

1908

Richard Keith Call

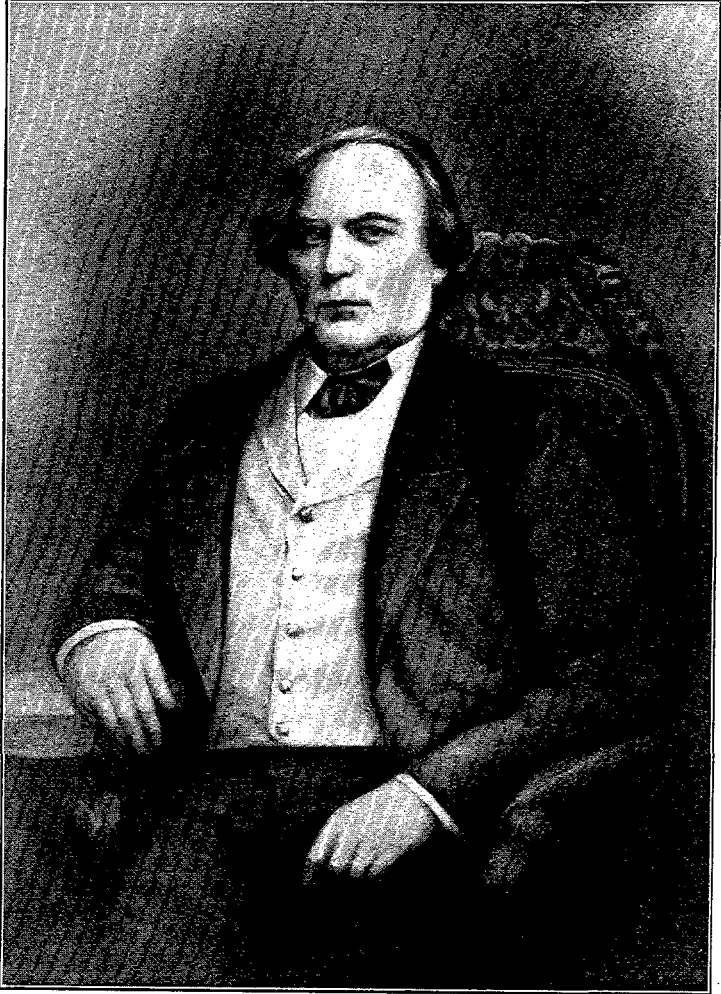
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RICHARD KEITH CALL.

THE FLORIDA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY.

RICHARD KEITH CALL.

BY HIS GRANDDAUGHTER, CAROLINE MAYS BREVARD.

Richard Keith Call, was born in Prince George County, Virginia, 1791. His father, Major William Call, was of high standing and influence, who had rendered distinguished service in the Revolutionary war. Major Call had possessed a large fortune; but after the war reverses came, his estate was embarrassed, and when he died very little was left, after the payment of all debts, for the support of his widow and children.

About this time many Virginians, attracted by the opening of the West, had crossed the mountains and carried civilization into the wilderness. Among these pioneers were Mrs. Call's brothers, George and David Walker, and they persuaded their sister to come to Kentucky also. In later years Governor Call thus described the journey from the Virginia home:

"Young as I was then, I still retain a vivid recollection of the country through which we passed. Then I saw mountains for the first time, and well remember the beauty and grandeur of the scene as I caught the first view of the Blue Ridge with sublime crest, marking the boundary of the western horizon as we approached them on a sunny afternoon in the month of October. We traveled slowly, with a loaded wagon containing all we possessed on earth, besides two horses and five negroes

* Afterwards member of Congress from Kentucky.

who traveled with it. After a few days' journey, we left the old settlements of Virginia and entered the wilderness, a wide slope of country, between the beautiful settlements of Virginia and those of Kentucky, which had long remained uninhabited by civilized man, the lurking place of hostile Indian bands. It was now beginning to be sparsely inhabited. It was on a cold winter day that we crossed the Kentucky river, with its perpendicular white cliffs on either hand—which to my boyish vision, appeared more than a hundred feet high."

At last the long journey came to an end, and a new home was made on a farm in Logan County. "Here," continues the narrative quoted above, "we lived happily together some eight or ten years, without one member of the family being separated from the others for more than one week at a time. Here, I spent the joyous light-hearted days of boyhood and early youth. The country was new and abounding with game, and I was young, buoyant in spirits, and hopeful of heart. Here, I learned to ride, to shoot, to fish, to swim, and dearly do I cherish in memory the waters and banks of the pearly stream Whippoorwill, so often the scene of my youthful enjoyments. It was on our little farm that I learned to work, to plough, to hoe, and to do whatever else the strong hand and the stout heart of a hardy boy could do. And this I regard as one of the best lessons of my boyhood; for, although I have never since been under the necessity of resorting to manual labor, it gave me self-reliance and confidence in my own ability to support myself. * * * It taught me the value of labor; it taught me to respect the honest laboring man, and above all, it taught me to sympathize with honest poverty and misfortune.

"There was no regular school in the neighborhood. * * * But we were blessed in our beloved mother. She had been well educated amid the best influences of society, had a vigorous mind, and knew how to impart the knowledge she had acquired. From her I received my

earliest and best instruction. Still, possessing a portion of my father's fine library, I had the advantage of some good books, and soon acquired the love of reading. * * *

"My excellent mother was a strict Episcopalian, but there being no church of that denomination in the neighborhood, the Sabbath day was kept holy by services at the family altar, in reading the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. Thus my mother, by her superior attainment and energy of character, supplied to her children the advantages of education and religious training. I can never cease to cherish with admiration, gratitude, or affection, her memory as long as life endures. But this good mother's health gradually failed, and in August, 1810, she breathed her last. After this, the family was separated, never to be again united under one roof."

After some months spent in study, made very difficult by the want of a teacher, Richard Call entered himself as a student at Mount Pleasant Academy, Montgomery County, Tennessee. "But the declaration of war against Great Britain in 1812," he wrote, "greatly disturbed and unsettled all my plans in regard to the completion of my education. I became restless and excited, nor could any longer confine my thoughts and attention to books. I desired to be in the field to participate in the dangers and glories of war. Still I remained at the Academy until April, 1813, when a war party of the hostile Creek Indians, having murdered a family on the Tennessee, near the mouth of the Duck river, I joined an expedition which marched in pursuit of the enemy. * * * We marched for several days through the wilderness without finding a foe, and without the occurrence of any event to compensate for the fatigue endured or the time expended. I returned to the Academy, however, pleased with the excitement incident to camp life, and ready for the next enterprise time and fortune should present." Within a short while he joined a volunteer company, of which he was elected 3rd lieutenant, to serve under Jackson against the Creeks. So began his military life.

The newly enrolled volunteers marched to Nashville, to be attached to General Jackson's own command. It was while encamped at the junction of two roads, one leading to Murfreesborough, the other to the "Hermitage," that they first met their great commander. Governor Call has given us his first impression of the man for whom destiny held such high civic and military honors. "He was still suffering pain and was looking pale and emaciated from the wound received in the famous duel with Benton. He was mounted on Duke, the brave old war horse that afterwards bore his gallant master so proudly on many glorious battle fields. His graceful, manly form, usually erect, was now bent with pain, while he still carried his arm in a sling. The expression of his countenance was grave and thoughtful, and his pallid cheek gave evidence of suffering; yet there was something in the lineaments of his face, a slumbering fire in his pale, blue eye, a something in his gesture and his voice, that made me, and made every one, recognize the presence of a great man."

The events of the Creek war are well known to history. The series of battles ending with that at Horse Shoe Bend completely broke the power of the Creeks as a nation. But the general, who was the hero of those battles, had many difficulties to contend with. It was no easy matter to feed an army in the heart of a hostile country; and more than once the army was threatened with starvation. Advance into the Creek country seemed impossible, for the men felt that even if they escaped death by the rifle and tomahawk, they would perish of starvation. Finally a large number of men and officers, construing their term of enlistment to have expired, in disregard of the wishes of General Jackson, returned home. Among them were all members of the company to which Lieutenant Call belonged, except the lieutenant himself. When all had gone, and Lieutenant Call found himself alone, he laid aside his sword, and went at once to General Jackson. The General received him warmly

and said: "My son, I knew that you would be here." The young soldier said that he had come to ask the privilege of serving in the ranks.

The request was granted, and he served in the ranks for the rest of the campaign. But when he returned home at its end he bore with him a letter from his general commending his fidelity and efficiency in such terms that he felt fully rewarded for all the dangers and privations through which he had passed.

Before the opening of the next campaign he had received the commission of lieutenant in the regular army. In the company of Captain (afterwards General) William O. Butler, he marched from Nashville to Camp Montgomery, and from there to Pensacola, which place was used by the British as a point from which to distribute arms and supplies to their Indian allies. Remonstrances against the violation of neutrality having no effect with the Spanish governor, General Jackson had recourse to stronger measures to drive the British from Pensacola.

The historian, Pickett, (1) writes of Lieutenant Call's services at Pensacola as follows: "By the aid of their boats, they (the British) had continued to fire upon our troops as they passed along the principal streets, but Lieutenant Call with a single piece of artillery, suddenly appeared upon the beach and dispersed them." Distinguishing himself also at New Orleans, the young officer was recommended for promotion, and soon received a captain's commission.

He was now stationed on the Gulf coast where he remained until he was made one of General Jackson's staff officers. The general's headquarters were at Nashville, but much time was passed at the "Hermitage," where his officers were treated as members of the family by the General and his wife. It is interesting to recall the names of the young men who enjoyed a general hospitality, gathered as one family during this brief inter-

* History of Alabama, p. 608.

val in their serious life work. They were Call, Butler, Bronaugh, Gadsden, Houston, Overton, Donaldson. All were makers of history, strongly influencing their times.

Many were the fetes given in honor of General Jackson at this time, and at one of these Captain Call met the young lady, Mary Letitia Kirkman, who afterwards became his wife.

News of disturbances in the south interrupted social pleasures, and again we find Captain Call on the frontier, serving against the Seminoles, and representing General Jackson in a correspondence with the Spanish Governor, Marot.

Time passed, and the negotiations with Spain concerning the cession of the Floridas were completed. General Jackson was appointed Governor of the newly acquired territory. In the arrangements for the change of government, Captain Call took an active part, being authorized "to make any arrangements with the Spanish Governor to expedite the delivery of the country ceded to the United States, and the transportation of troops agreeably to the treaty." (1)

For some time past, Captain Call had studied law, and he resigned his position as a staff officer in order to remain at Pensacola and engage in the practice of his profession. His comrades, Captain Easter and Dr. Bronaugh also resigned their military positions to remain in Pensacola, and the former became Captain Call's law partner.

In the early part of the year 1823, Captain Call was commissioned Brigadier-General of the militia of West Florida. He was at this time a member of the Municipal Board of Pensacola and a member of the Legislative Council of the Territory. During the summer of the same year he was made Delegate to Congress.

As delegate from a Territory he was of course, without a vote; but he was zealous in representing the inter-

* Letter from General Jackson to Capt. Call, May 11, 1821.

ests of Florida, and did much for its prosperity and development. From his report to his constituents, (March 5, 1825), I make the following extract, which shows something of conditions in those days: "The construction of highways to unite the remotest extremities of the Territory, I have regarded as an object of indispensable necessity for the improvement and settlement of our country. My predecessor, General Hernandez, to whose zeal and ability the Territory is much indebted, had prepared the opening of a road from Pensacola to St. Augustine. His proposition succeeded in the House of Representatives, but was lost in the Senate. That proposition I have renewed with success. Twenty-eight thousand dollars have been appropriated for this purpose. Twelve thousand dollars have been appropriated for opening a road from Coleraine on the St. Mary's river to Tampa on the west coast of Florida. Three thousand dollars from the bay of Tampa to Cape Sable, and from St. Augustine to Cape Florida. \$68,000.00 have been appropriated for the construction of lighthouses and light-boats * * * an appropriation of \$100,000.00 has been made for the establishment of a navy yard and depot on the coast of Florida. * * * Sensible of the inconveniences to which the people of Florida are exposed from the want of post offices and post roads every exertion has been made to relieve them from these embarrassments. A post route is now established from the interior of Georgia to Tallahassee, and the mail will be transported on this route, as well as the one from Pensacola to St. Augustine. On both of these, post offices will be established at convenient distances. * * * The location of the seat of government has received the approbation of the general government. * * * The survey of the public lands have been provided for under the superintendence of an enterprising and faithful officer; those surveys are now progressing. Sales of the lands already surveyed to the amount of twenty townships, are directed to be commenced at Tallahassee, on

the third Monday in May next." The settlement of private land claims had been provided for, changes in the judicial system had been made. In brief, the needs of the Territory, as stated in the opening paragraph of the report, "had been attentively and patiently considered by the legislative department of the government."

During the summer of 1824 General Call and Miss Kirkman of Nashville, Tennessee, were married. The following winter was spent at Washington, and after the adjournment of Congress, they made the long journey to the distant southern home.

The route was by way of New Orleans to Pensacola. Among many social pleasures enjoyed at New Orleans, not the least was the meeting with Lafayette, with whom a pleasant acquaintance had been formed at Washington. The government had bestowed upon Lafayette a large tract of land in Florida, and General Call was of great service in representing the interests of the great Frenchman in the Territory. A letter from Lafayette written after his return to France, possesses more than merely a personal or local interest.

"LaGrange, January 1.

My Dear Sir:—Your kind letter of August 7th has afforded me much gratification, not only on account of the documents it contained, and of which I have made immediate use, but still more because I have been happy in an opportunity to hear from you and to offer my acknowledgments for the very friendly concern you have been pleased to take in my Florida affairs. * * * It seems to me also that the introduction of the vine, mulberry, olive tree, and silk worm, managed by experienced hands would prove a true service to the country. A difficulty in my opinion, seems to arise from the unfitness of European labourers for that important part of the work clearing the ground. How to manage it you know better than I can do. Don't you think, sir, a prospect opens very favorable to the welfare of Florida in those parts of the country where the plague of slave labor has

not been entailed by Great Britain? I know the difficulties that offer to the planter, whatever be his losses, his regrets, his anticipations and to the Statesmen like Washington, Jefferson, Lowndes, Clinton, and so many others, whose lamentations and meditations on the subject have been in the course of more than a half century, so often communicated to me. Whenever the Southern States, under so good a climate, upon so good a soil, with suitable free, white, and upon the whole, cheaper labour, can in that manner obtain additional wealth, strength and population, I cannot think why they should not contrive the opportunity. Swarms of German laborers, now unprovided with money are embarking twice a month for New York. Here is another contemplated speculation. However productive of precious staples Florida may be, the cultivation of the vine, olive and mulberry tree, and the silk worm, would now be a desirable addition to her industry. I contemplate the sale of part of my township. Perhaps it will induce you and your friends, if a new prospect opens, to renew your idea of a purchase on the lands. As to your own arrangements, my dear General, I beg you will command me for anything I can do on this side the Atlantic, which would be an inadequate return for my obligations to you.

Be pleased to present my regards to Mrs. Call and friends, and believe me forever your friend,

Lafayette.”

Several weeks were passed pleasantly at Pensacola, and then General Call and his wife continued the journey to Tallahassee, the newly established capital, which was to be their home. He had procured a large plantation on Lake Jackson, and also an extensive tract of land just north of the limits of Tallahassee. At the latter place he made his home. It was known far and wide for its hospitality. The young and the old, the gay and the earnest, the rich and the poor, the statesman and the pioneer, the stranger within the gates, whether favored by, fortune or neglected by fortune, —all were welcomed.

Much might be written, did space permit, of social conditions in the Territory, for they were not such as usually accompany the settlement of a new country. The men and women of the capital and of the near plantations, as of the earlier settlements of East and West Florida, would have rendered distinction to any society. In 1829 General Call was sent to Cuba upon an important commission. Both England and Spain had made large land grants to individuals in Florida, and certain public documents relating to these had been taken to Cuba with the Spanish archives. To secure these was the object of General Call's visit to the island. The winter of this and the four following years were spent partly in Washington on business connected with these claims. Associated with Mr. William Wirt, he represented the claims of the United States; while the opposing claims of individuals were represented by Mr. Berrien of Georgia, and Col. White, member of Congress from Florida. "I shall be greatly relieved to have your aid and support in this case (1) in the Supreme Court," wrote Mr. Wirt to General Call, November 1830. "Your familiarity with every part of the case, and with all the collateral topics and localities which belong to it, will make you a most valuable auxiliary to any man who may have to argue it. I should be exceedingly unwilling to encounter it without you."

Success had indeed attended General Call's life. He was counted as one of Florida's most influential citizens, and held a place with the first in her courts and councils. His talents and industry had been rewarded by wealth. Friends surrounded him. Yet, though ambitions were satisfied, sorrow befell him. Of the eight children born to him, six had passed away in infancy or early childhood. In February 1836, his beloved wife also died.

To be continued.

1 Forbes vs. U. S.