

Spanish Invasions ^[1]

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by David Stick and Robert J. Cain, 2006

Spanish invasions of the North Carolina coast in the 1740s were an offshoot of a series of disputes between England and Spain, beginning with the War of Jenkins' Ear ^[2] (1739-42), in which the American colonies were unwitting participants. The hostilities began in late April 1741, when two Spanish privateers ^[3], one of them a high stern black sloop with about 100 men on board, appeared off the Outer Banks ^[4]. By early May they had captured six vessels, including two registered in Edenton ^[5] and another in Pasquotank.

Emboldened by this success, the Spaniards moved ashore at Ocracoke, building a tent town and establishing a base of operations from which they were able to control the movement of ships through Ocracoke Inlet and harass vessels sailing along the coast. In the process they burned several houses and destroyed great numbers of cattle on the coast in addition to fitting out several smaller vessels for operations in the sounds. Finally, in August, North Carolina merchants and shipowners joined together and fitted out the letter-of-marque ship *William* with a crew of 100 men and a small schooner with which to engage the Spaniards. When the *William* and its consort reached Ocracoke Inlet, the Spaniards abandoned their tent camp and left the coast.

As the War of Jenkins' Ear wore down, the Spanish privateers continued their periodic raids through the spring of 1742. Hardly had that ended, however, when the English and Spanish were fighting again, this time in King George's War. This conflict, known in Europe as the War of the Austrian Succession, eventually pitted Great Britain, Austria, and the Netherlands against Prussia, France, and Spain. It was fought principally in Europe, but there were several sizable campaigns in the Americas. Four companies of North Carolina volunteers totaling about 400 troops were part of a 3,600-man force of Americans under Governor William Gooch of Virginia.

In the summer of 1747 several small Spanish vessels "came creeping along the shore from St. Augustine full of armed men, mostly mulattos and negros" and made a series of landings on the coast at Ocracoke, Core Sound, Bear Inlet, and Cape Fear ^[6], "where they killed several of his Majesty's subjects, burned some ships and several small vessels, carried off some negros, and slaughtered a vast number of black cattle and hogs ^[7]." Before leaving the Carolina coast they also captured the town and port of Beaufort, despite the defensive efforts of the local militia ^[8]. In the process, ten Spanish prisoners were taken, and the invaders abandoned the town after only a few days of occupation.

The final Spanish attack, early in the fall of 1748, was launched against Brunswick ^[9] and resulted in the invaders' brief occupation of the town. Meanwhile, during the fighting taking place on the Cape Fear River ^[10] opposite Brunswick, one of the Spanish vessels, the *Fortuna*, caught fire and blew up. Though all of its officers were killed, several sailors were taken prisoner. When the other Spanish ships sailed down the river to Smith Island, they sent back a flag of truce. A prisoner exchange was arranged, marking the end of the Spanish invasions of the North Carolina coast.

References:

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Origin - location:

Coastal Plain ^[18]

From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[19]

1 January 2006 | Cain, Robert J.; Stick, David

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