

1960

A Report on the Site of Camp Finegan

William M. Jones



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.

Recommended Citation

Jones, William M. (1960) "A Report on the Site of Camp Finegan," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 39 : No. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol39/iss4/5>

A REPORT ON THE SITE OF CAMP FINEGAN

by WILLIAM M. JONES

PREFACE

AT THE TIME OF THIS WRITING, nearly a century has passed since the end of the "War of the Rebellion." Many of the earthworks, and other types of defenses, constructed by the "Boys in Blue and in Gray," have fallen victim to the ravages of time; still others are being leveled to make way for progress.

In time most of these sites will be forgotten, except for vague documentary references which rarely give accurate descriptions as to the actual locations of these places. It certainly behooves those of our generation who are interested to locate and record these earthworks where possible.

Camp Finegan, of which we write, was one of the defenses constructed by the Confederates for the purpose of protecting one of the only two roads leading from Jacksonville to West Florida at that time.

In this paper, we will attempt to describe how, by chance, we discovered this site and how we later identified it as Camp Finegan.

Having been a resident of the western section of Duval County since the year 1934, we have for many years been aware of the presence of a series of trenches located on Lenox Avenue at a point one-half mile west of Normandy Boulevard, where Lenox crosses a small creek. Originally these trenches, which today are visible only in places, extended from the northeast to the southwest for an undetermined distance, crossing the road at the creek.¹

Our attention was first called to these trenches by local residents who often referred to them as "ditches" with some rancor, because they had to be filled in before their homes could be built. At that time, we were not aware of the nature or significance of these ditches, and consequently for many years ignored them, in spite of the fact we had heard of several weapons that had been found by those plowing the fields near this site.

1. See map, page 369.

THE SITE OF CAMP FINEGAN

367

MATERIAL EVIDENCE

It was not until 1952 that our interest in this place was aroused. In that year we were approached by Mr. R. V. Pringle, who was living on the site at that time, who reported finding a number of "bullets" in his yard, usually after heavy rains.

On examination, these "bullets" proved to be a type of shot known as the "Minie Ball," which was named after the French Army officer who designed it.² This shot was a fifty-caliber, conical-shaped projectile used in muzzle loading rifles during the War Between the States, and, as a rule, by both Union and Confederate troops.

The presence of this type shot, together with the tales of "weapons" being found in this area, seemed to indicate that this place with the ditches was the possible site of some fortification related to the Civil War. We immediately began to look on these trenches with additional respect, and decided to determine, if possible, the name and origin of these works.

In the meantime, more material evidence in the form of a large brass "button" was recovered by Mr. Pringle. This button, measuring 2.5 inches in diameter, and showing the American Eagle in relief on one side, was identified by Historian Charles Peterson of the U. S. National Park Service. Mr. Peterson had this to say: "The large flat brass 'button' with an eagle design is in reality a buckle. This type of buckle was worn on the Union cartridge box belt and on the sword belt of sergeants. Judging from what remains of the attachments on the back, this was a sergeant's sword belt buckle. It dates from the middle nineteenth century."

While the artifacts that we have described may seem insignificant in the amount recovered, it must be remembered that this material was found by chance rather than by design. In any case it was our opinion that the buckle and shot found near these trenches pointed to this area as being a site related to a military operation of the War Between the States.

Arriving at the conclusion that the remains of the trenches located on Lenox Avenue were part of the defenses of a Civil War fort, our next step was to identify this site, if possible.

As a rule, one can depend to a certain degree on local legend

2. Hank Wieand Bowman, *Antique Guns* (New York: 1953).

when attempting to identify a place such as this. However, to our great disappointment, after talking to a number of local residents we were unable to find any "old-timers" who could give us even a hint as to the name or origin of these works.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Failing to obtain any information from the local people, we resorted to documentary research, confining our efforts mostly to Gold's *History of Duval County and East Florida* and other local publications. We encountered such names as "Camp Milton," "Yellow Bluff Fort," "Fort Steele," "Camp Finegan," and others too far removed from this site to be considered.

Camp Milton, which has definitely been located on the "Old Plank Road" at McGirts Creek, is still partially visible. Yellow Bluff Fort, a well-known Confederate fortification, can be seen at Dames Point on the St. Johns River. Fort Steele is thought to have been located near the present town of Mayport, while Gold, in his *History of Duval County*, locates Camp Finegan "on Cedar Creek near McGirts Creek."³

Now, from a geographical standpoint, only two of these places could be considered, Camp Milton and Camp Finegan, both located west of Jacksonville. Camp Milton, the remains of which can still be seen on the "Old Plank Road" at McGirts Creek, can be eliminated, and at the time, we did not question Gold's location of Camp Finegan.

Unable to find a name that seemed to apply to our site on Lenox Avenue, we were convinced the place had not been important enough to have been graced with a name, and in 1955 decided to give up this project for the time.

During the month of June, 1959, while browsing through a copy of the *Military and Naval History of the Rebellion*, by W. J. Tinney, we naturally turned to the chapter pertaining to the Florida campaign, wherein we discovered a statement that, in our opinion, was an important clue to the identity of the trenches on Lenox Avenue. We quote: "General Seymour, now occupied Jacksonville with his forces, and the enemy [Confederates] took a position at *Camp Finegan*, eight miles distant towards Bald-

3. Pleasant Daniel Gold, *History of Duval County, Including Early History of East Florida* (St. Augustine: 1929), 139.

After many trips to the Jacksonville Public Library, where we spent many hours searching through these records, we found evidence that in our opinion proves without a doubt that our site on Lenox Avenue was in fact the "Camp Finegan" mentioned many times in publications relating to the campaign in East Florida.

We discovered a report written by Confederate Army Captain Joseph L. Dunham regarding the loss of some pieces of ordnance to the Union Forces at Twelve Mile Station (Whitehouse). We present in part Dunham's report: "Colonel: In accordance with your orders under date of the 14th February, 1864 instant, I have the honor to report the following facts in connection with the loss of five pieces of artillery. . . . About twilight on the evening of the 8th of February, though not on duty, in consequence of serious indisposition of a months duration, I received a verbal order from Lieutenant-Colonel McCormack, commanding the forces at *Camp Finegan*, to move my section of artillery immediately to the rear; that the *enemy was approaching and near Miles Price's house, some one-half mile distant . . .*"⁵

While we would like to include Dunham's interesting report in its entirety, we are only concerned in this paper with the part that refers to Miles Price's house being one-half mile distant. Miles Price, an early settler in this section of Duval County and owner of the Gravelley Hill Plantation since 1858⁶, had his residence on what is now Lenox Avenue, and at a point just east of Memorial Park Road; this location is one-half mile east of the site of our trenches.

Therefore, if the enemy (in this case a Union Force under Colonel Guy V. Henry), were approaching Camp Finegan and were reported at Miles Price's house one-half mile away, this would prove that the site with the trenches on Lenox Avenue had to be Camp Finegan, because Colonel Henry and his men were advancing on this position.

There are many other references to Camp Finegan in these records, such as: "Camp Finegan, in the direction of Baldwin;" "Crossed Cedar Creek and reached the vicinity of Camp Finegan;"

5. *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, Vol. XXXV, Pt. 1, p. 347. Author's italics.

6. Legal Papers; Involving transfer of Gravelley Hill tract from Joseph I. Eubanks to Miles Price 1858. Duval County, Florida.

“came in sight of Camp Finegan on the right;” and others that imply that Camp Fingan was located on the road to Baldwin and west of Cedar Creek, all of which tends to point to our site on Lenox Avenue. Dunham speaks in his report of “Twelve Mile Station,” which is known today as “Whitehouse,” and in accordance with the distance given in the records, was three miles west of the trench site. In view of the above evidence, in our opinion, the trench site located on Lenox Avenue, one-half mile west of Normandy Boulevard, represents what remains of Camp Finegan today.

In the mid twentieth century, one might well question the reason for a military installation protecting what appears to be an obscure county road. In the early days, however, this route was far more important. This road, which is shown on LeBaron’s County map of 1898 as the “Alligator Road,” was one of the only two routes leading to West Florida, the other being the “Old Plank Road,” so named because it was once paved with planks.

Originally, the Alligator Road extended to the west from Jacksonville to a point two miles beyond the Riverside Memorial Cemetery, where it divided into two separate roads, one bearing to the northwest and the other to the southwest. The northwest fork continued on as the Alligator Road and connected with the Old Plank Road north of Whitehouse. The southwest fork, shown on LeBaron’s map as the “New River Road,” continued in that direction for an undetermined distance, being known in later years as the “Old Gainesville Road.” While the northwest fork of this road does not exist today, the southwest is still maintained as a “dirt road” until it connects with Normandy Boulevard near McGirts Creek.

Other documentary evidence ⁷that can be brought to bear indicates the possible existence of this road as early as 1825. All in all, as obscure as Lenox Avenue seems to be today, it obviously was an important link with west Florida in the nineteenth century.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

While we originally had no intention of presenting evidence other than that pertinent to the origin and identity of Camp

7. *Ibid.*

Finegan, we feel that we would have failed in our duty if we neglected to include at least several of the highlights of the occupation of this place during the War Between the States.

Among the many officers stationed at Camp Finegan from time to time was Confederate Captain J. J. Dickison, who became legend through his audacious attacks on the Union forces in the Jacksonville, Palatka, and Gainesville areas.⁸ Dickison, who was to Florida what John S. Mosby was to Virginia, certainly deserves to be known as the "Gray Ghost" of Florida.

Another officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles F. Hopkins, had good reason to remember his stay at Camp Finegan, for it was at this place that Hopkins himself asked for a "court of inquiry" to be called in order to clarify his reasons for evacuating St. Johns Bluff in the face of an enemy attack; "General [Finegan]: . . . I respectfully demand that a court of inquiry be called at the earliest day practicable to examine into the facts of the case and the policy of the course pursued by myself upon that occasion."⁹

As a result of this inquiry, Hopkins was exonerated at Camp Finegan on October 11, 1862; "We therefore consider Lieutenant-colonel Hopkins wholly justifiable in the course he pursued in abandoning the batteries on the Saint Johns."¹⁰

General Joseph Finegan used this camp as his headquarters on several occasions, which can be attested to by the many letters that originated at this place bearing his signature. We feel, therefore, that this camp received its name in honor of this General, although we were unable to find any reference to the subject.

During the month of February, 1864, and prior to the Battle of Olustee, this place was occupied by the "Second South Carolina and Third U. S. Colored Troops,"¹¹ during which time it was known as "Camp Shaw." This probably explains the presence here of the Union Sergeant's buckle which we mentioned earlier in this paper.

On May 25, 1864, according to a report by Brigadier General George H. Gordon, U. S. Army,¹² a Union force under the

8. Mary Elizabeth Dickison, *Dickison and His Men* (Louisville: 1890).

9. Charles Hopkins to Joseph Finegan, October 8, 1862, in *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, Vol. XIV, Ser. I, p. 142.

10. Statement of William D. Mitchell in *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*; Vol. XIV, Ser. I, p. 143.

11. *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*; Vol. XXXV, Part I, p. 285.

12. *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*; Vol. XXXV, Part I, p. 399.

command of Colonel Shaw left Jacksonville moving in the direction of Baldwin. We quote, in part, General Gordon's report: "The detachment met but few of the enemy until they crossed Cedar Creek and reached the vicinity of Camp Finegan. Here they were opposed by infantry and a few cavalry. Colonel Shaw thinks there might have been 400 or 500 in front of him. Our advance was within less than half a mile of Camp Finegan A brief fire of infantry and artillery was maintained for a brief period. The rebels were advancing, but the fire checked them" According to the above description, this "skirmish" took place on the present Lenox Avenue, between Cedar Creek and Memorial Park Road. In recent years, the route of this road has been changed between these two points, the change being so slight that it is hardly worth mentioning.

In conclusion, we were unable to find any definite information concerning the establishment or abandonment of Camp Finegan. The camp probably existed for about three years, or from the early part of 1862 to the end of 1864, and, as we have already surmised, was probably named after General Joseph Finegan.

A person standing on this site today and viewing the present placid scene would doubtless have some difficulty in visualizing this area as having once been the site of a military installation. However, Camp Finegan obviously was an important fortified bivouac area to the Confederates, and certainly deserves to be recorded in the annals of Duval County.