

# Florida Historical Quarterly

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Volume 46  
Number 1 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol 46,*  
*Number 1*

Article 6

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1967

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### Recommended Citation

Ott, Eloise R. (1967) "Fort King: A Brief History," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 46: No. 1, Article 6.  
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol46/iss1/6>

## FORT KING: A BRIEF HISTORY

by ELOISE R. OTT

Within the eastern residential section of Ocala is the site of Fort King. Probably more has been written of this military outpost than of any Florida fortification of its time. Yet long overlooked in official files in Washington is the scarcely known story of its erection - letters which tell of its plan, its buildings, and of problems resulting from the frugality of a government insistent upon a stringent economy of expenditure.<sup>1</sup>

Florida Territorial Governor William P. DuVal for some time had been urging the establishment of a military base "on the southern frontier of Alachua" to protect the whites and the Indians from each other. On February 2, 1827, Colonel Duncan L. Clinch, commanding the Fourth Infantry, announced his determination to place an installation within the reservation assigned to the Seminoles "to compel the Indians to remain within their limits, and give protection and security to the citizens of Florida."<sup>2</sup> With Captain James M. Glassell in command, two companies of troops marched southward from Wanton's (Micanopy) under orders to seek within a few miles of the intersection of the road from this place to Tampa Bay and the north boundary of the Indian Reservation an "eligible site for a military post." Reaching the area near the previously established Seminole Agency, the troops made camp on March 25 on an elevation one mile to the northeast. Here, flowing from a small spring on the hillside to a

1. Records of the War Department and the Office of the Quartermaster General, Record Group 92, Consolidated Correspondence File, Fort King, Florida, National Archives, Washington, (microfilm copy in the possession of the author). See also Frederick Cubberly, "Fort King," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, V (January 1927), 139-52.
2. Governor DuVal to Thomas L. McKenney, superintendent of Indian Affairs, March 2, 1826, in Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Florida*, 26 vols. (Washington, 1959-1962), XXIII, 453 fn.; Colonel Clinch's activation order, February 2, 1827, Records of the Quartermaster General, Consolidated Correspondence File, Record Group 92, Documents Relating to Camp and Fort King and the Oklawaha River, National Archives, Washington, (microfilm copy in the possession of the author, hereafter referred to as Fort King Documents). Clinch issued his orders for the activation of his plan from his headquarters at Fort Marks.

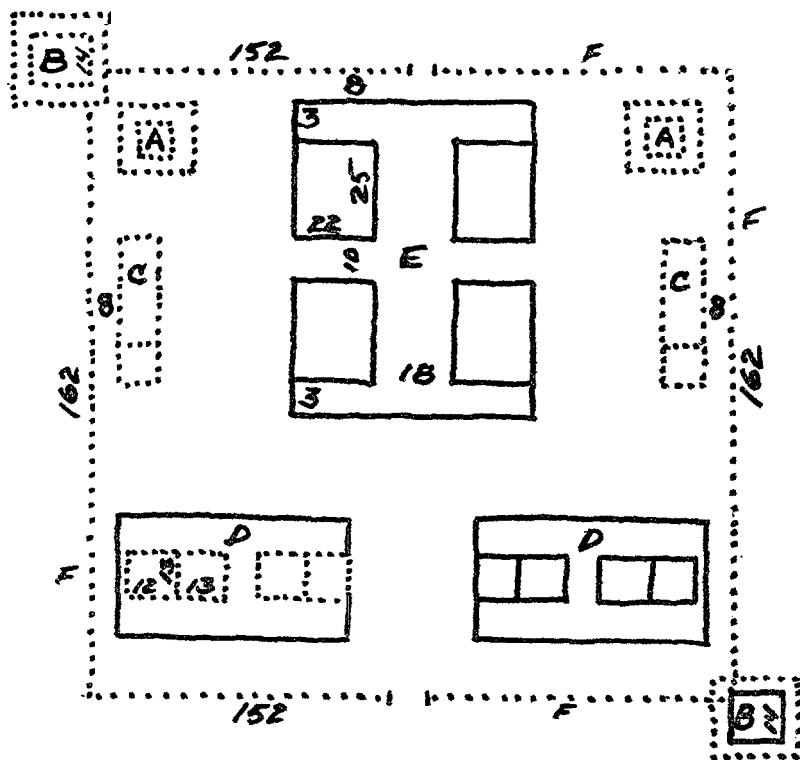
pool in a ravine below, was clear, cool water amid a verdant growth of magnolias, hickories, and other hardwoods. Having decided upon this location, the site was named in honor of Colonel William King.<sup>3</sup> First called Cantonment or Camp King, it soon became known as Fort King.

In suggesting the general location, Colonel Clinch was aware of the geographical advantage which had caused the Indian agent, Colonel Gad Humphreys, to place his headquarters in this vicinity -the opportunity for water transportation. Colonel Humphreys in midsummer of 1825 had followed Indian trails far into the interior and had discovered, he elatedly reported, "a large and beautiful spring unknown to the whites" before his coming.<sup>4</sup> From it a deep stream led to the Ocklawaha River and from there to the St. Johns and the ocean, which would make needless the hauling of supplies over the rough route he had followed for more than one hundred miles from Tampa Bay. Humphrey's spring is the now well-known Silver Springs.

For Camp King the immediate task was the clearing of a space 162 by 152 feet to be enclosed by a barricade of split logs upended in the ground to form walls or pickets. Gates of heavy timber were placed on each of two sides, and on one corner a blockhouse or watch tower, fourteen feet square, was erected. Construction of quarters was begun promptly, but of no less importance was the clearing of the Ocklawaha, so clogged with fallen trees and other obstructions that its navigation was impossible. Supplies were to be shipped in vessels from Charleston, South Carolina, to Palatka where they would be placed in smaller boats and transported by men from the post to a landing at Silver Springs. From here they would be "waggoned" the final three miles to Camp King.

In May twenty-two men were assigned to the river project, and the reduced force continued in the erection of log buildings within the pickets. For the enlisted men a large barracks con-

3. Colonel William King, formerly of the Fourth Infantry. He was appointed by General Andrew Jackson as civil and military governor of the provisional government of West Florida in 1818. Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, XXII, 286-90, 469 Fn. See also Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1903) I, 600.
4. Gad Humphreys to McKenney, September 20, 1825, Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, XXIII, 323-24.



## FORT KING

This sketch shows Captain James M. Glassell's 1827 plan for Fort King. The main gate leads through the picket line (F) which enclosed the entire fort. Below the gate is the centrally located enlisted men's quarters (E), four large rooms under one roof with passages between each block and piazzas on either end. Flanking these quarters on either side are two magazines (A) and two kitchens (C).

Two sets of officer's quarters (D) at the other end of the enclosure follow a pattern similar to the enlisted men's with four rooms under each roof and piazzas on either end. Only the blockhouse (B) on the south-eastern corner of the pickets was completed; the dotted lines represent the characteristic overhang of the upper level. The figures on the plan indicate dimensions in feet.

taining four compartments was raised. The rooms, each about twenty-five feet square, were separated by wide hallways, and there were piazzas front and rear. All was under one roof which provided not only protection from the sun, but also overhead storage. For the officers two separate buildings, about twenty by fifty feet, were planned, each with bedrooms and "drawing rooms" for two men. Extra sleeping space was in a loft above. Mess halls, kitchens, and ammunition storage almost filled the remaining area.

Since free circulation of air was deemed necessary in the warm climate, the living quarters were elevated on posts five or more feet above the ground. But planning ahead for cold weather, Captain Glassell requested shipment of materials "absolutely necessary, to render the Quarters comfortable in winter. . . ." These included "window-glass, . . . Bricks & Lime . . . [and] plank for flooring & c, as we cannot saw by hand, all that will be required. . . ." <sup>5</sup> From the office of the quartermaster general came a curt refusal, stating that this post "is altogether 'temporary,' anything more than comfortable huts, for the company, would be improper. The transportation of brick . . . could not be justified by the circumstances of the case. Suitable chimnies, can be readily constructed with logs and clay." <sup>6</sup>

There existed within the war department a difference of opinion as to the permanence of Fort King, which resulted in a communications delay and in a confusion of orders. In the meantime, Glassell, smarting under criticism, dictated a statement on July 20, 1827, to his quartermaster, Lieutenant F. D. Newcomb, to be forwarded to the quartermaster general, General Thomas S. Jesup: "Before the selection of this position, General Gaines in a conversation with me on that subject, directed that I should build, as compactly as possible, and the work to be enclosed with pickets, and the Quarters not to form any part of the line of defense. I was subsequently ordered by Colonel Clinch to follow

5. Francis D. Newcomb to the quartermaster general, May 16, 1827, *ibid.*, 844-45. See also James M. Glassell to the quartermaster general, May 5, 1827, *ibid.*, 832-33.
6. Acting quartermaster general to Newcomb, June 24, 1827, *ibid.*, 873. The quartermaster general's Office in an earlier letter had expressed displeasure with Glassell's plans saying "any further measures in relation to the construction of quarters are uncalled for, as the work already bestowed on that object is now to be regretted." Acting quartermaster general to Glassell, May 25, 1827, *ibid.*, 847.

General Gaines' plan, and from his instructions was under a firm belief that the position would be as permanent for two companies as any of our frontier posts . . . . Before the order of May 15th was received, the men's quarters were raised, and those for the officers of two companies progressing, so that the plan could not be altered. A block for the officers of one company only was then continued . . . ." To this memorandum Newcomb added: "I am requested by Major Glassell to forward the enclosed extract from orders rec'd by him from Colonel Clinch and a plan of the work as at first contemplated from those instructions received." Not only had Clinch approved the Gaines' plan, but he had included in his written orders an injunction to "make your command as comfortable as your situation will allow."<sup>7</sup>

Glassell, it seems, had made his point, but when brick, window glass, and planks were not forthcoming, he reported on September 22: "I had laid off the officer quarters to have chimnies of brick in the centre of each block: I shall however now make them of logs, and at the ends." Plaintively he added, "I have . . . used every exertion to curtail, as much as possible, expence to the United States, by sawing lumber; in which I have so far succeeded, as to have a sufficiency for tollerable comfourt, altho more is wanted. . . ." The economy of logs and clay was nearly disastrous, for a fire was discovered one night smoldering under a hearth, and it was extinguished with difficulty.<sup>8</sup>

On March 17, 1828, nearly a year after construction began, an enthusiastic report from Fort King announced that "the Quarters at this post are nearly complete. They are as good quarters as have ever been built in the South." No optimistic report could be given as to the clearing of the Ocklawaha River, however, and after repeated efforts a road was cut through the woods to Payne's Landing some twenty miles away, below the stream's most narrow curving course. It was here that boats from Palatka discharged cargo to be hauled to the post. But construction was hardly complete when, over the protests of Colonel Clinch, the garrison

7. Glassell to Newton, July 20, 1827, Fort King Documents.

8. Glassell to the quartermaster general, September 22, 1827, Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, XXIII, 922. Lieutenant Newcomb, reporting progress on buildings, also told of the fire and stressed the constant danger from inferior materials. Brick, so urgently needed, would cost the government but little, he suggested, because it could be brought to the fort cheaply by boat. Fort King Documents.

was withdrawn from Fort King on July 3, 1829, and for three years the camp was unoccupied.<sup>9</sup>

With the determination of the United States to move the Florida Indians to a reservation in the West, Fort King was reoccupied in June 1832, and on July 18, Lieutenant Joseph W. Harris of the Third Artillery made a detailed report of the condition of its buildings. His careful listing of their size, number, and position further identifies the plan submitted by Captain Glassell as that used in their construction. All were in such need of repair that there "was enough work to be done to call the entire force into incessant and arduous fatigue duty." Harris estimated that thirty men would be needed for sixty days. Enlisted men were paid fifteen cents a day for extra duty, which with \$100 for materials, would bring the cost to \$375.<sup>10</sup>

With the approach of winter Harris was concerned over heat. The chimneys constructed earlier had crumbled into ruins. The local sand-mixed clay was not durable, and, if utilized, there would be a constant danger of fire. Furthermore, Harris felt some consideration should be given to the men: "The troops have labored well and unceasingly since our arrival here and their comforts are fewer than they are entitled to." He tried to requisition five cast iron stoves with pipe and elbows, but late in December he received a letter of refusal, advising him to construct "chimnies such as are used by the people of the country." With a hint of sarcasm, Harris replied that these were familiar to him, he had used them on the smaller buildings, but he felt that they were unsafe for buildings as high as those for the men and the officers. The ridge pole of the former was forty-two feet, the latter thirty feet from the ground. Bitterly disappointed, Harris, however, obeyed orders, but stated that a proper consideration for the preservation of government property impelled him to give warning of its probable destruction.<sup>11</sup>

Harris reported the construction of a keel boat, successful as a cargo carrier. It was fifty-five feet long with an eight-foot beam,

9. All dates of occupation and withdrawal are in the Records of the War Department, National Archives, Washington.

10. Lieutenant Joseph W. Harris, "Report on the re-occupation of Fort King by Company D, Fourth Infantry," July 18, 1832, Fort King Documents. Harris also filed several later reports on the fort and a requisition for stoves.

11. *Ibid.*

and was capable of carrying 100 barrels in bulk. Operated by a skipper and a crew of eight men, it was propelled by poles except where the waterways were wide enough to permit the use of oars. The round trip to Palatka from Silver Springs took eighteen days-usually four or five down, but the return passage, impeded by the swift current and the narrow hazardous turns of the Ocklawaha, took much longer. The boat was in service several years, but was later discarded as the heavy supply wagons of the military proved of more dependable value.

As the year 1835 approached, it became increasingly apparent that the Indians could not be removed from Florida other than by force. Troops moved in and out of Fort King. A new barracks was built, and the unfinished officers' quarters were enlarged and completed as a hospital. Five companies were here in the summer, but all except one were withdrawn in preparation for a fall campaign against the Indians. But the Indians now put into effect a strategy of their own, and it was Lieutenant Harris who penned the graphic report of the daring attack by Osceola, almost within sight of the walls of Fort King, in which Agent Wiley Thompson, Lieutenant Constantine Smyth, and three civilians were murdered. On the same day, December 28, 1835, the Indians wiped out the force of Major Francis L. Dade, enroute to Fort King from Fort Brooke. On December 31, troops under Colonel Clinch and warriors led by Osceola fought the first organized engagement of the struggle along the bank of the Withlacoochee River. The Seminole War had begun.<sup>12</sup>

Fire set by the blazing torches of the Indians destroyed Fort King in July 1836. Its garrison had been withdrawn in May, and the fort was unoccupied at the time of the attack. The post was reestablished on April 22, 1837, and its rebuilding was started. Ten years had passed since its original group of buildings had been erected, and now a different plan was followed, consisting of one large structure surrounded by high pickets protected by four blockhouses. A number of one-story log cabins were placed outside the fortification; in time of alarm the occupants could take refuge within the defenses. Writing to a friend from Fort

12. Mark F. Boyd, "Florida Aflame: The Background and Onset of the Seminole War, 1835," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXX (July 1951), 3-115; Albert Hubbard Roberts, "The Dade Massacre," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, V (January 1927), 123-38.



King on September 1837, an army surgeon described the activity -troops removing several hundred yards of hammock growth from around the fort to avert another ambush, and others busily putting up a building for enlisted men and stores, a structure which so nearly filled the enclosure that its eaves overlooked the pickets.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, the struggle with the Indians continued. From Washington, in the spring of 1839, came Major-General Alexander Macomb to negotiate a settlement, and a temporary arrangement, the Treaty of Fort King, was agreed upon. In the general's escort was young Lieutenant John T. Sprague, who vividly described in his journal the picturesque appearance of the fortification, its peculiar construction, its park-like surroundings, and the bright colors of its flag contrasting with the green of the forest: "It is a picket work twenty feet high with a block house at each angle. In the center stands a two-story building occupied by the soldiers, on top of which is a Cupola in which is posted a sentinel who announces the approach of man by ringing a huge Cow-bell; which to say the least is very unmilitary, but still very useful. The Commanding Officer's quarters are outside and many other buildings, & c, such as wash rooms, bake house, guard tent, and some officers tents."<sup>14</sup>

Hostilities continued but further to the South, and Fort King, was not considered vital to the defense of Florida. From Cedar Key on August 14, 1842, the termination of the war with the Indians was announced. On March 23, the following year, the last occupation troops were withdrawn from the post. A small detachment remained to show possession, and Fort King continued to be a stopping place for military expresses between St. Augustine and Tampa.

Now scores of eager land seekers hastened in, filing for permits under the belatedly effective Armed Occupation Act or by pre-emption for the region lately occupied by the Indians.

13. Records of the War Department, "Fort King Documents; Samuel Forry to J. W. Phelps, September 1, 1837, Letters of Samuel Forry, Surgeon, U. S. Army, 1837-1838," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VI (April 1928), 212. Fort King was reestablished under the direction of General Jesup, and some fifty men were transferred there from Fort Armstrong.
14. Frank F. White, Jr., ed., "Macomb's Mission to the Seminoles," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXV (October 1956), 161.

Fort King became a public meeting place and here the settlers gathered to discuss the formation of a new county and the question of admitting the Territory of Florida to statehood.<sup>15</sup> Marion County was created in 1844, with Fort King designated as temporary county seat.<sup>16</sup> Meantime, the small log buildings adjacent to the fort served to house a newly-established post office, a mission organized by Methodist circuit riders, a general store, and other facilities.

Judge Isaac H. Bronson of the United States Court of Eastern Florida sought permission for the use by the county of two or more buildings at Fort King. "One of these," he wrote, "is large enough for a court room, jury rooms and county offices." This description identifies it as the one large building at the post, the two-story cupola-topped barracks of the enlisted men, which became Marion County's first courthouse.<sup>17</sup>

Some five months after Judge Bronson's request was filed, it was granted in a letter from General W. J. Worth written from his headquarters at St. Augustine on February 9, 1845. The general noted that "the necessity has ceased for further occupation of Fort King as a military station." He approved the use of several buildings for the courts, and suggested that all the others be sold. "None are of value," he added, as "they were originally of slight construction of unseasoned materials. . . . they are in ruinous condition and rapid decay, yet will answer a momentary purpose for the use of the courts and afford comfort and encouragement to our new settlers."<sup>18</sup>

There are frequent references in the Marion County records to the courthouse at Fort King. The first term of circuit court was held there in November 1845, and it continued in use until September 1846 when possession was taken of a new but small and temporary courthouse erected in Ocala, now designated as county seat. The site on which Fort King had stood (the NW  $\frac{1}{4}$ , Sec. 14, T 15 S, R 22 E) had been withdrawn from pre-emption

15. Eloise Ott, "Ocala Prior to 1868," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VI (October 1927), 89.
16. *Acts and Resolutions of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida (1844)*, 43-45.
17. Records of the General Land Office, Record Group 49, Fort King, Abandoned Military Reservation, National Archives (microfilm copy in the possession of the author).
18. *Ibid.*

while in use by the county, but on February 20, 1846, it was turned over to the General Land Office for civilian acquisition.<sup>19</sup>

Other than for what might be termed a postscript, the Fort King correspondence was ended. In a letter of November 4, 1846, Edmund D. Howse, sheriff of Marion County and former custodian of the Fort King property, urged the immediate sale of materials from the buildings to those, like himself, desiring to build in Ocala. The lumber, though old, was "worth considerable," and "the floors," he wrote, "are plank, the doors and window shutters plank and the windows are sash glass, all very valuable in this country where we have no conveniences (mills) for making plank."<sup>20</sup> And so the physical remnants of Fort King, whose presence had opened up the Ocala area to settlement, were utilized for more peaceful pursuits in the construction of civilization.

19. William L. Maxey, secretary of war, to R. J. Wilson, secretary of the treasury, February 9, 1846, *Ibid.*

20. Records of the General Land Office, Record Group 49, Fort King, Abandoned Military Reservation, National Archives.