

1968

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Recommended Citation

Mahon, John K. (1968) "Postscript to John Bemrose's Reminiscences," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 47 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol47/iss1/9>

POSTSCRIPT TO JOHN BEMROSE'S REMINISCENCES

by JOHN K. MAHON

SINCE JOHN BEMROSE'S *Reminiscences of the Second Seminole War*¹ was published, additional information about the author has been found. Inconsequential though the new data is, perhaps some of the fun of uncovering it can be communicated to the reader. From the date of publication it has troubled me that I did not know what became of Bemrose after he had returned to his native England. The opportunity to fill in the unknown factors came during the summer of 1967, when I was in Britain.

I knew that upon his discharge in 1836, after a five-year enlistment, Bemrose had returned to his native Lincolnshire and had settled in the village of Long Bennington. My family and I did not have to go far out of our way to Edinburgh to include Long Bennington, and so we found ourselves there on July 17, 1967, one of the midsummer days typical of England when daylight lingers far into the night. An hour or so of inquiry turned up some leads to persons thought to be named Bemrose who were alleged to live on a lane at the far end of the village. But these came to nothing, no one with whom we spoke had ever heard of John Bemrose.

At that point we betook ourselves to the churchyard and began to go over it stone by stone, but found no marker to indicate that Bemrose was buried there. Next we saw the vicar fussing about the church, entirely too busy to do anything for us except to make it clear that there were fees for looking into the parish registers. The vital records were at Lincoln anyway. Soon the vicar began to fear we would be in the way of choir practice two hours later, and so he found in his memory the name of Frank Chalk, who knew much local lore and who had helped with the record when many of the old headstones had been removed a few years before to make room for new ones. He insisted that I convey his apologies to Chalk for sending me, but I found there was no need to apologize. Mr. Chalk was interested in my search and

1. John Bemrose, *Reminiscences of the Second Seminole War*, ed. by John K. Mahon (Gainesville, 1966).

he was familiar with the Bemrose name. Aged seventy-eight, he had grown up with two of John Bemrose's grandsons. Bemrose, Mr. Chalk told me, had established himself as a chemist in Long Bennington after returning from his activities in America, and he had prospered. There were two physicians living in the community at the time, but Bemrose had attained a reputation for medical skill, and he was frequently called on to prescribe for sick folks. His five years as hospital steward in the United States Army, some of it spent in Florida, had grounded him well for this calling. Mr. Chalk directed to me then the building which had housed Bemrose's shop.

During the fascinating hour together in his small sitting room, Mr. Chalk identified Bemrose's son as Weightman Bemrose, the father of Mr. Chalk's friends. It was apparent that Weightman had been named for Dr. Richard Weightman, who had been Bemrose's superior officer as well as mentor and friend. Mr. Chalk owns a penknife and in the lacy engraving on a silver panel in the bone handle is the inscription Richard J. Weightman. Chalk did not remember how he had come into possession of the knife, but it had passed from some Bemrose or other to him. How curious that I should hold in my hand, in a small, dim sitting room in Lincolnshire, a knife used by a man during the Second Seminole War, 3,500 miles away in Florida, 130 years ago. Mr. Chalk generously offered to give me this knife, but there seemed so little of John Bemrose left in Long Bennington that I thought it ought to remain there. Even Bemrose's gravestone, Chalk opined, had been uprooted to make way for others, so that no one could now so much as stand where he had been buried.

Mr. Chalk did not know how long ago Bemrose had died, but he gave me the name of a grandson living retired at Blackpool. I wrote to this gentleman, explaining about the printed *Reminiscences*, and asked for information concerning his grandfather. In due time I received a letter from M. B. Bemrose, his brother; the one I had addressed had died six weeks before. The living brother did not indicate that he had ever heard of his grandfather's writing, or that he was especially interested, but he very kindly sent me the original invoice covering John Bemrose's funeral. It revealed that Bemrose had died on April 27, 1894, at the age of eighty. The whole cost of his burial came to ten pounds, six

shillings. Thus ends the story of the search in England. Upon returning to this country I sent Mr. Chalk a copy of the *Reminiscences*, asking him to make it available to other readers in Long Bennington as a memento to John Bemrose, but I am afraid the village has no library.

It now remained to try to find out whether Bemrose had ever been granted the pension for which he had applied in 1873. As a veteran of the Indian Wars he had become eligible under the terms of an act of Congress, March 3, 1855. M. B. Bemrose had indicated that he believed that his grandfather had declined the pension, but he was not sure. In Bemrose's file in the National Archives in Washington I found a human interest story. Bemrose had never drawn a cash pension. He might have been eligible both for a pension and a land bounty, but all that he received was a warrant for 160 acres of bounty land in Kansas. It is a reasonable presumption that he was financially very comfortable at the time, and he may, as a result, have rejected the cash. In any case, his land warrant was dated June 23, 1873, and he receipted for it at Long Bennington on July 15.

He had apparently initiated a correspondence relative to his bounty rights early in 1873 with William Tecumseh Sherman, then commanding general of the United States Army. Sherman had troubled to reply and his autographs are in Bemrose's obscure file. Bemrose addressed the commanding general, it would appear, because he had never intended to keep any land granted him by the government. He wished to transfer it to Dr. Peter Porcher of Charleston, South Carolina, ". . . my dear old friend, whom age and poverty has made wretched." Dr. Porcher was an ex-Confederate, and it was as much the war as it was age that had rendered him poor and wretched. What Porcher had done for Bemrose is not known, but the service was rendered when the latter was an enlisted man, and was thus especially vulnerable. Dr. Porcher's name does not appear anywhere in the *Reminiscences*. Whatever his good offices, to transfer 160 acres of bounty land, awarded for loyal service to the United States to a person who had served the Confederacy probably took the influence of a General Sherman to accomplish. Sherman tackled the problem, overcame it, and even offered to see that an army officer on duty in Charleston would personally deliver the warrant to Dr. Porcher.

Bemrose replied in a beautiful hand, expressing his deep gratitude to the "noble" general. He chatted away with Sherman as if the United States Army had not been transformed by the Civil War into a larger, less personal, and grimmer service than the one he had known. Memories of American friends, he told the general, provided him with "many sunny hours . . . for my great delight is to live in the past and prattle of former days." One wonders how the residents of Long Bennington reacted to his talk of a savage war in a remote country. Probably due to Sherman's intervention, Dr. Porcher received Bemrose's land warrant. He sold it on June 18, 1875, and it is to be hoped for John Bemrose's sake, that he was able to buy some comfort with the proceeds of the sale.²

2. Recently two letters (January 12, February 29, 1968) were received from Mrs. Dorothy Donovan of Warwickshire, England. She identified herself as the granddaughter of Bemrose's eldest son. Among her possessions there is a book, dated 1834, which belonged to her great grandfather. In the margins on the pages are penciled notes describing the condition and medical treatment of fourteen men wounded in Florida during the Second Seminole War. (Typed notes in possession of author.)

1894
Apr 27

Long Bennington
Mr W Bemrose
Order to J Gaby
Cask Coffin with Best Furniture £ s d
& Shroud for Mr Bemrose 6 0 0
Shillibeer 1 15 0
Driver " 3 6
Bearers 1 10 0
Burial Fee " 17 6
£ 10, 6, 0



May 1. 1894
Gaby

Copy of the invoice of Bemrose's funeral, May 1, 1894.



A recent photograph of the apothecary shop in Long Bennington which Bemrose operated after his return from the United States. The front of the building has been altered somewhat.