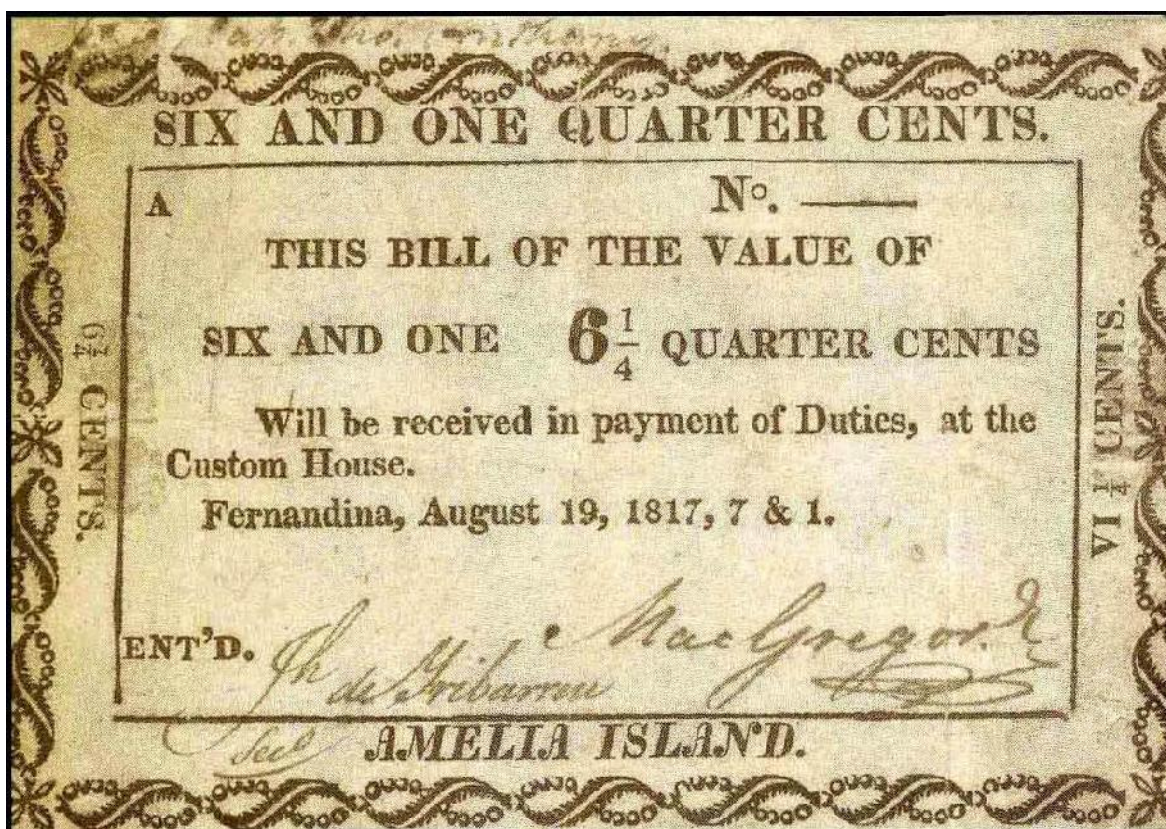


# Bicentennial of the Amelia Island Affair (1817-2017)

*The First Paper Money of Spanish Florida*



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A few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Amelia Island, Florida, also known as the “Isle of Eight Flags.” Amelia Island is 13.5 miles long and one of the southernmost of the Sea Islands; a chain of barrier islands that stretches along the East coast of the United States, from South Carolina to Florida.

The island was called *Napoyca* by the first Timucua Indian settlers around the year 1,000, then named *Île de Mai* by French settlers in 1562. In 1565 it was taken over by the Spanish and technically remaining a Spanish possession until 1763. However, the island got the name *Amelia* before the English actually took possession. James Oglethorpe, who was founder and governor of Georgia, led a scouting expedition south and came upon the island in March 1736. The island was named for the second daughter of Britain’s King George II. In 1764, the Currency Act prohibited the colonist from issuing any legal tender paper money.



*Amelia Island, Florida, USA*

A Second Spanish Period started in 1784, followed the brief British interlude in Florida history. As a result of Spain’s involvement in the American Revolutionary War, Spaniards once again appeared in Florida and tried to return their culture and Catholic religion to the colony. But the multicultural structure of the communities could not be changed. Amelia Island remained under Spanish control with the remainder of Florida until 1821.

In the wake of USA President Thomas Jefferson’s Embargo Act of 1807, all states were closed to foreign shipping but not Amelia Island, with the historic downtown located in Fernandina. In January 1811, the Spanish post on the island was named Fernandina in honor of Spanish King Ferdinand VII and it is the feminine diminutive form of the monarch’s name.



*Gregor MacGregor*

On Amelia Island there are many historical sites and an excellent museum. The History Museum of Amelia Island offers the “Eight Flags Tour.” During my visit of this historic area I was trying to find out more details about a period of time when this island was briefly under control of South American patriots. When suddenly, the person who was guiding the tour mentioned the name of Gen. Sir Gregor MacGregor. He was a grandnephew of the famed Scottish national Rob Roy and a former British Army captain who fought in the Iberian Wars in Spain. Also, MacGregor had joined freedom-fighting South Americans in their struggle for independence from Spain. He served under Generals Francisco de Miranda and Simón Bolivar and then he decided to sail north looking for “military fame and glory.”

**But, who was this military man and how he was involved in the historical fact of the first issue of paper money in Florida?**

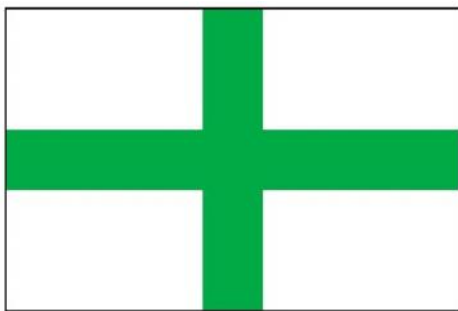
Sir Gregor MacGregor was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on December 24, 1786. In 1803 he enters the British Navy and served until 1805. In 1808, he returned to Edinburgh and registered at the University, until interesting news arrived from Venezuelan revolutionaries. In 1811, attracted by the revolutionary uprising, at age 25 he moves to this South American country and joins the Venezuelan Army with the rank of Colonel.

In 1812, Gen. Francisco de Miranda promotes McGregor to the rank of Brigadier General. He greatly admired Miranda, and dreamed of achieving similar heroic status. Then he married Josefa Antonia Lovera, Bolívar's cousin, in Caracas. He went on to fight in New Granada, and then Eastern Venezuela with Gen. Piar. In 1816, Bolívar promotes him as Major General and received him into the order of the *Libertadores*, specially thanking him for his services. Then, Gen. Arismendi, governor of Margarita Island in Venezuela, encouraged him to be the leader of the Florida expedition to add a new dimension to his life as a soldier of fortune.



General Francisco de Miranda

MacGregor went to Washington in March 1817. In the archives of the State Department is a mandate authorizing him to take possession not merely of Amelia Island but of 'East and West Florida' and called for "*due observance to the laws of the United States, and particularly those regulating their neutrality*". The paper, dated 31 March, is not, however, signed by the American Secretary of State, James Monroe, only by representatives of the Spanish American Republican movements such as Lino de Clemente (Bolívar's brother-in-law) for Venezuela, Pedro Gual for New Granada, Martin Thompson for Rio de la Plata (Buenos Aires) and Luis de Aury on behalf of Mexico.



Green Cross of Florida

He also visited Baltimore and Philadelphia and secured promises of aid from other revolutionaries. MacGregor was able, by promises of land, to get pledges for supplies and purchase of a schooner in Charleston, South Carolina; to get additional recruits in Savannah, Georgia, and to raise an armed invasion force of discharged veterans from the War of 1812.

In June 1817, Amelia Island then saw its fifth flag raised over it done with the blessing of President James Madison's government, which feared the British buildup in Florida after the War of 1812. This flag was designed with the St. George's Green Cross on a white field. It was inspired by MacGregor's family flag in Scotland.

General Gregor MacGregor led a group of 55 men to capture San Fernandina on Amelia Island from the Spanish. The Spanish were surprised and MacGregor's men overran the island on June 29, 1817. As soon as MacGregor proclaimed the independence of Amelia Island, he established a government, with himself at its head, naturally.

Also, he appointed Col. Jared Irwin, a former Congressman from Pennsylvania, as Treasurer of Amelia Island. The main purpose of this administration seems to have been to raise money and to give financial support to the South American revolution led by Simón Bolívar. As part of the economic activity, MacGregor placed a contract with a local printer in Fernandina to produce Amelia Island banknotes. He established a post office and a customs house and ordered a printing press for the purpose of creating a newspaper and printing paper money. It became the first customs house in the United States.

In Venezuela, Gen. MacGregor had been witness to the first issue of the republican paper money. of Gen. Francisco de Miranda, who participated in the Battle of Pensacola (West Florida) in 1780; being Vice-president of the Venezuelan Congress suggested this idea in 1811. Those bills were in circulation for a year and half and were known as “Republican paper money”. In 1812, Spaniards took control again of the General Captaincy of Venezuela. The royalist recovered as many notes as possible and they were burned in the heroic city of La Victoria. So, Venezuela became the first country, which issued republican paper money in the Spanish America.

This first issue of Republican notes had the signatures of three notable Venezuelans: Juan German Roscio, Bartolomé Blandin and Martin Tovar Ponte and those bills were known popularly as “Roscio, Blandin and Tovar.” Juan German Roscio, of Italian descent, was born in Caracas in 1769. He was a law graduate from the University of Caracas in 1795, joined the revolutionists and was elected deputy to the Congress of 1811. He edited the manifesto of the confederation of the Republic of Venezuela, assisted in forming the Federal constitution, and in 1812 was appointed member of the Federal executive. In 1816, Roscio moved to the United States and later published in Philadelphia his work entitled *“Triumph of the Liberty over the Despotism.”*



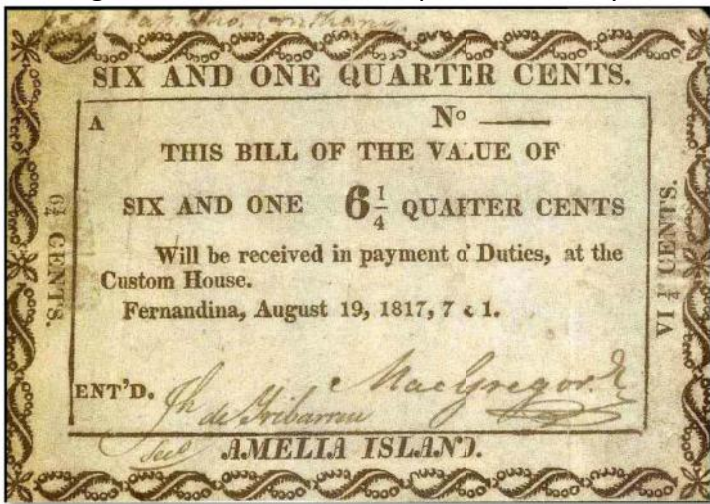
Venezuela P.4 1 Peso 27.8.1811

During this period of romantic deeds, a number of idealistic Venezuelans took part with other Latin American in the adventure of the “Florida Republic”, which reinforced Venezuelan tendencies towards integration. Their intention was to establish a bridge-head in the north to help the revolution, especially their compatriots in Mexico and Central America.

In the summer of 1817, Roscio participated in the invasion of Amelia Island. As soon as the South American patriots took the island, Florida’s people were called for elections to create a new independent republic. MacGregor appointed him, as Venezuelan lawyer, the main editor to the Constitution of Florida, and then civilian and military authorities were designated.

In Fernandina, during the liberating proclamation, MacGregor spoke to his men: *"Soldiers and Sailors! The 29<sup>th</sup> of June will be forever memorable in the annals of the Independence of South America ...I hope [soon] to lead you to the continent of South America to gather fresh laurels in freedom's cause ...Long live the Conquerors of Amelia! Pedro Gual, another Venezuelan lawyer and patriot, who also participated in this venture, wrote in reference to that moment: "Here, we are doing something that will benefit the whole of South America. This is the one aim that binds us closely together...The establishment of a Republic in Florida commands the attention and the support of all true friends of South America."* Some historians have called this episode as 'The Amelia Island Affair' in the history of colonial Florida.

Although Amelia Island was a Spanish territory, the first paper money was issued in English language and denominated in dollars and cents. All those bills were uniface with a legend at center *"This Bill of the Value of Six and One 6 1/4 Quarter Cents."* The denomination of 61/4 cent (P.S655) is considered very unusual. Most of odd denomination money was made for a reason, some practical but many not. On the vertical format are the denominations in Arabic numbers at left and Roman numbers at right. On the top of the bill also appears the written denomination.



Amelia Island N.1, P.S655, CA.3 6 1/4 Cents 19.8.1917

The other legend says: *"Will be received in payment of Duties, at the Custom House."* These bills were used mainly to pay the soldiers, much to their discontent. Major William B.C. Duryee was the first manager as a businessman. He also served as Collector of Customs the building became the First U.S. Custom House in the United States occupying this space until the late 1800's.

On this bill, there also appears the city's name and the issue date, as follow: *"Fernandina, August 19, 1817, 7 & 1."* The last two figures referred to the seventh year of independence for Venezuela, and the first year of independence for Amelia Island. At the end, the abbreviation 'ENT'D' (entitled), which means to give a person or thing a title, right, or claim to something.

Joseph de Yribarren, descendant from a very wealthy Basque family, was appointed as Secretary of Amelia Island's government. His signature appears in the proclamation of independence and several official documents. On these bills there appears two signatures, as follows: Joseph de Yribarren as Secretary at left, MacGregor at right; and on the bottom of the bill appears in capital letters 'AMELIA ISLAND'.



General Gregor MacGregor

The dimensions of these notes were 75 x 110mm, which were issued in black on heavy white paper from the United States (specifically from Philadelphia). These bills were put in circulation for a short period of time. Some sources reveal that they probably circulated until the end of 1817.

MacGregor was a charismatic leader who aspired to political power and persuaded people to follow him, a classic *caudillo* of the type that flourished in the Caribbean in this period. His lengthy and varied career is testament to his continue relevance in this period 1812 to 1824.

Also, MacGregor commissioned the striking of a medal to commemorate his liberation of Florida. Both sides of this medal, issued in Fernandina, contain the following legend in Latin: *“Duce Mac Gregorio Libertas Floridarum”*, meaning ‘Liberty for the Floridas under the leadership of MacGregor’ with an altered Greek cross indented at the edges. The reverse of the medal reads the name in Spanish *“Amalia”* and the inscriptions: *“Veni Vidi Vinci”* which means ‘Amelia, I Came, I Saw, I Conquered’. Also, with the date *“29 June 1817”* and a circular laurel branch.

Other sources revealed that this bronze Amelia Island medal of 33.1 mm is believed struck in Paris or London in 1818. Only 14 examples are known, four of



them are in museum collections. The few surviving paintings show his chest full of medals, including that of the Knights of the Green Cross, an order he instituted for his own followers. This medal he had minted to commemorate the Amelia Island events consciously placing MacGregor within a tradition of great leaders reaching back to Julius



*Duce Mac Gregorio Libertas Floridarum* Caesar. This is a rare and significant medal recalling a virtually forgotten footnote to U.S. and Florida history.

*Amalia Veni Vidi Vigi 29. Junii 1817*

Meanwhile, Col. Jared Irwin was trying to raise funds by issuing paper money on land warrants. This plan enjoyed limited success, but not money shortage. nearly enough to solve the critical

In early September, MacGregor, and already left, departed the island Spaniards were readying an attack on aid from persons he had visited in never materialized.



*Louis-Michel Aury*

those of his troops who had not upon hearing the news that the Fernandina. He clearly expected Philadelphia and Baltimore, but it

MacGregor was short on money, and troops, they deserted him with Soon, MacGregor’s followers joined French privateer operating in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He gave his support to the Spanish colonies in South America in their fight for independence from Spain.

when he was unable to pay his worthless Amelia Island dollars. Louis-Michel Aury. Aury was a

Aury assumed control of Amelia, got a legislature elected, set a committee to drawing a constitution which called for all of Florida to unite in throwing off the Spanish yoke.

MacGregor had left to seek additional support for his Florida adventure. As it turned out, he would never have the opportunity to return. He sailed with his family for the Bahamas. At Nassau, Josefa MacGregor gave birth to a son, who was named Gregorio McGregor in November 1817.

The United States, which had plans to annex the peninsula, sent a naval force led by Capt. J.E. Henry under secret orders from President Monroe, which captured Amelia Island on December 23<sup>rd</sup>. 1817, and hoisted the American flag and put end to the rising Republic of Florida.

Several writers have cited a second surviving specimen from the Green Cross Republic. However, research of each report have found that the other specimens were copies or, in one instance, a uniface One Hard Dollar-note also signed by MacGregor as manager of Bank of Poyais in 1822, which was engraved by the well-known British engraver William Hine Lizars, for a colony on the Mosquito Coast of Honduras. Around 5,000 of these Poyais dollar-notes were printed in England.

Col. Jared Irwin, who assisted MacGregor in the establishment of a short-lived revolutionary government on Amelia Island, died during a yellow fever epidemic in Fernandina in 1818. MacGregor's wife, Josefa died in Scotland in 1838. MacGregor's children appear to have remained in Scotland too, where his daughter, also named Josefa, is recorded as having died in 1872, leaving two sons, both of whom were childless. Of the lives of Gregorio and Constantino MacGregor, no details have as yet come to light.

After his wife's death, MacGregor had become a lonely, broken man. In 1839, he left Scotland quietly to return to Venezuela, the scene of many of his epic military adventures. There at least he was treated with respect as a returning war hero, having been reinstated as General of Division with a very comfortable military pension.

When he died in Caracas on December 4th, 1845, the President Gen. Carlos Soublette, government ministers and military chiefs of Venezuela marched behind his coffin, the obituaries in the Caracas newspapers concentrated on his heroic and triumphant retreat from Ocumare to Barcelona, describing him as a 'valiant champion of independence' but there was not a word about the Amelia Island Affair.



*Venezuela President Carlos Soublette*

His name can still be seen on a giant monument, built in Caracas to honor Venezuela's heroes of Independence. His remains are resting in the National Pantheon in Caracas.

## Conclusion

In 1513, Florida discovered by the Spanish explorer Don Juan Ponce de Leon in search of the Fountain of Youth. Don Pedro Menendez de Aviles founded St. Augustine, the oldest city in America, on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1565. Florida was ceded to Great Britain in 1763 in exchange for Cuba. Receded back to Spain in 1783 in exchange for the Bahamas Islands. Florida was purchased by United States from Spain in 1821 for five million dollars. Florida becomes the 27<sup>th</sup> state of the Union in 1845.

The Fernandina Custom House was located in the Duryee Building, where the Marina Seafood Restaurant is located now. The First Bank of Florida also was located in this building. This bank was purchased and became the First National Bank of Florida. Today, the Duryee Building is on Main Street in front of the depot of Florida's first cross state railroad.

According to some historical sources, this note is the oldest example of Florida paper money. The 6 ¼ - cent note is the only surviving piece of scrip from the independent Republic of the *Floridas*, also known as the 'Green Cross Republic', found on the barrier island of Amelia, near present-day Jacksonville. As the earliest issued Florida note, this piece of paper money represents the key to the entire collection of Florida currency.

In 1980, this 61/4- cent note was reported to be valued at \$ 20,000 USD. In March 2002, a unique note issued in 1817 on Amelia Island was one of the many items on exhibit at the American Numismatic Associations (ANA) National Money Show in Jacksonville, Florida. Today, if anyone finding one of these bills, holds a potential \$50,000 in his hands, although ironically, it was worthless when printed.

Miguel Chirinos ([miguelchirinos09@hotmail.com](mailto:miguelchirinos09@hotmail.com)) is originally from Venezuela, but has been living with his family in North Carolina, USA since 1996. His numismatic interests extend beyond collecting to include historical research. He has been contributing articles about Latin American paper money to the International Bank Note Society (IBNS) Journal for the past decade. Miguel is also an active member of the North Carolina Chapter of the International Bank Note Society (NC-IBNS).





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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregor\\_MacGregor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregor_MacGregor)

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