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EARLY HISTORY OF THE CROSS-FLORIDA BARGE CANAL

by CHARLES E. BENNETT

THE DREAM OF constructing an all-water route across the peninsula of Florida to carry freight and passengers has often been discussed and debated in the past history of this state. Many plans were projected and discarded, surveys were made, and work even began on a canal during the 1930s. However, only now is the Cross-Florida Barge Canal actually underway with completion scheduled for sometime after 1970.

The story of the canal and the men who have dreamed of its great potential is one of the most exciting and rich dramas of Florida history. Four hundred years ago the ruling powers of Europe were locked in a power struggle for domination of the New World. France, Spain, and England vied for rule of the sea and a piece of what now is the United States. The first decisive conflict between Europeans on our shores was the battle over Fort Caroline on the banks of the St. Johns River in 1565.

Almost as soon as the first Europeans began the exploration of Florida they realized the importance of a water route big enough for a small vessel to travel across Florida.

Fort Caroline, established by the French on the banks of the St. Johns River in 1564, was regarded by Spain as a threat to her security. It also brought about the first recorded mention of a waterway across Florida. Pedro Menendez de Aviles, Spain's great commander, attacked Laudonniere's withering forces and defeated the French, leading to the establishment of St. Augustine.

One of the men at Fort Caroline was Roberto Meleneche, a seaman and a soldier, who was captured by the Spanish prior to their attack in 1565. As a prisoner Meleneche gave a deposition which greatly influenced Menendez' thinking. In the first place, he felt that a land attack on Fort Caroline would likely be more successful than one from the river. Apparently taking this advice, Menendez followed this strategy in his operations against the fort. Meleneche also claimed that the St. Johns River had "two mouths," one on the Atlantic and the other to the southwest on

the Gulf of Mexico.¹ Because the mapmaker at the Fort Caroline settlement did not show a natural channel across Florida, not all the French supported Meleneche's contention.

After capturing Fort Caroline, Menendez explored the St. Johns and the west coast of Florida, seeking to substantiate Meleneche's claims. He planned to erect a fort at or near the southwestern "mouth" of the river to protect the water route from the Gulf to San Mateo and St. Augustine. In January 1567, Menendez set about acquiring specific information about the water course, but he failed to verify its existence. He was also afraid of arousing the hostility of the Indians if he pursued his quest with too much enthusiasm.²

Several mapmakers supported this theory of a Florida waterway. One map dated around 1595, in the Spanish Archives of the Indies in Seville, shows rather imperfectly the water course across northern Florida, the places visited by Menendez, and the forts established by him, including St. Augustine, San Mateo, and Ays.³ "A New and Accurate Map of East and West Florida Drawn from the Best Authorities," published in the *London Magazine*, March 1765, outlines a waterway from the St. Johns to a point just above Tampa Bay; a map made by Juan de la Puente in 1768 plainly shows a channel across the peninsula.⁴ A map dated 1775 found aboard a Spanish ship in the eighteenth century, shows many water routes across Florida, including several which link the Gulf of Mexico with the Atlantic Ocean.⁵ The earliest detailed map of the canal area in the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers files is a sketch of the country between Pensacola and St. Augustine which was drawn in 1778.⁶

From the very beginning, the Cross-Florida Barge Canal has been debated and discussed in the highest echelons. Yet the

1. Charles E. Bennett, *Laudonniere & Fort Caroline* (Gainesville, 1964), 87-93.

2. Woodbury Lowery, *The Spanish Settlements, Within the Present Limits of the United States*, 2 vols., (New York, 1905), II, 226, 278.

3. *Ibid.*, 286.

4. *The London Magazine*, CXXXIV (March 1765), 120; mss., Dep de la Guerra, 9a-2a-a, 14, 1768, Madrid, Spain.

5. Thomas Jeffreys, "Pais Cedés, containing the Peninsula and Gulf of Florida with the Bahama Islands" (map), Old Print Shop, New York, Florida, 1775.

6. Corps of Engineers, "Sketch of country between Pensacola and St. Augustine, July to August," 1778, Record Group Number 77, HQ map file (L-S), National Archives.

period between the time of Menendez and the first governmental action taken in the 1800s to actually construct the canal is barely recorded except by mapmakers, many of whom believed there was already such a waterway in existence. John G. Ruge of Apalachicola and chairman of the Florida State Canal Commission during the 1920s wrote: "The Florida Cross-State Canal project, covering a distance of about two hundred and fifteen miles from Fernandina to Saint Georges Sound, has been discussed since the days of Washington. The project was proposed initially in 1763, when the British took over Florida, and again in 1821, when the United States got possession."⁷ Exploratory missions were conducted by the British who also believed that the waterway existed.⁸

Government officials, beginning with Jefferson's administration, favored construction of a canal. Jefferson was concerned with Florida's proximity to Cuba and Cuban influence on navigation in the Gulf of Mexico. A canal across Florida would destroy Cuba's power over trade around the tip of the peninsula.⁹ Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, was interested in waterway development, as was George Washington earlier. Their interest is said to have inaugurated the waterway policy of the United States.¹⁰ On April 4, 1808, Gallatin presented a report on roads and canals to the Senate and outlined a program for development of waterways throughout the eastern seaboard. While he did not propose a waterway across Florida, he called for a system which would link the "Atlantic and western waters."¹¹ Florida at the time was a Spanish territory, and obviously the secretary would not have proposed construction of a canal through the area.

In 1830 the *Southern Review* reported: "Mr. Gallatin suggested the inquiry into the feasibility of uniting the St. Mary's and the Mississippi, and on the temporary occupation of Florida,

7. Quoted in Harry G. Cutler, *History of Florida*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1923), I, 75.

8. Don Manuel de Montiano to Don Manuel Joseph de Justis, February 23, 1740, *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society*; 10 vols. (Savannah, 1840-1916), VII, part I, 44.

9. Joseph M. White to Charles F. Mercer, *House Documents*, 23rd Cong., 1st Sess., No. 61, p. 68.

10. "Preliminary Report of the Inland Waterways Commission," *Senate Documents*, 60th Cong., 1st Sess., No. 325, p. 535.

11. *Ibid.*

by the American troops, in 1818, Mr. Calhoun, the Secretary of War, seized the occasion of directing some partial examinations near the head waters of the St. Mary's and the Suwannee, with the view to inland communication between the Atlantic and the Gulf."¹² It is believed that Andrew Jackson was an early proponent of a Florida canal. He had led an American force twice into Florida, once during the War of 1812, and again in 1818, at the time of the First Seminole War. He must have realized then the military value of a communication route between East and West Florida. John C. Calhoun, while Secretary of War in the Monroe administration, concerned himself with construction of roads and canals for defense purposes, but in 1820 he seemed cool to the idea of spending the money on a canal in an area which was largely unexplored and which the United States was still in the process of acquiring. In a letter to Jackson, he noted that "it will require much economy and good management to meet the ordinary expenditure of the year. You will accordingly take no measure in the present state of the business which will increase the expense of your division."¹³ While Jackson may have evidenced interest in the canal idea when he served as territorial governor of Florida, as president he opposed Federal support for such projects. His pocket veto of 1832 is evidence of this.¹⁴

In his 1821 study of Florida, William Darby included a letter written by a proponent of the canal to a resident of Charleston, South Carolina: "Canals connecting this river [St. Johns] with the Mexican basin, by the bay of Tampa, or with more expense, but with more importance, by the bay of Appalachy, could be effected. The herculean prospect that such an undertaking might, at the first view, carry with it, will be greatly softened down on only comparing with it the commercial advantages of an inland navigation between the Atlantic shores of the United States and the Mississippi; totally avoiding the circuitous and perilous route around the Cape and Keys of Florida, where more disasters annually occur, than on any other equal extent of the coasts of North and South America I

12. *Southern Review* (November 1830), 414.

13. Letter of March 15, 1820, Andrew Jackson Papers, LVI, Library of Congress, Washington.

14. James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 11 vols. (New York, 1891-1897), II, 601-03, 638-39.

have laboured considerably in the theory of this project, and expect, at some early period, to lay it before a community, sufficiently large and enterprising to appreciate its many and obvious advantages.”¹⁵

On December 28, 1824, the Florida legislative council presented a memorial to Congress requesting assistance in several areas. It called for the “opening of a canal across the Peninsula of East Florida from the river Suwannee to St. Johns or between such other points as on examination may prove to be more eligible Such a canal, by opening a passage from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic would in an eminent degree, develop the agricultural resources of Florida, enhance the value of public lands, promote the intercourse and enlarge the commerce of the Atlantic and western states and in time of war would give celerity and energy to the operations of the general government; and it is believed that in no part of the United States could an object of so much public utility be promoted with less difficulty or expenditure, the Peninsula being intersected at various parts by water courses, the connexion of which would render the expense of this work an object of comparative insignificance.”¹⁶

In 1824 a group of citizens of Camden County, Georgia, presented a memorial to Congress calling for “a canal within the boundary lines of this state and county from the waters of the St. Mary’s River, along the southern extremity of the Okefenokee Swamp, to the waters of the Suwannee River.” The estimated length of this waterway would be about 300 miles, with only twenty-five miles actually to be dug. According to the petition, this canal would both protect commerce and “open a safe inland communication . . . of the highest importance to our country.”¹⁷ The route for the proposed canal was based on a map of the territory by Charles Vignioles.¹⁸

Richard Keith Call, Florida’s territorial delegate to Congress, submitted plans to cut a waterway across Florida to the House Committee on Roads and Canals in February 1825. His letter,

15. William Darby, *Memoir on the Geography and Natural and Civil History of Florida* (Philadelphia, 1821), 74-75.

16. Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, 26 vols. (Washington, 1834-1962), XXIII, 136.

17. *House Executive Documents*, 18th Cong., 1st Sess., II, No. 4, p. 54.

18. *Acts of the General Assembly, Senate, State of Georgia*, November 8, 1823.

outlining the proposal to connect the Mississippi with the Atlantic by an internal communication extending along the northern margin of the Gulf of Mexico, was included in the report of the committee of February 26, 1825. "It is believed to be practicable, and by no means at an unreasonable expense, compared with the high importance of the subject," the report said, "to make an inland water communication from Boston to St. Mary's, and to connect the waters of the Atlantic with those of the Gulf of Mexico." The committee referred to the 1808 report by Secretary Gallatin, which indicated that a canal could be opened from the Mississippi to the Atlantic Ocean through the state of Georgia. "But, since the acquisition of Florida," the report noted, "a new route presents itself, to commence on the Mississippi, at the mouth of the river Iberville, and terminate at the mouth of the St. John's River, of the coast of Florida. . . . The whole distance is 700 miles, but the distance to be canalled would not exceed 120 miles, and would save a distance of navigation of 1,500 miles. The cost of this undertaking, from the information received, would be about six millions of dollars."

On December 8, 1825, the Florida legislative council named a three-man committee - James Gadsden, Edward Gibson, and William R. Simmons - to examine "the expediency of opening a canal from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic, by the most admissable route, through the peninsula of Florida."¹⁹ On December 8, 1825, a canal memorial was approved by Governor DuVal and sent to Congress. The memorial stressed the potential national aspects, rather than the local interests of the canal: "While the American commerce, but particularly the coast trade between the East and West, will be relieved from a heavy tribute annually exacted in the form of shipwrecks and insurance; while the dangerous shoals of the Florida Keys will be avoided, and the distance from the Atlantic ports to the mouth of the Mississippi greatly reduced; the increased facilities to certain and rapid communications along an exposed frontier, adding to the national security by augmenting the means of national defense, will be a result the no less imposing." The memorial asked for a study of the canal "whether as a national work to be constructed exclusively with the public funds for general benefit, or as a work

19. *Niles Weekly Register*, April 9, 1825, 89.

to be undertaken by private enterprise, under a charter of incorporation. . . .”²⁰

On December 19, 1825, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts submitted a House resolution calling “for the examination and survey of the Peninsula of Florida, for the purpose of ascertaining whether it be practicable to unite the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, by a ship canal, to run from the neighborhood of St. Augustine, or from the mouth of the St. John’s River, on the Atlantic coast, to the neighborhood of the mouth of the Suwannee River, in the Gulf of Mexico.”²¹ In the Senate a bill was introduced on January 10, 1826, calling for an appropriation of \$20,000 for the canal survey.²²

While the Congress was taking this action, interest in the Florida canal was developing elsewhere in the country. Cadwallader D. Colden of New York, at the request of the Committee of the Florida Company in the City of New York, wrote a letter to the *National Intelligencer* in December 1825, supporting the canal: “As it will be entirely within a Territorial government, no state rights are in the way. It will be more connected with commerce, and may be more connected with military operations than any work of the same nature in the United States can be. In these points of view it seems fit that it should be made at the expense of the nation, and not only be a ship canal, but be capable of passing vessels of war.”²³ Colden stressed the dangers of the coast around Florida and outlined the advantages of the shorter route.

While the advantages of a Florida canal were obvious, there were questions of its cost. The *New York National Advocate*, however, contended that the canal was, “a project, though of trifling cost, of more real value and importance to our commerce than any yet conceived or executed.”²⁴ The *National Intelligencer* claimed the canal was of “great importance” and that lives and property would be saved by the safe navigation across the peninsula rather than around the tip of Florida.²⁵

20. *Senate Documents*, 19th Cong., 1st Sess., No. 15, p. 3.

21. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 382 fn.

22. *Pensacola Gazette*, February 4, 1826.

23. *Washington National Intelligencer*, December 1825, reprinted in *ibid.*, February, 1826.

24. *New York National Advocate*, December 13, 1825.

25. *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, February 17, 1826.

The first government survey was approved by Congress on March 3, 1826, with an appropriation of \$20,000.²⁶ Major General Alex Macomb, head of the U.S. Army Engineers, instructed Brigadier General Simon Bernard, once Napoleon's principal military engineer, to send a brigade to make the survey for the canal route.²⁷

Joseph M. White, who succeeded Richard Keith Call as Florida territorial delegate, in December 1826, wrote a highly optimistic letter to Congressman Charles F. Mercer, chairman of the House Committee on Roads and Canals, giving the historical background of the canal and emphasizing the need for its construction: "These are some of the advantages of a work I have ventured to pronounce, in national importance, paramount to all others. To suppose that it will not, at a period not far distant, be accomplished, would be to suppose the nation hoodwinked, or destitute of that energy and enterprise that has produced its present glory, and the prospects of its perpetuity."²⁸

The survey authorization contemplated two routes to be studied for both a ship channel and small boat canal. One was from the St. Johns River to Vassasousa Bay, the other from the St. Marys River to the Appalachicola River, and both would connect the Atlantic Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico. General Bernard ordered Major Paul H. Perrault, a U. S. topographical engineer based in New York, to conduct the surveys in two parties, one on the eastern side of the peninsula and one on the Gulf coast.²⁹ The Perrault survey team reached Florida in July 1826 and started work. General Bernard visited Florida in June 1827, and upon his return to Washington reported to President John Quincy Adams that a ship canal across Florida was impracticable, and that the most that could be effected was a canal six feet deep for steamboats. Perrault also returned to Washington to work on his report and maps.³⁰

In the Florida election campaign of 1827, Joseph M. White defended himself against the claim that his opponent, James Gadsden, could get the canal project through Congress at a quicker

26. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 382 fn.

27. Alex Macomb to Simon Bernard, March 15, 1826, *ibid.*, 471.

28. *House Documents*, 23rd Cong., 1st Sess., No. 61, 67.

29. Bernard to Paul H. Perrault, March 18, 1826, Carter, *The Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 476.

30. *Ibid.*, fn. 855.

pace. White wrote the secretary of war in March 1827 that one of the engineers working on the canal survey "declared in a tavern in St. Augustine, that he had been out electioneering for my opponent Col. Gadsden, & that the canal would never be completed, if he were not elected." White also complained that the work was not going fast enough on the survey completion, and that more competent engineers should be sent to the territory to finish the job.³¹ White was re-elected delegate and continued his efforts for the canal. In addition to his work in Congress, he wrote articles for newspapers in Florida and New York showing the need for the waterway.

General Bernard reported in February 1829 to President Adams on the partially completed survey. On February 26, 1829, the President, in transmitting the engineer's report to the Congress, described the canal as a "great and most desirable national work."³² The report, signed by Bernard and Captain William Tell Poussin, included a general map of the area and traced several possible routes for the canal. One, known as the St. Marys route, ascended that river from its mouth to Alligator Creek, and then across the Okefenokee Swamp in a more or less straight course to the Gulf coast at the mouth of the Aucilla River. The St. Johns route ascended that river from its mouth to Black Creek, then across Trail Ridge and down the Santa Fe River to the Suwannee River, following this stream to its mouth. The board of engineers recommended the St. Johns route, but because of a lack of funds, it was unable to prepare the necessary cost estimates. Up to this time both ship and barge canal projects had been considered, but this survey called for a lock-barge canal, five feet deep with locks thirty three feet wide. The survey argued that a ship channel across Florida was "not practicable."

Congress, on May 31, 1830, approved legislation providing for the completion of the survey and appropriated \$10,400 to carry out the work. Major Poussin was in charge of this survey until the summer of 1831 when he left on a visit to France; on July 31, 1832, he resigned.³³ The lock-barge report of March

31. Joseph M. White to the secretary of war, March 4, 1827, *ibid.*, 785-86. See also fn. 786.

32. *House Documents*, 20th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 147, February 26, 1829.

33. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIV, 446 fn.

6, 1832, described in detail the area surveyed, but it did not answer the question of the canal's practicability, give an estimate of its cost, or point out its economic advantages. The survey was forwarded without comment to the House Committee on Roads and Canals by President Jackson on December 9, 1833.³⁴

Three more canal surveys were authorized by Congress during the late 1800s. An act of August 30, 1852, provided for the completion of the old line of survey, or a new line, for a canal across the Florida peninsula. Two routes were surveyed by Lt. L. M. Smith of the U. S. Topographical Engineers, both having Tampa Bay as their Gulf terminus and the St. Johns River as their Atlantic terminus. One route entered the upper St. Johns through the Wekiva River, four miles below Lake Monroe. The other entered the St. Johns through the Oklawaha River a few miles south of Palatka. The estimated cost for this canal was \$3,697,000, and it was to have a depth of six feet, a top width of sixty feet, and locks 110 feet long and sixteen feet wide. The route via the Oklawaha River was the favored of the two, but Secretary of War Jefferson Davis in his December 3, 1855 report called for additional surveys and an appropriation of \$12,000 to finance the study.³⁵

On December 16, 1872, a Senate Select Committee on Transportation Routes to the Seaboard was established, and it made a two-year study of the rail and water transportation system in the United States. This committee, known as the Windom Select Committee, recommended surveys made to determine the Practicability and probable cost of a canal across Florida, so as "to enable sea-going vessels to avoid the dangerous passage around the Florida keys."³⁶ Senator Simon Barclay Conover of Florida was a member of this committee.

Florida Congressman Josiah T. Walls, a Negro born in Virginia and living in Gainesville, strongly endorsed the canal project in testimony before the Windom Committee in 1874: "In peace, it will give to the United States government a prestige and power that will place the nation in an advanced position; and in

34. *House Documents*, 23rd Cong., 1st Sess., No. 61, December 9, 1833.

35. *Senate Executive Documents* 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., No. 83, p. 1.

36. *Senate Documents*, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., No. 307, Part I, 235.

war, a land-locked channel and secure passage for our Army and Navy.”³⁷

The two surveys in 1875 and 1878 were concerned with a possible route from the mouth of the St. Marys River through the Okefenokee Swamp to the Gulf of Mexico. Both a barge-type and ship-type canal were considered, and efforts were made to determine if the Okefenokee Swamp would be adequate for the water supply needed for the canal. The barge canal, measuring nine feet deep by eighty feet wide, would cost \$8,250,000; the lock ship-canal, measuring twenty-five feet deep and eighty feet at the bottom, would cost \$50,000,000. Lieutenant Colonel Q. A. Gilmore of the U.S. Corps of Engineers was a principal participant in these surveys and the results drawn from these two studies were known as the “Gilmore Report.” No specific recommendations were made at this time.³⁸

Many persons over the years had proposed that Florida or a group of private investors rather than the Federal government might be able to build the canal. In April 1878, a group of Floridians formed The Atlantic and Gulf Transit Canal Company, with capital of \$20,000,000, for the purpose of “constructing, maintaining and operating a canal across the peninsula of Florida.”³⁹ Nothing came of this venture.

There were several private surveys for a canal route, including one by Robert Gamble of Tallahassee which reported on the advantages of a barge canal connecting the Mississippi River with the Atlantic Ocean. This report had been referred to the Windom Committee.⁴⁰

Five Congress-authorized canal surveys over a period of fifty years had been made, but without any recommendations by the engineers. The distance of the suggested canal routes varied from 100 to more than 200 miles, and the costs were just as indefinite.

President Theodore Roosevelt, in March 1907, endorsed increased Federal support for the country’s waterways network and

37. Speech by Congressman Josiah T. Walls before Senate Transportation Committee, January 28, 1874, Library of Congress.

38. *Senate Executive Documents*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 154, April 21, 1880.

39. Charter of the Atlantic and Gulf Transit Canal Company, secretary of state of Florida, April 1, 1878.

40. Major Robert A. Gamble, “Exposition of Advantages of a Canal Through Florida,” *Senate Documents*, 53rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 118.

named an Inland Waterways Commission to consider improvement and control of the rivers system. Railroads, the President claimed, could no longer handle the movement of crops and manufactured items rapidly and efficiently enough to meet demand, and "the cost of improving the waterways system would be . . . small in comparison with the \$17 billion of capital now invested in steam railways in the United States."⁴¹ A report by the commission was made in 1908, and Roosevelt said: "The inner passage along the Gulf coast should be extended and connected with the Atlantic waters."⁴² No plans or recommendations were submitted for the Florida canal, but a year later Congress authorized its sixth survey of a "continuous inland waterway across the State of Florida," a barge canal with a maximum depth of twelve feet. The recommendation that came from this survey was unfavorable to the construction of such a waterway. Canal backers were disappointed again in 1924 when the report was reviewed and a similar conclusion was reached.⁴³

In Florida, enthusiasm for the canal continued, and in Congress, Representative Frank Clark of Gainesville kept up the fight for the canal. In 1921, the State legislature created the Florida State Canal Commission to promote construction of the waterway. In 1921, President Warren G. Harding declared himself in favor of the broadest development of the nation's inland waterways, and his successor, Calvin Coolidge, on January 21, 1927, signed into law the rivers and harbors act, authorizing the secretary of war to make a preliminary examination and survey of the "Waterway from Cumberland Sound, Georgia and Florida, to the Mississippi River."⁴⁴

It was this legislation that began the serious reconsideration of a ship canal across Florida and led to the first concrete efforts to complete the 400-year-old dream. It has been called the "dividing" date between the earlier and later history of the project.⁴⁵

The bitter struggle in the Senate for the canal in the 1930s the winning of the authorization for construction in 1942, and

41. Inland Waterways Commission Report, March 14, 1907, *Senate Documents*, 60th Cong., 1st Sess., No. 325, p. 16.

42. *Ibid.*, February 26, 1908, p. vii.

43. *House Documents*, 75th Cong., 1st Sess., No. 194, p. 44.

44. *Ibid.*, 40.

45. Henry Holland Buckman, "Documentary History of the Florida Canal, 1927-1936," *Senate Documents*, 74th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 275, p. 1.

the first Congressional appropriation which came in 1963, are later stories of the building of this important waterway. Menendez' dream is becoming a reality in the same place in Florida where be thought it existed 400 years ago.