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A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S VIEW OF
ST. AUGUSTINE AND FERNANDINA: 1863

Edited by P. J. STAUDENRAUS

NOAH BROOKS, BORN in Castine, Maine, in 1830, was an experienced newspaper man by the age of twenty-five. He worked for newspapers in Massachusetts, Illinois, and California before going to Washington, D. C., in December, 1862, as special correspondent for the *Sacramento Daily Union*. During the three years Brooks lived in the national capital he became a personal friend of President Lincoln whom he first met in Illinois in 1856. Before Lincoln died he asked Brooks to be his personal secretary. Brooks's visit to Union Army stations along the coast of South Carolina and Florida in June, 1863, was one of his rare trips outside the national capital during the war years. His eye witness description of occupied St. Augustine and Fernandina appeared in the *Sacramento Daily Union* on July 21, 1863. In later years Brooks published his Civil War memoirs under the title of *Washington in Lincoln's Time*, first published in 1896, but he failed to mention his visit to Florida.

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St. Augustine, June 30, 1863

An Ancient Spanish Town

In these stirring times, when each day seems to be an age of history for the future, one can fancy that this staid, sleepy and ancient town of St. Augustine is a part of another planet, having no special part or connection with the rest of this world. Here everything is as quiet and lifeless as it must have been before the adventurous Ponce De Leon landed here in 1513 in search of the Fountain of Youth. The harbor is deserted, save when an occasional Government transport makes the echoes with its shrill steam whistle, or a little fishing shallop comes or goes. St. Augustine is, however, a most beautiful place, and has a delightful situation on the west side of an excellent harbor, which

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is made by a deep basin formed on the inner side of Anastasia Island.

The time was when the town was a popular resort for invalids from various parts of the Union, and the raising and exportation of oranges and limes was a large feature of its revenue and trade. The war, however, has shut down upon this business, and there is nothing doing here now except what grows out of the limited operations of the Government. There are about seven hundred white inhabitants here, and it is a puzzle to know how they manage to live. The number of contrabands is comparatively few, there being but about three hundred. The Union lines do not extend but ten miles into the main land from St. Augustine in any direction, and communication with the town is thus cut off except by sea.

The place is now garrisoned by a single regiment, which is sufficient for all practical purposes, as St. Augustine, like several other points on this coast, is only held by the military forces of the United States for the purpose of keeping up the blockade. These soldiers live in clover, having a delightful climate, a fine old town, plenty of fresh meat, fish, vegetables, fruit and milk, and being in good quarters at the old fort built by the Spanish. This old fort, like most of the buildings here, is built of a deposit of concrete shells, called "coquina," found in inexhaustible quarries on Anastasia Island, opposite the town. For centuries this deposit of marine shells must have been forming, until there is now a vast layer of it, making the substratum of the Island, and affording a handsome and durable building material. The town is defended on the sea side by a well-built seawall, constructed by the United States under the superintendence of Captain (now General) [Henry Washington] Benham, at a great cost of money.

When the war broke out, the people of St. Augustine preserved their loyalty to the Government after a certain fashion, though all of the young men were swept off into the ranks of the rebel army; those who did not volunteer were impressed, so that an able-bodied man was not left in the town when the Federal army made its appearance here. Consequently, many of the citizens have relatives in the rebel army, and the recent order of General [David] Hunter, commanding that all such shall be sent over the rebel lines, works a great hardship to many. There

have been undoubted instances of loyal people being sent into the rebel lines by the order of General Hunter, leaving behind their property and effects, and having but small warning for preparation. On the steamer which brought me to St. Augustine came the proprietor of the only hotel in the place, who, about three weeks ago, was taken, with his family, to Hilton Head, by order of General Hunter, for the simple reason that he has a son in the rebel army. These people were imprisoned for a few weeks, and the wife and children, some of the latter being only a few years old, were sent over to Savannah under a flag of truce. The father has been sent back to St. Augustine, and he is, undoubtedly, a loyal man. There have been many cases similar to this.

Castle San Marcos, now known as Fort Marion, is one of the antiquities of the place. The date of its being commenced is not known [about 1672], but it is known to have been over one hundred years in building, and the following inscription, which I copy from a sculptured shield over the main entrance, shows that it was finished in 1756: "Reynando en Espana el Senr Don Fernando Sexto y Siendo Gob'or y Capn de Esa Cd San Augustin de la Floriday y Sus Prova el Mariscal De Campo Don Alonzo Fer'do Hereda. Asi concludio este Castillo, el An Od 1756 Divigendo Las Otras el Cap. Ign'xo du Pedro Brozas y Garay."

The fort is quite extensive, being built upon the plan of Vauban, and requiring a garrison of one thousand men. It has its dark dungeons, where human bones have been found; its secret chambers, walled up by the Spanish; its moats, portcullis, drawbridge and all of the features of an ancient fortification. Its bastions are named for several of the Saints, and under these bastions are to be found the ancient caves and recesses which the Spanish always built in their fortresses and castles. The pepperbox-shaped watchtowers on its four comers are falling to decay, and the glacis and ramparts bear the indentations of many cannon balls, but the old fort has never surrendered, though frequently besieged. . . .

Fernandina

Running up the low, sandy coast of Florida about sixty miles we reach Fernandina, whilom the residence of the famous Ex-

Senator [David Levy] Yulee, to whose efforts the new town of Fernandina owes its existence and temporary prosperity. The town of old Fernandina is situated about a mile-and-a-half below the new town, toward the entrance of the harbor, and is very ancient, having been founded in [1567] by the Spanish. The harbor is very fine, and is defended by an extensive fort, somewhat similar to Fort Sumter, built of brick and still unfinished. The work is called Fort Clinch, and at the breaking out of the rebellion it was held by the rebels, who expected to be able to blow out of the water any gunboat which might approach by the regular channel. To their discomfiture, however, the National forces approached by another channel on the north, far out of gunshot, and comparatively unknown to the rebels themselves. Thus flanked, the rebels had nothing left for them but to evacuate, which they did [March 3, 1862] taking the cars for the main land, Fernandina being on Amelia Island.

The new town of Fernandina was commenced about seven years ago, Yulee being one of the chief owners. The same speculative genius had so successfully engineered his railroad [Atlantic and Gulf] to Fernandina that he had diverted to this point a great deal of the New York Orleans trade, which otherwise would have gone around the great peninsula of Florida, and at one time he actually obtained a contract for carrying the mails across the peninsula from New York to New Orleans, and the California steamer mails were to have taken the same direction. But the war of the rebellion broke in upon this speculative scheme, and the skeddaddling rebels destroyed the depot, engines and cars, which are now a heap of ruins at Fernandina, though a single track yet remains, and the Yankee mechanics, who came into peaceable possession here have refitted an engine and tender by which they run out to the edge of the island and relieve pickets.

The town looks deserted and shabby enough, nearly all of the original inhabitants having left when the Yankee gunboats hove in sight. Their houses are filled up with contrabands, of whom over one thousand are now in the place, most of them being refugees from slavery. They come into our lines daily - men, women and children - most of them from Southern Georgia. The able-bodied men are put into the ranks of the colored regiment now being raised here, and the rest are supplied

with rations by the Government and are put to work upon plantations where practicable, but most of the poor creatures are hived up by hundreds in the abandoned houses of the former inhabitants, and have nothing at all to do. Some of them are very aged, there being several Negroes here of an age over one hundred years.

Colonel Littlefield, formerly of an Illinois cavalry regiment, is raising a colored regiment here, to be called the Fourth South Carolina, and he has very good success, having raised one company at once by volunteering; perhaps, however, the fact that he had the power to make a draft quickens the volunteering. While here I saw the very raggedest individual ever known - a fugitive slave who came into our lines, having come all the way from Georgia. By his own account, he had been a very hard case - that is, he had been a refractory slave, and had been repeatedly whipped for contumaciousness. On the morning of his escape he had been promised thirty-nine lashes; but, said he, with a grin, "when de time came dis chile was about five miles from dar, and he nebber stopped until las night." He was a mass of rags from top to toe, the original material of the garb being fairly undistinguishable.

This regiment is to be a cavalry regiment, and will undoubtedly be very useful in these parts. [General James] Montgomery's colored troops [South Carolina Second Regiment, Colored] have already proved themselves very efficient on this coast, and these frequent raids have inspired the rebel with a most wholesome terror. A rebel deserter, who came in here a day or two since, says that they have a variety of yarns concerning Montgomery's intentions - the most common of which is that he intends to free the whole of Florida from the rebels under [Brigadier-General Joseph] Finegan, which is a very likely story. There is but one regiment - the Eleventh Maine - at this point, and one gunboat, the *Potomska*. The harbor is good and affords a first rate chance for blockade runners to prosecute their business; but it is well defended and blockaded. It is a point worth noting, that this little one-horse town of Fernandina has a splendid and costly fort built for it by the Government, while such important places as New Haven, Connecticut, and thousands of others in the North are left unprotected. The difference is only the difference between North and South. If Yulee had begun sooner

he might have had his little railroad town the impregnable entrepot for the Seesh State of Florida.

As the original inhabitants of Fernandina have nearly all skedaddled, their property is about all sold under the hammer by the United State Tax Commissioners for the direct Government tax. The sales are now going forward, and are very lively. The town property is valuable and well-built for the most part, and some "splendid bargains" are made by the white refugees who are on hand, and by the contrabands, some of whom, having got a few dollars together, have bought comfortable homes for themselves. Three-story houses have been sold for \$200, and fine town lots for \$5 and upward. If the town shall continue to be held by the National forces, these purchasers will make a good bargain by these sales; but the future is "mighty on-sartin" in these parts. . . . It will be a long time before the squalid, ruined and Negro-haunted town of modern Fernandina is of any account to itself or the rest of the world. At present it is but a desolation and a heap.