinforcements forced the Carolinians to withdraw. Unfortunately, the campaign did not eliminate the Spanish threat, and Moore resigned.

Sir Nathaniel Johnson replaced Governor Moore. Johnson had been in the British army and a Member of Parliament. As a follower of the Stuarts, in 1686 he was rewarded with knighthood and appointed governor of the Leeward Islands. He was removed from office for refusing to take oaths of allegiance to William and Mary after James II was deposed. In 1689 Johnson retired to Carolina and pioneered in the silk culture.

In 1702 the Lords Proprietors commissioned him governor of Carolina, and he took office in 1703. Johnson was popular because of his military experience. He strengthened the town's bastions, built a fort on James Island (now Fort Johnson), reorganized the militia, and stationed a guard on Sullivan's Island. In 1706 he outfitted a privateer to cruise near Havana to bring word of approaching hostile ships. In August the privateer rushed back with news of five vessels carrying French and Spanish soldiers.

Before the militia was fully assembled, smoke signals on Sullivan's Island warned of the approaching fleet. The enemy crossed the bar, but turned back when they saw armed fortifications. They sent an emissary under a flag of truce. He was tricked into believing the town was heavily fortified by being blindfolded and taken from bastion to bastion to see assembled men at arms. The envoy did not realize that they had been rushed through alleys to appear again in the next bastion. When the emissary demanded surrender, Johnson refused.

Thinking the town could repel a frontal assault, the French sent out marauding parties. On James Island friendly Indians had been organized and rushed screaming through the woods, causing the invaders to flee. Those on Wando Neck had not posted a guard, and many were killed or taken prisoner as they fled. Another ship was surprised in Sewee Bay. Finally, the French commander offered a ransom of ten thousand pieces of eight and sailed away, leaving 230 prisoners behind. Colonists were overjoyed that their honor had been restored after the failed St. Augustine campaign.

Governor Johnson was also a High Church Anglican. His support of Church of England settlers resulted in the Exclusion Act of 1705, and the Church Acts of 1704 and 1706. His uncompromising intolerance of Dissenters caused such a riotous condition that his powerful enemies were able to have him removed from office in 1709. Johnson retired to Silk Hope, his plantation on the Cooper River. He died in 1713.

