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THIS WAS FORT DADE

by FRANK LAUMER

FORT DADE was born on the twenty-third of December 1836.¹ The announcement read: "A fort will be erected. . . on the Big Withlacoochee, at the point where the Fort King road crosses it, which will bear the name of the gallant and lamented Dade."²

General Thomas S. Jesup gave the order from his headquarters at Fort Brooke on Tampa Bay. Exactly one year before, the men of Major Francis Langhorne Dade's command had stood formation at this same fort on that other Christmas Eve - then marched away to die. Now a fort would rise along their line of march, some forty miles north by east of Fort Brooke, ". . . a depot and post of observation."³

It was twelve months and four generals since the Dade Massacre, and General Jesup now had the responsibility of carrying the white man's burden against a clever, determined, and outnumbered enemy. He commanded a force, regular and irregular, of over 8,000 men against 1,660 Seminoles.⁴ But numbers alone meant very little in the Florida territory where trained soldiers had as little advantage as if they had been put in the field to combat wild animals. Closed ranks, cannon, and sabre were for killing white men, not savages. Generals Clinch, Gaines, Scott, and Call had each tried and one way or another had failed. Each had killed a few Seminoles, taken a few losses himself, and shifted troops like chessmen on the green board of Florida, but in the end everything was really just the same. Blue-clad troops of the United States Army were holed up in a few forts, with detachments sallying out at intervals to rescue or bury settlers caught by lean

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1. This article was read as a paper at the annual meeting of the Florida Historical Society, May 1966.
 2. Orders Number 26, December 23, 1836, United States National Archives, Record Group 94.
 3. George R. Fairbanks, *Florida, Its History and Its Romance*, 3rd edition (Jacksonville, 1904), 204.
 4. John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1847), 97, 167. The estimate of Seminole strength given here refers specifically to January 1836, but the records indicate that there occurred no serious additions or depletions during the following year.

[1]

and desperate savages, detachments which were sometimes themselves cut off and thrust into wild and irrational fighting that was over before men with mortal wounds were dead.

Something more was needed. Something more was always needed to fill the desperate chasm between what the nation demanded of the military and the equipment provided them by politicians who generally were more concerned with citizens' votes than soldiers' lives. To Jesup, the whole dreary effort of "attempting to remove a band of savages from one unexplored wilderness to another . . ." was close to futile, and he felt the war was "doomed to continue for years to come, and at constantly accumulating expense."⁵ But Christian gentlemen in Washington City, who were spinning fine dreams of empire, had no time for such querulous words from a professional soldier who had little time for dreams. And as for the plight of the "savages" - the official policy on that, at least, was clear: "It is useless to recur to the principles and motives which induced the government to determine their removal. . . . They ought to be captured, or destroyed."⁶ It was simple - in Washington.

In the field there were shortages in men, weapons, and time, but bountiful nature had provided plenty of trees, and where there were trees, there could be forts. Jesup had resolved, "from a careful consideration of all the circumstances of the country and the army, . . . to establish a post on the Withlacoochee at the point where the Ft. King road crosses it. . . ." With additional bases to store the always scant subsistence and thereby shorten his lines of supply, his troops would have more maneuverability.

On the seventeenth of December the general had come down the Fort King road from Volusia at the head of volunteers from Tennessee and Alabama with 300 regular troops and 500 Indian warriors bound for Fort Brooke.⁷ He had crossed the Withlacoochee, fording past the wreckage of the high bridge, and made camp in the high pine bluff on the south shore that stretched a quarter of a mile further south and east. A forest of virgin pine towered above the white sand and heavy palmetto, ample water at its feet and bright winter sun glittering on green needles and

5. Thomas S. Jesup to J. R. Poinsett, February 11, 1838, *ibid.*, 200.

6. Poinsett to Jesup, March 1, 1838, *ibid.*, 201-02.

7. Jesup to R. Jones, December 17, 1836, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 7 vols. (Washington, 1832-1861), VII, 821.

flaking bark. Here and there stood blunt stumps, their trunks cut a dozen years before to build the stout bridge-burnt, rebuilt, and burnt again-that crossed the thirty-foot stream.⁸

Here at the crossroads of the Withlacoochee and the military highway, in the heart of the Indian settlement, was an ideal location for one of a series of outposts. Roughly forty miles from Fort Brooke and sixty from Fort King, the men of a garrison here could stay in touch with Indian movement in the interior while maintaining frequent contact with other posts. The river in this dry time of year was ten or twelve feet below the bank, and even with the normal high water of the rainy seasons in spring and late summer the fort to be built would be safe from flooding except on rare occasions. The swamps to the west should be distant enough with their attendant miasma and vapors that troops would not contract the fatal fevers that had claimed so many. In addition, a fort here would be a sign to the Seminoles that the white man had come to stay. A week later at Tampa Bay, General Jesup issued Order No. 26, instructing Lieutenant Colonel William Foster of the Fourth Infantry to proceed to the site on the Withlacoochee and establish Fort Dade.

Axes rang in the woods on Christmas Day. For two weeks Colonel Foster kept his brigade busy clearing land along the river to give the new fort a place to stand. The fragrance of pine sap was clean in the cold sunlight as log after log was cut and trimmed, sharpened like giant spears, and then set down butt ends first in a long rectangle. The wavering line of the lengthening palisade was secured and straightened by other logs, smaller, anchored horizontally to the uprights by the coarse cut nails sent up on the wagon train from Fort Brooke. Within the enclosure, supplies were piling up: "twenty-five thousand ball and buck-shot cartridges, twenty thousand rounds of rifle powder and bullets, fifty thousand rations of subsistence and five thousand bushels of corn, an ample supply of tools of every description required for service in the field as well as iron, steel, nails, and cordage. . . ."⁹

By the eighth day of the new year, 1837, General Jesup had

8. George A. McCall, *Letters from the Frontiers* (Philadelphia, 1868), 191-93. Captain McCall was a part of the command that cleared the original course of the Fort King road, and he describes briefly the crossing of the river at this point and construction of the first bridge.

9. Orders Number 26, December 23, 1836, United States National Archives, Record Group 94.

returned and set up temporary headquarters for the Army of the South at the unfledged fort.¹⁰ Congressmen who fought a paper war in Washington wouldn't have thought much of it—just a big walled enclosure set in the pines with nothing much in it but palmetto roots, supplies, and milling soldiers—but chances were they'd never see it. The damaged bridge had been shored up and a lot of land cleared, leaving only a few big oaks here and there, but the block houses had only been started, and the troops were still encamped all over the area. The birth pains were over but the new fort had some growing to do.

A few more days and Jesup, with Colonel A. Henderson of the marines and his men and accompanied by the regular troops at the fort formed ranks and set off up the Fort King road. Jesup rode at the head of the blue column as it filed toward the river, and the three silver stars of a major general commanding¹¹ glinted on the golden epaulettes against a dark blue coat as his mount crossed the bridge and slowly passed from the sight of Colonel Foster and the others, gone from his new fort to find the Seminoles and take their land. Behind him most of his officers marched with the men, a weeks rations in their haversacks and their horses taken by the quartermaster because of the lack of forage.¹² Then the last man was gone north on the road that might lead to peace and the morning was cold and quiet.

Colonel Foster had been left to tend the young fort, new and lonely in the wilderness. His battalion was with him and Captain Lyon's artillerymen and he would need their help to make it strong. With what the general referred to as "his accustomed energy," he drove the men on, transforming a forest into a fort.¹³ A thousand logs stood shoulder to shoulder in the palisade and through the giant gate hung on iron hinges came a thousand more. Notched down, one upon another, they climbed a dozen feet to form block houses, barracks, storerooms, and a hospital. The horses taken from the officers were stripped of their black

10. Orders Number 34, January 8, 1837, *ibid.*

11. This information is drawn from the uniform regulations of the period supplied by the United States National Archives and Record Service, specifically: "1836, Article 52, Uniform, or Dress of the Army. 1. A Major General Commanding in Chief. Epaulettes - gold, with solid crescent; device, three silver embroidered stars, . . ."

12. Orders Number 5, January 9, 1837, United States National Archives, Record Group 94.

13. *Ibid.*

bridles and blue blankets with the gold lace to serve as draft teams, their ration cut to six quarts of corn and all the dry winter grass they could eat.¹⁴

And while the fort was growing, Jesup had met the Indians in one skirmish after another. Away to the north, around the Great Swamp, soldier and Seminole met and fought and broke and met again. White men in blue uniforms and red men in dirty rags glimpsed each other for the first time down the barrel of a musket and red hand or white squeezed first and one by one men died. So, with surprise and pain and death a fever of action would end and the sacrifice would enable men to talk again and peace would come a little closer.

General Jesup and his staff met with Jumper and Alligator, field officers of the Indians, on the eighth of February. The dark bold eyes of fighting men sized each other up in a field between their camps and each made his own plans while they discussed settlement of their differences. Only compliance with the Treaty of Paynes Landing, said Jesup, would end the struggle. They would put this to Micanopy replied Jumper, but he is known to want peace and he will come to you and give his word. Good, said the general, then hostilities shall cease immediately and on the eighteenth day of next month we shall meet again at the new fort by the Big Withlacoochee called Fort Dade.¹⁵ Jumper, lean, hard, and six feet tall, had directed the fire that had killed Francis Dade, and the irony of the site chosen for the reaffirmation of peace was not lost on him, but he made no comment.

With great expectations the fort and the men waited. In the interval since the meeting in the field, plans had been made for both peace and war, some forts being evacuated and convalescents sent north to Georgia, but others, like Fort Dade, were kept open and heavily garrisoned. Captain R. M. Kirby was in command of the fort now while Major A. R. Thompson of the Sixth Infantry commanded the brigade in camp nearby. Captain I. F. Lee, an officer of engineers engaged in a survey of the river, was in charge

14. *Ibid.*

15. Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, February 21, 1837; *New York American*, February 24, 1837. The latter paper carried several stories on Florida including one dealing with the surrender of Osceola, "with all the grace of a fallen hero," and stating unequivocally that "the war has terminated." Both points must have been as welcome as they were false.

of a battalion of friendly Creek Indians camped outside the palisade. The block houses had been "covered in," rations and subsistence stored, the area tidied as well as possible considering the hundreds of troops scattered in and outside the fort, and everything arranged to present a formidable and military appearance. But the lengthening day of late fall became early evening, and around the fires on the meeting day, there was hope, mingled with despondency. To some men it made no difference, for soldiering was soldiering, but to others, home had suddenly seemed near when there was talk of peace.¹⁶

And to General Jesup, prepared all day for the arrival of the Seminole chiefs, disappointment was most bitter of all, for a peace here at his Fort Dade, and now, in the third month of his command, would be a crowning achievement for him and a lesson for the future military annals of the nation. As recently as the seventh of the month, shortly after the meeting with the Seminoles and their promise to come in, he had written, "This is a service which no man would seek with any other view than the mere performance of duty: distinction, or increase of reputation, is out of of the question; and the difficulties are such, that the best concerted plans may result in absolute failure, and the best established reputation be lost without a fault."¹⁷ But in the days intervening it had come to seem possible that he might be able to wind it up after all, finish a distasteful struggle in a wilderness that could not even be said to be habitable by white men, and with his long-suffering troops, depart with honor. It would have justified his plans, mitigated his errors, and turned a dreary campaign into a brilliant victory. Fort Dade might one day have stood as a memorial where all the agony had ended.

The next day and the next preparations continued for vigorous prosecution of the war, while hope receded. Then, word came that a party of Seminoles had been sighted on the road. They looked peaceful and were headed for the fort. It was the twenty-second day of February, birthday of Francis Langhorne Dade,¹⁸

16. Information on the personnel of the fort has been taken from a microfilm copy of the Fort Dade Post Returns supplied by the National Archives and Record Service.

17. Jesup to R. Jones, February 7, 1837, Sprague, *The Florida War*, 173.

18. The date of birth of Major Francis Langhorne Dade was found in *Tylers Quarterly Magazine*, XVII (1935-1936), 55.

when Alligator and Cloud entered the fort at four o'clock.¹⁹ They were late, but perhaps not too late.

A week, and then ten days were lost in illness, procrastination, and the general vicissitudes of life while soldiers and Indians milled about, staring, talking a little, each officially scornful but perhaps in a secret way, with admiration for each other as well. Time and again General Jesup met with the assorted chiefs; Jumper, Alligator, Cloud, and Halah-too-chee (a nephew of Micanopy and heir apparent), explaining, advising, insisting that peace could only be had with emigration.²⁰

The clear cold days of winter were ending and the rains of March began. Brittle sunlight gave way to soggy clouds that rushed above the jungle and the river and transformed green and gold and blue to sodden grey. The sturdy fort, set well back from the river and the road in an acre of wet sand, presented a drooping flag above the sharpened stakes of its palisade to the swarm of troopers and their Creek allies camped about the clearing. Within the gates officers and men moved between the block houses, heads bowed against drizzle or downpour, blue coats as dark and wet as the long strips of peeling bark on the log walls.

In the general's quarters, bedraggled Seminoles in colored turbans, knee-length cotton tunics and coats, with their feet in buckskin moccasins and legs wrapped in formal leggings of woolen broadcloth, met in grand council. This was the fifth of March, a Sunday afternoon, and General Jesup and his staff sat across from the Seminoles, their uniforms with braid and sash and sword looking impressively commanding. They spoke through Abraham, the half-caste Negro, and the odor of unclean humanity was strong in the damp and heated room.²¹

Halah-too-chee opened the talk by stating that his uncle, Micanopy, hereditary chief of all the Seminoles, was old and infirm and therefore unable to attend, but had deputed Jumper and himself to act for him, and he would ratify any agreement that they might reach.

19. Jesup to B. F. Butler, February 22, 1837, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, VII, 833.

20. *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, March 21, 1837.

21. Information on Seminole dress can be found in John M. Goggin, "Osceola: Portraits, Features, and Dress," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXIII (January-April 1955), 161-92; Irvin M. Peithmann, *The Unconquered Seminole Indians* (St. Petersburg, 1957).

Jesup accepted this, then asked if it was understood that the primary stipulation was that they leave the country? This was the whole point - if they agreed here then all the other problems could be met and a war that might have continued for years to come could be over.

Without perceptible pause, the question was translated and answered - yes, they understood.

The questions and answers hurried on, but the only one that really mattered was met. If the Seminoles held to it, and if no over-anxious settler or careless soldier disturbed them, then here and now countless lives had been saved, a frontier opened, treasure conserved, and the names of General Thomas S. Jesup and Fort Dade, Florida, would be remembered down through the years.

The next day the papers of capitulation were ready and the chiefs made their marks. They would return to their people, gather them with all their possessions including their slaves, and come in to the camp to be set up by the military near Fort Brooke, prepared for shipment to the West.²²

Through the evening the Seminoles milled about the fort, even Jumper's wife accompanying the tall spare leader who was evidently satisfied with the arrangements, though one officer thought that ". . . all his fire is not yet extinguished. . . ." The Chief, Cloud, was still there, "soldierly in appearance; very robust, with a most benevolent countenance . . .," and Halah-too-chee with a "melancholy" look.²³ ". . . There was [not] an individual in the army but believed that the Indians were sincere . . .,"²⁴ though thoughtful men suppressed their satisfaction from the subdued and melancholy Seminoles. Time enough to gloat when they were gone-it was enough now to make plans for a return to civilization.

There was talk that the general planned to discharge the volunteers and militia immediately, send the marines north, and whatever regulars were not needed to superintend the departing

22. The text of the Capitulation is given, with comment, in Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 23, 1837, and in Sprague, *The Florida War*, 177-78.

23. Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 24, 1837.

24. T. Noel to George H. Crossman, June 3, 1837. This letter and others relating to Fort Dade were supplied by the National Archives and Record Service.

Indians during the coming months would be transferred to healthy stations where they would “find repose, and be able to recruit their strength.”²⁵ The “sickly season” would soon be on them here—already two men were dead of the fever and two more were in the post hospital. With the gradual warming and the rainy days, the river was rising to flood the winter-dry swamps and the nights were becoming more restless with the season’s first mosquitoes. These were annoyances to be borne during war, but the war was over and peace meant discharge or at least reassignment. In the North, spring was coming, and as every soldier knew, any place was better than here.

* * * *

This day, the sixth of March 1837, was the high point in the life of Fort Dade. The Capitulation, which might have taken its place among the important documents of the country was doomed to be forgotten. The nation, like a parent who has consistently lied to a child, was shocked when its child, the Seminole, was discovered in deceit. The younger chiefs had never intended to fulfill the stipulations agreed to, but used the diplomacy usually attributed only to civilized people to gain their real ends. The enemy had been made to contribute vast quantities of food and provisions, medicine, and, what was even more precious, time. For three months the bulk of the Seminole nation, including most of the chiefs from Micanopy down through Osceola, were encamped near Forts Brooke and Mellon, recovering their strength and provisioning their larders, under no restraint and allowed to come and go as they wished. Then in June they simply disappeared, melting away as only Seminoles could, back into their beloved woods and swamps in time to put in crops that would in turn carry them through another winter. And all was as it had been.²⁶

Fort Dade still stood, of course, abandoned through the summer to the fever with most of the forts in the territory, and re-occupied in September or October when civilized men could again wage war, but never did it regain the chance for glory. No battles

25. Poinsett to Jesup, May 17, 1837, Sprague, *The Florida War*, 179.

26. *Ibid.*, 178-80.

were ever fought there, no one ever said or did anything there again that would matter to history. It waited faithfully through the hot and silent summers while palmetto and weed lifted tender shoots through the sand of the compound, then once again the sound of fife and drum would drift up the Fort King Road and the gates would open to receive the autumn troops. Wild things would be flushed from block houses, the impedimenta of man would be deposited here and there, a flag slowly gathering stars would climb a weathered pole, and once more Fort Dade would live.

But it was all down hill. After the fitful struggle with the Seminoles ended in 1842, the troops remained for shorter and shorter periods. Then some years were skipped entirely, until in September 1849, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Bainbridge with a detachment of the Seventh Infantry sent up from Fort Brooke to garrison the fort, stopped eight miles short of the river where old Fort Dade waited.²⁷ Here along the military road a few settlers had put up shanties, set out crops, and even established a post office in 1845.²⁸ It isn't clear whether any structure actually stood in this location that could be called a military installation then or later, or whether the troops were simply camped in the area near what had come to be known as the Fort Dade Community, but here they stayed, filling out their post returns for "Ft. Dade, Fla." Gradually, even the old settlers who had called this place after the established military post on the river forgot, and succeeding generations never knew that there had been a "military" Fort Dade.

This post office named for a forgotten fort shifted place throughout the area, a mile this way, two miles that, depending on the residence of each succeeding postmaster. Finally it settled in the rolling land some three miles west of the Fort King road.²⁹ But this Fort Dade too, was doomed. The railroad had come by

27. "Fort Dade is located in the vicinity of the Post Office bearing the same name and in 8 miles South of the Withlacoochee River and on the direct road to Tampa." Post Return of Detachment 7th U. S. Infantry at Fort Dade for the Month of September, 1849.

28. Information on the Fort Dade Post Office has been taken from records supplied by the Social and Economic Branch of the Office of Civil Archives of the National Archives and Records Service.

29. Details of the precise location of the Fort Dade Post Office were found in a report to the topographer's office of the post office department in December 1885 by then Postmaster Robert J. Marshall.

this time and the rival community along the Fort King road that now called itself Dade City got the station and a post office of its own. Growing business in the area came to Dade City and its station and on April 15, 1889, the Fort Dade Post Office shut down for good.³⁰ By now memories of and references to Fort Dade had come to mean the peripatetic post office, and, with its demise, the tenuous tie of memory to the old fort faded and was gone.

But unknown to the early settlers who tended their cattle, orange groves, and homes in the area once made safe by the lost fort, the name had settled once more like a restless spirit on an island in Tampa Bay. Egmont Key, where Captain Dade had hunted back in 1824 even before the establishment of Fort Brooke, had been set aside as a military reservation in 1882 and now stood as the third official Fort Dade. It covered 378 acres, nearly the entire key, and contained some twenty buildings and a tennis court. As late as 1916 it was still listed as an active military base.³¹

Of the original, or "Old Fort Dade," not one log remains. The Withlacoochee River still hurries silently by the bluff, periodically filling the swamps that once bred the malarial mosquitoes that killed men named Adams, Kelly, and Knight who served at the fort in its youth and theirs.³² The palmettoes have come again, and the oaks and pines, thrusting up through silent sand where the booted feet of blue-clad soldiers stood. The Fort King Road shrunken in its age still passes, yet even it gives no sign of recognition that in this wasted field beside it a proud fort once lived. Who remembers that here a general and an Indian chief once gave their word that war had ended? Now like Adams, Kelly, and Knight, Fort Dade is dead.

30. Office of Civil Archives, National Archives and Record Service.

31. The description of the last Fort Dade, Florida, is taken from a detailed map in *Military Posts in the United States and Alaska*, quartermaster general's office, June 1905, supplied by the Office of the Chief of Military History, Washington. "Fort Dade, Florida" is listed in the 1916 edition of the *United States Military Reservations, National Cemeteries and Military Parks* (Washington).

32. Post Returns, Fort Dade, Florida.