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Ruth Danenhowe Wilson



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THE BULOW PLANTATION, 1821-1835

by **RUTH DANENHOWER WILSON**

In the dense jungle growth of a hammock ten miles north of Ormond, are bare arches of coquina and great rectangular chimneys of another age towering above the live oaks and palmettos—all surrounded by the desolation of more than a century. This is what is left of Bulow Ville, one of the largest of the sixteen plantations, each working more than one hundred slaves, which were destroyed by the Indians early in 1835 in the section south and west of St. Augustine.¹

This plantation was first thought of in 1812. The Spaniards, who had made little success with agriculture in Florida, had adopted a policy of making land grants to foreign planters in an effort to bring back the successful plantations of this region of 1783, as they were when on England's ceding Florida to Spain their British owners abandoned them.²

To one, John Russell, Don Juan Jose de Estrada, acting governor of East Florida, on July 28, 1812, granted four thousand acres of choice land in exchange for the schooner *Perseverance* (renamed by the Spanish *Barbarita*) of fifty-eight tons burden and valued at \$2,300. It was in this schooner that the newcomer had brought his family and slaves from New Providence in the Bahamas. Head-rights for himself and his company added 675 acres: fifty acres each for himself and his wife, and twenty-five each for his five children and his eighteen slaves.

This site has been presented to the State of Florida for a state park, to be named Alexina Mitchell Wilder Park.

1. Sprague, John T. : *The Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*. New York, 1848. p. 106.
2. Siebert, Wilbur H.: *Loyalists in East Florida 1774-1785* DeLand, Florida, The Florida State Historical Society, 1929. II, p. 183.

John Russell named his prospective plantation "Good Retreat," but no record has been found of any developments he made there before his death in 1815. His son James in 1821 re-established the title for his father's heirs, as evidenced in the following order and report, which are reproduced here as illustrations of the exceedingly formal procedure of the Spanish authorities in legal matters. These documents and all others relating, are printed in *American State Papers*.³

For the simple operations of granting this tract to Russell and confirming it to his heirs some twenty-two acts, decrees, notifications, petitions, reports, declarations, appraisements, orders and other instruments were recorded, one of which, the charming Report below is characteristically Spanish.

ORDER

Don Jose Coppinger, colonel of the national armies, military governor, political chief, and ultra-marine sub-delegate of this place and province, & c., by these presents :

I confer unto Don Francisco Jose Fatio all the faculties required by law, to the effect that, with two assistant witnesses, whom he will appoint in due form to assist him in this commission, he transport himself on the lands which were by this government sold to the deceased, John Russell, and on those lands which were granted to the same as a new settler; said lands, situated between the Matanzas and Tomoca, and there put Mr. James Russell, a lawful son and heir of said John Russell, deceased, in possession of said lands, which are hereby restored to him in consequence of what has been represented and proved on the proceedings relating

3. *American State Papers, Public Lands*, IV, pp. 571, 677-693; St. Johns county records. A, p. 71.

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thereto, with the reserve of the respective, rights which the actual occupiers may consider to possess in the lands aforesaid, in order that they may make use of said right if they think proper; and after putting down, in writing, the result, said commissioner will make his report, as it is already ordered in my decree this day, which I issued in conformity to the petition of Mr. James Russell aforesaid, with the consultation of the auditor of war. St. Augustine, of Florida, June 18, 1821.

JOSE COPPINGER.

By order of his Excellency:

JUAN DE *ENTRALGO*, *Notary of Government.*

[characteristically Spanish]

R E P O R T

In Tomoca, June 21, 1821, in conformity to the tenor of the preceding order, I, Francisco Jose Fatio, accompanied by the witnesses, assistants, who subscribe this, and by Mr. James Russell, we went to the place aforesaid, riding about on horseback ; and, taking said James Russell by the hand, I put him in possession of the lands referred, to in my commission. There he called aloud, pulling up the grass, threw up sand in the air, broke branches of trees, and did other things indicating possession, which he took quietly and peacefully, and without contradiction. And in proof thereof, I make this report, which I sign, together with the witnesses and the interested party.

FRANCO. PELLICER

FRANCO. JOSE FATIO

JOSE SIMEON SANCHEZ

JAS. H. RUSSELL

In 1821 the heirs sold the 4675 acres to Charles W. Bulow for \$9,944.50 in cash, when Bulow “. . .

immediately took possession of the tract of land and planted and improved a part of one of the tracts and erected buildings.”

Bulow was a former member of the legislature of South Carolina who was said to have made a fortune in Charleston at the time of the embargo, which may be a euphuism for speculation in cargoes of blockade runners: He had plantations in South Carolina, a house in Meeting Street, Charleston, valued at \$25,000, and a house in St. Augustine.

Like the elder Russell, Bulow died soon after acquiring the Florida property, that is, in 1823, in St. Augustine, where his grave may be seen in the Huguenot cemetery, the simple inscription giving his age as forty-four. The *St. Augustine East Florida Herald* of May 10, 1823 after lauding his character states that “Col. Bulow has embarked a large capital in the cultivation of the cane, and having all the necessary resources for prosecuting the experiment on an extensive scale, we have to deplore in his death not only the loss of a highly valuable citizen [but also] of an enterprising agriculturist whose success would have given impulse to the interests and prosperity of the territory.”

Col. Bulow left his Florida plantation to his only son John Joachim, specifying it could not be sold until the boy was of age and then only if one-third cash were secured and bond and mortgage given for the balance.⁴

The United States Commissioners of Land Claims in East Florida reported to Congress December 31, 1825, that the claim of the heirs of Charles W. Bulow, claiming under a grant to John Russell, was, in their opinion, valid.

4. Will of Charles W. Bulow, St. Johns county records, St. Augustine.

John J. Bulow being a minor the plantation was managed by trustees for a time. Although there is no record of John's age he was apparently twenty-one by 1828, as on January 24 of that year he signed an agreement with the United States giving the government a fifteen foot right-of-way for a road to a bridge over the St. Sebastian river at St. Augustine.⁵

Tradition through his descendants make him out to be something of a drunkard. Be that as it may, he did not turn the East Florida plantation into cash or even one-third cash on attaining his majority, but continued to develop it as his trustees had done. It was soon spoken of as the most prosperous plantation in East Florida, with three hundred slaves working on it. A thousand acres were planted to sugar cane and twelve hundred to cotton. Buildings were erected for plantation purposes and the owner had a large dwelling house overlooking the creek.⁶

Some idea of life on the plantation can be gathered from comments of two of Bulow's guests. James Amanuel Ormond, the third of the three James Ormonds whose plantation adjoined on the south that of Bulow, states in his reminiscences that in 1828 when he was thirteen he was sent by his father to live for about a year with John J. Bulow, "who owned from three to four hundred negroes and planted largely." Ormond describes his host as fairly well educated. "He was young his own master, and had graduated in all the devilment to be learned in Paris, France. He had a large library of books, mostly fiction, with which I filled myself."⁷ Ormond also tells us that Bulow kept an eight-oared barge and traveled in state sometimes

5. *Ibid.* J. J. Bulow & U. S. Government.

6. Williams, John Lee : *The Territory of Florida*, New York, 1837. p. 137.

7. Reminiscences of James Ormond, MS.

as far as Jupiter Inlet, with his guns, nets, tent and cooks.

About three years after this the building of the great stone sugar mill was completed according to an inscription set on its north wall reading "Bulow Ville, Jan. 26th, 1831." This mill, with its engine and other machinery, cost about forty thousand dollars, a great sum in those days in Florida. The molasses and sugar cane from the mill together with cotton and minor products of the plantation were taken on flat boats down Bulow creek and the Halifax river to Live Oak Landing a short distance north of Mosquito Inlet where they were loaded on schooners for Savannah, Charleston and New York.⁸

At the end of 1831 young Bulow entertained no less a guest than John James Audubon who by that time had gained recognition as a naturalist and was in Florida on a collecting and painting trip. Audubon arrived on Christmas Day after walking with his two assistants about fifteen miles from one of General Hernandez' plantations. Bulow sent a wagon for his guests' luggage and offered to send horses for them but Audubon preferred to "see the country in as much detail as possible . . . to get new birds."⁹

It is pleasant to think of that Christmas, Bulow's welcome with the bounty of the plantation, followed perhaps by a companionable evening with woodland reminiscences and plans for new expeditions. A few days later Audubon wrote from Bulow Ville that "Mr. J. J. Bulow, a rich planter at whose house myself and whole party have been for a week under the most hospitable and welcome treatment that could possibly be expected," took him on a trip in his boat down the Halifax river to get specimens of brown

8. *Ibid.*

9. Herrick, F. H.: *Audubon the Naturalist*. 2 v. New York 1917, II p. 15.

pelicans. Audubon speaks further of his host as "the generous Bulow." Apparently he had more goodwill than foresight for he took his distinguished guest on this shooting and camping expedition in December with no heavy clothing, blankets, nor fire-wood. A "norther" coming up they all came near perishing during the night with their boat stuck in the mud near a mangrove swamp with no fire-wood available. When morning light came they waded in the mud, waist-deep, to push the boat off with "limbs becoming stiffened and almost useless at every step we took." After two and a half hours of such work they reached a point where there were a few trees and made a fire to recussitate two of the negroes who had "fallen down in the mud as senseless as torpidity ever rendered an alligator or a snake."¹⁰

How unfortunate that neither Audubon nor Ormond gave any details of the plantation house. In the claims later presented to Congress it is described as two and a half stories high, sixty-two by forty-two feet in dimension with a piazza all around. Probably it was furnished in a style in keeping with the well-to-do young man who had brought a library of fiction there. That it was possible to obtain rich furnishings for planters' houses is known from advertisements of goods and furniture obtainable in St. Augustine.

From the time of Audubon's visit little is known of the Bulow plantation for five years. Apparently it continued to grow and prosper during that time for in 1836 the appraised value of its various buildings with boats, tools, harness and oxen was over fifty thousand dollars. Of this amount five thousand dollars was the value of the plantation house,

10. Audubon, in a letter to the editor of *American Monthly Journal of Geology*.

three thousand of household and kitchen equipment. The stone sugar works, one hundred nineteen by ninety-three feet consisted of boiling houses, two curing houses, steam engine house and a large framed saw-mill all complete. There were forty negro houses, all framed, with board floors and shingled, valued at \$2,500, with negro furniture valued at \$250. In addition there were barns, corn houses, gins, poultry houses, cooperage, blacksmith shop, fodder houses, etc.”¹¹

Over this little kingdom existing self-sufficient in the wilderness with a few neighbors to the south and St. Augustine forty miles to the north, young Bulow held supreme sway. According to James Ormond III, there was not a lawyer, minister nor doctor within forty miles.

The period when young Bulow could live as “monarch of all he surveyed” came to an abrupt end in December 1835 with the outbreak of the Seminole War, and the quartering of militia at Bulow Ville in spite of the owner’s violent opposition. He declared that he and his slaves could defend his plantation without military aid. It is possible that Bulow shared the opinion of many Florida settlers that the project for sending the Indians west of the Mississippi should be abandoned and another effort made to give them their own boundaries in Florida. Such an opinion was voiced as a temporary solution by the commanding officer in Florida, General Jesup, in a letter to the Secretary of War, for which he was severely snubbed.¹²

Bulow’s belief in the friendliness of the Indians to him may have come from knowing them both on the plantation and in St. Augustine. James Ormond tells how the planters in the Halifax region depend-

11. 25th Congress, 2nd session. Private claims. Bucknor claim.

12. Sprague, *op. cit.* pp. 199-201.

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ed for all fresh meats on the Indian hunters "with whom they were on the best of terms."

In December when there were many signs that the young chiefs were collecting near Tampa not to emigrate as had been agreed, but to go on the war-path, troops of the regular army were stationed at Fort Brooke on Tampa bay. General Hernandez sent Major B. A. Putnam from St. Augustine with a detachment of militia. known as the "Mosquito Roarers" to protect the plantations between the Matanzas river and New Smyrna. On his way south Major Putnam stopped at Bulow Ville. In his testimony before Congress he later described the incident as follows: "I recollect that Mr. Bulow on whose plantation we made a short stop on our march from St. Augustine to Rosetta (the plantation of the Marquis de Fougères) was very much disgusted by the presence of troops at his place and very uncivil".¹³

On Christmas Eve during the night a large body of Indians came into New Smyrna and burned all the residences. Mrs. Sheldon, the wife of a planter there, tells how they were warned by a servant in time to escape. After an uncomfortable night on the peninsula they reached Bulow's Landing the next day. On their arrival they found all the inhabitants of the Halifax region collected there, afraid to go to St. Augustine without protection.¹⁴ What a contrast that Christmas night of shaken nerves and hideous anxieties must have been to the one of four years before when Bulow welcomed Audubon to bounteous fare and pursuits of scientific interest.

Major Putnam removed his troops from Rosetta to Bulow Ville the night of December 28th. making his headquarters there until January 23rd. Putnam

13. Bucknor claim.

14. *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VIII, pp. 188-196.

reported that Bulow “. . . objected to the troops occupying his place and manifested his opposition in a very decided manner. On our approach to his place he continued to fire upon us with a four-pounder, charged with powder, with the expectation, I presume, of preventing our going to his place”. Another witness states that “. . . so rude was he in his reception of the officers that they took possession of his house and would not admit him to their mess *at his own table*. He was pressed as a soldier, and, it is said, put under guard.”

Putnam's understanding of his orders was that he was not to protect any one plantation but to station his troops at the most strategic point for the aid of the whole region. He withdrew from Rosetta because he feared that the Indians might cut him off from his base at St. Augustine if he tried to occupy the more southerly position. He fortified Bulow Ville by forming a breastwork around the quarters with cotton-bales belonging to the estate; and also built a fort in front of the dwelling house with materials from the plantation.¹⁵

The Seminole War had now begun in earnest. On December 27 Major Dade and his command of a hundred and thirty-nine regular troops were surprised in the Great Wahoo swamp and all but two men were massacred.¹⁶ In the Halifax region several expeditions against the Indians were fitted out from what was now called Fort or Camp Bulow. The largest of these was on January 23 when Major Putnam took a detachment of the “Mosquito Roarers” south to what is now Port Orange to see if provisions could be found on the Dunlawton plantation for the troops and refugees at Bulow Ville. They

15. Bucknor claim.

16. Fairbanks, George R.: *History of Florida*. Jacksonville 1904 pp. 196-198.

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encountered the Indians in superior force and the undisciplined militia who, according to young James Ormond, "had never before heard a gun fired in anger" were forced to retreat to Bulow Ville, with nearly everyone wounded, including Putnam himself, and one negro killed. Bulow's hopefulness of the Indians' loyalty must have had a severe blow when he learned that the once friendly Coacoochee led the savages, his head adorned with reflectors taken from the lighthouse at the Inlet.¹⁷

A detachment of some forty-five men from St. Augustine conducted the wounded back there from Bulow Ville under cover of night.

After the retreat from Dunlawton the men were so worn out or dissatisfied that they requested permission to abandon the post at Bulow Ville. A few days later, according to the narrative of Lieutenant Cohen ". . . all of Bulow's, Williams's, DuPont's, and General Hernandez' negroes with such other property as could be removed were safely landed at Anastasia Island where the city authorities had directed that the negroes should be located. The troops then retired to St. Augustine. When the plantation-post was abandoned Bulow's carts, wagons and teams were all pressed to carry the soldiers' baggage and he was not permitted to put in them a single article."¹⁸

So the great Bulow plantation was left unprotected, standing alone in the surrounding wilderness where some of the few neighboring settlements were already smoking ruins.

On which day the savages made good their revenge on Fort Bulow is not known. The next de-

17. Ormond Reminiscences.

18. Cohen, M. M.: *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*. Charleston, 1836. p. 96; Bucknor claim.

scription of the plantation is in Lieutenant Cohen's narrative headed "Camp Bulow, Feb. 5th, 1836."

"Two days rations having been prepared Col. B. orders a move (fr. Camp Brisban). The line of march is taken up at 9 a.m. . . . for Bulow's plantation on which the Indians were reported to be in considerable force, having a stockade, swivel, etc. After a fatiguing march of twelve miles, rendered more so by the delays of the wagons, we arrived there, found no foe, took quiet possession of the plantation and a four-pounder, and encamped for the night.

"We gazed, not without regret, on a scene over which ruin brooded or stalked with no stealthy pace. The noble mill and mansion are utterly destroyed, and an extensive library of splendid works is scattered over the field, torn or fired, as if the Seminoles willed not that we should sip of the pleasant waters of the Pierian spring, 'the pure well of English undefiled', to the savage but a sealed fount. Here we rescued a Milton and Shakespeare and mean to make them companions of our otherwise weary way, the solaces of our heart-heavy hours. Think of one of these insensate sons of, the forest with a "Paradise Lost" or a "Hamlet", holding it up, looking at it, and trampling or burning it. What to him is the mighty English lion? What to him the sweet swan of Avon? In his hands they are just as a jewel of gold in the swine's snout, as Solomon saith." ¹⁹

In an interesting unpublished narrative called "Life in Camp and Field", owned by the St. Augustine Historical Society, Dr. J. Rhett Motte tells of camping by the still smoking ruins of Bulow Ville :

"We resumed our march through heavy sands

19. *Ibid.* 143.

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and occasional swamps succeeded by thick scrubs, until near dark, when the ruins of Bulow's noble mill and mansion pointed out our resting place for the night, having marched thirty miles since morning. We turned down the broad avenue, once flanked by noble oaks whose scathed and blackened trunks and leafless limbs alone remained to attest their former magnificence. On either side were extensive fields, most luxuriant once with richest sugar crops but now presenting a scene in which the demon of desolation stalked with unchecked sway.

"On our left arose through the calm twilight of a summer's eve the ruined arches and columns of the once stately sugar mill while before us lay a smouldering, ashy heap, the only vestige to show where once stood the hospitable mansion, before the dark demon of ruin commenced his riots. Amid these ruins we built our bivouac fires, the river Halifax smoothly gliding near through green meadows of pastoral beauty."²⁰

What became of the spoiled young man whose life had been so suddenly changed by the fortunes of war little is known beyond the bare fact of his death three months later on May 7th, 1836. The Ormond manuscript states that "He was wild and dissipated and after the way of all such came to an early end."²¹ There has been no record found of his death in St. Augustine nor is there any Bulow grave marked there except his father's. But there remains the tribute of Audubon's, "During the whole stay with Mr. Bulow, there was no abatement of his kindness, or his unremitting efforts to make me comfortable and to promote my researches. I shall ever feel

20. Motte, Dr. J. Rhett. : "Life in Camp and Field." MS in library of St. Augustine Historical Society.

21. Ormond Reminiscences.

grateful to one of the most deserving and generous of men." ²²

Since the younger Bulow left no heirs the plantation, according to his father's will, reverted to his sister, Mrs. Wm. G. Bucknor of New York, and her heirs, with her mother having a life interest in one-half.

After the seven years of Indian war was over various claims were presented to Congress for the value of plantations destroyed by the savages. The Bucknor heirs of the Bulow plantation presented theirs in due course, claiming that the value of the buildings and crops totalled eighty-two thousand dollars. Their detailed inventory included the harvested cotton and sugar crop still waiting to be shipped, and the new, partly grown crops. The testimony of Major Putnam and others proved that the plantation had been made into a fortified military post and as such, according to precedents set by claims near Fort Niagara for compensation after the War of 1812, had a valid claim.

The bill to meet the Bulow claim passed both the Senate and the House but never at the same session. So it finally lapsed.

Today deer, coon and wild turkey haunt the ruined mill. The stone inscribed "Bulow Ville, January 26th, 1831" was in place until May of 1938 when it was apparently pried out and stolen. At about the same time someone, rumoured to be a hunter of buried treasure with a radio metal detector, uncovered iron sluices that ran underground out of the mill and later carried them away.

Of the commodious plantation house beside the peaceful creek merely the outlines of the foundations are left with a scraggly oleander bush beside them

22. Herrick, *op. cit.* II, p. 15.