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CAPTAIN BUNCE'S TAMPA BAY FISHERIES,
1835-1840

by DOROTHY DODD

The known facts about William Bunce can be stated briefly. He was a sea captain from Baltimore,¹ who engaged in the mercantile business at Key West from August, 1824, until 1829.² In 1832 he was listed as a customs inspector in the Key West District.³ In the same year he commanded the small sloop *Associate*, out of Key West, in which George W. Murray, W. R. Hackley, and P. B. Prior visited Carlos bay and Charlotte Harbor to locate a site for a settlement on the Allagon Grant.⁴ Bunce's activities on the coast of southwest Florida naturally made him familiar with the Spanish fisheries of that region.

The business of supplying dried and salted fish for the Havana market was well established early in the English occupation (1763-1783) and must have carried over from the first Spanish period. Both Bernard Romans⁵ and James Grant Forbes⁶ describe the fisheries, which centered around Carlos bay, Charlotte Harbor, and Tampa bay, as being conducted by small vessels from Havana that made seasonal visits to the Florida coast. During the second Spanish period (1783-1821), permanent establishments were made from the Caloosahatchee river to Tampa bay. These establishments were run by a few Spaniards who intermarried with the Indians.

Commodore David Porter, in 1824, sent the U. S. schooner *Terrier* to investigate the Spanish fisheries in connection with his war against Caribbean pirates. Lieutenant Commander James M. McIntosh, captain of the

1. *Pensacola Gazette*, October 1, 1825.

2. H. Rep. 189. 30th Cong., 1st sess. [524], p. 36.

3. S. Doc. 154, 23rd Cong., 2d sess. [269], p. 35.

4. John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (1837), p. 289. The abortive settlement probably was the towns of Senybal and Murray, mentioned by Williams, p. 32, and incorporated by the Legislative Council in 1833 (Florida [Ter.], *Acts*, 1833, pp. 118, 119).

5. P. Lee Phillips, *Notes on the Life and Works of Bernard Romans* (1924), p. 124.

6. *Sketches Historical and Topographical of the Floridas* (1821), pp. 117, 118.

Terrier, described as follows a fishery on Punta Rosa key:

"The inhabitants . . . are Spaniards and Indians. The Spaniards are extensively engaged in fishing, making seines, or cultivating the soil. A considerable part of the key is cleared, and under fine culture of corn, pumpkins, and melons. There are nine neat well thatched houses, with an extensive shed for drying fish, and a store house for their salt and provisions. Ten or fifteen bushels of salt, a small cask containing a few gallons of molasses, with a little salt provisions, were all I could discover they had."

"There are also two other places of a similar kind," McIntosh continued, "one situated about a mile within the entrance of the Coosahata river, the other on a small key near the entrance of Boca Grande, or Charlotte harbour. . . . There are Spaniards living on this last key who have resided here for 30 years. . . . They have attached to each of these establishments a small schooner from 20 to 25 tons, and are licensed as fishing vessels by the Captain General of Cuba. . . ." ⁷

Seven years later, William A. Whitehead, collector of the Key West District, visited the Charlotte Harbor fisheries. "They appear to have been occupied by the Spaniards for a number of years prior to the cession of Florida to the United States as fishing places for the supply of the Havana market," he wrote, "the head fisherman having resided himself at one of them for forty-seven years. . . . At the four establishments, there may be 130 men, half of which number probably are Indians, and about 30 Indian women, with from 50 to 100 children. They live in palmetto huts, and in the most simple manner, their chief articles of food being the fish they catch. They salt and send to Havanna (each establishment having a small schooner for the purpose) from 6 to 8,000 quintals ⁸ annually, the usual price being from 3 to 4 dollars per quintal. Charlotte's harbor being within this district, their vessels regularly enter and

7. *Pensacola Gazette*, October 16, 1824.

8. A quintal equals 101.43 lbs.

clear at this port [Key West], paying their tonnage duty, and the supplies they may bring from Havana. The salt, with which they cure their fish, is also regularly imported."⁹

The "head fisherman" referred to by Whitehead was undoubtedly one Caldez, who lived on Toampe island, about five miles south of Boca Grande. He was, according to John Lee Williams, "a stout, healthy, old white-haired Spaniard, very industrious," who, in 1832, was said to be 90 years old. His business was sufficient to keep "two small schooners running to Havana with fish and turtle." His village, said Williams, "is built on the west end of the island and consists of from eighteen to twenty palmetto houses, mostly occupied by various branches of his numerous family." The Caldez family, like the inhabitants of the other fisheries or ranchos, lived principally on fish, turtle, and coonti - a diet that was supplemented by cuba corn, peas, melons, and such tropical fruits as coconuts, limes, and oranges.¹⁰

The exports of the four Charlotte Harbor fisheries in 1831 were valued at \$18,000. They consisted "of dried fish and fish roes, fish oil, and articles of American manufacture."¹¹ What the "articles of American manufacture" may have been is unknown, unless they were the birds, mentioned by Williams, which the Indians caught with "bird-lime from the juice of the Gum Elemi, which they call Gumbo-limbo," and "sent to the Havanna in neat willow cages."¹² Although we have no report at this time of fisheries at Tampa bay, which was not in the Key West district, there can be little doubt that similar ranchos were operated there as profitably as at Charlotte Harbor.

It is not surprising that this business should attract Yankee competition. New England seamen had fished in Florida waters since the change of flags, selling their live catch most profitably in Havana. In 1832, Americans began to dry and salt fish for that market, which ap-

9. H. Doc. 201, 22d Cong., 1st sess. [220], p. 2.

10. Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 25, 33, 294.

11. H. Doc. 201, 22d Cong., 1st sess. [220], p. 1.

12. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

parently could not be glutted with fish.¹³ It is not unlikely that William Bunce was one of the first Americans to enter this business. Certainly, in 1834, he established the rancho at the mouth of the Manatee river that is described in the following documents. At this and his subsequent fishery on Palm island, he employed Spaniards and Indians, a fact which seems to have caused the destruction of the latter. How far any actions of Bunce, himself, may have caused the destruction is hard to determine.

Soon after the start of the Seminole War an outcry arose against the Spanish fishermen, who were believed to be aiding and encouraging the Indians.¹⁴ Bunce, a leading citizen of Hillsborough county,¹⁵ does not appear to have been suspected at first of any subversive activity in spite of the fact that, as executor of the estate of Antonio Pachecho, he hired out the Negro Lewis as guide for Major Dade's ill-fated expedition.¹⁶ Indeed, he was described by an army officer in 1836 as "one of the most intelligent men on the coast . . . and highly respectable."¹⁷

In the summer of 1837 a report reached General Thomas S. Jesup, at third-hand and a full year late, of an incident that, if true, indicates that in the spring of 1836 Bunce advised the Indians to resist removal. Bunce's "talk" - as reported to Lieutenant J. A. Chambers by Jim Boy (Tustemuggy Emurthla), a friendly Seminole, who had it from Athlugee, a Creek, who had it from George, a nephew of Cloud, and Antonio, the Seminole Negro - was as follows: "Bunce told George and Antonio, you Indians are all fools, and have no sense; the whites only want to get you all in here [to Tampa bay], when they will send you away off to a very bad country, where all of your old people and children

13. H. Doc. 201, 22d Cong., 1st sess. [220], p. 2.

14. See *Floridian*, February 13, 1836; H. Doc. 78, 25th Cong., 2d sess. [323], pp. 320-323.

15. He was appointed one of the first justices of the peace for that county in 1834 and reappointed in 1836 (*Florida Legislative Council, Journal*, 1834, p. 38; 1836, pp. 114, 115).

16. H. Rep. 187, 30th Cong., 1st sess. [524], p. 2.

17. H. Doc. 78, 25th Cong., 2d sess. [323], p. 144.

will die. You Indians don't know anything about reading and writing, but I look into the papers and see it all. If you wait a little while, you will have plenty of people to come here and assist you. The reason the white people want to get you off from here as quick as they can, is, because they know if you remain that you will have people to come and assist you." According to Jim Boy, Bunce enjoined that his name be kept secret.¹⁸

Jesup immediately communicated this report to Joel R. Poinsett, secretary of war, in a letter of June 15, 1837. The statement was corroborated, he said, "by information received through other channels, but, as it comes through Indians and negroes, there is no testimony that would convict a white man." He, himself, seems to have been convinced, for he continued, "If the war should recommence, I am clearly of opinion that the individual whose name is mentioned in the statement should be removed from the country."¹⁹ On second thought, however, he wrote Poinsett on August 21, asking that his references to Bunce be considered confidential. Publication of the statement, he said, "without the explanations or defence of Captain Bunce, might inflict a serious injury on him, when he may be entirely innocent or only have talked imprudently."²⁰ Jesup had left Florida by the time hostilities recommenced. No evidence has been found that Bunce was ever called upon for an explanation.

Whatever his true relations with the Indians may have been, Bunce retained the respect and confidence of his white neighbors. In 1838, they elected him delegate to the St. Joseph Constitutional Convention from Hillsborough county. On January 11, 1839, he affixed his signature to Florida's first constitution.

This is the last action of Bunce's of which record has been found. General Armistead's reference, in his letter of January 9, 1845, to "sheds previously owned by Captn Bunce deceased" would seem to indicate that he died before the burning of his fishery in October 1840. Cer-

18. *Ibid.*, App., pp. 166, 167.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

tainly his death occurred before January 21, 1842, for in a letter of that date General Jesup referred to him as "the late Captain William Bunce, of Tampa Bay."²¹ On January 2, 1844, Henry Wright was appointed by the register of wills of Baltimore county, Maryland, as administrator of his estate.²² The documents that follow, from the United States Senate Files in the National Archives, were the result of Wright's efforts to recover damages from the United States for the burning of the Palm island fishery. He was successful to the extent that on March 3, 1847, Congress appropriated \$1,000 as compensation for the damage inflicted.²³

Territory of Florida)
 Hillsborough County) Ss

Personally appeared before me Edmond Lee, Judge of the county court for said county, Manuel Ollivella, who being duly sworn deposeth, that he was well and intimately acquainted with the late Captain William Bunce, and that in the year 1834, said Bunce established a fishery in that year at the mouth of the Manatee river in Tampa-bay, about thirty miles below Fort-Brook which was at that time & has since been my residence. Said Bunce continued the business at that place untill compeled to remove from there by the commencement of Indian hostilitys in the autumn of 1845 [*sic*]. The outlay for this fishery as stated to me by said Bunce, consisting of numerous fishing boats, canoes, seins, fishing tackle, buildings and every [thing] necessary, including a smack & a small sloop, calculated in all for the employment of one hundred & fifty men, was about eight thousand dollars, and the anual profits were estimated at between five & six thousand dollars nett. In the year 1836 the danger of his position from hostile Indians compelled him to move this large establishment from the main land

21. H. Rep. 187, 30th Cong., 1st sess. [524], p. 3.

22. Record Book of Hillsborough County, Territory of Florida, 1838-1846 (typed copy by Florida Historical Records Survey, 1938, from original MS. owned by D. B. McKay, Tampa, Fla.), p. 413.

23. 9 U. S. Stat. 703.

to an Island near the mouth of Tampa-bay known as Palm Island, leaving therefore his original place with all its buildings, wharf & improvements untill a prospect of security should enable him to return to it, he was compeled to incur a new all the expenses of erecting the same number of buildings, and clearing the land, building a wharf &c &c, at an expense at between one thousand & fifteen hundred dollars. Having again renewed this establishment, his business was renewed with equal success and profit, and with flatering prospects of increasing prosperity, the distruction of this establishment by order of General Armstead in 1840 by fire & the previous burning of his buildings at the mouth of the Manatee, by officers of Commodore Dallas squadron in 1837 completely blasted his prospects and subjected him to loss injury & damage, which beyond the costs of the buildings, could not be less than ten thousand dollars. It is proper to add that no charge of misconduct on the part of Captn. Bunce or his people in his employ was alledged as the cause of the burning either the Rancho or fishing establishment, but on the contra he & his people were loyal to the Government, many of them being employed in important trusts, & conformed in all respects to the military regulations and requirements & the laws of the Territory. My acquaintance with said Bunce was of the most friendly & neighborly character having resided for months in the same house. Deponent further deposeth that he has no interest in the beforenamed establishments nor has he any interest in any business pecuniary or otherwise with the Heirs of the late captain Bunce, other than a desire to do justice to a worthy, enterprising, industrious, honest and energetic man and do justice to his children, further deponent sayeth not.

(signed) MANUEL OLIVELLA

Sworn to before me & subscribed at Fort Brook Tampa, May 6." -1844-

EDMOND LEE, Judge
H. C. C.

Territory of Florida)

Monroe County)

Personally appeared before me Stephen R. Mallory Judge of the court for Monroe County Fielding A Brown Merchant at Key West, who, being duly sworn deposeth that he was intimately acquainted with the late Captain William Bunce of Tampa Bay Hillsborough county Territory of Florida, and that he sayd. Brown was the sole Agent for said Bunce for many years, was well acquainted with sayd. Bunces business & with his fishery (or Rancho) at the mouth of Manatee River & on Palm Key & for which he say^d Brown acted as Agent making purchases for & receiving returns for sale of the fish for said rancho, was well acquainted with the profits arising from say^d business prior to the rancho on Palm Key being burned & say^d business being broken up by said burning and that the buildings burned down & distroyed, were worth & cost one thousand dollars or more & that the business of said fishery yeilded a yearly nett income of between five and six thousand dollars & that the business would have increased the income, had said Bunce not have been disturbed & broken up in his business. Said Brown further deposeth that he has no interest in any way in said fishery or rancho, further deponent sayeth not.

F. A. BROWN

S. R. MALLORY

Judge of the county court, M C Fa
at Chambers
Key West April 3^d 1844

Territory of Florida)

Hillisborough County)

) Ss

Personally appeared before me Edmond Lee, Judge of the county court for said county, Manuel Oliguela, who being duly sworn deposeth that he resided in the fall (October) of the year eighteen hundred and forty on Palm Key (near the mouth of Tampa Bay) at the Rancho

or Fishery of the late Capt. William Bunce, that the Tom Salmond steamer, Michael Frederick Master arrived at the Key with a detachment of United States troops, under command of Capt. S. M. Plummer landed on said Key & proceeded forthwith to burn all the buildings belonging belonging *[sic]* to said Rancho or fishery, without allowing deponent & others time to save what vegetables melon & corn they had growing, said Commanding Officer having been solicited to allow a few moments which was positively refused. Also that said Rancho consisted of dwellings store & boat houses &c, in all forty buildings and that said deponent was ordered to set fire to the buildings, which order he positively refused to comply with Said deponent did accompany Capt Bunce to the Key at the time he located there and remained there to reside untill the destruction of the buildings aforesaid further deponent sayeth not

Sworn & subscribed to)

before me, Fort Brook)	his
Tampa May 6" 1844)	Manuel X Oliguela
EDMUND LEE Judge HCC	mark

Territory of Florida)

Alachua County) Ss

Personally appeared before me John G Putnam a justice of the peace for said county John J. W. Wiese who being duly sworn deposeth that he was well acquainted with the late Capt William Bunce & also with his rancho or fishery on Palm Key, in the Bay of El Spirito Santo commonly called Tampa Bay and has often been at said Rancho was well acquainted with its location Also that in or about the month of October in the year One thousand Eight hundred & forty, A. D. he was on board of the Steamer Tom Salmond Michael Frederick Master at which time Capt S M Plummer U. S Army with a detail of U S Troops under his orders was on board on that said Steamer proceeded from Fort Brook, E Fa to Palm

Key, that then and there said Capt S M Plummer did land with command on said Key), that the buildings were standing at the time of the landing of said Capt. S. M Plummer and that the buildings of said Rancho were burned & distroyed directly after the landing of said party. The buildings although of cheap materials except the dwelling house of Capt Bunce could not have cost less (in their erection alone) than fifteen hundred Dollars, there being at said Rancho about Thirty buildings more or less, besides a covered wharf for the security & repairing of boats; said deponent understood at the time of the destruction, that it was done to prevent liquor smugglers from harboring there and not from any malconduct of the fishermen residing at and belonging to said rancho furthermore that deponent has not any interest pecuniary or otherwise in said Rancho

JOHN J. W. WEISE

We the undersigned do hereby certify that we are well acquainted with Mr John J. W. Wiese, that he has for some years been a resident of these Keys & that he is respectable & a man of veracity & standing.

Ceder Keys May 3rd 1844) J G PUTNAM
) M C BROWN
) Witnesses E H RICHARDS

Sworn to before me and)
subscribed to this third day)
of May 1844 at Ceder Keys Fa)
)
J. G. PUTNAM J P)

Upperville
January 9" 1845

Dear Sir

I received your letter of the 4" Inst and have in reply to state to you and those concerned, that in the summer of 1840 while I had to command the Army, I ordered some sheds previously owned by Captn Bunce deceased to be burned, these buildings thatched with Palmetto, and situated on Palm Island, they were at the time I havd [?] them burned (distroyed) as a cover and hiding

