

1970

## History of the Blockhouse on the Withlacoochee

Tom Knotts



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Knotts, Tom (1970) "History of the Blockhouse on the Withlacoochee," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : No. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol49/iss3/5>

## HISTORY OF THE BLOCKHOUSE ON THE WITHLACOOCHEE

by TOM KNOTTS \*

THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN the Florida Seminoles and the American settlers moving in from Georgia and the Carolinas which had been brewing for decades erupted into bloody conflict on December 28, 1835, when Major Francis L. Dade's command was massacred near Wahoo Swamp, while enroute from Fort Brooke to Fort King.<sup>1</sup> Osceola and a detachment of warriors murdered Wiley Thompson, Indian agent at Fort King, and Constantine Smith the same day as Dade's massacre. Brigadier General Duncan L. Clinch, commander of the regular forces in Florida, clashed with the Indians three days later as he attempted to cross the Withlacoochee River. The battle was not decisive and both sides withdrew. Two months later a unit of nearly 1,000 men under Major General Edmund P. Gaines was attacked near Clinch's battleground on the Withlacoochee. The Seminole force, reportedly over 1,100 strong, surrounded Gaines troops for eight days. A rescue party led by General Clinch ended the siege March 6, 1836.<sup>2</sup>

In late January 1836, Major General Winfield Scott, commanding the Army of the East, was placed in charge of the Florida operations. Scott moved from Washington to Florida to set up logistic support and to formulate a plan of battle. By the time he arrived in March, he had developed a plan which he hoped would end the war. There were three forces available in Florida: one at Fort Drane, another at Fort Brooke, and a third at Volusia.<sup>3</sup> Each was supposed to move toward

---

\* Mr. Knotts is a resident of Yankeetown and the author of *See Yankeetown: History and Reminiscences*.

1. Wahoo Swamp is along the east bank of the Withlacoochee River in present-day Sumter County. Fort Brooke was located on Tampa Bay at the mouth of the Hillsborough River. Fort King was near present-day Ocala.
2. John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War* (Gainesville, 1967), 108-12, 147-50; Rembert W. Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform: General Duncan L. Clinch* (Gainesville, 1963), 123-24.
3. Fort Drane was located in northwestern Marion County near present-day Irvine. Volusia was on the St. Johns River near the south end of Lake George.

the cove of the Withlacoochee where it was believed the enemy could be entrapped and defeated.<sup>4</sup>

Such a large scale operation called for considerable food supplies, and Major John McLemore at Fort Dabney near Suwannee Old Town on the Suwannee was placed in charge of logistics. In a private letter to Colonel James Gadsden, General Scott's adjutant, McLemore pointed out that there were stores available at his post and a boat suitable for the expedition to the Withlacoochee.<sup>5</sup> The letter was received at Fort Drane on March 22 or 23,<sup>6</sup> and answered March 25. Gadsden was very explicit and covered the situation thoroughly in his communication. He pointed out that the three armies would probably meet near the cove by March 29 or 30, and since they might be detained in the area for several days, food supplies under McLemore's command would be needed. Therefore, Gadsden directed Major McLemore to transport his corn and beef via water to a point near the rapids on the Withlacoochee. McLemore was to rendezvous by March 30, but if no contact was made by April 4, he could withdraw, since the forces would then be moving south.<sup>7</sup> Had Gadsden's order been followed explicitly by Major McLemore many difficulties could have been avoided.

McLemore had anticipated that Gadsden would have accepted his offer. A company of militia had been mustered in mid-March in Jefferson County to man the post on the Withlachochee. Its officers included: James M. K. Holloman, captain; Joseph McCants, first lieutenant; L. B. Walker, second lieutenant; and Samuel W. Barrington, third lieutenant.<sup>8</sup> These were the men at Fort Dabney when Gadsden's letter arrived, and in accordance with the instructions it contained, they prepared twelve beeves and gathered 600-700 bushels of corn to take on the expedition.

Colonel Gadsden's letter of instructions allowed only five days from the time that he wrote it and the time that Major

---

4. The cove was the area embracing Lake Tsala Apopka.

5. John T. Sprague, *Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 153.

6. Myer M. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns* (Charleston, 1836; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 198.

7. Sprague, *Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 153-54.

8. Samuel Pasco, "Jefferson County, Florida, 1827-1910," Part II. *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VII (January 1929), 238-40.

McLemore was supposed to be on the Withlacoochee River. First of all, Gadsden's order had to travel by military messenger nearly fifty miles. Then the supplies had to be placed aboard the boat and everything made ready for the expedition. It then took time to travel down the Suwannee, around the Gulf, and up the Withlacoochee - a distance of 100 miles. At that time the Withlacoochee's lower reaches were unexplored and unchartered, making an even more difficult journey.

This all took longer than the time allotted, and McLemore did not reach the Withlacoochee until April 4.<sup>9</sup> This was the last day that he was supposed to remain in the area unless he received orders to the contrary. McLemore, however, decided to construct a blockhouse and to leave a force of approximately forty men; thinking, perhaps, that such an armed fortification eventually would be of some assistance to the army.<sup>10</sup> After all the work and preparation of getting the supplies to the Withlacoochee, these men who volunteered to remain felt that it was worth the chance they were taking to stay a few days longer than authorized. While the blockhouse was being constructed, everything was quiet, and there was no interference from the Indians. General Scott later testified at a court of inquiry that the erection of the blockhouse at this late date was patriotic zeal pushed too far."<sup>11</sup> Colonel Gadsden, however, pointed out in his deposition that Major McLemore had returned with part of his command to the Suwannee in accordance with his orders, but that he could have brought the whole of his forces, had not a part of them preferred remaining and braving the enemy. They voluntarily sought the hazard.<sup>12</sup> When McLemore departed the blockhouse, he promised to return and relieve the post in eight or ten days.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequent events at the blockhouse were related in a letter written by Dr. Lawrence, a surgeon who was present at the siege:

- 
9. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, 199.
  10. *House Executive Documents*, 25 Cong., 2nd sess., No. 18, 1838, p. 451. Hereinafter referred to as *House Document 78*.
  11. Caroline May Brevard, *History of Florida from the Treaty of 1763 to Our Own Times*, 2 vols. (DeLand, 1924), I, 139. By order of the secretary of war a court of inquiry assembled in November 1836, at Frederick, Maryland, to investigate the failure of Scott and Gaines in Florida.
  12. *Senate Documents*, 24 Cong., 2nd sess., No., 224, 1837, p. 71. Hereinafter referred to as *Senate Document 224*.
  13. Sprague, *Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 154.

We had just completed building the block-house, and dug out a spring near the edge of the fort, when, on the morning of the 9th of April, at a little before dawn of day, we were attacked by the Indians, who had encompassed us on three sides, and were in number about 150 or 200. The engagement lasted one hour and three quarters, when they found out to their sorrow, that our reception was not only too warm, but that they had ventured too near us without due reflection. On the next day, we had one man<sup>14</sup> killed on his post by an Indian rifle, fired from the opposite side of the river. On the 15 April, we were attacked by a body of the savages who had completely surrounded us, and whose number we computed at 4 to 500, though we have since heard that Powell<sup>15</sup> had 1000 to 1500 of them. This was the hottest engagement we had during our stay on the Ouithla-coochee. They fired their guns by hundreds at the same moment at our block-house, and succeeded in taking our only means of escape, our boat-which they took down the river and destroyed after the battle. The engagement continued two hours and 45 minutes, and we had three men slightly wounded.

On the 24th, we had a very severe battle, in which they displayed their ingenuity by shooting fire-arrows on fire upon the roof of the house, which destroyed the roof and left us exposed to the inclemency of the weather. This arrow-firing was performed by 26 of their men, whilst about 3 to 500 used their guns. We had, on this occasion, two or three of our men wounded. We probably killed 40 or 50 of the Indians. The night after the battle, we heard their chief hail us and say, "that he was going away in the morning, and would trouble us no more." He kept his promise very well though he did give us about 100 guns the next morning, ere he left. Our captain Holloman, was killed on the 3 May, whilst endeavoring to fortify and strengthen our position. The Indians continued to give us a passing shot from 50 to 100 guns, every five or six days, though he kept a spy upon us at other times. The officers were 21 days living on corn, without salt or meat, and the men about 28 days.<sup>16</sup>

The troops in the blockhouse realized from the size and ferocity of the Indian attacks that ammunition would be a

---

14. Eli Sealy was killed on April 13 according to Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, 199.

15. Powell was a name commonly used when speaking of Osceola.

16. Samuel G. Drake, *Aboriginal Races of North America* (New York, 1880), 431-32.

problem if not properly conserved. According to one observer, "From the commencement of the siege, not a single shot was fired unless at a particular object."<sup>17</sup> The marksmanship of the troops was so accurate that after a chief was shot the four or five Indians who sprang to his assistance were downed with a single volley. The Indians believed that witchcraft and silver bullets were making the small band invincible.<sup>18</sup>

The casualties at the blockhouse were light considering the amount of fighting that took place over a period of six weeks. Captain Holloman and one other were killed, and five soldiers were injured slightly.<sup>19</sup> The extent of Indian casualties is not known. According to John Bemrose, a soldier stationed at Fort Drane at the time: "The Indians lost severely before this little fort, and ascribed their losses to witchcraft."<sup>20</sup>

Apparently while the three wings of the army were searching west-central Florida, according to General Scott's plan, many of the Indians that were normally found in that area were on the banks of the lower Withlacoochee harassing the small band at the blockhouse.

The troops, after a month of this continual attack, knew that plans had miscarried since Major McLemore had not returned as he had promised. The officers considered at length various methods of possible escape. The flatboat had been destroyed by the Indians making escape by water impossible. and to try to move overland was much too hazardous. It was about forty miles through Indian country to Fort Drane. Ammunition and food were almost exhausted; the meat was rancid and the corn moldy after exposure to the rain. Finally in desperation a plan was devised. On May 10, three men were selected by lot to go for help. At 11 o'clock that night they embarked in a canoe, which leaked badly and which required constant bailing.<sup>21</sup> The Indians saw the canoe leave and they tried to halt it, but the men were able to reach the Gulf before daylight. The Indians

17. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, 199.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 199-200. Lieutenant L. B. Walker took over command after Holloman's death.

20. John Bemrose, *Reminiscences of the Second Seminole War*, ed. John K. Mahon (Gainesville, 1966), 91.

21. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, 199. John L. Williams, *Territory of Florida*, (New York, 1837; facsimile edition Gainesville, 1962), 244, places the date as May 10.

had been alerted and were on the lookout for the soldiers when they arrived at the mouth of the Suwannee. When the canoe was fired on, the soldiers decided to stay in the Gulf for safety sake. They continued in a northwesterly direction, arriving finally at St. Marks about May 20.

In the meantime Major McLemore, after leaving the volunteers at the Withlacoochee blockhouse in April, had returned to the Suwannee. There he was stricken with fever and died.<sup>22</sup> His death thus removed the link with the blockhouse, and no one outside knew of his plans to return there. The men who accompanied him back to the Suwannee in the meantime had been released after the major's death and they had quickly gone home.<sup>23</sup> Colonel Gadsden in his deposition stated:

His [McLemore's] successor, not advised of his intentions, never sent the boat back, and, to the above melancholy event [McLemore's death] may be justly attributed most of the misfortunes and sufferings of the gallant little band in the blockhouse.<sup>24</sup>

Generals Scott and Clinch had crossed the Withlacoochee on March 28 and 29. Finding only a few scattered Indians near the cove and no large concentrations, the army moved south and away from the blockhouse. The other two armies were never near the blockhouse during their operation. By April 10 Scott's forces, having failed to locate the enemy, were on Tampa Bay preparing to return to their former posts. Scott planned to accompany Brigadier General Abraham Eustis, commanding Left Wing Army Force, on his return to Volusia and the St. Johns River and St. Augustine. In the meantime General Clinch was to return to Fort Drane.

In a letter from Tampa Bay to Adjutant General Jones in Washington, Scott detailed his plans for his forces:

The right wing, under Clinch . . . will march by the route it came over; . . . re-enter the cove . . . and then march to the mouth of the Withlacoochee (not yet visited) and there

---

22. Williams, *Territory of Florida*, 243.

23. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, 199.

24. *Senate Document* 224, 19.

receive from the vessels and boats to be sent from this place a fresh supply of subsistence for men and horses . . . . Having accomplished the objects of the march to the mouth of that river, he will either cross there or return to Blodgett's ferry, at Camp Izard<sup>25</sup> . . . and return to Fort Drane, observing the right bank of the Withlacoochee in ascending, as far as his renewed means of subsistence may allow.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately for the men in the blockhouse these orders were modified. A man from the U. S. cutter *Dexter*, recently arrived at Tampa Bay, explained the difficulties that would likely be encountered should General Clinch try to march a force to the mouth of the Withlacoochee. This intelligence caused Scott to modify his original plan, as he explained further to the adjutant-general:

Since writing the above, I have been forced, from our ignorance of the mouth of the Withlacoochee, to modify the instructions given to Clinch. From Camp Cooper<sup>27</sup> he is instructed to take a trail that we observed (coming down) which leads into and towards the head of the cove . . . . The vessels and boats prepared for the mouth of the Withlacoochee will take Major Read and his Florida battalion to that place, whence he will survey the mouth, and examine the river to a point as high as practicable.<sup>28</sup>

The blockhouse would have been in General Clinch's line of march under the original orders. It could still be found if Major Read ascended the river as ordered. Apparently no one at Tampa Bay was particularly concerned about the Withlacoochee post, however; none of the orders issued even mention the possibility of a garrison existing there. Colonel Gadsden's orders to Read, dated April 14, 1836 directed him:

To embark as early as practicable . . . you will embark with your whole battalion, including invalids and sick for the mouth of the Withlacoochee, and that you come to anchor in the nearest and safest accessible harbor to the

---

25. Camp Izard was located on the Withlacoochee River in southwestern Marion County.

26. Winfield Scott to R. Jones, April 12, 1836, *House Document* 78, 419.

27. Camp Cooper was located near present-day Brooksville.

28. Scott to Jones, April 12, 1836, *House Document* 78, 423.

mouth of the stream, and that you proceed with your effective force, leaving your sick and invalids on board, with the boats at command, to survey and examine its entrance, and to penetrate as far as practicable, and consistent with the security of your command . . . You will preserve notes of your observations . . . detailing minutely the character of the anchorage at the mouth of the Withlacoochee; the navigability of the river for boats; the probable distance to which it may be penetrated; the character of its banks, and the facilities generally afforded for the forming of depots, with a view to supplying an army operating hereafter on or near its waters. This duty performed, you will proceed to St. Marks, Florida, in the transport, where your command will be honorably discharged.<sup>29</sup>

According to Major Read, the Florida battalion was in poor shape when it reached the mouth of the Withlacoochee on April 18. There was much sickness among the men, the water was bad, and medical supplies were scarce. Even so, he assembled a group and ascended the river in two cutters, commanded by Midshipmen Read and Drake, from Vandalia. Major Read believed the Indian sailors aboard the schooners were familiar with the Withlacoochee, but even using "ardent spirits," he was unable to gain any worthwhile intelligence.<sup>30</sup> Two or three miles above the bar he saw smoke caused by a fire some three miles above them covering a great area. Feeling that it was imprudent to proceed further upstream, Read returned to the transports and set sail for St. Marks.<sup>31</sup> After reaching St. Marks, the volunteers of the Florida battalion were released from duty.

When Major Read arrived in Tallahassee on April 22, he reported that he had found part of a flatboat at the mouth of the Withlacoochee. Governor Call had learned that Major McLemore had established the post on the river and had left a flatboat there, and he was now very concerned as to the welfare and safety of the men at the blockhouse. Major Read expressed his anxiety in a letter to General Scott, but pointed out that he had been unaware of the garrison's presence on the Withlacoochee at the time he was there.<sup>32</sup>

---

29. James Gadsden to Leigh Read, April 14, 1836, *ibid.*, 434-35.

30. *Ibid.*, 468-69.

31. Sprague, *Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 149.

32. Read to Scott, April 27, 1836, *House Document* 78, 470.

Governor Call, realizing the urgency of the situation, immediately dispatched a letter to Major McCants who had assumed command at Suwannee Old Town after McLemore's death. He told him that a flatboat at the blockhouse had been destroyed, and that from the number of fires in the area, he suspected that there were many Indians present. Call also expressed fear that the Indians had destroyed the garrison, and he ordered McCants to prepare a rescue operation. If the commander at Fort Drane approved the mission, he was to proceed by boat to the Withlacoochee.<sup>33</sup> At the same time Call sent a message to Fort Drane directing the commander there to begin planning a rescue operation by water from Suwannee Old Town, if an overland expedition was impossible.<sup>34</sup>

All concerned had now been warned that the blockhouse, if not already destroyed, was in dire need of assistance. But there were many problems. Governor Call was not sure how long the commanding general wanted the post manned, and he did not want to order an outright rescue mission at this time. He did authorize the expedition so it could be put in motion by orders from Fort Drane, but by the time General Clinch received this message he had released his volunteers. Many of his regulars were sick and all the men were weary from the march to and from Fort Brooke. Clinch also realized his forces were too few to be an effective rescue force and at the same time guard the Alachua frontier, their primary mission. In the meantime, the general had submitted his resignation and was preparing to leave for his home on the St. Marys River. In the light of all of these problems, Clinch called a council of his officers present at Fort Drane to decide what should be done to rescue the troops at the blockhouse. After lengthy discussion and debate, "it was decided unanimously that a force adequate to the purpose could not be marched from this post."<sup>35</sup> Governor Call's letter, Read's report, and a letter from General Clinch telling of the council's recommendation were all forwarded to Scott at St. Augustine. Clinch had tried to raise a group of volunteer horsemen to be used in a rescue mission, but he received no response.

Scott received the messages on May 1, and was very dis-

33. Brevard, *History of Florida*, I, 277.

34. *Ibid.*, 277-78; Herbert J. Doherty, *Richard Keith Call: Southern Unionist* (Gainesville, 1961), 103.

35. *House Document* 78, 451-52; Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform*, 133.

pleased with everyone concerned, especially Major Read. Scott felt that the orders that he had issued at Fort Brooke were sufficiently clear; Read should have known of the possibility of a blockhouse on the Withlacoochee. When part of the flatboat was found at the mouth of the river, Read, in Scott's opinion, should have known there were troops up the river who were probably in trouble with the Indians. Scott notified Clinch that he differed from the opinion expressed by the council, and that if nothing had yet been done to effect a rescue, he wanted immediate action.<sup>36</sup> Clinch on May 5 informed Scott that he had sent an express to Old Town, and that he had had no success in his efforts to raise forces to go by land. With all the exchange of messages and plans there was still no positive action taken to remove the force from the blockhouse at the time the three-man canoe party reached St. Marks about May 20. However, when the information concerning the blockhouse reached Governor Call at Tallahassee eighty volunteers were called from the area. Under the command of Major Read, they set sail from St. Marks on May 22 aboard the steamer *Minerva* and arrived off the mouth of the Withlacoochee River the following day. That night under cover of darkness, a boat was sent up the river and the besieged party was evacuated successfully without firing a shot.<sup>37</sup> Thus ended the defense of the blockhouse on the Withlacoochee. The Indians likely destroyed the structure immediately, as was their custom and turned to other pursuits.

---

36. *House Document* 78, 454.

37. Williams, *Territory of Florida*, 244.