


1948

## Robert E. Lee in Florida

Karl A. Bickel

 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](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Bickel, Karl A. (1948) "Robert E. Lee in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 27 : No. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol27/iss1/6>

## ROBERT E. LEE IN FLORIDA

by KARL A. BICKEL

The career of General Robert E. Lee is so overwhelmingly associated with the valleys of Virginia and the great and decisive battles of the Civil War that his very real personal interest in Florida and the fact that as one of the commission of United States Army officers in 1849 he made a detailed and personal examination of the entire coast line of Florida from Pensacola to Jacksonville and Fernandina, has been largely obscured. During this tour of inspection as secretary of the commission, he recorded the results of the examination of every bay, river mouth of any importance, or estuary, and with his brother officers reported not only upon the military significance of these but likewise commented upon their present and possible commercial or agricultural future.

This document, entitled "Report of the Board of Engineers Upon Their Examination of the West and East Coast of Florida, from Pensacola Harbor to Amelia Island," is now in the files of the National Archives in Washington. The writer's interest in the Florida portion of General Lee's career was aroused by a brief paragraph in Douglas Southall Freeman's extraordinarily interesting and historically important *Robert E. Lee, A Biography*, in which he referred to the expedition.

This suggested letters to the War Department, the Library of Congress, and finally through the friendly and very helpful cooperation of both, to the National Archives. Thereupon, after a considerable search, the War Records Office of the National Archives revealed in the records of the Chief of Engineers the original *Report* from Colonel Robert E. Lee, March 12, 1849, making certain recommendations for military reservations along the Florida coast, as well as the general report of the Board of Engineers hitherto mentioned. The instructions from the War Department constituting the Board were

---

NOTE-This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Florida Historical Society on February 6 last.

issued by General James E. Totten, Chief Engineer, on September 8, 1848.

Colonel Lee was made the Recorder for the Board ; and the later report, completed at the conclusion of the survey and dated Savannah, Ga. March 14th, 1849, is in his handwriting.

On January 15th General Lee, visiting in Baltimore, wrote General Totten, Chief of Engineers:

Sir: Since my arrival in this city I have learned that there is a map of a portion of the coast of East and West Florida, made some years since by a party of officers of the Corps of Topographical Engineers and published in three sheets, giving the result of surveys of that coast east of Mobile with the details of several harbors viz, St. Josephs, Apalachicola, etc. in reference possibly to the contemplated canal across the isthmus of Florida. I have to request if possible a copy of said map for the use of the Board of Engineers Officers now on the way to examine the Florida coast. If the map in question can be mailed tomorrow (16th.) directed to Col. DeRussy at Charleston, S. C., it will overtake them there. If it does not overtake the Board at that point it will be left at the P. O. where it must be forwarded.

Very respectfully your Obedient Servant,  
R. E. Lee, Lt. Col. & Recorder

The map, according to a letter to Lee from General Totten, dated Washington, January 16th., was mailed to Col. DeRussy at Mobile, not Charleston, on that day. He further remarked that if a copy of the map of the State of Florida compiled in 1846 and then in the Topographical Bureau could be obtained, it would also be sent to Mobile.

In reply to a request that it would be interesting to see if the maps sent the Board could be located, the National Archives, with a patience and pertinacity that seemingly always exists in the hearts of a true historical researcher, went into a long and exhausting search for

the maps. There was some slight confusion at the start as to just what map or maps Colonel Lee and General Totten had referred to, but this finally was cleared up and W. L. G. Joerg, Chief of the Cartographic Records Branch, Natural Resources Records Division, wrote :

The maps have been found. The map requested by Lee in his letter of January 15th., 1849 is ambiguously identified by his reference to "details of several harbors viz, St. Josephs, Apalachicola, etc." although the "some years since" of Lee's letter turns out to be 1829. As to be expected from Lee's reference to East and West Florida, in the old territorial sense, the map does not include the entire peninsula but only goes south as far as Tampa Bay and Indian River.

Negative photostats of this map have been placed in the library of the Florida Historical Society.

#### *Other Visits to Florida*

Lee apparently visited Florida four times during his life. His father, General Harry Lee, returning from the West Indies where he had been for some months recovering his health, had landed on his return at Cumberland Island, Georgia, where at Dungeness was the estate of his old Commander, General Nathaniel Green. Here General Harry Lee was most kindly cared for and here he died on March 15, 1818. He was buried here in the plantation garden. In 1862 the plantation was owned by a great nephew of General Green, a Mr. Nightengale.

Late in 1861 Gen. Lee was assigned to the command of the department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, and in a letter to his wife dated Coosawahatchie, S. C., January 18, 1862, he writes,

While at Fernandina I went over to Cumberland Island and walked to Dungeness, the former residence of General Green. It was my first visit to the house, and I had the gratification at length of visiting my father's grave. He died there, you may recol-

lect, on his way from the West Indies, and was interred in one corner of the family cemetery. The spot is marked by a plain marble slab with his name, age and date of his death. The garden was beautiful, enclosed by the finest hedge I have ever seen. It was of wild olive.

This was apparently General Lee's second trip to Fernandina. In a letter to his wife dated Savannah, November 18, 1861, he writes, "This is the first moment I have had to write you and I am now waiting the call to breakfast on my way to Brunswick, Fernandina, etc." Later, writing from Savannah on November 22, 1861, to his daughters, Lee states, "This is my second visit to Savannah. I have been down the coast to visit Amelia Island to examine the defenses. They are poor indeed. I hope the enemy will be polite enough to wait for us."

This was Lee's last appearance in Florida as a soldier. In the early part of March 1862 he was recalled to Richmond by President Davis and was assigned on March 13th, under the direction of the President, "to the conduct of the military operations of the armies of the Confederate States."

### *His Last Visit to Florida*

During the winter and spring of 1870 Gen. Lee's health was impaired and he was persuaded to take a trip into the deep South. He left Lexington with his daughter on March 24. At Raleigh, Charlotte, and Salisbury there were bands and speeches and banquets.

"We spent the night in the sleeping car" his daughter Agnes wrote her mother on April 3 from Savannah, "very handsome and comfortable but the novelty, I suppose, made us wakeful. I think we will go to Florida in a few days."

But they were still in Savannah on April 17, when Lee, writing again to his "dear Mary," said, "Tomorrow I expect to go to Florida and will stop at Amelia Island. Visitors to that region coming out say that the

weather is uncomfortably hot. If I find it so I shall return."

The record of this last visit to Florida, as contained in his letters, is not long. He visited Cumberland Island again and went up the St. Johns River nearly to Palatka, spending a night at the home of Col. Robert G. Cole near there, after which the entire party returned to Savannah. Col. Cole had been a member of General Lee's staff during the time he was in command of the Army of Virginia and they were close friends. In a letter to his wife dated Savannah, April 18, he wrote,

I returned from Florida Sunday, April 16th, having had a very pleasant trip as far as Palatka on the St. Johns. We visited Cumberland Island, and Agnes decorated my father's grave with beautiful fresh flowers. I presume it is the last time that I shall be able to pay to it my tribute of respect. The cemetery is unharmed and the grave is in good order, although the house at Dungeness has been burned and the island devastated. Mr. Nightengale, the present proprietor, accompanied me from Brunswick. We spent a night at Col. Cole's, a beautiful place near Palatka and ate oranges from the trees. We passed some other beautiful places on the river but could not stop at any place but Jacksonville, where we remained from 4 P. M. to 3 A. M. next morning, rode over the town and were hospitably entertained by Col. Sanderson. The climate was delightful, the fish inviting and abundant.

That was General Lee's farewell to Florida. It could scarcely have been more happily phrased. He died at Lexington, Virginia on October 10 the same year.

The Cole home, visited by Gen. Lee in 1870, was on the east bank of the St. Johns several miles south of Federal Point, at Orange Mills. It was the pre-Civil War home of Col. Cole's brother, Archibald H. Cole, who was associated with David Levy Yulee in the building of the Florida Railroad from Fernandina to Cedar Key. The

old place has disappeared. The house burned about 1900, and the orange grove of several thousand trees was completely destroyed in the freezes of 1895 and 1899. But it is recalled by a nephew of Col. Cole, a director of the Florida Historical Society: Facing the river, with moss-hung live oaks between, it had its own wharf where the river steamers stopped to add to their cargoes of oranges. So Gen. Lee did not go to Palatka, but could land at the front door of his host.

The Palatka *Herald* of April 20, 1870, says:

General Lee paid our county a visit on the last trip of the Nick King. He spent the night with Colonel Cole at Orange Mills. Our citizens would have been glad to have had the honor of his presence, but in this they were disappointed. Whether here, or in Virginia, General Lee will live in the hearts of his countrymen.

#### *The Cruise and the Report*

General Lee is known to have written letters to his family from the schooner Phenix, the vessel provided by the Government for the cruise and which the commission boarded at Mobile. These letters, five in number, are owned by descendants and are still held from publication although the family have been generous in permitting historians to read them. They were written between February 1, and March 18, 1849. The first was mailed from Mobile, the second dated February 2, was mailed from Apalachicola, the third was mailed at Cedar Keys February 13, the fourth dated February 22, was dated at Key West and the fifth from St. Augustine March 18. The report itself indicates that Lee visited Fort Brooke, Tampa Bay, and probably St. Marks, Key West and the Miami area on Biscayne Bay. It seems certain that the commissioners did not remain on board the Phenix during the relatively long stays in these ports. A photostat of the Report of the Board of Engineers upon their examination of the West and East coast of

Florida, a typed copy of the same, have been deposited in the library of The Florida Historical Society at St. Augustine. Typed, it amounts to some 36 pages. It is clear, concise and, while frequently technical, is often generally interesting in its comment upon current commercial conditions along the coast and the references which Lee included as to its present and future commercial possibilities.

Sketching very rapidly the situation at Pensacola, which had been previously surveyed by the army engineers, the Board commented upon the situation at Apalachicola, noting its healthy climate and the fact it was already quite "navigable for light steamers." Apalachicola, Lee noted, contained a population of 1,500 and for the year ending Sept. 2, 1847 had imports valued at \$2,661,000 and exports of \$5,435,789. Cotton, the principal item, had been exported to the extent of 160,000 bales. The occupation of the west end of St. George Island by a military work was urged as a preliminary step towards complete protection.

At St. Marks, the report states that the export that year had amounted to 30,000 bales of cotton. The Board recommended that the old Spanish fort at St. Marks be reserved for a defense site. Off Cedar Keys the Board observed that the Suwannee was navigated for 200 miles by light steamers. Cedar Keys exported 2,234 bales of cotton and 2,000 bales of hides and skins that year.

Tampa Bay, Mullet Key, Egmont Key, Longboat Key and the mouth of the Manatee received the Board's attention. The Board was obviously impressed with the possibilities of Tampa Bay, yet it was a difficult position to defend. The Board recommended the reservation of keys at the Bay's mouth for future works, the erection of a work on Egmont Key, and further study.

The coast, they noted, south of Tampa off Sarasota, was "bolder" than to the north of Tampa. The inspection of Charlotte Harbor was detailed but in the end the Board made no recommendations as to defensive



works. From Cape Romano to Cape Sable no recommendations were made.

It is obvious that the attention of the Board was definitely aroused by the situation they found at Biscayne Bay. Its importance, they stated, from both a military and commercial viewpoint, was based upon the excellence of its position.

"When surveys are completed the erection of defensive works at this point may become important to complete the system commenced at Cay West and Tortugas."

The Board accepted Fort Marion as sufficient for the needs of St. Augustine and then passed on to a study of the mouth of the St. Johns River and Jacksonville.

"The commerce of the St. Johns," said the report, "is such that it may soon require protection." Stating that they believed future surveys were important, they advanced the opinion that a military work on Baton Island would "probably prevent an attack upon Jacksonville."

In conclusion the Board recommended that St. George's Sound and Tampa Bay receive first attention from the Government. Following that, they urged action on Biscayne Bay, Cedar Keys and the St. Johns River. Thirdly, they recommended works at St. Joseph's Sound, St. Marks River and Charlotte Harbor.