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A SOLDIER'S VIEW OF THE SEMINOLE WAR, 1838-39

by WILLIAM D. HOYT, JR.

Three letters from James B. Dallam, a soldier in the United States Army engaged in the war with the Seminole Indians, provide an interesting view of conditions in Florida in 1838-39 and of the progress of operations there during a lull in the fighting.¹ Written from three different posts-Fort Harllee, Fort Clinch, and Tampa Bay-the epistles describe events over a period of six months and refer hopefully to the prospects of peace. Sandwiched between accounts of negotiations with the Indians are accounts of the country itself, with considerable praise for the healthy climate and fine soil, and also the prediction that "after the war Florida property will be in great demand." When Dallam was writing, the battle at Okeechobee was several months in the past, and matters were drifting along more or less smoothly, with the next outbreak of violence some time in the future.²

James Baxter Dallam (1806-39) was the son of Josias William Dallam, of Hartford county, Maryland, and his second wife, Henrietta Jones. He enlisted in the army at an early age and was stationed in various parts of the country, including Wisconsin. He did not live to take up the Florida land he wrote about, for he was among those killed in July 1839, just a month after the last letter printed here. Francis Johnson Dallam (1787-1857), the addressee, was James Dallam's older half-brother, had recently concluded fifteen years of service as city collector of Baltimore, and was cashier of the Citizens bank of that metropolis.

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1. The original letters are among the Dallam Papers in The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. The portions omitted contain references to family matters entirely unconnected with Florida.
 2. The murder of eighteen of the thirty men in Lt. Col. William S. Harney's detachment near the Caloosahatchie river on July 22, 1839, abruptly ended negotiations for peace and the war was continued for three more years.

The letters follow:

Fort Harlee ³ E. F. November 3d 1838

Dear Brother-

. . . . We had a large assembly of the Principal Characters in Florida here a day or two since (30th ult) the General commanding three Colonels and seven Captains, when the affairs of the war were discussed an[d] we are all in hopes of the war ending this winter-in fact if present appearances are any sign of coming events the war cannot last longer than the Spring. Some of the most influential chiefs have come in and others are on their way to Tampa including the renowned *Sam Jones*. The inhabitants are going back to their farms and a gentleman from Micanopy informed me that there was no danger to be apprehended in this section of the country as he had been lately in the heart of the Nation (on the Withlacooche) and that he saw some Indians who told him the war was over. Genl. Taylor has succeeded admirably in gain[ing] the confidence of the Indians (friendly as well as hostile) and had the war been conducted at the first of his plan, it would not have lasted a year. ⁴ He says that it is impossible to drive them from the Swamps (and every unprejudiced person must agree with him) and that the only method of getting rid of them is to coax them off. the word *coax* may seem strange to be used by a General but you know that more towns have been gained by money than arms and I am certain from what I know of the country that no other way can be successful.

We shall move (by we I mean the troops) from this in three days to Fort Clinch near the mouth of the Withlacooche where five companies of the first Regiment are

3. Fort Harlee was in Alachua county, just north of Waldo and on the Santa Fe river. It was established in March 1837, and was abandoned in November 1838, just after the writing of this letter.
4. Zachary Taylor (1784-1850) led the troops which defeated the Indians at Okeechobee on December 25, 1837. He was made commander of the Florida department in May, 1838, and continued in that post until 1840.

ordered with one company of Dragoons to scour the country from the Suwanee River southward down the Gulf. I expect to be there during the winter please direct your letters hereafter to Whitesville or Gary's Ferry as I have made arrangements with the Postmaster there to forward all my letters.

I had written thus far when the mail came in and brought me two Baltimore papers. in the American of 24th October I see an article headed Florida which is false in all its details except the health of the troops. there has been no hostile meeting of the whites and Indians since last April except on the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia. a large number of Indians are in at Tampa between 3 and 4 hundred with some of the principal chiefs and great reliance is placed in their promises of getting all the Indians to come in and by the best authority there are not over five hundred warrio[r]s in the Territory. Coosa Tustinugger Sam Janes sub chief who is in at Tampa says that all will come in except Wild Cat the Indian that was so harshly treated by Ge[n]l Jessup and who escaped from the Prison at St. Augustine.⁵ the Army and the Inhabitants generally have the utmost confidence in the ability of Genl Taylor to conclude the war and if he is not too much harrassed by the only heavy drag to his operations (the Major Genl) he will be certain of closing the war in a short time-. . . .

Believe me

Your affectionate Brother

J. B. DALLAM

Fort Clinch⁶ E. F. November 30th 1838

Dear Brother-

. . . . You ask me how I like Florida &c. So well that

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5. Wild Cat was among the Indian chiefs imprisoned in October, 1837, by Gen. Thomas Jesup (1788-1860), Taylor's predecessor in command of the army in Florida. Wild Cat escaped from St. Augustine, returned to his people, and carried on the work of Osceola, who had died while in prison.
 6. Fort Clinch was on the Withlacoochee river about eighteen miles from its mouth. It was established in October 1836, and served as an army post until June 1842.

should the First Regiment remain in Florida after the war I shall undoub[t]edly permanently establish here. As I have been better pleased with it than any country I have ever visited Wisconsin excepted. Florida as far as my own experience extends is as healthy as any other part of the United States. the regiment of U. S. Troops to which I am attached has now been in Florida for more than a year and during that period there has been but five deaths in it and those broken down drunkards who had the seeds of disease in them before arriving. the Regiment has been stationed over the whole country from Tampa Bay to Trader's Hill in Ga. and most of the companies [have] been hard at work all summer building Forts so that you perceive that the country cannot be very unhealthy. as for Climate I think it the most delightful in the world as when this summer the Thermometer stood at Fort Harlee in the shade at 104 and after being exposed 15 minutes to the sun rose to 155 I did not feel the heat as sensible as I have at Prairie du Chien and the same night had to use a Blanket to be comfortable. Fort Harlee is not affected by the sea breeze which makes the weather so delightful on the eastern coast where it prevails-still I have no doubt that there are years in which Florida is unhealthy judging by past years, as I have been told that whenever there is a wet spring that the months of August and September are sure to very unhealthy-The quality of the Land is very variable having seen some very superior and other not worth the trouble of examination.

Hammock Land is considered to be the best but I have seen some excellent farms made in the pine barrens but do not think that the soil can bear more than two or three crops without wearing out-All parts of Florida produce fine sugar cane and cotton but corn and sweet potatoes appear to be the products of the people who now reside here. Florida is emphatically the poor and lazy man's home. I have no doubt but that after the war Florida property will be in great demand and sell much higher than western. I shall speculate a little myself. Should you have any notion of purchasing property in

Florida I would refer you to Col Christopher Andrews of Washington City who will & can give you the best information on the subject as he has travelled all over the country and made numerous purchases

Believe me

Your affectionate Brother

J. B. DALLAM

Tampa Bay June 18th 1839

Dear Brother-

. . . . I leave here tomorrow for the southern part of the peninsula having been appointed sole Indian trader with the Indians under the treaty lately had by Genl Macomb with them at Fort King⁷ - Should the treaty have been entered into by them in good faith I have no doubt of doing something handsome this summer. The Indians who have been carried on the War are divided into three parties those in Middle Florida being the runaway Creeks who are at present committing depredations near Tallahass the Tallasses who inhabit near the Wilklacoochee and Suwanee rivers who are also committing murders and the Seminoles and Micasaukees who inhabit the Southern part of Florida. These Indians have never been met with by any of our forces since the battle of Ochechobee as they then retired to the everglades where our troops could not penetrate and no demonstration having been made against them since that time as our troops have been constantly engaged protecting the frontier from the Creeks and Tallassis. And it is therefore natural to suppose they have all the money in their possession that was known to be among them and they must also have a great quantities of hides and

7. Alexander Macomb (1782-1841) was the senior major general and commander of the United States Army. He had been in Florida briefly in 1836, and was sent back in the spring of 1839 to complete negotiations with the Indians. The treaty mentioned in Dallam's letter was nullified by the murder of Harney's men a month later.

skins collected since they have been quiet and my being the exclusive trader⁸ at the post located for that purpose will bring all those who are inclined to conform to the treaty to my store as from the appearance of those I saw at Fort King during the treaty they must be wretchedly off for clothing the Genl wishes me to take every article suitable for them except powder and lead

I should like very much to do something for Edward⁹ as I believe Baltimore is the worst city in the Union to bring up a young man in and as soon as our regiment is located out of Florida I will be able to afford him a fine opportunity. The posts of Baton Rouge and New Orleans are supposed to be the ones to which the regiment will be ordered as soon as the Florida war is over when as we have to keep a number of clerks if you and Edward are willing I will come on for him. I would like to have him now but the morals of this section of Florida where all the *canaille* of the army are congregated are of rather too loose a character to introduce any young man of a warm temperament-

Believe me

Your affectionate Brother

J. B. DALLAM

The attack on Col. Harney's detachment, in which Dallam was killed, is thus described by Sprague :¹⁰ "Lieutenant-Colonel Harney . . . proceeded to Charlotte's Harbor to establish the trading-house for the convenience of the Indians While there he was attacked in the most treacherous manner and his command murdered in their beds. Mr. Dalham [the name is thus throughout all the reports] and Mr. Morgan accompanied him with a large supply of Indian goods. The Indians visited the

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8. In the several reports the name occurs as *Dalham* and he is referred to as "sutler."
 9. Edward Boothby Dallam was Francis J. Dallam's second son. The proposal to have him take up a clerk's position with the army in the South fell through completely after the death of his uncle James.
 10. John T. Sprague, "*The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War.*" New York, 1848. p. 233.

camp for several days previous in a most friendly manner. At the dawn of day a simultaneous attack was made by two hundred and fifty Indians The surprise was complete. . . . Those not murdered in their beds fled to the river, when they were shot down in the water. Colonel Harney escaped by swimming to the fishing smacks The whole party consisted of thirty men, of whom about twenty-four were killed, among them Mr. Dalham and Mr. Morgan. Negroes Sampson and Sandy, interpreters, were taken prisoners. Sampson was detained a prisoner two years, when he effected his escape."

Sampson later told of the attack:¹¹ "I accompanied Lieutenant-Colonel Harney to the Caloshatchee river. He went there for the purpose of establishing an Indian trading house. Mr. Dalham and Morgan were along with the Indian goods I slept in the store, Mr. Dalham and Mr. Morgan were outside; one in a bunk the other in a hammock. Just at the break of day I heard the yell of Indians and the discharge of rifles; and as I ran out I found they were all around us. Mr. Dalham lay dead under his hammock"

Thus the Seminole War, which had again been declared at an end, was renewed.

11. *Ibid.* p. 316.