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THE AMBUSH OF CAPTAIN JOHN WILLIAMS, U.S.M.C.: FAILURE OF THE EAST FLORIDA INVASION, 1812-1813

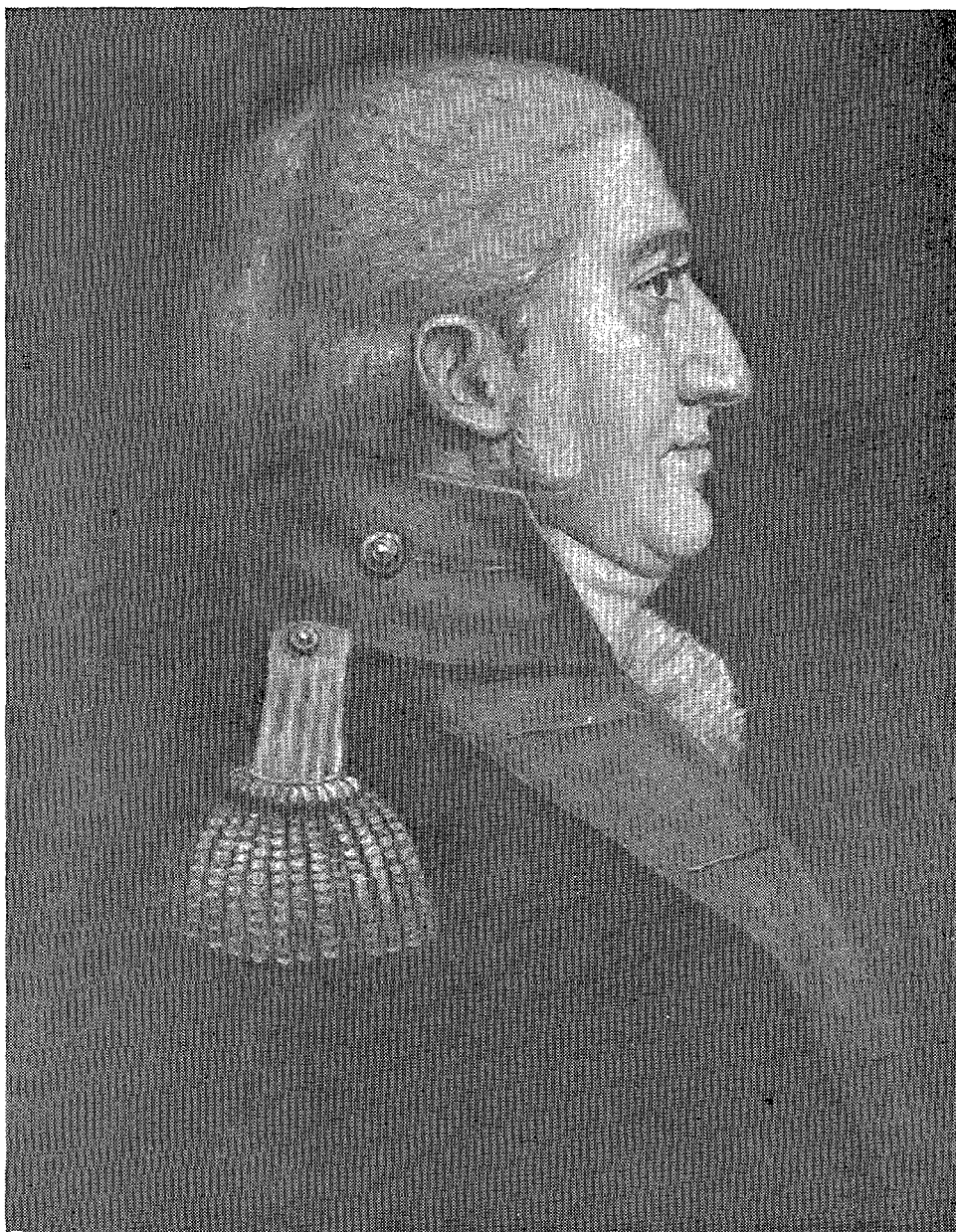
by J. H. ALEXANDER*

TWELVE-MILE SWAMP lies northwest of St. Augustine between Interstate 95 and U.S. Highway 1, the old King's Road. The heavily wooded swamp, named for its approximate distance from St. Augustine, is a forbidding area of cypress bogs and palmetto thickets. The swamp has probably changed little since 1812 when, in one violent half-hour, it became the focal point of an extraordinary, undeclared military contest between the United States and Spain.

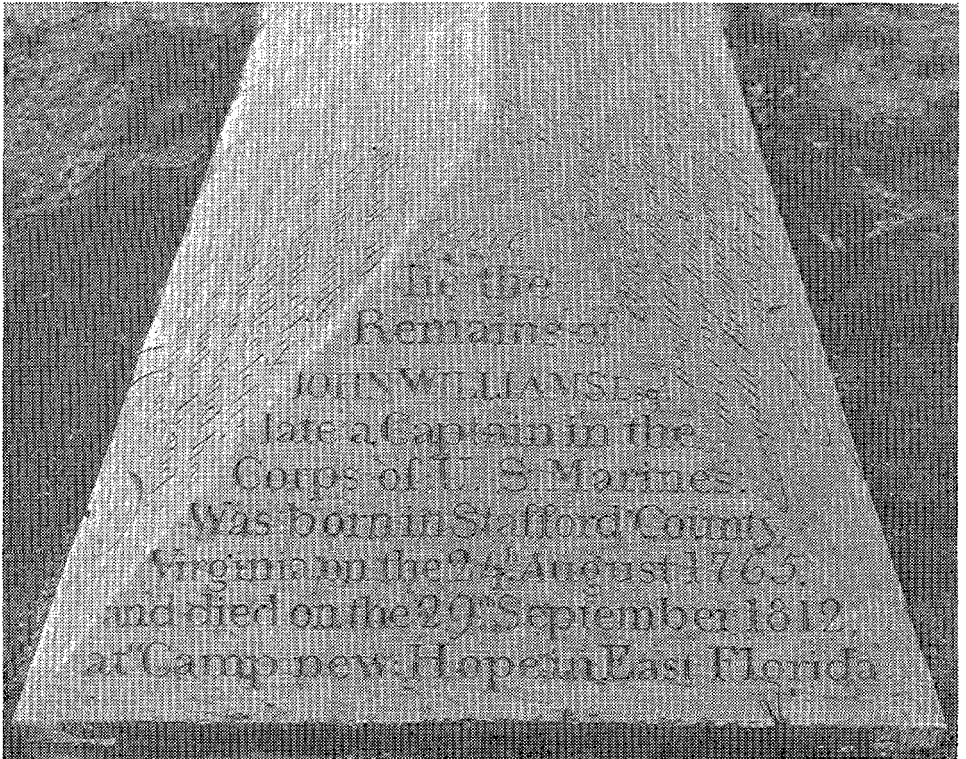
Into this wilderness area on the evening of September 12, 1812, came a ragged column of about twenty United States marines and Georgia militia. They had the mission of escorting a pair of wagons from the camp of the Patriot Army near St. Augustine to the supply depot at Davis Creek Blockhouse, about eight miles northwest of the swamp near the present town of Bayard. The troops were sickly, hungry, and more than a little fearful. They were very much aware that bands of well-armed Seminole Indians and escaped slaves were active in the area. The troops were doubtlessly anxious to reach the safety of the blockhouse where they might enjoy fresh provisions and medical supplies before returning to the American lines at Pass Navarro. The siege of St. Augustine by the Patriot Army was exactly five months old, and things were not going well for the Americans. As the twilight darkened in the gloomy swamp the troops shivered and eyed the surrounding thickets with growing uneasiness.

Marine Captain John Williams commanded this small column. A sensitive, frustrated, forty-seven-year old Virginian, he had been assigned the hazardous duty of keeping open the tenuous line of communications between Colonel Smith and Lieutenant

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Lieutenant Colonel Franklin Wharton, third commandant of the marine corps, 1804-1818.



Grave marker of John Williams, Lot 158, Section 1, Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, D.C. Defense department photograph (marine corps) 526664-A.

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Elias Stallings at Davis Creek. As he entered Twelve-Mile Swamp that evening, it is interesting to conjecture what may well have been on his mind. He was probably very concerned about his marines. Three had been killed recently in an ambush by Indians and blacks. Another had deserted to the Spanish only the day before. Many of his other men were disabled by illness. They were half-starved and in rags. Morale was very low. Moreover, Williams was bitter about the entire deployment of his marines. Originally deployed for "service with the fleet," the men were now engaged in a protracted and thankless inland campaign with the army.

Viewing the wretched condition of his troops in the gathering gloom of the swamp, it is probable that Williams reflected with mirthless irony on the glorious day in the spring of 1811 in Washington when he had led his fully equipped force aboard the schooner *Enterprise* to sail for the Georgia station, amid the best wishes of his commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Franklin Wharton, and a certain Miss Dulany. It is probable that Williams also recalled the stirring events of the past March when he led his force across the St. Marys River into Spanish East Florida to join the bizarre filibuster expedition. Since then, however, the United States had gone to war with Great Britain, and the East Florida invasion had become a diplomatic embarrassment. Williams probably realized that he was now involved in a backwater operation and yearned for more dramatic action, such as command of a marine detachment aboard one of the great ships. As a professional fighting man, it is probable that Captain Williams also looked appraisingly at Captain Tomlinson Fort, his volunteer counterpart from Milledgeville, Georgia, and wondered to what extent he could count on this civilian soldier in the event of an engagement.

Whatever Captain Williams's thoughts may have been that evening, they came to an abrupt end when a large band of Negroes and Indians lying in ambush in the thick woods along the trail fired a point blank volley into the column. Williams went down with the first fire, and although he later managed to rally his troops to prevent a massacre, it was his defeat in the Twelve-Mile Swamp and subsequent death seventeen days later which signaled the swift collapse of the entire East Florida invasion.

The preceding narrative is a conjectural interpretation of events that took place on Saturday evening, September 12, 1812, in Twelve-Mile Swamp. The significance of Captain Williams's death to the outcome of the Patriots War is no conjecture. It is the purpose of this article to present evidence in support of the fact that Williams's ambush was the catalyst, the pivotal watershed, which caused the abrupt termination of the American attempt to obtain forcible possession of Spanish East Florida. Until Williams's disaster in Twelve-Mile Swamp, the Americans still maintained a siege of St. Augustine, occupied the key port of Fernandina on Amelia Island, and had access to a sizable body of reinforcements in the form of Colonel Neil Newnan's Georgia volunteers. The Williams ambush caused the immediate abandonment of the siege of St. Augustine, the attrition of Newnan's force in prolonged punitive expeditions against the Seminoles, and the subsequent withdrawal of all United States forces from the entire province. Admittedly, there were many factors bearing on this withdrawal—the ingenuity of the Spanish governor and the bankruptcy of the entire annexation scheme are two examples—yet the pivot point was undoubtedly the death of Captain John Williams.

According to one Florida historian, "There is probably no event in American History so romantic, so fantastic, yet concerning which so little has been written, as the 'Republic of Florida.'" ¹ The Republic, an interesting by-product of the Patriots War of 1812-1813, was organized to the extent of having a Director, an army, a flag, a constitution, and a capital in Fernandina. ² The Patriots War itself appears to have resulted from a combination of aggressive nationalism, strategic necessity, and an underlying fear of Negro insurrection.

According to the author of the basic general history of Florida, "Quite early in the second [Spanish] occupation it became clear that Spain could not people, develop, and govern Florida effectively. It was equally obvious that it would fall to the United States unless some great power, possibly England, should intervene to prevent it." ³ Another authority on the history of the area asserted that the immediate excuse for invasion of the province of

1. Pleasant Daniel Gold, *History of Duval County, Including Early History of East Florida* (St. Augustine, 1929), 78.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 103.

East Florida by the Patriots was the impending war with Great Britain. He pointed out that Spain and Great Britain had treaty relations, and that Britain might attempt to use Spanish Florida as an advanced staging base.⁴

The matter was of sufficient importance for President James Madison to bring it to the attention of Congress. On January 25, 1811, Congress passed an extraordinary joint secret resolution which in effect authorized the temporary occupation of East Florida. The President appointed General George Matthews, former governor of Georgia, and Colonel John McKee, as commissioners to confer with the Spanish authorities for the temporary cession of that province, and authorized the support of United States armed forces should the need arise.⁵

In the meantime, a number of frontiersmen along the Georgia border learned of the secret resolution and began to assemble with anticipation in the port city of St. Marys. To excite further the ambitions of the expansionists came recurring word of the arming of Negroes in East Florida. On June 29, 1811, General Matthews informed Secretary of State James Monroe of rumors that a regiment of Jamaican blacks was expected to attack Florida.⁶ The following spring the Secretary of War received a letter from Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Adam Smith, commander of American forces on the border, which stated: "I have been informed by General Mathews [*sic*], that he has good reason to believe that a detachment of English troops (blacks) are on the eve of being sent to occupy the military posts within East Florida."⁷

There was evidently some foundation to the fears of the frontiersmen of the "black peril" in Spanish Florida. One study shows that it had "long been a policy of the Spanish government . . . to encourage Negroes from the British settlements to take

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4. T. Frederick Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813," Part I, *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (July 1930), 3-4.
 5. George R. Fairbanks, *History of Florida, From Its Discovery by Ponce de Leon, in 1512, to the Close of the Florida War, in 1842* (Philadelphia and Jacksonville, 1871), 253.
 6. Edwin N. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Material and Sources of Chapter XIX, Volume I, History of the United States Marine Corps," p. 4, unpublished manuscript, revised edition, June 30, 1931, copy in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.
 7. Smith to Secretary of War, March 18, 1812, in Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813," Part I, 5.

refuge in Florida." There was evidence of a regiment of runaway slaves being formed by the Spanish governor in St. Augustine as early as 1740. The Seminole Indians frequently welcomed the refugees as slaves of their own, although with a benevolent "democratic feudalism" under which the Negroes flourished. "There was . . . no group of people in Florida with a greater stake in resistance to invasion and annexation by the United States than the Seminole Negroes." ⁸

Shortly after the appointment of General Matthews as American commissioner, President Madison directed that a force of marines be established on Cumberland Island, off the coast of Georgia, to help secure the southern flank. ⁹ The Marine Corps at the time was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Franklin Wharton and had an authorized strength of forty-six officers and 1,823 enlisted men. ¹⁰ On April 22, 1811, Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton instructed Captain John Williams to establish the Cumberland Island position, to join the flotilla in order to protect the rights and neutrality of the United States, and to cooperate with the army detachment at St. Marys Station, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Smith. ¹¹

Captain Williams had been born in Stafford County, Virginia, on August 24, 1765, a member of a large family that included five brothers and three sisters. He was a Freemason, living in Centreville in 1805 when the Secretary of the Navy offered him a commission as second lieutenant. Why he decided to become a marine at that relatively advanced age is unknown. Williams was promoted to captain in January, 1811. At the time of his assignment to Georgia he was stationed at the marine barracks in Washington, where he enjoyed a close relationship with Commandant Wharton and his family. ¹²

On April 24, 1811, Captain Williams boarded the schooner *Enterprise* with his detachment of one lieutenant, three sergeants, three corporals, a fifer, a drummer, and thirty-nine privates to sail for Cumberland Island. At that station for the better part of

8. Kenneth Wiggins Porter, "Negroes and the East Florida Annexation Plot, 1811-1813," *Journal of Negro History*, XXX (January 1945), 11-16.

9. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 1.

10. Edwin N. McClellan, "Marine Corps History, 1807-1812," *Marine Corps Gazette* (March 1923), 30.

11. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 1.

12. R. B. Tiffany, History and Museum Division, United States Marine Corps Headquarters, Washington, D.C., to author.

a year he endured great boredom, broken only by a rash of sickness which took the lives of seven of his troops.¹³ In the meantime, however, events were building to a climax along the Florida border which would end Williams's ennui for good.

General Matthews had continued his "armed diplomacy" at great lengths, and by March 1812, he had assembled a sizable force of frontiersmen, adventurers, and filibusterers-his Patriots Army-at Point Petre across the St. Marys River from the Spanish town of Fernandina on Amelia Island. Advised by General Matthews that "affairs were ripe for execution," Commodore Campbell of the United States Navy blockaded Fernandina with his gunboats on March 16, 1812.¹⁴ On that same day, Colonel Lodok Ashley of the Patriots delivered the following message to the Spanish commandant, Don Justos Lopez: "We are informed sir, that you have armed the negroes on the Island, against us . . . if we find it to be so. . . we solemnly [*sic*] declare to give no quarters in the Town of Fernandina."¹⁵

On March 17, the garrison capitulated to the surrender demands of the Patriots, backed by Campbell's gunboats. In earlier elections, General John W. McIntosh had been elected Director, and Colonel Ashley, military chief, of the Republic. The Spanish commandant, Lopez, signed the articles of capitulation, as did McIntosh.¹⁶ With the entry of United States troops into Fernandina the following day the Patriot flag was hauled down and the American stars and stripes raised.

These were heady times for the new Republic. The Patriots clamored for an immediate "on to St. Augustine" campaign. Lieutenant Colonel Smith, the senior regular officer present, wavered between his desire for action and his doubts over the legitimacy of the entire enterprise. At length he opted for action. Leaving Captain Williams and his marines at Fernandina with instructions to keep communications open to his headquarters, Smith departed for the interior of East Florida. Smith moved with alacrity in this early part of the campaign, seizing Picolata on the

13. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 1-3.

14. *Ibid.*, 4-6.

15. Lodok Ashley to Commandant of Amelia Island, March 16, 1812, in Works Progress Administration, Historical Records Survey, Florida, Patriot War Papers, 1812-1813, located in vault of the clerk of the Circuit Court, St. Johns County, Florida, unpublished manuscript, Jacksonville, 1937, p. 20.

16. Fairbanks, *History of Florida*, 254-55.

St. Johns River on April 7, and occupying Moosa Old Fort on the outskirts of St. Augustine five days later. The border country was excited by the news that the Spanish provincial capital was under siege by 200 United States troops and their "Patriot allies."¹⁷

Unfortunately, however, the very brashness of the Patriots had caused considerable embarrassment to the Madison administration. Both the Spanish and the British governments protested the invasion. On the same date that Smith reached the outskirts of St. Augustine, the Federalists in Congress forced President Madison to disavow General Matthews's actions.¹⁸ Madison was forced to repudiate and dismiss Matthews to save his own face, although he "was not ready to abandon his Florida project." He appointed Governor David B. Mitchell of Georgia as the new American commissioner, and American troops continued to occupy East Florida "to the walls of St. Augustine."¹⁹

Both Madison and Monroe continued to press for legitimacy for the Florida invasion. A bill authorizing the occupation of East Florida was narrowly defeated by the Federalists and the President's enemies in the Senate on July 3, 1812. Three days later, Secretary Monroe informed Mitchell that the President thought it advisable to withdraw the troops. The object was not to be considered as abandoned, however, as it was likely that Congress might reverse its decision at the next session.²⁰

In view of this top level indecision, Governor Mitchell, who was as capable of inflammatory rhetoric as his predecessor, wrote Monroe: "I owe to the United States, and Georgia in particular, to assure you that the situation of the garrison of St. Augustine will not admit of the troops being withdrawn. They have armed every able-bodied negro within their power, and they have also received from the Havana a reinforcement of nearly two companies of black troops! [If these blacks] . . . are suffered to remain in the province, our southern country soon be in a state of insurrection."²¹

17. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 6.

18. Mary L. Frech and William Swindler, eds., *Chronology and Documentary Handbook of the State of Florida* (Dobbs Ferry, New York, 1973), 8.

19. Rembert W. Patrick, ed., "Letters of the Invaders of East Florida, 1812," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVIII (July 1949), 55.

20. Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (New York, 1949), 193-94.

21. Mitchell to Monroe, July 17, 1812, quoted in *ibid.*, 194-95.

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In the meantime Captain Williams remained in command of occupied Fernandina. In subsequent testimony he was said to have been "very popular with the inhabitants; he was mild, kind and obliging."²² Even Don Justos Lopez remarked that during the three months that Williams had remained in command he showed politeness and benevolence to the people in Fernandina.²³ Williams, however, was very much caught up in the high level indecision as to the legitimacy of the occupation. On April 21, 1812, Secretary of the Navy Hamilton ordered him to withdraw his forces to Cumberland Island. On the other hand, Governor Mitchell directed him to remain in Fernandina and wrote Secretary Monroe that Williams's services were essential for his campaign. At this point Williams admitted to his friend Lieutenant Samuel Miller in Washington that he had never been placed in such a disagreeable situation, and if he evacuated his post all supplies would be cut off from Colonel Smith.²⁴ Mitchell prevailed, and Williams remained on station.

The situation with Colonel Smith at St. Augustine had begun to deteriorate. Perhaps he suddenly realized that his force was too light to breach the walls of the Castillo de San Marcos and too extended to conduct a prolonged siege and blockade. At any rate, from May through September 1812, Smith wrote an increasingly bitter series of letters to his superiors in which he complained about his need for reinforcements, lack of supplies, disgust with the undisciplined Patriots, and fear of Spanish reinforcements. On May 16, 1812, the first of several critical reversals occurred when Governor Estrada of St. Augustine deployed an armed schooner to shell Smith's position at Moosa Old Fort. The Americans fell back in disarray, the regulars establishing a new position at Pass Navarro along Four Mile Creek. The Patriots, however, retreated all the way to Hollingsworth's plantation on the St. Johns River above the Cowford, twenty-five miles away.²⁵ The siege of St. Augustine still prevailed to an extent, but the Americans were in a vulnerable situation.

22. George J. F. Clark, quoted in McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 25.

23. Lopez to Magistrate of St. Mary's Georgia, in Patriot War Papers, 7.

24. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 7.

25. *Ibid.*, 9. Hollingsworth's Plantation was located near the present Cathedral Oaks section of South Jacksonville.

Smith's complaints grew more strident. On June 4 he wrote the United States adjutant and inspector: "With a weak Detachment, but badly provided, laying before one of the strongest fortified places on the Continent, containing a garrison five times our numbers, what can be expected from me? [Lacking] . . . Cavalry we remain ignorant of their movements."²⁶

The fact that Smith was becoming increasingly alarmed over the prospects of Spanish reinforcements in the form of armed blacks is evident in his letter of June 20 to Governor Mitchell: "by a Deserter today we learn that from the vessels off the bar a hundred Black Troops have actually been landed, which are only a part of the force brought from the Havanna."²⁷ While there is little evidence to substantiate the landing of such an organization, Smith nevertheless failed to note a most significant landing on June 17. On that day, a new provincial governor, Don Sebastian Kindelan, arrived from Spain to replace Governor Estrada.

Kindelan appears to have been a remarkable man. On the one hand, he had arrived to find his province occupied and his capital besieged. On the other, he probably realized he must avoid war with the United States if at all possible. The Spanish were currently aligned with Great Britain against Napoleon in Europe and could ill afford a simultaneous overseas war with the Americans.²⁸ Kindelan's position called for a shrewd balance of force, diplomacy, and covert activity. He was equal to the task. In a letter addressed to Colonel Smith, "The Commander of the United States Troops in Florida," Kindelan stated: "I have just arrived in this City and taken charge of it, . . . and it appearing very strange to me, to find United States regular troops encamped in the vicinity of it, when my nation is at peace . . . with the said United States."²⁹

Smith, increasingly concerned about the legitimacy of his occupation, referred the letter to Governor Mitchell, who maintained a terse but formal correspondence with Kindelan concerning withdrawal plans the next several months. Kindelan, in the meantime, made secret arrangements with the indigenous forces-

26. Smith to U. S. Adjutant & Inspector, in Davis, "United-States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813," Part I, 20.

27. Smith to Mitchell, June 20, 1812, in *ibid.*, 101.

28. Patrick, "Letters of the Invaders of East Florida, 1812," 54.

29. Governor of E. Florida to Com. U. S. Troops in Florida, June 11, 1812, in *Patriot War Papers*, 69.

the Seminoles and their Negro allies-to initiate guerilla warfare against the Americans. This was a peculiar development. The Seminoles had no particular fondness for the Spanish. In fact, early in the invasion a Seminole chief named "Bowlegs" had offered his services to the Patriot commanders, General Matthews and General McIntosh, at Hollingsworth's plantation. The chief was advised not to take part in a quarrel between white men. This was a tactical error of considerable proportions. Chief Bowlegs, insulted, offered his services instead to the Spanish in St. Augustine where Kindelan was delighted to receive him. Within weeks, a full-scale Indian uprising was in progress along both sides of the St. Johns River, and many of the Patriots departed to protect their own homes and families in southern Georgia.³⁰

One military writer, analyzing these activities in later years, concluded that the Spanish decision to "let loose the Indians and some refugee negro slaves . . . upon the settlers" was based on starvation and despair.³¹ However, it would rather appear that this move was based on Kindelan's ingenuity. By utilizing blacks and Indians to do his fighting for him, the Spanish governor could maintain his overt neutrality and still accomplish an essential military objective: the lifting of the siege and withdrawal of American forces. Kindelan offered \$1,000 for the scalp of McIntosh and \$10 for any other Patriot scalp.³² The Milledgeville (Georgia) *Journal* later reported that the Spanish governor had "augmented his premium" by also offering a bottle of rum for each scalp.³³ It was evident that Kindelan was waging undeclared, psychological warfare against the Patriots.

Lieutenant Colonel Smith continued to voice his complaints in the mail. On June 17 he notified Mitchell that he could no longer prevail upon the Patriots to send out any patrols.³⁴ On July 6 he wrote Mitchell requesting Captain Williams and his marines from Fernandina, stating "You are acquainted with the difference between Regulars and Militia."³⁵

30. Gold, *History of Duval County*, 81.

31. George Richards, "Captain John Williams, USMC, A Tradition," *Marine Corps Gazette* (August 1932), 12.

32. Tebeau, *History of Florida*, 108.

33. *Niles Weekly Register*, November 7, 1812.

34. Smith to Mitchell, June 17, 1812, in T. Frederick Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813, Part II," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (October 1930), 99-100.

35. Smith to Mitchell, July 6, 1812, in *ibid.*, 104.

Williams departed Fernandina on July 11 for the interior of East Florida. He found the Americans in four different locations: Colonel (promoted July 6) Smith and his regulars still besieging St. Augustine from their position at Pass Navarro; General McIntosh and his Patriot forces at Hollingsworth's; Captain Tomlinson Fort and a fresh body of Georgia Volunteers at Picolata on the St. Johns River; and Lieutenant Elias Stallings at his new blockhouse on Davis Creek.³⁶ Williams no doubt discovered the morale and appearance of the entire force a shocking contrast to the units that had departed Fernandina in such high spirits the previous April.

Colonel Smith's troops in particular were in bad shape. They were "almost destitute of clothing," "frequently more than half the force was on the sick list," and in the "gathering storm" of the war with Great Britain "this little detachment in Florida seems to have been practically ignored."³⁷ It was also observed that: "the position of the American army detachment had grown increasingly precarious during the last weeks of August and the early days of September. The often reinforced Spanish garrison was now far stronger than Colonel Smith's detachment, and the Indians were threatening to cut his supply lines. . . . Fever, dysentery, and other diseases confined more than one-third of Smith's forces to their crude huts."³⁸

The American situation was clearly deteriorating. In addition to sickness and uncertainty, the element of fear created by the presence of Indian and Negro bands in the area began to have its effect. As more evidence appeared that Kindelan was either receiving black reinforcements or organizing escaped slaves, Governor Mitchell wrote him angrily, denouncing his "black troops," and arguing that his "certain knowledge" of the attitude of the "Southern Section of the Union in regard to that description of people" should have "induced you to abstain from introducing them into the Province."³⁹

Colonel Smith was convinced that the Spaniards were about to move. On August 10 he urged Lieutenant Stallings to "keep a

36. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 33.

37. Jacksonville *Sunday Times-Union*, March 16, 1930.

38. Patrick, "Letters of the Invaders of East Florida, 1812," 53.

39. Mitchell to Kindelan, July 6, 1812, in Patriot War Papers, 91.

bright lookout as the Dons have an inclination" to attack.⁴⁰ The next day he warned Captain Fort that "the Dons are preparing to attack me and they calculate on being aided by 2 or 300 Indians and negroes."⁴¹

Some of Smith's worst fears were realized on August 12, when a courier en route from Davis Creek to Pass Navarro was ambushed, scalped, and mutilated by a party of Indians and Negroes. Reporting the incident to Governor Mitchell, Smith commented that "The blacks assisted by the Indians have become very daring," and that this boldness "has obliged me to send a strong guard with the wagons." Smith also observed that the incident had badly frightened the remnants of the Patriot force, and he doubted whether they "will ever revive again."⁴²

Captain Williams began to despair of the sickness, lack of supplies, shadowy guerrillas, Colonel Smith's fears, and the restrictive rules of engagement which prohibited the Americans from using their weapons first unless fired upon. A few weeks after arriving in the St. Augustine area he wrote his commandant requesting that the marines be withdrawn from the campaign and reassigned to sea duty. In a subsequent letter he listed his sick and wounded, complained about the shortage of clothing for his men, and again requested to be withdrawn from service with the army. Lieutenant Colonel Wharton's replies were sympathetic, but there was very little he could do. The Secretary of the Navy was on an extended absence from Washington, and, besides, Williams's chain of command now went through Colonel Smith to Governor Mitchell direct to Secretary of State Monroe, bypassing the navy department.⁴³

In disgust, Williams wrote his friend Lieutenant Miller: "I wish you, if you can, would find out the reason of the U. S. Troops being kept in this province without the liberty of firing a gun unless we are fired upon. Our situation is an unpleasant one as well as a very unhealthful one." Williams concluded with a forlorn request for Miller to make his best respects to "Miss

40. Smith to Stallings, August 10, 1812, in Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813, Part II," 108.

41. Smith to Fort, August 11, 1812, in *ibid.*, 109.

42. Smith to Mitchell, August 21, 1812, in *ibid.*, 110-12.

43. Wharton to Williams, September 24, October 1, 1812. Both letters are contained in "Wharton's Letter Book, June 29, 1810-Feb. 19, 1815," History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S.M.C., Washington, D.C.

Dulany" and to tell her "I will return as soon as the Florida war is over." ⁴⁴

An examination of some of the letters written by "the East Florida Invaders," on the eve of Captain Williams's ambush will provide an indication of the deteriorating morale of these troops at that critical point. From Colonel Smith to George Ruddle, a contractor: "we have been without spirits [whiskey] for some time." ⁴⁵ From Lieutenant James Ryan to John Ash of Savannah: "On the morning of the 9th a Mr. Armstrong of the patriots . . . was shot and scalped [*sic*] about three miles from our camp." ⁴⁶ From Captain Fielder Ridgeway to T. N. Ridgeway who lived in Maryland: ". . . we suffer much with the warm climate and bad water and from the want of Supplies of provisions. We have a Small force, the Indians west of this province has become hostile agt us, has sculped Several of our men. . . . we are now become sickly. Our aim is at Fort St. Augustine; five times the force we have will not be able to take by storme, its the best and most Secure Fortified Fort I ever See if we take it we must hem them in and starve them out but even our present force will not do that, for the Spanish have the Indians to Sculp us. . . ." ⁴⁷

From Surgeons Second Mate William Kinnear to members of his family in Virginia: "Colonel Smith is scarely sufficient to maintain its ground against a numerous enemy consisting chiefly of west india Blacks strangers to fear renders our situation extremely critical we have already experienced the loss of ten brave men murdered by the Indians and Negroes one of them a Mr. Maxwell charged with dispatches for Colonel Smith from the Blockhouse . . . was way laid and dreadfully tortued and murdered having his nose ears and privities cut off scalped and otherwise barbarously used." ⁴⁸

The arrival of Colonel Newnan and the rest of the Georgia Volunteers did little to reassure Colonel Smith. On September 7

44. Williams to Miller, September 6, 1812, in McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 10, 30.

45. Smith to Ruddle, September 11, 1812, in Patrick, "Letters of the Invaders of East Florida, 1812," 57.

46. Ryan to Ash, September 11, 1812, in *ibid.*, 58-59.

47. Fielder Ridgeway to Thomas N. Ridgeway, September 11, 1812, in *ibid.*, 60.

48. William Kinnear to John Kinnear, in *ibid.*, 62.

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he wrote Governor Mitchell of his concern over the vulnerability of the supply line to Davis Creek.⁴⁹

Such was the situation when Williams led his small column into Twelve-Mile Swamp on the evening of September 12, 1812, en route to the Davis Creek Blockhouse. Much less is known of the force which lay in ambush for him. Most sources agree that it was a mixed unit of Negroes and Indians, organized and led by a free black named "Prince," encouraged if not actually directed by Governor Kindelan. There is little evidence to indicate that this was the much-feared regiment of "Cuban Colonials" which had so concerned Colonel Smith and Governor Mitchell. More than likely the Negroes were a combination of free blacks like "Prince," escaped slaves, and Seminole slaves, all from East Florida. Colonel Smith himself had initially reported that the Spanish garrison at St. Augustine contained about "50 free Men of Colour," so perhaps "Prince" came from this source.⁵⁰ After the action, Smith claimed that ninety black reinforcements from Cuba, "sable Warriors," were sent to attack Williams.⁵¹ Again, historians have found little to support this. According to John Lee Williams in his book published in 1837: "a company of negroes was collected in St. Augustine, headed by a free black, called Prince."⁵²

Accounts of the ambush and subsequent engagement are provided by a number of historians, by the subsequent letters of Colonel Smith, and by regional newspapers. The consensus does not vary significantly. It appears that the ambush was intelligently planned and well-executed. Williams, his only sergeant, and the wagon horses went down in the first volley. The sergeant was stripped and scalped. Notwithstanding the loss of their leaders, it also appears that the marines, finally given an opportunity to fight, gave a good account of themselves in the melee. They extricated their fallen captain, took up a defensive position,

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49. Smith to Mitchell, September 7, 1812, in T. Frederick Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813, Part III," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (January 1931), 136.
 50. Smith to U. S. Adjutant & Inspector, April 26, 1812, in Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813," 10.
 51. Smith to Thomas Bourke, October 25, 1812, in T. Frederick Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813, Part IV," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (April 1931), 261.
 52. John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1962), 197.

and returned fire at their attackers. Captain Fort, wounded in the knee, also fought bravely, although the marines disdained to follow his exhortations to charge. It was Williams, literally shot to pieces with eight gunshot wounds, who rallied his troops with a bayonet countercharge that scattered the enemy and ended the fighting. The blacks destroyed one wagon and took the other with them when they retreated. Captain Williams sent most of his men on to the blockhouse and hid himself in the palmettos for the remainder of what for him must have been a terrifying night. Lieutenant Stallings brought him to safety the next morning.

Williams provided the only known eyewitness account of the action in a letter to his commandant dictated on September 15 from Davis Creek. Extracts of the letter, later published in the *National Intelligencer*, contained the following: “. . . as I was marching with a command of about twenty men with two waggons from the Camps to this place, I was . . . attacked by a party of Indians and negroes . . . it being dark, we commenced battle which continued nearly as long as a man of my command had a cartridge, during which time I received eight wounds. . . . My right leg is broke, my right hand shot through with three balls, my left arm broke, my left leg shot through, a ball in my left thigh near the groin: another through the lower part of my body, which renders me altogether helpless. They found one man on the ground that was dead and scalped, several more wounded that had escaped in the bushes. . . . The enemy, from all accounts, were about fifty in number. You may suppose that I am in a dreadful situation, tho' I yet hope I shall recover in a few months.”⁵³

Captain Williams did not recover, in spite of being moved to the relative comfort of Hollingsworth's plantation and receiving the best wishes of his commandant and the Secretary of the Navy.⁵⁴ A common military firearm of the period 1794-1812 was a smoothbore, muzzle-loading, flintlock musket which fired a .69 caliber ball. To survive the impact of eight such projectiles at close range as Williams did would have been miraculous under those primitive conditions. He died on September 29 at Hollings-

53. Williams to Wharton, September 15, 1812, *National Intelligencer*, October 20, 1812.

54. Wharton to Williams, October 12, 1812, McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 33-34.

worth's, a good officer who had served well and who was soon forgotten.

The impact of his death, however, raged through East Florida and Georgia. The immediate consequence was Colonel Smith's cry for help to Newnan: "I intend to fall back as soon as you join me."⁵⁵ The loss of both Williams and the supply line, left Colonel Smith with nothing "to do but retreat."⁵⁶ He abandoned his positions outside St. Augustine and commenced a disorderly retreat to Davis Creek. The siege of St. Augustine had ended ingloriously.⁵⁷ Within days Smith retreated again, this time to Hollingsworth's plantation, which he euphemistically renamed Camp New Hope in anticipation of the arrival of reinforcements with which he might regain the initiative.⁵⁸

The reaction along the Georgia border to Williams's death was at first angry and then indignant. Governor Mitchell blustered to his government about "this savage and barbarous attack."⁵⁹ The *Savannah Republican* spoke of "American breasts swelling with indignation against that banditti at Augustine."⁶⁰ An Augusta editorial urged Georgians to "mount upon the whirlwind."⁶¹ The *Georgia Journal* of October 7 condemned Governor Kindelan for inciting "disaffection among our slaves," and urged the immediate reduction of St. Augustine at point of bayonet, although pausing to observe that such an enterprise might require more than 10,000 troops.⁶²

Eventually, public attention was diverted to other events, notably the war with Great Britain. Colonel Newnan engaged the Seminoles in a pair of bloody expeditions west of the St. Johns near present day Gainesville, killed their chief, and went home with his volunteers. Diplomatic pressure on President Madison to withdraw from East Florida increased markedly after the abandonment of the siege of St. Augustine. Colonel Smith was relieved of command. Camp New Hope was burned and evacuated on

55. Smith to Newnan, September 12, 1812, in Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813, Part III," 137.

56. Jacksonville *Sunday Times-Union*, March 16, 1930.

57. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812*, 208.

58. Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813, Part III," 146n.

59. *Niles Weekly Register*, November 28, 1812.

60. *Savannah Republican*, October 8, 1812.

61. *National Intelligencer*, October 24, 1812.

62. *Ibid.*, October 20, 1812.

April 26, 1813.⁶³ Two weeks later the port of Fernandina was returned to Spain, and the last American forces left East Florida. The activities did not end American ambitions in the province, of course - Andrew Jackson was to lead his famous expedition across the border four years later - but it clearly marked the end of the Patriots War.

Subsequent historians have emphasized the "catastrophe of Twelve Mile Swamp" as the key which unlocked the St. Augustine siege, which in turn marked the inevitable end of the East Florida invasion.⁶⁴ It is interesting to note that in books published in 1885 and in 1906, both writers cite the bravery of Prince, who saved the population of St. Augustine from starvation by his action against the invaders.⁶⁵ Another historian gives the credit to the Spanish governor: "Without firing a shot, without using a soldier who could be identified as Spanish, Kindelan forced Smith to lift the siege of St. Augustine and seek safety on the St. Johns. Indians and Negroes accomplished the feat for the Spanish governor. While he remained in St. Augustine, they had . . . struck Smith's life line, and . . . won by their boldness."⁶⁶

"Captain John Williams expired yesterday," observed the *Savannah Republican*. "He was a brave and honest man."⁶⁷ Outmaneuvered, defeated, and mortally wounded in the pivotal action of an obscure and bizarre campaign, John Williams clearly deserved a better fate.⁶⁸

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63. T. Frederick Davis, "United States Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813, Part V," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, X (July 1931), 34.
64. Porter, "Negroes and the East Florida Annexation Plot, 1811-1813," 21.
65. William W. Dewhurst, *The History of Saint Augustine, Florida* (New York, 1885; facsimile edition, Rutland, Vermont, 1968), 138; Herbert Bruce Fuller, *The Purchase of Florida, Its History and Diplomacy* (Cleveland, 1906; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 195.
66. Rembert W. Patrick, *Florida Fiasco: Rampant Rebels on the Georgia-Florida Border, 1810-1815* (Athens, Georgia, 1954), 194.
67. *Savannah Republican*, October 8, 1812.
68. Captain Williams was the second marine officer to lose his life in action after the Revolution. W. S. Bush, a lieutenant, died a month earlier in the engagement between U.S.S. *Constitution* and H.M.S. *Guerriere*. McClellan, "Indian Fights, 1807-1813, Chapter XIX, Volume I," 34. On December 19, 1812, Commandant Wharton ordered all officers in the corps to wear crepe on the left arm and sword hilt for one month in memory of Williams. Wharton order of December 19, 1812, contained in Wharton's Letter Book, June 29, 1810-Feb. 19, 1813, maintained by History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S.M.C., Washington, D.C. In 1904 Williams's remains were transferred to Arlington Cemetery.