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The Editor's Corner--James Buckland: The Mystery of an Early Florida Visitor

Eugene Alvarez
membership@myfloridahistory.org



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JAMES BUCKLAND:
THE MYSTERY OF AN EARLY FLORIDA VISITOR

by EUGENE ALVAREZ

FLORIDA, in 1836, was little more than a semi-tropical battlefield for United States troops and Seminole Indians. Having only been recently acquired from Spain, the major towns of the territory, by 1836, were St. Augustine, possessing approximately 4,000 inhabitants, and Pensacola with a population of approximately 2,000 persons. The St. Johns was the major river of the territory, and along its shores were located several tiny settlements, including the small river town of Jacksonville. According to a visitor in 1836:

We reached Jacksonville by 1 o'clock at night; where we stopt until morning, for the purpose of taking in wood. I had time enough to walk through this miserable little place with a brother officer, while the operation of wooding was going on; but saw nothing worthy of commemoration in its dozen scattered houses and sandy streets.¹

Jacksonville served as a trade center for near-by residents who purchased needed supplies and received their mail there. One such person who used the services of the Jacksonville post office was James Buckland of Ellington, Connecticut. From all available evidence, it appears that he resided at St. Johns Bluff, about fifteen miles east of Jacksonville. Upon establishment of the Fort Caroline National Memorial in 1953, as underbrush was removed for construction of a museum, the grave of James Buckland was discovered.² Standing in a palmetto thicket, the grave was marked by a three-foot stone and the inscription:

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1. Jacob Rhett Motte, *Journey Into Wilderness: An Army Surgeon's Account of Life in Camp and Field During the Creek and Seminole Wars, 1836-1838*, edited by James F. Sunderman (Gainesville, 1953), 105.
 2. Long-time residents of the St. Johns Bluff area have previously known of the Buckland grave.

IN MEMORY OF
JAMES BUCKLAND,
FORMERLY OF ELLINGTON, CONN.
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE
FEBRUARY 23, 1836
AGE 46 YEARS

Old grave sites are not rare in northeast Florida, since the area has been inhabited since 1564. But what makes the Buckland grave so striking, is de fact that it is the only known grave in a section of Duval County which until recent years was no more than mosquito-infested, wooded underbrush.

In attempting to learn the identity of James Buckland, several questions come to mind. First, to be buried under an expensive stone might indicate that Buckland was a man of some wealth or fame, but since no existing records of Duval County or Jacksonville contain his name, this assumption can be dismissed. Who was Buckland and when and why did he move from the comforts of the North to live in the Territory of Florida? Furthermore, why was he buried at St. Johns Bluff and not in Jacksonville? Also, how is it to be explained that the grave of James Buckland, a Connecticut Yankee who migrated to the banks of the St. Johns, stands alone some thousand miles from his home.³

In attempting to answer these questions, correspondence with officials in Ellington, Connecticut, reveals some clues. The last will and testament of James Buckland was signed in New York on September 8, 1835, a little over five months before his death. Records show that his business and trade was that of a "blind maker" in New York City, and that he owned some property in Ellington willed to his parents and brother.⁴ The Ellington

3. Ellington, Connecticut is located in Tolland County. The town was incorporated in 1786, and in 1950 contained a population of 3,099.

4. Correspondence with Edna T. Edwards, town clerk, Ellington, Connecticut, November 30, 1962.

archives reveal that a Mrs. Azubah Buckland was admitted to church membership in the Ellington Ecclesiastical Society in 1817, but was later dismissed by letter.⁵ There is also mention of Mary Ann Buckland who was admitted to "the membership of the church by confession of faith, on March 5, 1832." Whether either of these women were related to James Buckland is unknown.

Through the cooperation of Thelma E. Smith, deputy librarian of the Municipal Reference Library of New York it was discovered that one James Buckland was listed in the New York City Directory in 1835; Buckland's occupation is listed as "blind maker." His business was at 247 Mercer Street and his residence at 10 Amity Street.⁶ It is known that Buckland was living in New York as of September 1835. Sometime between September 8, 1835 (the date of the signature of his last will and testament), and February 23, 1836, he journeyed to northeast Florida. Additional information concerning Buckland was found in an 1836 Jacksonville newspaper. As early as January 14, 1836, Buckland had unclaimed mail in the Jacksonville post office.⁷ He was either on his way to Florida, or had possibly arrived in the territory by that date, and had not yet picked up his mail. The *Jacksonville Courier* also carried notices concerning his mail on January 28 and February 4, and a final notice appeared on February 25, 1836.⁸ In the same edition of the paper, the obituary of James Buckland was published:

At St. Johns Bluff, on Tuesday morning last, Mr. James Buckland, of New York, aged about 40 years.⁹

He was buried near the site of Fort Caroline, where more than two centuries before his death, France and Spain fought the first decisive battle for possession of what is now the United States of America. There are two possible explanations as to why

5. Correspondence with Mildred A. Dimock, clerk of the Board of Selectman, Ellington, Connecticut, March 3 and 19, 1963. The Ellington Ecclesiastical Society was absorbed by the Ellington Congregational Church in 1915.

6. Correspondence with Thelma E. Smith, deputy librarian, New York Municipal Reference Library, January 14, 1963.

7. *Jacksonville Courier*, January 14, 1836.

8. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1836.

9. *Ibid.*

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there are no other graves adjacent to James Buckland's. First, if there were any additional stone markers placed near the grave, indicative that he was buried in a cemetery, they have either been destroyed or removed. But why was only the Buckland stone left remaining? Second, since wooden headboards were frequently used as grave markers in the nineteenth century, these would have long ago decayed in the humid climate of the Florida weather, leaving one lonely marked grave - that of James Buckland.