



War of Jenkins' Ear (From *New Georgia Encyclopedia Online*)

Although the War of Jenkins' Ear remains a minor episode in early American history, it has much significance for colonial Georgia. The conflict between the Spanish and English over the land between South Carolina and Florida lasted for nearly two centuries, but once formal hostilities began in 1739—only six years after Georgia's founding—the survival of the colony hung in the balance. Causes of the war centered on disputed land claims and on shipping rights. Shipping on the high seas suffered frequent interruption from acts of piracy by both sides. One incident gave the confrontation its name: a Spanish coast guard Captain severed British captain Robert Jenkins's ear in 1731 as punishment for raiding Spanish ships. Jenkins presented the ear to Parliament, and the outraged English public demanded retribution.

Throughout the 1730s, diplomatic attempts between England and Spain occurred, but they increased the animosity that led to war in late 1739. General James Oglethorpe made several passes into Florida in 1740 and seized two Spanish forts, Fort Picolata and Fort San Francisco de Pupo, west of St. Augustine, Florida, along the St. Johns River. He began a strike against the fort at St. Augustine in May 1740, but the campaign was a failure. Oglethorpe wanted to seize the fort before reinforcements could arrive, but problems with multiple commanders and diverse forces resulted in disorganization. Oglethorpe settled for a traditional siege of the fort but failed to coordinate his land and naval forces. By early July he discontinued the attack, retreated to Fort Frederica, and waited for a Spanish invasion.

In 1742 the Spanish landed on the southern tip of St. Simons Island, and occupied Fort Saint Simons. Oglethorpe led the charge against a Spanish scouting party, who fled. When the Spanish advanced another regiment a second skirmish ensued, an event later known as the Battle of Bloody Marsh. When English forces were triumphant, the Spanish retreated back to Florida. Oglethorpe prepared another offensive against St. Augustine in 1743, but his efforts had little result and represented the last episode of the war on the Georgia-Florida border.

This conflict appears to have been of little consequence to history, but to Georgia it was a struggle for existence. Settlers cooperated with Indian forces to repel Spanish threats. The colony fulfilled its original purpose as a buffer for British North America against attack and solidified English claims on the continent. Georgia remained in English possession due to the War of Jenkins' Ear.

Suggested Reading

Herbert E. Bolton and Mary Ross, *The Debatable Land: A Sketch of the Anglo-Spanish Contest for the Georgia Country* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925).

"Georgians and the War of Jenkins' Ear," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78 (fall 1994).

Larry E. Ivers, *British Drums on the Southern Frontier: The Military Colonization of Georgia, 1733-1749* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974).

John Tate Lanning, *Diplomatic History of Georgia: A Study of the Epoch of Jenkins' Ear* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936).