

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 23
Number 1 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 23,
Issue 1

Article 5

1944

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Recommended Citation

Davis, T. Frederick (1944) "Pioneer Florida: The Beginning of Tampa," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 23: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol23/iss1/5>

PIONEER FLORIDA (IV)

by T. FREDERICK DAVIS

THE BEGINNING OF TAMPA

General Andrew Jackson was responsible for the failure of the first purposed community settlement of whites in the Tampa region. It came about in this way:

General Gregor MacGregor, a Scotchman, who had been associated with Bolivar in the South American revolutions, conceived the idea of also liberating the Floridas from Spanish rule. In 1817, he collected a force recruited largely from adventurers hanging loose upon the society of the United States, made a descent upon the island of Amelia in northeast Florida and captured it in June, 1817. He held on for several months, when, his situation becoming precarious and foreseeing disaster, he abandoned the enterprise and decamped, to try again from another point.

MacGregor went to Nassau, Bahamas, where he hoped to collect a force recruited from British veterans of the War of 1812, to be reinforced by a body of Indians enlisted in Florida, and with this "army" he intended to make another attempt to liquidate Spain's interest in Florida. At Nassau, MacGregor met with considerable encouragement. His plan was to establish a settlement at Tampa Bay, march thence across the peninsula and attack St. Augustine, with the capture of which he would consider the conquest of East Florida complete, and rightly so.

Early in 1818, MacGregor sent an ex-British officer, Robert Chrystie Armbrister (spelled Ambrister in the American records) to select a site for the settlement at Tampa Bay and secure enlistments for the contemplated Indian contingent. Armbrister

landed at Tampa Bay, then proceeded to the region of St. Marks where many Indians friendly to the British in the War of 1812 resided.

Simultaneously, but coincidentally, General Andrew Jackson swept into Middle Florida with his American army, to punish the Indians for alleged depredations along the southern frontiers of the United States and other nuisances-inappropriately called in history the First Seminole War. Not knowing the whereabouts of Jackson's army, Armbrister stumbled into the American camp on the Suwanee river one night and was taken prisoner. He was sent to St. Marks, where he was later tried by a military court on charges of aiding and abetting the Indians against the *United States*, convicted, and shot by a firing squad. With the execution of Armbrister, MacGregor's plans against Spanish Florida were abandoned along with the purposed town at Tampa Bay.

The MacGregor and Jackson invasions" were the culmination of a long series of events through which Florida slipped from Spain into the possession of the United States. The treaty with Spain ceding East and West Florida was dated February 22, 1819, but it was not until July, 1821, that the United States took formal possession. During the interval many questions arose concerning Florida, among them a movement for the annexation of West Florida to Alabama, the western boundary of Florida to be the Apalachicola river instead of the Perdido as formerly. The sentiment for annexation became so strong in certain quarters that its accomplishment was deemed certain. Even the location of a capital

* For further details and references see: on MacGregor, T. Frederick Davis, "MacGregor's Invasion of Florida," *Florida Historical Society Quarterly*, VII, 3-7; on Jackson's invasion, *Niles' Weekly Register* of the period, and *American State Papers*.

for the new Florida began to be considered. In this particular a site on Tampa Bay was foreseen by the editor of the influential *Niles' Weekly Register*, in the issue of March 24, 1821:

"Florida, in every respect, is a valuable acquisition to us. It *may* cause a considerable revolution in things, domestic and foreign. It opens to us a large tract of country, capable of furnishing immense supplies of cotton, sugar, rice, and perhaps coffee and cocoa, and the olive, all which, it may be expected, will be fully tried on an extensive scale, by new adventurers in those, at present, rich commodities-the product of these will have a domestic effect, as well as that which may be caused by considerable disbursements by government at Pensacola and probably at Hillsborough bay, or Tampa bay, or Espiritu Santo bay, as a place on the west side of the peninsula is called, which will, mostly likely, become the seat of government; for we presume that what is now called West Florida will be added to the state of Alabama, to which it seems rightfully to appertain."

Again, June 30, 1821, the editor of the *Register* expressed himself upon the importance of Tampa Bay: "From what we hear of Tampa bay, though its shores are not now inhabited, it will probably contest with Pensacola the honor of being ultimately fixed upon as the southern naval depot of the United States. The bay is said to be easier of access and to have more water than that of Pensacola ; the neighboring country is fertile and abounds with live oak [valued for use in the construction of ships]-and a short canal will unite the bay with the great river St. Johns." Note this early reference to a cross-peninsular canal.

The division of Florida was not approved by Congress and the naval station did not materialize; but

Tampa Bay was soon to claim the establishment of an important military post known as Cantonment Brooke, later called Fort Brooke, named in honor of its first commanding officer, Colonel George M. Brooke, U.S.A.

No record has been found indicating the precise date on which the erection of Cantonment Brooke was commenced. Presumably orders were issued late in 1823 for its establishment, judging from a note in the *St. Augustine East Florida Herald* of January 10, 1824, quoting the *Pensacola Floridian* of recent date: "We understand that Col. Brooke, of the 4th Infantry, has received orders requiring four companies of that regiment to proceed to Tampa bay, where they are immediately to commence building quarters. The Companies of Captains Dade, -----, and Brady, it is said, are detailed for this purpose, and they will probably set out [from Pensacola] in a few weeks under the command of Col. Brooke."

In its issue of March 20, 1824, the *Herald* announced: "A military post (which in honor of its distinguished commander has been named Cantonment Brooke) has been established near the mouth of the North Hillsborough river. . . . The site was selected with a view to a vigilant eye over the Indians of the South; and for the protection of those emigrants who may be tempted to try their fortunes in those milder latitudes."

From these items it seems certain that Cantonment Brooke was begun and completed in its original setup within the period between the first of January and the middle of March, 1824.

At the time of the establishment of Cantonment Brooke, there was no bona fide Anglo-American settler in the vicinity. The region was inhabited by Indians who vividly remembered the drubbing given

them by General Andrew Jackson in Middle Florida in the spring of 1818 ; as a rule they were not friendly towards Americans, and such settlers of a permanent type were loath to brave the dangers without military protection. The publicity previously given the region may have induced some investigation by individuals, but they did not remain. In fact, it does not appear that any white person was ever a long-time resident at or in the immediate vicinity of the site on which Cantonment Brooke was located prior to the establishment of that post. With military protection provided, most likely the first private enterprise to appear was a sutler's store in the shadow of the post. There was no mass emigration of civilians to the vicinity at this time. They came one by one and took up abode. Slowly a civilian community grew up near the cantonment. This was the beginning of the present city of Tampa.

Contemporaneous accounts of the life at Cantonment Brooke in its early years are scant. It was a typical frontier post far removed from established centers of civil life and therefore dependent upon its own exertions to furnish pastime and recreation. Colonel Brooke (brevet brigadier-general in September, 1824) had his family with him ; likewise some of the other officers perhaps, but these were few. It is consequently safe to presume that in the absence of a considerable number of women such entertainment as broke the humdrum existence was of the nature known as "manly" sports. Good fishing was near at hand. No doubt sailing on the bay, with an occasional boat race, was a pastime. But we have an account of one event that bears the earmarks of great excitement. It was three days of horse racing at Cantonment Brooke, starting 15th of March, 1826. As described in the *Pensacola Gazette* of April 15, 1826:

“First day: Mr. Page’s horse *Bacchus*, Mr. McCall’s horse *Packingham*, and Captain Dade’s horse *Richard the Third*, were entered for the three mile heats-won by *Bacchus* in two heats, which were well contested.

“Second day: Captain Yancey’s horse *Uncle Sam*, Mr. Collin’s horse *Beppo*, and Mr. Morris’ horse *Bob Logic*, were entered for the two mile heats. First heat beaten by *Beppo*. The superior bottom of *Uncle Sam* gained him the second and third.

“Third day: Mr. Page’s colt *Keep Coming*, and Mr. Collin’s colt *Go It*, were entered for a single mile. This race was handsomely run on both sides, and was beaten by *Go It* a half neck only.”

As *Go It* and *Keep Coming* raced neck and neck down the final lap that day we can easily sense the excitement of the spectators-soldiers, a sprinkling of civilians, and perhaps a few Indians. This was probably the first “derby” held in Florida; that it was clean sport we have no reason to doubt.