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FLORIDA'S DISRUPTED MAIL SERVICE, 1821-1845

by RICHARD J. STANABACK*

WHEN FLORIDA BECAME an American territory in 1821, almost no means of communication existed between its settlements or with other parts of the country. If a viable government and a prosperous economy were to be instituted, effective links of correspondence would have to be developed. To accomplish these ends, the post office department in succeeding years authorized many post roads and post offices. By 1845, there were approximately fifty post offices, and 2,920 miles of post roads in Florida.¹

The existence of these facilities did not guarantee efficient service. In fact, mail delivery continued to be more erratic than regular. The reasons for errant mail were many. Contractors, riders, and postmasters often bungled their jobs, there were attacks by robbers and Indians, and sometimes bad weather caused trouble. The post office tried to remedy the situation by fining contractors, removing lax postmasters, and by sending out inspectors to recover lost mail. In many instances, however, it could do little to prevent the failures or it found its measures ineffective.

While Florida's merchants, planters, government officials, and military personnel were all dependent upon a prompt exchange of information, newspaper publishers were the most concerned about receiving recent news. If they did not know what was happening elsewhere in Florida and in the country, it was reflected by a dearth of news in their journals. Editors, therefore, were usually the first to complain about failures of the mails—a fortunate circumstance for postal historians.

Pensacola apparently suffered postal problems throughout the territorial period. In the beginning the problem was vexing

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1. *Senate Documents*, 29th Cong., 1st sess., No. 1, 862-63; *The Biennial Register of All Officers and Agents In the Service of the United States* (Washington, 1842), 227-29.

when the mails from Washington did not bring news concerning the political organization of the territory.² In 1825, a series of failures left West Florida residents with scant outside contact for almost a month. The editor of the *Gazette* noted:

For three weeks past we have been disappointed with regard to the mails; two of the three which came last, brought us far short of the usual supplies of paper, and by the last we have received but a single paper from the North. These repeated failures cannot be accounted for, and we hope the same cause of complaint may not exist long. Our readers will excuse the scarcity of foreign news in our papers to-day [*sic*], as it is occasioned by the want of papers to extract from.³

The post office tried to substitute steamboats and stages for horses on Pensacola routes, but mails continued to be irregular.⁴ In fact, it was reported in 1838 that the town had received better service before the changes were made.⁵ Mail deliveries deteriorated to such an extent the following year, that one editor wrote:

We beg of the Postmasters on the way to turn up the barrel in which these precious documents newspapers have been stored and give them to us, fresh from the bottom. We shall thus, though something late, keep up with the news as it *used to be known* at the north, and, shall escape all danger of being shocked by intelligence of the death of friends and the election of enemies, before it could possibly be known that the former were sick or that the latter were candidates.⁶

Further breakdowns in Pensacola's communications occurred in 1840, despite the assurance, on paper, of apparently excellent service. So frustrating was the dearth of outside news that it was suggested the mail be delivered via Texas if it assured some improvement.⁷ When five missing mails finally arrived at Pensacola from St. Joseph in 1840, the gratified editor of the *Gazette* exclaimed: "Thankful for the smallest favor, we propose

2. Pensacola *Floridian*, December 31, 1821, May 4, 25, 1822; Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers of the United States*, 26 vols., *The Territory of Florida* (Washington, 1934-1962), XXII, 347.

3. *Pensacola Gazette and West Florida Advertiser*, January 1, 1825.

4. *Ibid.*, January 4, March 7, 1828; *Pensacola Gazette and Florida Advertiser*, February 13, 1830; *Pensacola Gazette*, February 1, 1833, October 11, 1834, August 29, 1835, January 16, 1836.

5. *Pensacola Gazette*, February 24, 1838.

6. *Ibid.*, December 7, 1839.

7. *Ibid.*, February 1, 1840.

that it shall be ascertained who may have been the immediate cause of this benefaction to the reading public, and that we shall give him a public dinner."⁸ In 1841, the paper noted that "a man might travel from London and visit Lakes Erie and Champlain and New Orleans in less time than it takes the mail to travel from Tallahassee to Pensacola."⁹

The inferior service prompted the citizens of Pensacola, as it did people elsewhere in Florida, to demand that Congress and the post office department do something about the problem.¹⁰ But the post office, because of the cost involved, either would not or could not stem the tide of service interruptions in West Florida. As a result, a Pensacola paper commented on the situation: "We know that the capital of our Territory has not been captured by the Seminoles or swallowed up by an earthquake, only because we see no mention made by the northern papers of any such disaster."¹¹

Tallahassee, although it was the capital of the territory, fared no better in its postal service than other parts of Florida. It was not unusual for letters, but no newspapers, to arrive one day and for newspapers but no other mail the following day.¹² This inconsistency often caused people to post duplicate letters in the hope that at least one would reach its destination.¹³ In March 1832, the lack of northern news again irritated the people of Tallahassee who were awaiting information on the tariff, the national bank controversy, and nullification.¹⁴ Attempts by the post office to reduce the irregularities were not very successful, and by January 1835, the scarcity of intelligence prompted the editor of the *Floridian* to lament: "What we shall do next week for matter for our columns Heaven only knows. Our stock of 'horrible disasters,' 'murders,' and 'suicides' is nearly exhausted."¹⁵ Route improvements were provided Tallahassee in the latter

8. *Ibid.*, December 5, 1840.

9. *Ibid.*, February 13, 1841.

10. *Ibid.*, March 20, 27, April 24, December 18, 1841.

11. *Ibid.*, January 8, 1842.

12. Tallahassee *Florida Intelligencer*, April 28, 1826.

13. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIV, 328.

14. Tallahassee *Floridian*, March 27, 1832.

15. *Ibid.*, January 17, 1835.

part of the territorial period, but mail deliveries continued to be slow and erratic through 1845.¹⁶

A similar condition prevailed in East Florida. In 1822 it was not uncommon for territorial officials in St. Augustine to utilize special messengers in place of the mails.¹⁷ When a mail did arrive, it frequently contained letters posted months before. This was the case in August 1823, when Governor William P. DuVal received papers sent by the state department in Washington back in November 1822.¹⁸ The local editor was convinced that postal workers were often at fault for such delays. "Is it not time to cry, Rats, Rats? Aye, and if they could be caught should they not be made to squeak a little?"¹⁹ Whether or not this was the case, there were few improvements in the ensuing years. By one account, it took the Jacksonville *Courier* eight days to traverse the forty miles to St. Augustine in 1835.²⁰ The western mails, in particular, suffered delays and suspensions.²¹ So exasperated was one St. Augustine editor with the service in 1840, that he satirized, "Tallahassee, with reference to intercommunication with her sister cities of the East, may be literally said to be in the *far west*; and the transit of news between the two places, is about equal to the length of time required for an European correspondence."²² But this and other complaints failed to produce a more effective postal service, and editors, local officials, and ordinary citizens had to be satisfied with tenuous communication links throughout the territorial period.²³

One reason for erratic Florida mails was that many postal contractors or their employees were incompetent. Although the post office tried to select reliable men to transport the mails, assigned schedules were often ignored, bundles of newspapers and other items were left behind rather than transported to the next post office, and prescribed postal routes were not always

16. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1836; Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, August 13, 1841; Tallahassee *Star of Florida*, August 25, 1841, December 6, 1844.

17. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXII, 556.

18. St. Augustine *East Florida Herald*, August 16, 1823.

19. *Ibid.*, November 27, 1824.

20. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1835.

21. *Ibid.*, May 3, August 29, 1837, January 8, 1838, May 27, 1840; St. Augustine *News*, February 23, 1839.

22. St. Augustine *News*, January 24, 1840.

23. *Ibid.*, November 27, 1840, May 28, 1841, February 26, 1842; St. Augustine *Florida Herald*, and *Southern Democrat*, April 9, July 16, 1841, February 27, 1844; Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXVI, 1023.

followed.²⁴ In some cases, carriers turned mail over to strangers or deposited it carelessly along the roadside.²⁵ Delays sometimes occurred when one contractor, who was inadequately trained, took over the route.²⁶ Understandably, the reaction of Florida papers to these derelictions was caustic:

The irregularity of this Mail is a grievance that must be remedied before it can become a public convenience— it never arriving at the times stated, by one, two, and three days, and lastly for more than a week.— Our correspondence which is of some importance to us has been entirely interrupted, in consequence of this irregular conduct of the contractor, or the carriers for whose faithfulness he is responsible.²⁷

Contractors who failed to live up to their contracts were sometimes fined.²⁸ Stockton, Stokes, and Company was fined \$500 in 1837 for fifty-six failures to deliver the mails on schedule. The company continued to pile up failures, and it received fines of more than \$4,000 in 1840 and \$1,200 in 1841.²⁹ Contractors were also fined for other reasons, including allowing a Negro to carry the mail, substituting horses for wagon and stage conveyances, and not keeping the mails dry.³⁰

Some postmasters were also responsible for the loss of mail or its failure to be delivered properly.³¹ In some instances mail was sent without necessary locks and seals, thereby hazarding its safety.³² Other times there were locks, but no keys.³³ Mail delays occurred when postmasters carelessly deposited mail in

24. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 297-98.

25. *Ibid.*, 486, 504; *Pensacola Gazette and West Florida Advertiser*, February 9, 16, 1827.

26. Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 3, 1835.

27. St. Augustine *East Florida Herald*, March 28, 1826.

28. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 504; *House Documents*, 25th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 138, 37, 55; *House Documents*, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 263, 2, 19, 47-48; *House Documents*, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 263, 2, 19, 47-48; *House Documents*, 27th Cong., 3rd sess. No. 204, 38, 70-72.

29. *House Documents*, 25th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 138, 55; *House Documents*, 26th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 84, 67-68; *House Documents*, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 263, 47-48. The failures were numerous as it was customary to charge only five or ten dollars for each occurrence.

30. *House Documents*, 26th Cong., 2nd sess., No. 84, 29, 67, 73. Negroes had been excluded as carriers of the mail since 1802 for fear that they would tamper with it. See *Annals of Congress*, 7th Cong., 1st sess., 1371-72.

31. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXII, 579; XXIV, 102, 144.

32. *Ibid.*, XXIII, 322-23.

33. *Ibid.*, 436.

sacks addressed to the wrong town or state.³⁴ Postmasters refused at times to add mail to bags that had been tied or they disposed of numbers of newspapers because of their bulk.³⁵ Editors who suspected such negligence warned: "There is neglect somewhere[.] Look out Post Masters, or we shall light upon you like a Duck on a June Bug."³⁶

Sometimes inspectors checked complaints of the inefficiency of postal employees. After one such investigation in 1828, the postmaster of Escambia County was chided by Washington: "I will thank you to use special care that all packages shall receive their proper direction, so as to prevent a repetition of the errors complained of."³⁷

Mail robbery was another vexing problem. Postal clerks were sometimes discovered stealing money or bank drafts by opening letters. An employee in the St. Augustine post office was caught in 1826.³⁸ In 1837, James Haven, a mail carrier serving Appalachicola and Chattahoochee was arrested for tampering with the mails, and in 1845, another carrier was apprehended for stealing checks and then forging them.³⁹ So flagrant was this activity that it was not uncommon for travelers to find open letters or empty mail bags strewn along post roads.⁴⁰

On July 14, 1827, the carrier on the Tallahassee-Pensacola route was attacked by two highwaymen. "One of the villians discharged a rifle at him, the ball of which passed through his hat, within an inch of his head; the other immediately made at him with a large Spanish dirk knife, with which he attempted to stab him, but fortunately only cut through his clothes."⁴¹ In this attempt the thieves were not only unsuccessful in grabbing the mail pouch, but one of them, Martin Hutto, was later caught and sentenced to two years in jail.⁴² But prison

34. *Pensacola Gazette and Florida Advertiser*, April 18, 1828; *St. Augustine Florida Herald*, September 6, 1832; *St. Joseph Times*, January 8, April 28, 1840.

35. *St. Joseph Times*, January 8, 1840; *St. Augustine News*, April 2, 1842.

36. *St. Joseph Times*, July 23, 1839.

37. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIV, 160.

38. *Ibid.*, XXIII, 70, 646-47, 664-65, 687-88, 729.

39. *Ibid.*, XXV, 379, 389; XXVI, 1049-50.

40. *Ibid.*, XXVI, 490, 904, 909-11, 920.

41. *Ibid.*, XXIII, 940n.

42. Hutto escaped custody three times in 1827-1828, before and after his conviction as a mail robber. See *Ibid.*, 1062, XXIV, 17-20; *Pensacola Gazette and Florida Adviser*, November 9, 1827, October 14, 1828.

sentences did not stop the depredations, and eventually the robbers became bold enough to attack even the post offices.⁴³

Besides having to contend with highwaymen, Florida post riders also had to keep a wary eye out for Seminoles, especially after the outbreak of the Second Seminole War. In September 1835, news reached Jacksonville that Indians had killed a carrier on the road between Tampa Bay and Camp King.⁴⁴ According to the report, he had been "shot and and [*sic*] scalped, his bowels taken out, and thrown into a pond."⁴⁵ In November 1839, a mail wagon was attacked between St. Augustine and Picolata, and in February 1840, a mail coach headed for Jacksonville from St. Augustine was stopped and the driver and carrier murdered.⁴⁶ Two additional riders were found murdered on a Tallahassee route in 1841.⁴⁷ These atrocities usually alerted the mail riders, and at any sign of Indians a rider would seek refuge in the nearest town without concern for mail schedules.⁴⁸ Florida officials called for special troops to protect the mails, and the request was granted, but the dangers continued until the cessation of hostilities.⁴⁹

The climate was another problem plaguing the carriers. Rain storms drenched them and their mail pouches and turned creeks and streams into raging torrents which were sometimes impassable for several days. Tallahassee found its communication with the outside world cut in this manner several times.⁵⁰ High winds and hurricanes disrupted mail deliveries to seacoast towns like St. Augustine. In 1835 storms disabled Key West's only postal packet, and for several months little national news was available.⁵¹

43. *St. Augustine News*, October 15, 1842.

44. *Jacksonville Courier*, September 2, 1835; Tallahassee *Floridian*, September 19, 1835.

45. *Jacksonville Courier*, September 3, 1835, quoted in *St. Augustine Florida Herald*, September 10, 1835.

46. *St. Augustine News*, November 29, 1839, February 21, 1840; Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXVI, 110, 118.

47. *St. Augustine Florida Herald*, and *Southern Democrat*, August 31, 1841.

48. *Jacksonville Courier*, December 24, 1835, January 14, 1836.

49. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXVI, 369.

50. Tallahassee *Advocate*, March 7, 1829; Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 4, 1834, March 28, 1835; Tallahassee *Sentinel*, December 10, 31, 1844.

51. *St. Augustine Florida Herald*, September 9, 1829, March 6, October 9, 1834; *St. Augustine News*, September 11, 1840; *Key West Gazette*, July 25, August 8, 1835.

Florida mails were also interrupted by other problems and conditions. Contractors failed to purchase provisions for their horses, post riders were thrown from their saddles, and stages overturned. At other times, mails were held back because of a lack of locks with which to secure them, stages departed without the mails, post offices burned to the ground, and steamboats became stuck on sandbars.⁵² Between 1821 and 1845 Florida's inhabitants experienced a plethora of interruptions in their mails. Correspondence was delayed days and even weeks despite efforts by the post office to remedy the situation. One service in which the people expected improvement with the coming of statehood was their postal service.

52. Tallahassee *Floridian*, March 27, 1832, October 28, 1837; St. Augustine *Florida Herald*, September 5, 1833; St. Augustine *Florida Herald*, and *Southern Democrat*, June 5, 1843; St. Augustine *News*, February 9, 1845; *St. Joseph Times*, August 6, 1840; Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, November 11, 1842.