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AN ARCHEOLOGIST AT FORT GADSDEN

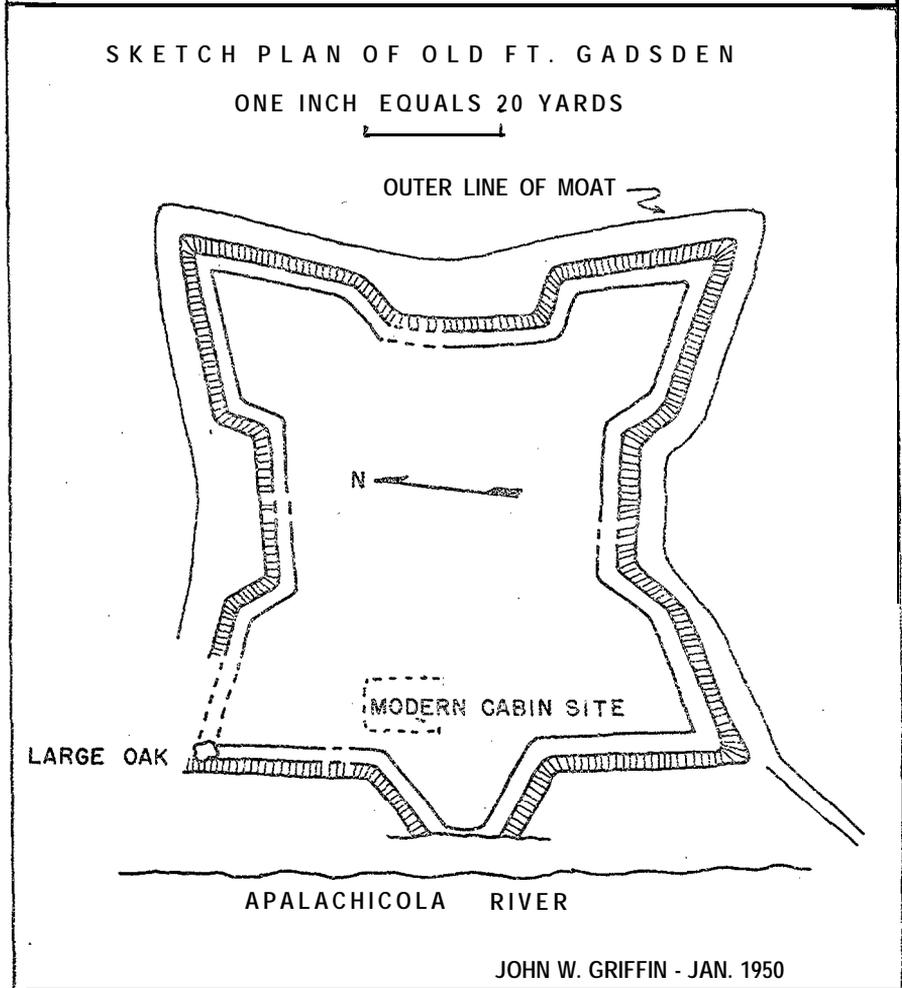
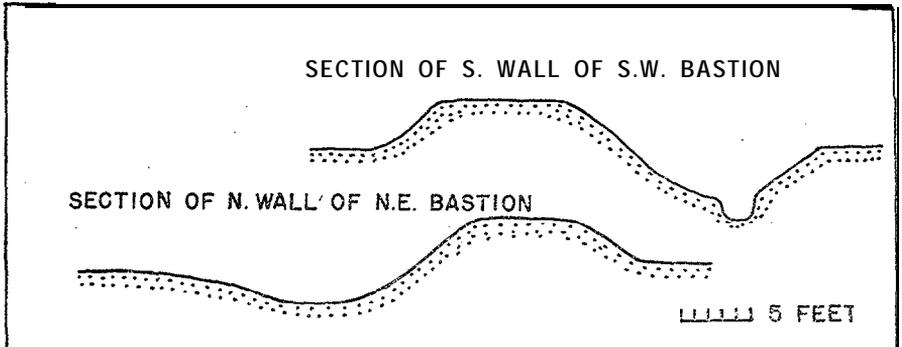
by JOHN W. GRIFFIN

While the search for documentary evidence and the writing of articles and monographs on the history of Florida finds continued and increasing interest, the locations in Florida at which historic events occurred often lie neglected and all but forgotten. Such was the case of Fort Gadsden, a monument to the War of 1812 and to Andrew Jackson's military forays into Spanish Florida. Recently, however, the United States Forest Service became interested in preserving and marking this structure as a historic site, and asked for the cooperation of the Florida Park Service in undertaking the background study necessary in such a program.

Thus it was that the writer spent several days at the site of Fort Gadsden in January 1950. The report which follows is based on this field work at the site, and is preliminary in nature since the time devoted to the project was sufficient for laying plans for the intelligent development of the site, but insufficient for a full study of the historic archeology.

Fort Gadsden lies on the east bank of the Apalachicola river on lands of the Apalachicola National Forest in Franklin county. It stands on Prospect Bluff, which fronts the river for about a mile, and is the most southerly bluff on the river with a good land approach. The fort is toward the southern end of the bluff, only several hundred yards north of the swamps bordering Fort Gadsden creek.¹ The last half mile to the site is now woods road, but to that point access is by paved or graded road.

1. The actual location is in the NE 1/4 of the SW 1/4 of Section 23, T 6 S, R 8 W.



HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Fortunately for our work, Dr. Mark F. Boyd had gathered and published much of the material on the history of Prospect Bluff.² Since this material is readily available in the *Quarterly*, only the briefest historical sketch will be offered here.

In 1804 James Innerarity, a partner in the firm of John Forbes & Co., successors to Panton, Leslie & Co., established a trading post at Prospect Bluff, probably somewhere in the neighborhood of Brickyard Landing, to the north of the later fort site. The post was in operation at the time that Col. Nicholls of the British Army began construction of a fort on the bluff in 1814. This fort, which was constructed as a British base, in Spanish territory, during the War of 1812, was an extensive affair with about seven acres included within its defenses. A map, prepared in 1818 by Capt. Gadsden of the United States Army, and published by Dr. Boyd, gives the outlines of the British fort, as well as the plan of later Fort Gadsden.³

When the British withdrew from Florida following the War of 1812, they left the fort and its contents in the hands of a group of runaway slaves and Indians. These latter included both Choctaw and Seminole, and probably a number of Upper Creek as well. All of the occupants were distinctly antagonistic to the United States, and raids from the fort upon the American frontier led to the decision to liquidate the post.

In 1816 a joint Army-Navy force descended upon the fort. After determining the range with cold shot, the naval vessels began using hot shot. The first round of hot shot from one of the gunboats penetrated the magazine, exploding it, and killing about 270 of the

2. See Mark F. Boyd, "Events at Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River, 1808-1818", *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 55-96, October, 1937. This article contains a copy of Gadsden's map of 1818. See, also, Capt. James Gadsden's report on the defenses of the Floridas to General Jackson, reprinted in the *Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4, April, 1937. The present historical sketch is drawn from Dr. Boyd's paper.

3. Page 73 of Dr. Boyd's article, referred to above.

occupants outright. The vast majority of the remainder were wounded, and the so-called Negro Fort ceased to be a menace. This magazine explosion stands as one of the major mass catastrophes in Florida history.

The area was apparently abandoned until 1818, when General Jackson ordered the construction of the fort which he named Fort Gadsden. The plan of this fort, as previously mentioned, is to be seen on an 1818 map. An American garrison was maintained here, deep in Spanish territory, until the cession of Florida to the United States. The fort is one of the few places in Florida which can positively be associated with the actual presence of Andrew Jackson.

Soon after the American occupation of Florida, a townsite, Colinton, was laid out surrounding the fort, but apparently was never developed. During the Civil War, a Confederate post was maintained at the fort, and in more recent years a cabin, now destroyed, was located inside the embankments and the fort interior was planted in garden. Repeated visits by treasure and relic seekers have disturbed much of the area. Today, fishermen and hunters come to the site, as well as an occasional person interested in history.

INVESTIGATIONS

Although our investigations were brief, and of necessity preliminary, certain observations were made and certain problems were encountered which may be worthy of record.

Some traces of the older British fort remain. The outer trenches (see Gadsden's map for their outline) are in evidence, but the large eastern bastions, said to have been 15 feet high and 18 feet thick, were not noted. We might postulate that the Americans, who built a smaller fort, did not care to have these embankments available to possible attackers, and so leveled them. This is, however, supposition, unsupported by documentation. The area of the so-called Negro Fort, centering at the octagonal earthwork of the Gadsden map, is now marked by an irregular mound of sand several hundred feet

east of Fort Gadsden. The mound is about 100 feet in diameter and several feet high, and is surrounded by a trench. Presumably this was the location of the ill-fated magazine.

Most of our time was spent at Fort Gadsden itself, where the well-preserved earthworks were measured and plotted. A map of our field observations has been prepared and accompanies this report.

Except for an area on the north side which has been leveled to provide automotive and wagon access to the interior, the fort is completely outlined by earthworks. In form and size the outline conforms exactly to the plan on Gadsden's map of 1818, but at that time only the west, or river, side was an embankment; the other sides being palisaded. Three buildings, or sheds, formed the walls between the bastions on the north, east, and south. Another difference lies in the moat profile. Gadsden's cross-section shows a well-defined counter-scarp and glacis slope arrangement which is not apparent today. Rather, the present moat is a well marked depression, with its outer edge at ground level, as may be seen in the cross-sections on our map.

It is obvious, then, that the fort has been altered since 1818. Whether this alteration occurred in the years immediately following 1818, or whether it occurred during the Civil War, was one of the problems which confronted us at the site. A solution may be offered by Gadsden himself, who in his report to General Jackson made the following statement:⁴

Fort Gadsden is a temporary work, hastily erected, and of perishable materials, without constant repairs it could not last more than four or five years. If the position should therefore be selected for a permanent defense, an entire new work will have to be constructed.

It seems entirely reasonable to assume that when it was decided to maintain a garrison at Fort Gadsden

4. Page 244 of Gadsden's report, referred to above.

for several years that the embankments now in evidence were constructed by the garrison. Not only would such construction have strengthened the post, but it would also have provided work for troops isolated on the frontier. The finding of tasks to occupy the time of stationary troops is always a military problem.

On the other hand, the alterations could have been undertaken by the Confederates during their occupancy. Several arguments can be advanced against this interpretation, however. In the first place the outline is exactly that of Gadsden's fort, and it seems improbable that the plan would, or could, have been so faithfully followed forty years after the abandonment of a crude palisaded outline. Secondly, it is doubtful that the Confederates would have followed the pre-existing outline, since the type of fort is definitely not in keeping with military operations of the Civil War period. For example, Confederate gun emplacements in Torreya State Park, farther up the river, are based on entirely different military principles.

We might reasonably conclude that the earthworks were constructed in the years immediately following 1818 and before the cession of Florida to the United States.

ARTIFACTS

We were not, in the progress of our investigation, engaged in a search for artifacts. In the process of test-pitting the area, however, certain materials came to light.

Portions of three old glass bottles were found, all of heavy green glass. Two of these are of approximately quart size, and have the typical early nineteenth century contours of bottles for alcoholic beverages. The third is a neck portion of a larger bottle, perhaps a demijohn. A few fragments of glazed earthenware, or "China", of early nineteenth century types were also found. In the moat of Fort Gadsden a plain oval military brass buckle was found; this is of the type with two studs on the reverse side for attachment to one end of a belt or strap,

and a hook on the reverse side which fits into a hole on the other end of the belt or strap. An iron ring, attached to a bolt fitting, found on the surface within the fort may be a piece of artillery hardware.

In the area of the Negro Fort we found Indian pottery, "China", unglazed European earthenware, lead balls and melted lead fragments, a gun flint, a small iron ball, iron nails, and miscellaneous rusted scraps of iron. Since this was the area of the magazine explosion it might naturally be expected to contain more artifactual debris.

From time to time persons have found other artifacts at the site, including rifles which "loaded from the bow end", as one local informant who had obviously been to sea put it. Unfortunately, these articles have become scattered and in many cases lost, as is all too frequently the case with relics collected from curiosity. All artifacts found at the site lay near the surface, and in no place other than the moat, where six to eight inches of black dirt had accumulated, was there any appreciable amount of humus.

The Indian pottery at the site is of some little interest. Although our investigations were too cursory to enable us to state definitely that this pottery belonged with the fort occupation, it very possibly did. If such is the case, we have Indian pottery of the early nineteenth century, mostly dating from between 1814 and 1816, which could be the product of Choctaw, Seminole and/or Upper Creek. There are only twenty-five sherds, and all but two of these are smooth and undecorated. The two which are decorated have brushed or scored surfaces, much like the pottery found by Bullen along the Chattahoochee and tentatively attributed to the Lower Creek of the latter half of the eighteenth century.⁵ The sherds are all tempered with fine sand or grit, with minute particles of mica visible in most specimens. The paste is compact and most surfaces are well-

5. Ripley P. Bullen, "An archaeological survey of the Chattahoochee River Valley in Florida." In press.

smoothed; some are burnished to a polish. The sherds are thin, ranging from 3 to 8 mm., with an average of 5 mm. or less. This pottery sample, while admittedly small and inadequate, appears to be quite distinct from the known pottery complexes of the prehistoric and early historic northwest Gulf Coast.⁶ Fort Gadsden, or more specifically the so-called Negro Fort area, has the potentiality of aiding in the unraveling of historical Indian archeology in Florida.

CONCLUSION

This brief summary has indicated, once again, how the techniques of history and archeology can supplement and support one another. The joint approach, the writer feels, is much more fruitful than either approach employed in isolation. When enough data has been accumulated from numerous studies, the archeologist and historian together can attack the data to reach a fuller understanding of human behavior, which is, after all, the goal of both disciplines.

6. For description and discussion of the various archeological periods see Gordon R. Willey, *Archaeology of the Florida Gulf Coast*, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. 113, Washington, 1949.