

AN ENGLISH 'FRIAR' FROM ST. KITTS IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, 1663

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The XVII Century marks the beginning of English and French colonization in the Lesser Antilles. This situation turned the Island of Puerto Rico into a frontier between the world of the Spaniards and that of their European enemies. The strategic position of the Island made for frequent attacks by French and English corsairs. Since the previous century, Puerto Rico had been converted into a military stronghold, a bastion for the defense of the Caribbean, and from it were launched the various military expeditions which attempted, unsuccessfully, to dislodge the English and French from their possessions in the Lesser Antilles.

An interesting episode in this struggle began on 4 March 1663, when an Englishman arrived in San Juan. He had landed on the east coast of Puerto Rico, at a place known as Buenavista, facing Vieques Island. The Englishman was brought to the capital city by a resident (*vecino*) of Caguas.¹

The arrival of this Englishman caused a great stir, he being brought before the governor and captain-general of the Island, Don Juan Pérez de Guzmán, who submitted him to intense questioning in order to learn of the causes and reasons for his unexpected visit.

The Englishman informed the governor that he brought matters of 'great importance to the service of the King of Spain', and explained that the purpose of his visit was to bring a message from Guillermo Guast (William Watts), English governor of St. Christopher's (St. Kitts). The governor of St. Christopher's commanded it to be told the governor of Puerto Rico that he was disposed to send, every year, 'five hundred or a thousand pieces of Blacks and such additional merchandise . . . as may be within his power', in exchange for silver or produce from the land. The recent arrival brought also another message from the English governor of St. Kitts, giving account of his intention to invade and settle the island of Vieques. This announcement filled the Spanish governor with consternation, because, as he wrote his King, said Island was 'only three leagues' distant, and so near to Puerto Rico, 'it would be a great detriment as in small craft they can come and sack the plantations in those places (near to Vieques) and cause us all the evil and harm which they may wish to without our being able to remedy it.'

During the interrogation to which the Englishman was submitted, he declared to have been born in London 52 years since, 'more or less', and that he was a Catholic, Apostolic and Roman. According to him, his name was not

¹General Archives of the Indies, Seville; *Audiencia* of Santo Domingo, *Legajo* 157, *Ramo* 3.

Alejandro de Castro, a name which he used for fear of the English Protestants, but rather Fray Pedro Martín (Friar Peter Martin), a friar of the Dominican Order, and he had entered the order in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, of whose monastery he had been a teacher.

When asked to present 'papers and patents of his order', the Englishman stated that he bore none, as he came from England and carried no identification 'because of the risk to his life if it were known by any . . . that he were Catholic.' The supposed friar gave testimony that he had left London only four months before, with a Catholic family aboard a merchant ship that reached Antigua. According to him, from St. Christopher's he went to the Island of Santa Cruz and thence to Puerto Rico. He had sailed among the islands in a war frigate 'of twenty-six pieces of iron and bronze', whose name he did not know. The frigate belonged to the English Prince Rupert, and the surname of her captain was Freus (?), who had a complement of 50 men. According to the Englishman, Prince Rupert at the time was in the court in London, but he had sent the frigate to know the whereabouts of his brother, Prince Maurice, and to discover whether he was held prisoner in Puerto Rico, or any other news about him.

The supposed friar also related that the frigate had been to the Island of San Juan (St. John), and that the English had taken possession of it and 'raised banners in the name of the King of England.' According to him, 'the principal aim was to come and settle the Island of Bieque', but the English have been unable to do it, 'as they lack the people they had prepared for it', because of which they will wait two or three months to carry out their design.

The Spanish governor used this opportunity to ask the Englishman about the forces which the King of England had deployed in Europe, and the Englishman said 'more than 200 ships and many people'. The interrogation also extended to the English forces on the islands of Jamaica and Barbados. According to the 'friar', the participation of the governor of Jamaica in the recent invasion of Cuba was done without authorization from the King of England. He said that in Jamaica there were many English and that 'having made a town by the sea shore they make another at the old site'. He informed also of having heard that 'they have fortified her very well as they want her to be their headquarters (*plaza de armas*) in these parts.'

When referring to the Island of Barbados, he said to have 'notice of a trustworthy person that more than six thousand men could be taken from her without their lack being felt on said Island.' He said also that at present there were fifty merchant ships in her harbor due to the great commerce she enjoyed.

When asked how he proposed to return to the English, he said that the governor of (French) Santa Cruz informed him that a sloop (*balandra*) would come to the port for him. When asked why, if he were a friar, he appeared now 'dressed as a soldier with a walking-stick in hand', the Englishman repeated that his true

name was Fray Pedro Martín (Friar Peter Martin) and referred to his earlier depositions that explained the reasons for which he hid his true identity.

On 31 May, the governor of Puerto Rico, Juan Pérez de Guzmán, wrote to his King giving an account of these events and the result of his interrogation of the Englishman, and informed him that he had sent a small vessel to reconnoiter the Island of Vieques and discover if it had been occupied by the English. He also reported that, with regard to the Englishman, 'I had him put in jail because his dress is that of a soldier, with a walking-stick in hand, and because he came as a spy and to gather news to our detriment. . . .' Finally, governor Pérez de Guzmán sent the supposed friar as a prisoner to Spain, to the *Casa de Contratación*, for the King to 'do as befits his royal service.'

On 11 August, the court's attorney, upon receiving the letter from the governor of Puerto Rico, ordered that the Englishman 'be brought to the (jail) at court', and that the governor of Puerto Rico be written so that he 'take great care that the English do not come to the Island of Bieque, and have great care for the safety of that fortified city (*plaza*) and its holdings (*puesto*).

The documents do not tell us what was the fate of the supposed friar, but Vieques Island continued to be the goal of English ambitions, as some centuries later it would still be that of their American descendants.

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