

# The Minorcans

by Eleanor Philips Barnes

In 1949, Eleanor Philips Barnes presented "The Story of the Minorcans" to the St. Augustine Historical Society. This is an excerpt from that history.

You have read about St. Augustine's history as a city. Strangely enough, one of the strongest influences upon its social life is the story of the Minorcan people who formed such an important part in one chapter of Florida's history.

In 1763, after England took over Florida, nearly all the Spanish residents fled to Cuba. Dr. Andrew Turnbull, a Scottish physician and the former British Consul at Smyrna, Turkey (now known as Izmir) in the Levant (countries bordering on the eastern Mediterranean), was granted several thousand acres of land in Florida. Dr. Turnbull formed a land company and came to Florida to select the site of the proposed colony. After many months, he decided upon a site about 70 miles south of St. Augustine and called it Smyrna. Hopes ran high for a successful venture. It was proposed that the colony undertake the raising of cotton and olives and the making of wine and silks. Dr. Turnbull then returned to Europe to complete plans for the colonization.

Dr. Turnbull first recruited one hundred and ten Italians as colonists. He took them to the port of Mahón on the isle of Minorca, the second largest island of the Balearic group in the Mediterranean. He then sailed to the port city of Smyrna, and the surrounding Levant to collect several hundred Greeks. Upon his return to Minorca months later, he found that nearly all his Italians had married lovely Minorcan girls. Now, the families of those girls were appealing to be included in the proposed British Colony. The Minorcans were excellent material as their stock, mostly Roman and Latin, was descended from the famous Carthaginians. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of April in 1768, 1403 Italians, Minorcans, Greeks and a few Frenchmen set sail in 8 ships for America. This was the largest colonial group ever to cross the Atlantic up to that time. Thus, on the banks of the ninth Inlet, the colony of Mahonese had its beginning.

The Minorcans' contract with the British colonizers came under the Indentured Servant Law. Each was to serve from 6 to 8 years and some were to receive compensation. All were to be freed and receive 50

acres of land plus five acres for each child at the end of the indenture period.

Because the colonists were mainly Catholic, they were accompanied by a priest. He was the 38 year old Father Pedro Camps of San Martin de Mercadel in Minorca. It was this saintly man who was to insure the Minorcans' place in St. Augustine history by his firm but gentle hold upon his people. He painstakingly recording of baptisms and marriages that form the background for the many family histories that are being recorded. He also did much to keep peace within the colony.

"Les Mesquites," as the colony was called, came to a bitter end in 1777. No one knows precisely what straw of misfortune finally caused the colonists to lose their patience. In the face of all adversity, the colony of the Mahonese had lasted nine years. Scorching heat, disease, death, menacing Indians, inadequate shelter, improper food, insufficient clothing, and cruel treatment made the Minorcans' dream an unendurable reality. In July 1777, almost all of the colony came "en masse" to British Augustine. In the fall of the year, Father Camps led the rest of the group to the safety and peace of St. Augustine. It had been three months of anxiety for the good Father. He had been torn between the urge to administer to the flock preceding him and his zeal to comfort the aged and infirm left behind in his charge.

The Minorcans rejoiced when Spain regained St. Augustine in 1783. They were very much at home among their Latin cousins and soon learned to laugh and play once more. They intermarried with the Spanish families and those of the English who had remained. Within three generations, the story of the Minorcans was almost a forgotten legend. But let it always be remembered by the student of Historical romance, that in the veins of nearly all native St. Augustine families runs the blood of the Minorcans. They were those proud, courageous people whose story reads like a chapter from the Arabian Nights.