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LIFE AT FORT BROOKE 1824-1836

By JAMES W. COVINGTON

IN JANUARY, 1824 the military post known as Cantonment Brooke and later as Fort Brooke * was established at the juncture of Hillsborough River and the bay bearing the same name. There were many sites more suitable for a fort which could be found along the shores and islands of Tampa Bay; but the land at the chosen location had already been cleared and a house and wharf erected by Robert Hackley, a gentleman from New York who believed that his father held title to the land. Incidentally, Hackley had left the property in charge of an overseer so that he could go to Pensacola for supplies and he was dumbfounded upon returning to find the troops reposing on his plantation. The Hackley claim was based upon a Spanish grant nullified in the Adams-Onis Treaty and the family never received compensation for the work done in clearing the land.¹

The plans for the establishment of Fort Brooke developed from the Treaty of Camp Moultrie which was signed with the Seminole Indians in 1823. Under the terms of this pact the Seminoles agreed to move into a reservation located in the south-central part of the peninsula. Commissioners representing the United States government in the treaty negotiations suggested that a military post be located at Tampa Bay to prevent the Indians from receiving ammunition and arms from Cuba.

Colonel James Gadsden, one of the treaty commissioners, was appointed to mark the boundaries of the new reservation. He advised Secretary of War Calhoun that a military post situated on the shores of Tampa Bay would demonstrate the military power of the white man and serve as a means of keeping the Seminoles within the reservation. Accordingly, orders were issued by Calhoun, a good friend of Gadsden, on November 5, 1823, for Lieutenant-Colonel George M. Brooke to proceed with four

* In 1954 a group of Tampa boy scouts under the supervision of Dr. John Goggin and Charles Knight did some digging near the site of the fort and uncovered pieces of flints, lead bullets, military buttons and arrow heads.

1. Karl Grismer's *Tampa* (St. Petersburg, 1850), 55-60, contains a good account of the establishment of Fort Brooke.

companies of the Fourth Infantry from Cantonment Clinch at Pensacola to Tampa Bay, where a military post would be established.²

Three companies of men boarded the schooner *William and Henry*, one company boarded the schooner *Rachael*, and the two transports plus one carrying the officers set sail from Pensacola on January 15, 1824, and arrived at the mouth of Tampa Bay on January 18th.

A party was sent out to find Colonel Gadsden, who had been in the area examining the coastline in quest of a suitable site for the fort. This search party found a letter from Gadsden to Brooke stuck in a large stick and marked by a piece of muslin flying in the breeze. The place where the pole was erected thereafter became known as Gadsden Point, and is now part of the MacDill Air Force Base area. The letter directed Brooke to meet Gadsden at the juncture of the Hillsborough River and Hillsborough Bay, where he camped.

Brooke and some others set out in a small boat from the anchored transport to meet Gadsden. Lieutenant McCall and a few friends waiting aboard the transport, decided to explore the several islands at the mouth of Tampa Bay. They saw signs of deer on Egmont Key and saw three deer on Mullet Key.³

Gadsden and Brooke visited several suitable spots which might be used as a site for a fort, and finally decided upon a spot located on the northeastern bank of the Hillsborough River at the place where the river entered Hillsborough Bay.

The transports moved up Tampa Bay, but could not come close to the selected site because of the shallow water. It was decided that the best thing to do would be to land the men at Gadsden Point and march them to the Hillsborough River, where they would cross to the opposite shore by row boats. This was done and the erection of Cantonment Brooke was begun.

Post returns written by Lieutenant-Colonel Brooke indicate that during the first two years of the post's existence, the men spent most of the time cutting wood and erecting buildings. A high spot near the Hillsborough River was selected as the site

2. James W. Covington "The Establishment of Fort Brooke," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXX (April, 1953), 273-278.

3. George McCall *Letters From the Frontier* (Philadelphia, 1868), 127.

for the location of the principal buildings and the underbrush was cleared away but the lovely grove of live oaks was allowed to stand and provide shade.⁴ The officers moved into Hackley's plantation house and used it as sleeping quarters until their housing units were erected. Tents served as temporary housing for most of the persons present while the wooden buildings were being erected and the camp during 1824 and 1825 presented a view of white canvas tents, the frame work of half-completed structures and finished buildings.

By April, 1824, part of the officers' quarters, all of the quartermaster's quarters and commissary's storehouse and bakehouse had been finished. It was hoped that the enlisted men could occupy their two hundred and sixty feet long and twelve feet high barracks room by the middle of the month.

Since pine logs were used to provide the lumber needed for the buildings at the post, work parties went out in search of the pine trees. One such party of woodcutters worked along the shores of Hillsborough Bay about two miles northwest of the camp. When the members of this group were first aroused by the bugle in the morning they drank only a large cup of coffee and marched off to work. After working steadily until nine o'clock a half hour rest period was taken, during which time the men ate breakfast.⁵

Food at Cantonment Brooke was excellent. All types of vegetables including corn, melons, stringbeans, collard greens and tomatoes were grown in the gardens established on the land that Hackley had cleared. Some nearby settlers were able to earn some needed cash by selling produce from their gardens to the commissary department. Beef was supplied to the camp twice a week by contractors living in the north Florida area. They were notified of the opportunity to bid on the contract by advertisements placed in the Pensacola, Saint Augustine and other Florida newspapers.⁶

There was always a rich supply of sea food available for the men in camp. A boat crew rowed out in the bay twice a week to gather enough delicious oysters in an hour's time to supply the needs of the entire camp. Usually seven men went together in a

4. *Ibid.*, 133.

5. *Ibid.*, 136.

6. *Pensacola Gazette*, November 13, 1824.

boat with a seine to catch a supply of fish. They returned in a short time with a rich haul of sheephead, drum, red fish, flounder, sole, mullet and trout. Sometimes red fish weighing from twenty-five to thirty pounds were caught on hook and line baited with salt porkskin.

When the boat crew returned to the camp they placed all the fish on the dock and the fish call was sounded by the bugler. Of course, the officers' cook was given first choice of the fish. Then the sergeants brought wheelbarrows to carry off the fish for the enlisted men. The Seminole Indians were allowed to take away any of the fish left at the dock. Finally, all of the remaining fish unwanted by the soldiers and Indians were buried in the gardens to supply fertilizer.⁷

Sometimes the military diet was supplemented from other sources. Fresh fruit and dried pompano were brought to the camp by the Cuban fishermen at Charlotte Harbor. Gophers {land turtles} were brought in by Indians and sold for twenty-five cents a pair. Turkeys, whooping cranes and deer hams were also carried to the camp and sold by the Seminoles. Cigars and oranges from Havana were sold to the soldiers by the fishermen from the various ranchos scattered along the coast who usually carried their catch to the Cuban city.

Lieutenant McCall preferred the flesh of whooping cranes to that of a wild goose. On one occasion he shot a flamingo and had the cook prepare the tongue for him. He found the Roman delicacy to be tender but too oily and rich for his taste.

Although Fort Brooke was an isolated post, the officers and men were able to find amusements and means of entertainment to pass away the hours. The Fourth of July, 1824, was celebrated by a long speech, the invitation of Indian guests, many toasts and a fine dinner.⁸ When the enlisted men were not working, they were allowed to hunt and fish. Starting March 15, 1826, a three-day derby was held at Fort Brooke. Horses owned by the officers were entered in one, two and three-mile races and probably there was much betting by all on the results of the events.⁹

7. McCall, *Letters From the Frontier*, 138.

8. *Pensacola Gazette*, August 7, 1824.

9. *Pensacola Gazette*, April 15, 1826.

Persons from the outside world were able to visit the post via the army transport *Florida*, which sailed periodically from Pensacola.¹⁰ This transport carried the inspecting parties, supplies, officers wives and assorted passengers to the remote frontier post. The transport usually anchored in deep water some several miles distant and smaller boats carried the goods and passengers across the shallow water to the wharf. Sometimes ships were wrecked near Tampa Bay and ships bound for Fort Brooke rescued the survivors taking them to Fort Brooke.¹¹

Lieutenant Colonel George M. Brooke was very proud of his establishment by 1830. It was located in a healthy spot and very few soldiers fell ill. There were many buildings contained within the military reservation. These structures included a guardhouse, barracks, storehouses, blockhouse, powder magazine, wharf and stables.

Perhaps as a result of the isolation in the wilderness far distant from any large sized settlement, the general spirit was not good and there were numerous infractions of military law among the enlisted men at Fort Brooke. In April, 1824, five men deserted from their posts.¹² In November, 1825, twenty-six men out of a total of one hundred and thirty-men present at the fort were under arrest or confinement.¹³

It is difficult to ascertain the background of the men in the Fort Brooke garrison as the census records and post returns do not indicate these details, but the 1840 census returns show that most of the soldiers were born in England or Ireland. The few names listed in the post returns for the 1824-1830 period usually denoted English origin. Major Dade's force in 1835 included approximately twenty-nine men from Ireland, twelve from Pennsylvania, eleven from New York, seven from Germany and the rest from scattered sections of the eastern United States and western Europe.

10. In January, 1827, Colonel Clinch and General Gaines inspected Fort Brooke, *Pensacola Gazette*, February 16, 1827.

11. The schooner *Maryland* bound from Tampico to New Orleans became disabled and the crew was taken by the schooner *Amelia* to Tampa Bay. *Pensacola Gazette*, September 7, 1827.

12. Post Return, Fort Brooke, April, 1824, Military Records, National Archives, hereafter cited as Post Returns.

13. *Ibid.*, November, 1825. In 1831, several men amused themselves by printing in ink a one copy newspaper. A photostat of the newspaper may be seen at the Hillsborough County Historical Commission exhibit room.

When the job of erecting the buildings was completed, the work crews were assigned to the construction of roads. Lieutenant McCall, placed in command of one such group, was able to blaze a crude trail leading from Tampa Bay to Alachua. At great effort bridges were constructed across the Little Hillsborough and Hillsborough rivers.¹⁴ In 1825 Congress seriously considered the construction of a road leading from Tampa Bay to Cape Sable and Captain Isaac Clark was ordered to explore the route and determine if a road could be built. Captain Clark was one of the first Americans to explore the land lying south of Tampa Bay. Even the few Seminole Indians and Latin-American fishermen that he met during his journey did not know too much about the interior of the country. He visited Charlotte Harbor and found that the Seminoles were often transported by fishermen to Havana, where they received a most cordial reception. At Charlotte Harbor Clark met Jumper, a Seminole leader who was waiting for the return of his men from Havana where they had gone to secure a supply of rum.¹⁵ Besides supervising the construction of roads and the erection of buildings, there were a few other problems which were faced by Lieutenant-Colonel Brooke. He was certain that the fishing ranchos maintained by fishermen of Spanish descent were evading the customs laws of the United States; and keeping a close watch upon their activities, he finally succeeded in having a customs post established at Tampa and Charlotte Harbor.¹⁶

Supply problems gave the Lieutenant-Colonel a great deal of concern. To his dismay he discovered that only four thousand of ten thousand cartridges received were in good condition and fit for use. Possibly some of this rapid deterioration of military stores was due to the fact that there was not a proper place to store the ammunition but finally by January, 1826, a brick pow-

14. The mail service for Fort Brooke was very poor and frequent notices appeared in the Pensacola *Gazette* concerning letters addressed to persons at Fort Brooke as being held in the Pensacola dead letter office and, if not called for, were subject to destruction.

15. Agent George Humphreys to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, March 2, 1825, Florida Seminoles, 1825, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives. The author could not find a copy of Clark's report in the National Archives but a summary was printed in *The Army and Navy Chronicle*, 1836.

16. Brooke to Adjutant-General August 29, 1825, B 151, Records of the War Department, Office of the Adjutant-General, letters received, hereafter cited as O.A.G.

der magazine was erected. He expressed the hope to Washington that he would be supplied with a pair of six pound howitzers so he could use them, if needed, to scare the Indians.¹⁷ Fort Brooke alias Cantonment Brooke certainly was not much of a strongly fortified position during its pre-Seminole War days.

One unique duty which was assigned to several of the soldiers was the interviewing of the persons living at the various fishing ranchos scattered along the coast in order to establish their claim for land. Unfortunately, although these fishermen had a just case, it was impossible to prove when they had first settled on the land and all of the claims were disallowed.¹⁸

Sometimes special duties permitted the soldiers to leave the post for other assignments on a permanent or temporary status. Several companies were transferred from Fort Brooke to Fort Mitchell in Georgia where trouble was brewing in the Cherokee reservation.¹⁹ On another occasion Colonel Brooke dispatched scouting parties as far south as the Peace River to hunt for runaway slaves living among the Indians. He did not like this type of duty, because at that time (in 1828) there were only twenty-eight men fit for duty at the post. In 1826 Lieutenant McCall led one detachment to Camp King (Ocala) in order to preserve order during the election of a Seminole chief.²⁰ It was during one of these trips that McCall brought back two hundred young orange trees and planted a grove which grew with a great deal of success near the banks of the Hillsborough River.

When the military forces moved into the Tampa Bay area, news soon came to their attention concerning the supposed activities of pirates in the vicinity. Scouting parties were dispatched to thoroughly search the area but the well armed soldiers found no pirates. One patrol, however, in April, 1824, found the bodies of three men who had been shot and burned at the stake.

There was some evidence, however, that some "minor league" pirates were inhabiting the islands near Charlotte Harbor. Governor Duval had dispatched Captain Horatio S. Dexter into the region in 1823 and he observed some interesting sights. Dexter's

17. *Io. to id.* January 1, 1827, B 16, *ibid.*

18. For these interviews see *Spanish Land Grants in Florida I* (Tallahassee, 1940). *passim.*

19. *Pensacola Gazette*, April 24, 1830.

20. McCall, *Letters From the Frontier*, 152.

report, written August 26, 1823, was a most notable one. Although he could not visit Charlotte Harbor, some friendly Seminoles told Dexter that several coastal islands contained settlements of runaway slaves. The Negroes were armed with muskets, bayonets and a plentiful supply of ammunition. White men kept the blacks supplied with food and weapons, and the Indians were prevented by force from landing on the islands. The Seminoles; however, traded with the islanders who made visits to the mainland and exchanged rum, powder, lead and molasses for cattle. The vessels of the white men were described as mounting one, two, or three guns. It is possible that these men were survivors of the Cuban pirate bands that had been attacked by the *Enterprise* and other vessels of the United States Navy in 1821. Although Brooke sent several expeditions into the Charlotte Harbor vicinity these groups were not able to find any traces of the pirates.

A few animals began to disappear in the Hillsborough River and alligators were suspected. When their bodies were later found, the teeth marks of the alligators could be seen. Soldiers were posted at the wharf and instructed to shoot the beasts. A large number of 'gators', including one eighteen feet in length, was killed.

Some civilians began to erect their homes on the government property near the fort proper. William G. Saunders from Mobile, Alabama was permitted to establish a general store in 1828. Soon there were several business houses including a boarding house, boat repair yard shoe repair shop and a small but compact red light district.²¹ Since the military reservation included a two hundred and fifty-six square mile area, the settlers were trespassing on federal property and could be removed at the convenience of the government. Any improvements that they made would be at their own risk and such restrictions prevented the growth of the town known as Tampa Bay.

When Hillsborough County was organized in 1834, the village of Tampa {Tampa Bay} was selected as the county seat. Of course, at this time Tampa and Fort Brooke were for all purposes the same settlement and it was not until the 1870 census

21. The water supply for Fort Brooke was obtained from a spring situated some distance away and was carried in barrels on a mule drawn wagon.

that the populations of Tampa and Fort Brooke were separately reported. Augustus Steele served in several positions simultaneously - county judge, postmaster and deputy collector of customs.

One visitor to Tampa described the village and fort in the following words :

Tampa Bay is a neat little village of wooden houses situated at the mouth of the river Hillsborough and close to the garrison. There is a small traffic carried on between it and the few scattered settlers of the neighborhood, who bring in their surplus produce and exchange it here for goods or money. . . The barracks which almost may be said to be part of the village, are a long range of log buildings erected by the troops during the Florida Indian war in 1837. They have a covered gallery all round and are well adapted to the climate of Florida being raised about three feet from the ground, high in the roof and well ventilated. They are also built on the highest part of the garrison, about fifteen feet above the level of the sea, an unusually great elevation on the coast of Florida.

We were all delighted on landing, with the appearance of the garrison, its neat white-washed buildings, and its grassy parade (ground); while round the neat cottages in which the officers and their families lived, grew rows of orange and lime trees thickly covered with their golden fruit, then nearly ripe.²²

There were many Indians living in the neighborhood of Fort Brooke. One village was located at Lake Thonotosassa and two hundred Seminoles lived at that camp under the command of fifty-year old Stout King. Since a sub-agency building was situated in the military reservation many Seminoles visited Fort Brooke in order to obtain their rations as promised in the 1823 treaty.²³

One time a drunken Indian terrorized the army camp and chief Stout King reprimanded him in front of the white men. The angry Indian later seized Stout King and held him over a campfire until the chief fainted. The leader almost died from the burns,

22. George Ballentine, *Autobiography of an English Soldier in the United States Army* (New York, 1853), 101-102.

23. Cattle for the Indians as promised in the treaty were driven from Georgia and shot by the agent. He did not allow the Indians to shoot at the cattle as they were poor shots and would cause the beasts unnecessary suffering. After the animals were dead, the Indians were allowed to take their choice of the meat.

but was given treatment at Fort Brooke hospital and survived. He now became known as Burnt Chief instead of Stout King.

In December, 1835, orders came from General Duncan Clinch to Major J. S. Belton, commander of Fort Brooke to dispatch two companies of men to Fort King. Accordingly Major Francis L. Dade, seven other officers and one hundred and two men left December 24 on a trip which would end in disaster. The citizens of the village of Tampa was sorry to see the soldiers leave on their trip and a group of women made knapsacks and filled them with home cooked food, presenting a well-filled knapsack to each man as he left the fort.²⁴

During the first months of the war it appeared that Fort Brooke would be overwhelmed by the Seminoles. One hundred friendly Seminoles were attacked and driven to the fort by a superior force of hostiles. All overhanging trees were cut down near the fort so that spies could not climb them. One hostile Indian was captured when he pretended to be a friendly drunken Seminole. The Seminoles attacked the farm of Levi Collier situated in the present day Hyde Park section of Tampa and set fire to the buildings and crops. Soldiers from Fort Brooke, noticing the smoke from the burning buildings, raced to the rescue of the family and brought them across de river to the fort. Other out-lying farms were also attacked and the army post became a haven for the refugee civilians.

The situation was so desperate at Fort Brooke early in 1836 that General Gaines proposed burning de buildings, putting all civilians on board the ships and marching out in search of the enemy. Fortunately, he soon realized that such action would be rash. Fort Brooke was not really ready for an Indian war. One observer called it a paper fort. Fortifications at the place included two blockhouses erected at the end of a street with four or five barracks on each side, a triangular stockade, two twelve-pounders and a battery of six-pounders.²⁵ Most of the defenses had been erected since the outbreak of the fighting.

Fort Brooke played a prominent role in the removal of the Seminole Indians from Florida. In 1835 before any thought of a Seminole war had ocured, the Federal authorities planned to

24. *Tampa Tribune*, June 16, 1957.

25. *Army and Navy Chronicle*, II (February 4, 1836), 79.

have the Seminole leaders conduct their own bands to Tampa Bay. At the Fort Brooke agency rations would be distributed and a census taken. Since the migrating Indians carried their ponies and cattle along with them and these animals could not be taken to Indian Territory, pens were erected to house the livestock. Finally, after the Indians had been issued sufficient food and clothing, they would be taken aboard a fleet of transports waiting in Tampa Bay and sailed to Indian Territory via New Orleans, and the Mississippi and Canadian rivers.

When the murder of Charley Emathla gave advance warning of the warlike feelings of the hostiles, five friendly leaders and from four to five hundred Indians quickly moved from Tallahassee to Fort Brooke where they sought protection. Lieutenant Joseph W. Harris, the superintendent of emigration issued food and blankets to the Indians and many of them volunteered their services to protect the fort.

The Indian leaders found a white friend who was willing to write the letter to President Jackson which follows:

Our father we wish to say something to you. It is because we wish to follow the advice which your agent, who has been cruelly murdered by one of our crazy red men, always gave us. We have come to your fort and placed ourselves beside your people like true friends. Could our father now see us at the place where we were told to come and from whence the Big Canoes were to carry us to our new country. We are here and are ready to go. If we did not mean to go we should not have been here but with our mad brothers on the Red Path.²⁶

There were never very many men in the garrison during the 1824-1835 period and it was not until the outbreak of the hostilities that the military establishment contained a large force. In October, 1825, the roster included one lieutenant-colonel, one surgeon, three captains, one first lieutenant, one second lieutenant, four sergeants, four corporals, one musician (bugler) and forty-one privates.²⁷ This figure declined to three officers

26. Seminole leaders to President Jackson February 7, 1836 H 231 Seminole Emigration, 1836, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives.

27. Post Returns, October, 1825.

and forty-seven enlisted men in July, 1832.²⁸ When Fort Brooke became the most important fort in Florida during the Second Seminole War, many thousands were camped within its confines at one time. As late as August, 1841, when the major fighting had ceased, there were seventeen officers and six hundred and sixty-five men on the roster.²⁹

As Fort Brooke became a major military establishment, the little town of Tampa grew on the outskirts and depended upon direct and indirect military spending during the first twenty or thirty years of its existence as the chief means of subsistence for its citizens.³⁰

28. *Ibid.*, January, 1830.

29. *Ibid.*, August, 1841.

30. Many of the earlier Fort Brooke buildings were destroyed in the 1848 hurricane. Destruction was so great that the military authorities gave serious thought to the permanent abandonment of the place and greater use of the establishments at Fort Dulaney.