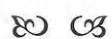


AMERICAN JOURNEYS COLLECTION



Letter of
Don Diego de Molina,
1613

DOCUMENT NO. AJ-077



WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DIGITAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES



|| www.americanjourneys.org || www.wisconsinhistory.org ||
© Wisconsin Historical Society 2003

Letter of
Don Diego de Molina,
1613

C O N T E N T S

Introduction	217
Urges the Spanish King to destroy the Colony promptly	218
Dangers which may be expected	219
Condition of the English settlements.....	220
Chesapeake Bay described.....	222
Forts in Virginia.....	223

AMERICAN JOURNEYS COLLECTION

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DIGITAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

INTRODUCTION

THE history of early Virginia has not only its domestic phases, but it is also interwoven to some extent with that of Spain and France. English colonization had its origin in rivalry with Spain; and the early proceedings of the Jamestown colony were beset with Spanish intrigue, and embarrassed by apprehensions of Spanish interference. In 1611 a Spanish caravel, sent by the king of Spain to spy out the conditions of things among the English in Virginia, appeared in James River. Three persons went ashore at Point Comfort to ask for a pilot — Don Diego de Molina, Marco Antonio, and Francisco Lembri. They were arrested and kept prisoners in Virginia. After several months Antonio died; and, in 1616, to satisfy the complaints of the Spanish, the two surviving spies were embarked with Dale for Europe. On the way over, Dale found out that Lembri was an Englishman, and was therefore a traitor as well as a spy, and hung him. Restored to his own country, Molina is reported, in 1618, as inciting the king of Spain to send troops to Virginia, “because of a silver mine there, from which he shows a piece to justify the truth thereof.” The letter below must have been addressed to Don Alonzo de Velasco, who was Spanish ambassador at London from 1610 to 1613. It was translated for Dr. Alexander Brown and published in the *Genesis of the United States*, pp. 646–652. Our text is, however, a fresh translation from the Spanish. The original holographic letter is in the archives of Spain at Simancas.¹ Smith gives some account of the episode in his *Generall Historie*, Book iv.; see p. 320, *infra*.

L. G. T.

¹ Secretaría de Estado, *legajo* 2590, folio 47. Dr. Brown's transcript is in the Lenox Library.

LETTER OF DON DIEGO DE
MOLINA, 1613

THE person who will give this to Your Lordship is very trustworthy and Your Lordship can give credence to everything he will say, so I will not be prolix in this but will tell in it what is most important. Although with my capture and the extraordinary occurrences following it His Majesty will have opened his eyes and seen this new Algiers of America, which is coming into existence here, I do not wonder that in all this time he has not remedied it because to effect the release would require an expedition, particularly as he lacks full information for making a decision. However I believe that with the aid of Your Lordship's intelligence and with the coming of the caravel¹ to Spain, His Majesty will have been able to determine what is most important and that that is to stop the progress of a hydra in its infancy, because it is clear that its intention is to grow and encompass the destruction of all the West, as well by sea as by land and that great results will follow I do not doubt, because the advantages of this place make it very suitable for a gathering-place of all the pirates of Europe, where they will be well received. For this nation has great thoughts of an alliance with them. And this nation by itself will be very powerful because as soon as an abundance of wheat shall have been planted and there shall be enough cattle, there will not be a man of any sort whatever who will not alone or in company with others fit out a ship to come here and join the rest, because as Your Lordship knows this Kingdom abounds in poor people who abhor peace — and of necessity because in

¹ *I.e.*, the caravel from which Molina had incautiously gone ashore at Point Comfort.

peace they perish — and the rich are so greedy and selfish that they even cherish a desire for the Indies and the gold and silver there — notwithstanding that there will not be much lack of these here, for they have discovered some mines which are considered good, although they have not yet been able to derive profit from them. But when once the preliminary steps are taken there are many indications that they will find a large number in the mountains. So the Indians say and they offer to show the locations that they know and they say that near the sources of the rivers, as they come down from the mountain, there is a great quantity of grains of silver and gold, but, as they do not set any value on these but only on copper which they esteem highly, they do not gather them.

As yet these men have not been able to go to discover these although they greatly desire it, nor to pass over this range to New Mexico and from there to the South Sea where they expect to establish great colonies and fit out fleets with which to become lords of that sea as well as of this, by colonizing certain islands among those to the east of the channel of Bahama and even to conquer others, as Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo and Cuba.¹ And although this would be difficult at the least, we have already seen signs of these purposes in the colonizing of Bermuda where they are said to have strong fortifications, because the lay of the land is such that a few can defend themselves against a great number and prevent disembarking and landing.² The depth as I have understood is not enough for ships of a hundred tons, but I believe that they make it out less than it is, for that island has already been described in the relation of Captain Diego Ramirez who was stranded there, and it seems to me that larger vessels can enter. I do not recall it well but the description is in the house of Don Rodrigo de Aguiar of the Council of the Indies and the

¹This expectation came true in the course of years. The Bahama Islands belong to England, Porto Rico belongs to the United States, — a product of the Virginia settlement, — and Cuba is under American influence.

²The present English fortress at Bermuda is considered one of the strongest in the world.

register is in Seville in the house of the licentiate Antonio Moreno, cosmographer of the Council. But above all this captain will give enough information of the island, and it is very important for the military actions which may have to take place in it. Its fertility is great, there is abundance of fish and game, and pork as much as they can want, and so they get along very well in that colony because they have little need of England, for they are likewise rich in amber and pearl of which in a very few months it is said they have sent to that kingdom more than fifty thousand ducats in value, reckoning the ounce at a moderate price. Four days ago a vessel arrived here that brought them men and provisions and they do not cease talking of the excellence of that island and its advantages.

The soil in this place is very fertile for all species, only not for those which require much heat, because it is cold. There is much game and fish, but as they have not begun to get profit from the mines, but only from timber, the merchants have not been able to maintain this colony with as much liberality as was needed and so the people have suffered much want, living on miserable rations of oats or maize and dressing poorly. For which reason, if today three hundred men should come, this same year would destroy more than one hundred and fifty, and there is not a year when half do not die. Last year there were seven hundred people and not three hundred and fifty remain, because little food and much labor on public works kills them and, more than all, the discontent in which they live seeing themselves treated as slaves with cruelty.¹ Wherefore many have gone over to the Indians, at whose hands some have been killed, while others have gone out to sea, being sent to fish, and those who remain have become violent and are desirous that a fleet should come from Spain to take them out of their misery. Wherefore they cry to God of the injury that they receive and they appeal to His Majesty in whom they

¹ This is a strong confirmation of the terrible indictment by the colonists of the cruel experiences under Gates and Dale. See the *Breife Declaration*, and the *Tragicall Relation*, *post*.

have great confidence, and should a fleet come to give them passage to that kingdom, not a single person would take up arms.¹ Sooner would they forfeit their respect and obedience to their rulers who think to maintain this place till death.

And although it is understood there that the merchants² are deserting this colony, this is false for it is a stratagem with which they think to render His Majesty careless, giving him to understand that this affair will settle itself, and that thus he will not need to go to the expense of any fleet whatever to come here. With eight hundred or one thousand soldiers he could reduce this place with great ease, or even with five hundred, because there is no expectation of aid from England for resistance and the forts which they have are of boards and so weak that a kick would break them down, and once arrived at the ramparts those without would have the advantage over those within because its beams and loopholes are common to both parts — a fortification without skill and made by unskilled men. Nor are they efficient soldiers, although the rulers and captains make a great profession of this because of the time they have served in Flanders on the side of Holland, where some have companies and castles. The men are poorly drilled and not prepared for military action.

However they have placed their hope on one of two settlements, one which they have founded twenty leagues up the river in a bend on a rugged peninsula³ with a narrow entrance by land and they are persuaded that there they can defend themselves against the whole world. I have not seen it but I know that it is similar to the others and that one night the Indians entered it and ran all over the place without meeting any resistance, shooting their arrows through all the doors, so that I do not feel that there would be any difficulty in taking it or the one in Bermuda, particularly if my advice be taken in both matters as that of a man who has been here two years and has considered the case with care. I am awaiting His

¹ Probably the wish was father to the thought.

² The Virginia Company.

³ Jamestown Peninsula, which is not over ten leagues up the river.

Majesty's decision and am desirous of being of some service and I do not make much of my imprisonment nor of the hardships which I have suffered in it, with hunger, want and illness, because one who does a labor of love holds lightly all his afflictions. The ensign Marco Antonio Perez died fifteen months ago, more from hunger than illness, but assuredly with the patience of a saint and the spirit of a good soldier. I have not fared very ill, but tolerably so, because since I arrived I have been in favor with these people and they have shown me friendship as far as their own wretchedness would allow, but with genuine good-will. The sailor who came with me is said to be English and a pilot. He declares that he is from Aragon and in truth no one would take him for a foreigner.¹

This country is located in thirty-seven and a third degrees, in which is also the bay which they call Santa Maria.² Five rivers empty into this, very wide and of great depth — this one at its entrance nine fathoms and five and six within. The others measure seven, eight and twelve; the bay is eight leagues at its mouth but in places it is very wide, even thirty leagues.³ There is much oak timber and facilities for making ships, trees for them according to their wish — very dark walnut which they esteem highly and many other kinds of trees.

The bearer is a very honorable Venetian gentleman, who having fallen into some great and serious errors is now returned to his first religion and he says that God has made me his instrument in this, for which I give thanks. He wishes to go to Spain to do penance for his sins. If I get my liberty I think of helping him in everything as far as I shall be able. I beseech Your Lordship to do me the favor of making him some present, for I hold it certain that it will be a kindness very acceptable to our Lord to see in Your Lordship indications that charity has not died out in Spain. And so Your Lordship ought to have charity and practise it in the case of a man who goes

¹ Francis Lembri, who was proven to be an Englishman and hung by Dale as a traitor, when returning to England in 1616. ² Chesapeake Bay.

³ The widest portion of the bay is not over thirteen leagues, or forty miles.

from here poor and sick and cannot make use of his abilities, and if I have to stay here long I am no less in need of Your Lordship's help (as you will learn from the report of this man, who will tell you how I am faring). Your Lordship might aid me by sending some shipstores such as are brought here for certain private individuals and in particular cloth and linen for clothing ourselves (this man and me) because we go naked or so ragged that it amounts to the same, without changing our shirts in a month, because, as the soldier says, my shirts are an odd number and do not come to three. I trust in God who will surely help me since He is beginning to give me my health which for eleven months has failed me. I have not sufficient opportunity to write to His Majesty. Your Lordship will be able to do this giving him notice of everything I am telling. May God guard Your Lordship as I desire. From Virginia, May 28 (according to Spanish reckoning), 1613.

If Your Lordship had the key to my cipher, I should write in it. But this letter is sewed between the soles of a shoe, so that I trust in God that I shall not have done wrong in writing in this way. When I first came here I wrote His Majesty a letter which had need of some interpretation and directed it with others to Your Lordship. I do not know whether you have received them.

I thought to be able to make a description of this country but the publicity of my position does not give me opportunity for it, but that which is most to the point is that the bay runs northeast by east and at four leagues distance from its mouth is this river from the south, nine fathoms in depth. At the entrance is a fort ¹ or, to speak more exactly, a weak structure of boards ten hands high with twenty-five soldiers and four iron pieces. Half a league off is another ² smaller with fifteen

¹ The fort at Point Comfort called "Algernourne Fort," first established in 1608 by President Percy. The Spanish here has a play upon words which cannot be translated, "a fort [*fuerte*, strong] or rather a weak."

² Fort Charles on Strawberry Bank in Elizabeth City, first established in 1611.

soldiers, without artillery. There is another¹ smaller than either half a league inland from here for a defence against the Indians. This has fifteen more soldiers. Twenty leagues off is this colony² with one hundred and fifty persons and six pieces; another twenty leagues further up is another³ colony strongly located — to which they will all betake themselves if occasion arises, because on this they place their hopes — where are one hundred more persons and among them as here there are women, children and field laborers, which leaves not quite two hundred active men and those poorly disciplined.

¹ Fort Henry, on the east side of Hampton River, a musket shot to the west of Fort Charles.

² Jamestown.

³ At Henrico, where Dutch Gap cuts the bend of the river. Some few scattered bricks still give evidence of this early settlement.