

1927

The Ruins of Fort San Luis Near Tallahassee

Venila Lovina Shores



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Shores, Venila Lovina (1927) "The Ruins of Fort San Luis Near Tallahassee," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 6 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol6/iss2/6>

THE RUINS OF FORT SAN LUIS NEAR TALLAHASSEE

In western Florida there are many places of historic interest whose physical remains have been obliterated by the action of the elements, and the memory of man may have long since ceased to know them. Now and then the student searching historical material finds bits of information left by the pens of long ago concerning them. Here are some of these fragments relating to Fort San Luis.

From Spanish records historians¹ have learned that Fort San Luis, established about 1640, was not only a place for safety but also the mission center from which the Franciscan friars carried on their work of conversion. The territory included by the workers from this mission embraced at least northern and western Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. From the same sources it has been learned that within a radius of twenty miles there were several missions dependent upon San Luis, but the exact location of few is known today. That they were established at points of vantage for work among the Indians is certain, and we hope that further study may mark their definite location.

At the present time there is nothing to show definitely the location of this old mission-fort, San Luis ; however, the writer believes that in the spring of 1926 bricks forming two of the corners were found, thus partially identifying its location. The site is on the right side of a road now leading westward from Tallahassee at the top of the second hill. In his journal, Andrew Ellicott² refers to this place, when in 1798-

¹ Jeannette Thurber Connor and Herbert E. Bolton.

² *Journal of Andrew Ellicott*, Philadelphia, 1803, p. 240.

1800 he was serving the United States government in running the boundary in compliance with the treaty of San Lorenzo with Spain (1794) :

Some miles north of St. Marks, there is a tract of country though not extensive, which is tolerably good, and here the Spaniards had a small settlement or colony; it was conquered about sixty years ago, by an enterprising party from Charles Town, South Carolina; it is now totally abandoned and scarcely a vestige of the settlement now remains, except the ruins of a fort, one or two pieces of old artillery, almost, in a state of decomposition.

In the issue of the *Pensacola Gazette and West Florida Advertiser* of November 27, 1824, the location of Fort San Luis is aptly described as:

. about twenty miles from the coast. It is the only high and perfectly commanding spot in this part of the country; a narrow winding ridge rises gradually for half a mile, ending in a very high bluff, surrounded by a deep swamp, on this bluff the fort was erected.

When the capital of territorial Florida was located much interest was shown in the natural beauties of the country which surrounded this new "city in the wilderness". The ruins of Fort San Luis received their share of attention, not only in newspaper articles but also in the writings of travellers passing through the region. A letter³ from Judge H. M. Brackenridge, of Florida, to Colonel White the delegate from the Territory, tells of the destruction of San Luis, thus :

The appearance of a dense population, which seems to me to have covered the country has induced me to make some inquiry . . . While in Havana I could learn nothing; but while in Charleston I met with an English work, Robert's account of Florida 1763, which gives a piece of history apparently little known. The district of Apalache, it appears was in-

³ Washington, D. C., Jan. 14, 1827; in the *Pensacola Gazette and West Florida Advertiser*, Mar. 23, 1827.

habited by a race called Atimaco Indians with whom the Spaniards became intermingled. The Yamassee Indians who lived near St. Augustine backed by those of Apalache made frequent excursions into the new settlements of South Carolina threatening them with total destruction. In consequence of this Col. Moor, Governor of that State, made three inroads into their country, in the years 1702, 1704, and 1706 marching to the Flint River, then taking a direction south towards Tallahassee. In the last expedition, he entirely defeated the Spanish Governor, the don Juan Mexia, killing and taking prisoners above 800 of the Spanish and Indians—Don Mexia himself being one of the prisoners—Col. Moor transported 1400 of the Indians and fixed them in a settlement near the Savannah River. The settlements were entirely destroyed. This agrees tolerably well with the traditionary account of the old Indian, Chefixico, who says that his father told him the settlements formed by the intermarriage of the Spanish and Indians had been destroyed by a great warrior after three different invasions. Chefixico says that when a boy, the country was so open as to be scarce of game, and was not resorted to by the Indians until the forests grew up; that it was then full of orange and fig trees, and the roads and bridges still to be seen.

Another description of the destruction is given in the Pensacola *Gazette*⁴ as follows :

From Capt. Burch who has lately returned from surveying the ground for the national highway from Pensacola to St. Augustine, I have learned some very interesting particulars. . . traces of Spanish settlements are found. The first is a fort St. Louis, at least its ruins, situated about six miles east of Ocolockony and north by west 25 miles from St. Marks. This place has more of the appearance of having been a fortified town than a mere fortification. . . . Fort St. Louis

⁴ By-an act of Feb. 28, 1824, Congress provided for the opening of a public road from Pensacola to St. Augustine. It is definitely stated in the act (*United States Statutes at Large*, Little Brown Co., IV, p. 6) that the road shall pass "the site of Fort St. Lewis". Capt. Burch was appointed to take charge of the survey. In the *Pensacola Gazette*, April 25, 1824, note is made of his having "lately received orders" for the work, and "it is calculated that this force [200 men] will enable him to reach Tallahassee . . . by the first of June next". *Pensacola Gazette*, Oct. 9, 1824; "Old Settlements in Florida" copied from the National *Intelligencer* (no date, or author) implies that the work of Capt. Burch had been completed.

was built on an elevated spot of ground around a hollow; from the bottom of which issue two springs that furnish an abundant supply of water, but which after running but a few yards, again sink into the ground. One of these on being opened by Capt. Burch, displayed a wooden box or trunk in which it had been enclosed; they were overshadowed by a beautiful live oak tree. . . . Capt. Burch met with an old Indian near Tallahassee of the Creek Nation, who appeared to be of great age and who informed him that he had been in a war which destroyed these settlements. His age could not be precisely determined, but from circumstances it was thought that it could not be less than one hundred and thirty or forty. . . . At the time of the war with the Spanish he was in the prime of life and recollects very particularly all its circumstances. . . . The Indians made repeated attempts at St. Louis, and were as repeatedly repulsed, being unable to withstand the cannon. They then mustered their whole force and after laying waste the whole country, they made a final effort by investing the fortified places; and endeavoring to starve them out. They were encamped principally on the North side of the Fort; the Spanish prepared everything for evacuating it, and retired in the night to the fort on the Ocolockony. The first intimation to the Indians of the retreat, was the explosion of the Fort: the cannon were so broken and injured as to be unfit for use, and is still to be seen. The country having thus fallen into their hands, together with the Yamassy tribe of Indians, with whom the Spanish had intermarried, and lived on a most friendly footing; the males were all destroyed, and the women taken for wives or slaves.

But the country had been so entirely cleared, that there was no game, and the domestic animals having been destroyed during the war, the great body of Indians returned to their nation. The Indians who remained formed a new race, who were called Seminoles, which in the Hitchy language signifies run wild. The old Indian himself went to the Apalachicola Indian lived near St. Louis-until the forests grew up, when he returned about the time the Tallahassee and Mikasuky towns were built. He represents the Spanish population to have been very numerous, but could give no precise idea of their numbers The Indians had no firearms being armed with bows and arrows and clubs. In order to protect themselves from the effect of the shot, they suspended thick boards about their necks and which did not always answer the purpose. The Indians have preserved a superstitious story which keeps them

at an awful distance from San Luis. They say that the Spaniards, on quitting San Luis, buried their church ornaments, and with them some bottles of medicine (magic) which would prove fatal to them if they were touched. They cannot be prevailed upon to 'accompany the whites there even to show the place.

Of the appearance of the ruins at about the time Tallahassee was established as the territorial capital, we find several other reports. John Lee Williams, who was one of the commissioners appointed to select the site for the new capital, wrote to Richard Keith Call as follows : ⁵

Among the curiosities of the country we discovered an old Spanish Fort on a commanding hill about half way from Oclockney to Tallahassee. The south line of it measured 71 paces, the north 55, the east and west ends about 46. It had bastions near the angles, and in the spring about fifty feet down the ravine, east of the works, we discovered the breach of a six-pound field piece, and near it another piece of the same dimensions, from which the muzzle was broken. An ancient Indian of old Tallahassee, told us that the fort was taken by the Creeks, when he was a boy, near a hundred years ago, that the country tho thickly settled with the Spaniards was broke up, that the Yamassee Indians then called Bone, were friends of the Spaniards and also cut off.

In a **View of West Florida** ⁶ the same writer speaks more at length regarding this ruin and its appearance :

Extensive forts were erected, on many commanding eminences. Fort St. Lewis was situate two miles west of Tallahassee. Its form was an irregular parallelogram; the eastern and longest side was fifty-two paces. Within the moat, two brick edifices had been erected; one sixty by forty, the other thirty by twenty feet. There were bastions at each corner. The outward defenses are extensive. A covered way led to a spring, in a deep ravine, under the north-east wing of the

⁵ Brevard, Caroline, History **of Florida**, I. p. 263. Letter dated St. Marks, Nov. 1, 1823.

⁶ Williams, John Lee **A View of West Florida, etc.** Philadelphia 1827 p. 32. The *Pensacola Gazette* April 24, 1824 contains similar statements.

fort. Here were discovered two broken cannon, one of them having only the muzzle broken off; this has been removed to Tallahassee, and again awakens the echoes of the distant hill on days of rejoicing. Many articles of old iron have been discovered about this old ruin. Before it, trees and grape vines grow, in the order in which they were planted: the rows are distinctly traced, although overrun with a more recent forest.

A few sentences found in the *Pensacola* Gazette of April 2, 1825 add another fragment to the picture on this hill top as seen in the early twenties:

These [the two brick edifices] are in total ruins, and nothing but the mound appears where the walls stood, composed wholly of broken bricks, which had been composed of a coarse sandy clay and burned in the modern fashion. Yet on the very walls of these buildings are oaks eighteen inches in diameter. On the same hill, and in fact within the outworks of this fort, are to be seen grape arbors in parallel lines, which still maintain their pristine regularity.

In early territorial days the attraction of Fort San Luis was not alone its traditions and its power to arouse in the imagination a vision of another era, but its natural beauties made it a delightful place, and many were the merrymakings held there according to the traditions of our own Tallahassee. It was here that Prince Murat⁷ and Mrs. Catherine Dangerfield Gray first met. The fascination of the Priest's Spring⁸ must be felt as long as its peaceful beauty is undestroyed by the hand of man.

VENILA LOVINA SHORES

⁷ Long, Ellen Call, Florida *Breezes* p. 156. "I met Kate the first time at a picnic. It was at old Fort St. Luis; her shoes were so much too large for her that one slipped off, I did seize it and drank to her health" so says Prince Murat.

⁸ So Jeannette Thurber Connor very aptly called the spring on first seeing it in March, 1926.