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Journal of John Lee Williams

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JOURNAL OF JOHN LEE WILLIAMS

Commissioner to Locate the Seat of Government of the Territory of Florida.

Journal of a voyage from Pensacola to St. Marks and the district of country included between the rivers Ochlockney and Suwannee, in West Florida, during the months of October and November, 1823.

On the 30th of September, 1823, I set sail in an open boat owned and commanded by a Captain Ellis and steered by a boy named George, being accompanied by Dr. Charles E. Foster. We laid in provisions for thirty days. In the evening crossed Pensacola Bay lay at Deer Point. Four miles.

October 1st.— Wind ahead; crossed to Santa Rosa Island but found that our boat in beating would make no headway. In the evening we crossed and again slept near Deer Point.

October 2d.— Dragged the boat a few miles and landed late in the evening on Santa Rosa. Thirteen miles.

October 3d.— With great labor we arrived at the Bowery just before evening and thereby escaped a severe rain which poured down in torrents during the night.

October 4th.— Tarried at the Bowery. (Barnery.)

October 5th.— Arose at the dawn of day; finding the wind shifted to the northwest, got under way immediately. Sailed up the sound and at 4 p. m., anchored at Pass Celestie. The Captain fearing to go to sea so late in the evening, we lay till next morning. Thirty miles.

From an intimate acquaintance with the country about the sound of Santa Rosa and the Choctawhatchie bay, I have been led to believe that the whole of the Choctawhatchie river passed through the sound and that the Pass Celestie is of recent origin. The island of Santa Rosa and the peninsula between the sound and the Yellow Water bay are formed of white barren sand and although there are many shells intermixed, they are yet but little decomposed; vegetable remains are scarce and there is no clay underneath to support the soil. In a few places on the peninsula pea beds have been discovered enveloping numerous small cypress roots and stumps; but the whole betrays marks of recent decomposition. The springs which issue from the bank discharge waters extremely pure and untainted by any mineral qualities.

The Pass Celestie is constantly wearing off the penin-

sula to the eastward and the island of Santa Rosa is of course continually increasing in length.

The Choctawhatchie bay must necessarily decrease in size and depth. The shoals and marshes are evidently making further into the bay.

October 6th.— At 5 a. m., we proceeded from the pass into the Gulf, with the wind north and the breeze light. Nothing worthy of notice occurred until this evening when we came to in a strong surf and anchored till morning. Twenty-five miles.

October 7th.— At dawn hoisted anchor and sailed with a light north wind to St. Andrews bay, which was reached at 3 p. m. We could not persuade our captain to leave it till next morning. We took some red fish and crabs but found the mosquitoes extremely annoying. In this place Dr. Foster and myself, in seeking fresh water, came suddenly upon a female alligator nursing a numerous brood of young ones on the surface of the pool; she immediately sunk; the young ones did not seem intimidated, but continued to swim about barking like puppies. The water was brakish and highly flavored with decaying vegetables. Twenty-five miles.

October 8th.— Early this morning we sailed around Capt False, supposing it to be San Blas, and entered St. Joseph's bay, thinking it was the Apalachicola. I was unable to procure in Pensacola either map or chart of the coast. It was late in the evening before we reached the head of the bay and discovered that we were landlocked; our boat at length got on a shoal from which we were unable to remove it. Being much fatigued, we soon fell asleep and rested until the next morning.

October 9th.— This morning we took much pains in examining the coast. Upon crossing the peninsula we immediately discovered that we could not be in Apalachicola bay as there was no outlet to the southward. We here saw many water fowls and shell fish of which the conchs were extremely large. This bay, although very deep at the entrance, is very shallow after proceeding fifteen or sixteen miles inland. The cape which surrounds the south and east sides is narrow and formed of several sharp parallel ridges of sand, amongst which were some pools of fresh water. A large bayou at the southwest penetrates within five rods of the Gulf. The south shore is paved with beautiful shells. This bay will afford a harbor for large vessels, safe and of easy

approach. We anchored at 12 m., just behind the north-west point of entrance in rough water, the wind blowing strongly from the north. On this cape we discovered the finest cabbage trees, but it is said that they grow in St. Andrews bay. Twenty miles.

After doubling the point, with some difficulty, we had a pleasant sail down Cape San Blas and arrived at the east point about 3 p. m. Here the wind failing, we landed, caught some fine red fish and a sun fish and collected a few shells, when a light western breeze springing up, we sailed through armies of porpoises and shoals of medusas, to the Indian pass of Apalachicola bay. We found the entrance of this bay on a pleasant evening very beautiful. Before us opened a fine, extensive sheet of water; on the left grass meadows extended to the north and west, as far as the eye can reach. The shores are sprinkled with beautiful keys or islets of cabbage or cedar, whose intense verdure affords a comfortable relief from the dazzling white sandy shores which we had passed. We found that this flattering prospect, however, like many others in this uncertain world, was calculated for show more than use. As darkness approached, our brilliant landscape vanished, and a succession of oyster bars succeeded in encircling us on every side, among which we were obliged to anchor, but we took vengeance on the oysters by roasting and eating great numbers of them. Twenty-eight miles.

October 11th.— The wind blowing strong ahead, we were compelled to remain on St. Vincent's island. I took my gun and traversed it in various directions. It is large and contains some good, with much bad land. A very large peninsula runs on the north almost the length of the island, attached by grass meadows to its eastern end. Between this peninsula and the spot where we lay there runs an arm of water which our captain insisted was a strait through which we might sail. We attempted it in the evening, but after rowing until 9 o'clock we were landed in a bayou and returned to our camp about twelve o'clock.

October 12th.— This day, we with some difficulty, crossed the bay from the north shore, the wind blowing a gale from the east. The islands here are high pine barrens, with a few small but pleasant hammocks on the shore. The back country for some miles is intersected with swamps. The wind veering more northwardly,

we sailed at nine in the evening. I took charge of the boat while the rest slept. I ran about ten miles, but the wind coming more eastwardly, causing a rough sea, I anchored during the balance of a bad night. Twelve miles.

October 13th.— We this day raced against wind and tide to the north of the Apalachicola river, where there were several houses remaining and a small vessel on the stocks— the site of a pine barren with bad water. At one we found Major Jenkins, the collector of the port, with whom we dined and spent several agreeable hours, until the tide turned and we proceeded to cross the mouth of the river, but our captain in the dark, keeping too far out, was by the northwest wind driven into St. George's channel, and we were shaken to a jelly before we struck the island where we found a harbor at 12 o'clock. Fifteen miles.

October 14th.— As we are afloat among the family of the saints, we may as well here describe some of their domains. This island is nearly fifty miles long by three-quarters in breadth; on an average of about one-third of the width from the southern shore consists of parallel ridges of yellow barren sand. Across these there are a few places where the storms have broken through and carried the waves over the island. The centre and northern parts contain some good hammock lands, which run off into marshes intersected with numerous bays, affording safe harbors for small craft.

The St. George channel or sound affords a passage for small vessels drawing five or six feet of water, but the shoals and oyster reefs render the navigation difficult and dangerous.

The wind continues strong ahead. We attempted in vain to proceed and ran into a deep hole about two miles from our last anchoring place, where we continued till the next morning. We named this cove Alligator Cove, on account of the great numbers of these animals which constantly floated on the waters.

October 15th.— Although the wind was strong ahead, my anxiety to proceed induced me to push the boat about four miles up the inland, but the skipper appeared displeased and, refusing assistance, we anchored near some pleasant live oaks, under which we encamped during the day, which I spent exploring the island. In the evening a storm commenced, which I had for some days

anticipated. It began moderately, but rapidly increased in violence, until it put out our fires, sunk our boat and threatened staving it in pieces. We were perfectly drenched with rain and all our baggage shared the same fate.

October 16th.— The morning brought us no relief. On the contrary, a sudden rise of the tide, occasioned by the sea breaking over the island, threatened to drown us out. In this emergency, I assisted the captain to get up his boat, unload and bail her out. Having reloaded, with great difficulty, we sailed back to Alligator Cove, where we spent a very uncomfortable night, for the wind, coming around to the north, from which point alone it could reach us, it blew furiously, attended with showers of rain. In fidgetting with our sail, the captain broke the breech of my carbine and during the rest of the voyage we were without a gun.

October 17th.— Ran up to the east end of the island. With great difficulty crossed over the shoals and reefs over which at one time we dragged the boat nearly four miles. Twenty-five miles.

October 18th.— This morning opened with delightful weather, but without wind, and the tide had left our boat aground. Therefore, took a pleasant ramble on the seashore, which was strewn with the effects of the late storm. Cockles, conchs, mussels, escollops, newts, medusas, mosses and coralines lay bleaching in the sun, with an infinite number of smaller shells. I returned to the boat about 10 o'clock. It was nearly afloat. Dr. Foster brought in a large pelican, which he found dying, choked by a fish he had taken, weighing six or eight pounds, whose dorsal fin had penetrated the pelican's pouch, from which he was unable to extricate it himself. The fish afforded us a fine meal. We soon got under way, and all taking to the oars, crossed over to the north shore near the mouth of Crooked river. A strong current passes from St. George's sound into the Gulf between St. George's and Dog island. We came to anchor about sunset ten miles east of Crooked river, to get fresh water and cook provisions, not having eaten any breakfast or dinner. After supper, the wind being fair, I wished to proceed, but could not move the captain, although our provisions were exhausted, for he had destroyed all of his the fourth day after we had left Pensacola, and being unwilling to let him and his boy suffer,

we had shared our stores with him till they were now at an end. Vexed with eternal unnecessary delays, I determined to attempt the passage by land, accordingly I left the boat. Twelve miles.

October 19th.— At early dawn I took as many articles as I could conveniently carry and proceeded up the coast, which was one entire marsh and swamp covered with palmettos. After traveling about four miles I discovered part of the vertebra of an enormous fish they were fourteen inches in diameter. The balance of the skeleton, with a huge mass of decaying flesh, I found toward evening on the shore surrounded by turkey buzzards, cranes and vultures. In the course of the day I found an old canoe, but after spending several hours in caulking it; I could not make it bear me, it was so much decayed. Encamped at sunset on the fine beach at Alligator harbor. This bay is extremely similar to St. Joseph's in shape, and the peninsula which surrounds it, but the entrance is very broad and full of sand bars, so far as I could discover. The northwest point presents a high, pleasant country, with a clean beach of white sand, over which run many fine springs of pure water. In the evening the boat reached the bay and anchored at no great distance. Dr. Foster visited me in the evening, and informed me that they had run four or five miles out from the shore and found the water shoal the whole distance.

October 20th.— Started at half past five, and after pursuing the beach about two miles, I took a northwest course, intending to strike the forks of the Ocholockney, but after toiling till 3 o'clock p. m., among ponds, swamps and marshes, I grew faint from want of provisions, and had to shape my course eastward, in order to reach the shore, which I accomplished toward evening, about five miles from Ocholockney bay. It being flood tide, I could get nothing from the ocean, so I walked on to the bay. Having struck up a fire and the tide being low, I caught a crab and found a few oysters, which I ate and slept soundly till next morning. Twenty miles.

October 21st.— I spent the whole morning in examining the bar at the mouth of the Olcholockney and the several channels through the oyster shoals. Breakfasted on oysters, which I found in great abundance. I then sought timber for a raft to enable me to cross the bay. This I at length accomplished with great difficulty, as neither

pinus nor oaks growing here will swim on the water. I was therefore obliged to seek, far down the coast, for driftwood that was seasoned. By evening I had procured sufficient for the purpose.

October 22d.— The wind and tide rendered the bay so rough that I dared not cross it. I therefore explored the country westward of the bay, which I found, as usual, full of ponds and marshes, some fresh and some salt water. The Ocholockney river is a fine, navigable stream for boats, and extends high up in the state of Georgia. It has several branches; Tologie and Little rivers enter it in the territory from the west. Twelve miles from the Gulf it forks— the western branch is called Crooked river, which after meandering twenty or thirty miles, enters New river, after which junction they enter the sound at the west end of James island. This river, I am informed, will carry six feet of water to the forks; the eastern branch, in four or five miles, spreads into the bay, which extends from one to two miles in width to the Gulf. The Bay of Ocholockney is about six miles long at the mouth. There are three channels— the western is narrow and shoal at low tide, the other two, though crooked and intricate, will, with good pilotage at ebb tide, admit craft drawing four feet of water. There has formerly been a commercial house established on the east side of this bay. The great quantities of excellent land in the vicinity of this stream will, at no distant period, give rise to very flourishing settlements.

October 23d.— This morning, after eating a breakfast of oysters, I started with my raft at ebb tide. I had to drag it near half way across the shoals. But the tide soon began to rise. I seated myself on my raft, but it being old and porous, soon became heavy and I was obliged to paddle with great energy to keep it from sinking. On the eastern shore I found the boat. It had entered the bay during the night and they had caught a raccoon, which was the only victuals they had found during the day past. I rested here a few hours while I spread out my baggage to dry, having wet it by the sinking of my raft. I then proceeded about four miles, the sun intensely hot, and no fresh water to be found. I became faint and blind with fatigue, hunger and thirst. After resting some time, I called to the boat, which was still beating in sight. After entering on board we proceeded nearly to the Indian pass of Apalachicola river. Twelve miles.

October 24th.— At daybreak we heard the morning gun discharged from the Fort, but we passed the Apalachicola river without discovering it, and continued till noon to cruise southwesterly; being unable to find an opening in the coast of sufficient magnitude, we became sensible at last that we had passed the place of our destination, and accordingly put about. At 3 p. m. we entered the river at ebb tide and beat among the oyster bars until evening, when we came to anchor behind the grass point. About 12 I discovered the tide was flowing into the river. I therefore awakened Dr. Foster, and with his assistance, in about three hours, we rode up to the Fort. We were received by Lieutenant Hutton, then in command, Captain McClintock having rode into the country for his health, with very pleasing marks of hospitality. Dr. Simmons, my colleague, had been awaiting me for fourteen days and had accompanied Captain McClintock into the country.

October 25th.— We found it necessary to rest this day. Some of us, among whom was myself, were so exhausted by fatigue and hunger that we were unable to walk without great difficulty.

October 26th.— I discovered this morning that horses could not be secured at the Fort, and being anxious to join my colleagues as soon as possible, I determined to proceed on to Ocholockney. In order, however, to make the most of our time, I procured a perogue and surveyed the Wakully river at its source. In this service Dr. Williams, acting surgeon of the Fort, volunteered his services.

The Wakully is altogether an extraordinary river. At the distance of about 11 miles from its embouchure, it bursts at once from the earth, a navigable stream. The spring is a beautiful oval basin of almost an unfathomable depth. It presents to the eye a pale azure translucent surface, under which are seen myriads of fish in little companies, at times sporting in the flood, and again disappearing behind the cliffs of rock which project into the fountain. During the first mile of its course the river may be 10 yards wide, about 6 feet deep, and after leaving the spring it is full of grass. During the next three miles it is divided into a thousand islands. Cypress, indeed, often shoot up in the middle of a deep channel.

(To be continued.)