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A LOST LANDMARK REVISITED: THE PANTON HOUSE OF PENSACOLA

by THOMAS D. WATSON AND SAMUEL WILSON, JR.

FIRE destroyed much of Pensacola during the night of September 24-25, 1848.¹ Among the many buildings lost to the flames was the imposing, three-story brick mansion that once had served as the West Florida headquarters of Panton, Leslie and Company. For over half a century its columns had towered above the northern shoreline of Pensacola Bay as silent reminders of bygone years when William Panton, its builder and first occupant, had lorded it over the southern Indian trade from within its confines.²

According to Marie Taylor Greenslade, a descendant of the Panton family, Panton built the house in 1785. From other evidence, however, this date seems too early for its construction.³ This was the year that Panton first took up residence in Pensacola, and four more years passed before he, a British subject, received the Spanish government's official notification that he would be permitted to stay. Local tradition maintains that he

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1. Captain Dubreuil to Admiral Kendrain, September 28, 1848, in *Ministere d' Affaires Etrangere, Archives Diplomatique*, box 236, xerox copy, Papers of Panton, Leslie and Company, University of West Florida Library, Pensacola, Florida (hereinafter cited as Panton, Leslie papers).
2. Panton, an avid loyalist of Scottish origins, fled from Georgia to East Florida at the onset of the American Revolution. On or about January 15, 1783, he joined John Leslie, Thomas Forbes, and William Alexander as a founder and senior partner in Panton, Leslie and Company, formed for the purpose of engaging in the war-ravaged southern Indian trade. Alexander severed his ties with the firm some time after it was discovered that East Florida would be retroceded to Spain. See Panton to Leslie, July 18, 1791, in *D. W. Johnson et al v. John Innerarity et al*, Louisiana Supreme Court, case no. 1156 (1825). The others continued the partnership eventually gaining Spain's approval to conduct the Indian trade in both Floridas. Panton managed the company's West Florida operations, Leslie handled its affairs in East Florida, and Forbes looked after its interests in Nassau. Randy Frank Nimnicht, "William Panton: His Early Career on the Changing Frontier" (M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1968), offers a solid account of the pre-Spanish phase of Panton's career.
3. Marie Taylor Greenslade, "John Innerarity, 1783-1854," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (October 1930), 90-95.

completed the house in 1796.⁴ Construction quite likely began no later than 1796, given Panton's mounting misfortunes.

In April 1785, Panton sailed into the harbor at Pensacola with an assortment of goods he had hastily assembled in Nassau. It was his plan to engross the lucrative Indian trade throughout the area of West Florida and beyond. His hopes rested on the assumption that Spain had no other alternative for meeting its treaty commitments to the Creeks, Alabamas, Choctaws, and Chickasaws to establish and maintain a satisfactory trade for their convenience. At the outset, however, Panton learned to his chagrin that he could obtain nothing more from the Spaniards than begrudging sufferance to supply only the Creeks on a year-to-year emergency basis. Indeed, if not for the importunings of Alexander McGillivray, the half-breed Creek leader, Spanish-Indian agent, and a business associate, Panton's tenure in Pensacola would have been shortlived at best.⁵

The year 1789 brought vast improvements to Panton's status in Spanish West Florida. In February he assumed the Choctaw and Chickasaw trade through Mobile when the original concessionaire, the New Orleans-based firm of Mather and Strother, failed. Five months later he learned that the Spanish court had formally adopted a policy that sanctioned, at least indirectly, a Panton memorial of 1786 outlining the terms his company would require for remaining in the West Florida Indian trade. This concession laid to rest a threat Panton had made in 1787 to pull out of West Florida unless relieved of burdensome Spanish trade restrictions and import duties.⁶

In the 1790s, however, Panton's dominance of the southern Indian trade began to slip away. The talented Alexander McGillivray, whose sway over the anti-American Creek party was crucial to the interests of both Panton and Spain, died in Pensacola on February 17, 1793. His passing threw the leadership of

4. Leora M. Sutton, "Archaeological Investigations, Blocks Three and Eleven Old City Plat of Pensacola" (unpublished report to Board of County Commissioners, Escambia County, Florida, ca. 1976), 4.

5. Thomas D. Watson, "The Troubled Advance of Panton, Leslie and Company into Spanish West Florida," in *Eighteenth-Century Florida and the Revolutionary South*, ed. by Samuel Proctor (Gainesville, 1978), 79-86.

6. Thomas D. Watson, "Continuity in Commerce: Development of the Panton, Leslie and Company Trade Monopoly in West Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LIV (April 1976), 558-63.

the Creeks into almost total disarray at the very time that the United States government intensified its efforts to lure the southern Indians away from Spanish influence. Later in the year, President Washington proposed, with Panton, Leslie and Company clearly in mind, that Congress institute a non-profit government factory system for assuming the Indian trade. Thereafter Panton brooded over the prospect of having to compete against the resources of the United States.⁷ Congress eventually acted favorably on Washington's proposal, and the factory system was funded in 1795. The Creeks accepted the establishment of government factories on their land in the Treaty of Colerain, concluded in July 1796.⁸

During this very month, the terms of the Treaty of San Lorenzo setting the northern boundary of West Florida at thirty-one degrees north latitude came to Panton's attention. He protested mightily to Spanish authorities over his abandonment to the whims of the United States, his foremost adversary.⁹ For the remainder of his life he devoted his efforts variously to conciliating the United States, liquidating his company's considerable outstanding Indian debts, and pleading with Spain for compensation for actual and anticipated business losses.¹⁰

In January 1797, meanwhile, Panton was faced with the ultimate complication of his declining years: the outbreak of war between Britain and Spain. Out of concern for Indian reprisals against West Florida, Spain allowed Panton to remain and to struggle to hold on to whatever of the Indian trade he could. He did so by resorting to subterfuge on the high seas, by influencing British authorities to make special allowances for his commercial needs, and by sheer luck.¹¹ From these considerations it seems likely that construction on the Panton house could have begun no earlier than mid-1789 and no later than mid-1796.

7. Michael D. Green, *The Creeks: A Critical Bibliography* (Bloomington and London, 1979), 32-36; Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1790-1834* (paperback ed., Lincoln, 1970), 86; Thomas D. Watson, "Merchant-Adventurer in the Old Southwest: William Panton, the Spanish Years, 1783-1801" (Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1972), 245-49.

8. R. S. Cotterill, *The Southern Indians: The Story of the Civilized Tribes Before Removal* (Norman, 1954), 113-15.

9. Watson, "Merchant-Adventurer," 260-61.

10. *Ibid.*, 261-65.

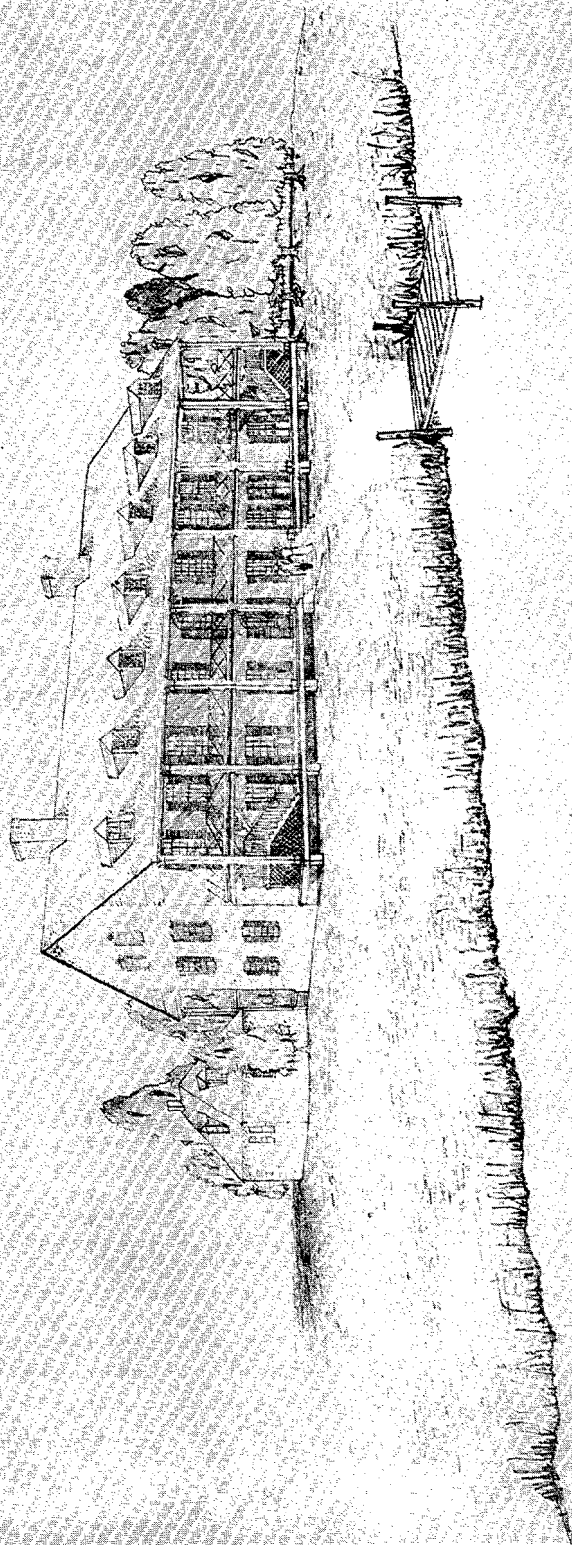
11. *Ibid.*, 266-312.



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View of the north and east sides of the old Pantan, Leslie and Company warehouse that was converted into a residence for John Innerarity in 1806.

The hipped roof building in the left foreground is the kitchen of the Pantan mansion (courtesy of the Pensacola Historical Society).



Weary from his many cares and burdens, and afflicted with dropsy, Panton died at sea on February 26, 1801. John Forbes, one of the partners in the business, assumed directorship over the Panton firm's West Florida interests.¹² Foremost among his immediate problems was finding means for replenishing the company's supply of gunpowder and musket balls, the *sine qua non* of the Indian trade, and items that British wartime restrictions had forbidden the company to acquire from English sources.¹³ Within a fortnight of Panton's death, Forbes petitioned Vicente Folch y Juan, governor of West Florida, to accept the Panton house and its adjacent kitchen as collateral against a loan of gunpowder and musket balls from Spanish government stores.¹⁴

Governor Folch initiated a formal inquiry to establish the legal ownership of the house. Three sworn witnesses, Martin de Madrid, José Hernández de Armas, and Louis Gagnet, testified that they had seen the house built and knew Panton to be the owner and proprietor. Folch then appointed three official appraisers, James Wilkins, Florencio Ximénez, and Nicolás López, to assess the value of the property. They submitted their report on March 14, 1801 (see appendix).¹⁵ The appraisers made no description of the overall physical appearance of the building. Instead they listed the types and quantities of the various components, such as masonry, carpentry, hardware, etc., that went into the construction of the house and kitchen. They placed the total value of the components at 14,704 pesos, 3 1/4 reales. An English translation of relevant excerpts from the appraisal appears below.¹⁶ These data, along with an archeological site survey of the Panton mansion conducted in 1975 by Leora M. Sutton of Pensacola, were indispensable to the preparation of this study.

12. John Forbes, a younger brother of Thomas Forbes, accompanied Panton on his voyage from Nassau to Pensacola in 1785. The younger Forbes became a junior partner in Panton, Leslie and Company in 1791. See Panton to Leslie, July 18, 1791, in Johnson v. Innerarity. In 1804, after the death of John Leslie, the original firm was succeeded by John Forbes and Company. See William S. Coker, "Entrepreneurs in British and Spanish Floridas, 1775-1821," reprinted in William S. Coker (ed.), *Historical Sketches of Panton, Leslie and Company* (Pensacola, 1976), 5.

13. Watson, "Merchant-Adventurer," 294-96.

14. Petition of John Forbes to Vicente Folch y Juan, March 12, 1801, Archivo General de las Indias, Papeles de Cuba, Legajo 58, Doc. F, Elizabeth Howard West Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

15. Ibid.

16. Sutton, "Archaeological Investigations." In 1975, Ms. Sutton, an authority

It has been stated that Panton's nephew, John Innerarity, married Marie Victoria Coulon de Villiers in 1806, and that afterwards "Panton's mansion at Pensacola became their home. . . . It was a massive brick house, three stories and a cellar, built on the English style with adaptations for a southern climate."¹⁷ The Sutton excavations, however, uncovered no evidence of a cellar. The shallow water table also precludes the use of cellars. It is more likely that some particular room on the ground floor was designated as and served the same purpose as a cellar. One contemporary account calls the Panton house "a three story brick mansion—the most imposing edifice in the area." Another confirms this general impression.¹⁸

Innerarity still occupied the house at the time of its fiery destruction in 1848. Adverse fresh winds, according to one account, drove the flames over three-quarters of a mile from their point of origin before they engulfed the mansion, leaving the occupant "the final but also the principal victim" of the conflagration.¹⁹ A son-in-law, Isaac Hulse, a United States Navy surgeon, supervised the conversion of a nearby company warehouse constructed at the same time as the Panton mansion into a residence for John Innerarity. Of the warehouse, Hulse wrote: "The walls are brick, three feet thick at the base, and three stories high. The new dwelling will have as many conveniences almost as he [Innerarity] enjoyed in the spacious dwelling that was destroyed. His actual loss by fire he estimates at over \$50,000."²⁰

The converted warehouse was destroyed by fire and storm in 1915. Photographs of this structure are extant and shed light on the general appearance of the original Panton house. Its description as an English-style structure suggests a gable-end building, perhaps not unlike the Johnson plantation, *Magnolia*, on the

on the history of Pensacola, organized and supervised an archeological survey of the old Panton-Forbes complex and adjacent sites of historical interest just before construction began on a judicial building and parking lot. The study was funded by a grant from the Escambia County Commissioners.

17. Greenslade, "John Innerarity," 92. Greenslade states that John Innerarity arrived in Pensacola from England in 1802 as an employee of the Panton firm. A brother, James, had preceded him to Pensacola by several years. See *ibid.*, 91. The Innerarity brothers later acquired an interest in John Forbes and Company. See Coker, "Entrepreneurs," 5.
18. Sutton, "Archaeological Investigations," 43.
19. Dubreil to Kendrain, September 28, 1848, Panton, Leslie papers.
20. Greenslade, "John Innerarity," 95.

west bank of the Mississippi River below New Orleans, which was built in the early 1800s and is now almost in ruins. The architect Benjamin Latrobe, in ascending the river in 1819, noted that Johnson's was the first sugar plantation on the large scale that he saw and described it as "a large house of two stories of brick, with a portico on each front."²¹ These two houses, Johnson's and the remodeled Panton warehouse, form the basis for the character of the conjectural restoration sketch presented herein.

The most important data used to determine the original size and shape of the Panton mansion are contained in the Sutton archeological report. The mansion's outer walls were seventeen inches thick with outer dimensions of 34' 4" x 102'. Three interior brick walls separated the four rooms of the lower story. From the data contained in the 1801 appraisal, it may be inferred that these partitions also extended into the upper stories. The ground excavations, however, reveal one discrepancy: Sutton discovered the foundation of only one double fireplace that served to heat the two easternmost rooms of the house, whereas the 1801 appraisal lists two double fireplaces. It is possible that the foundation of the westernmost fireplace was removed. The excavations also failed to reveal the foundations for the front and rear galleries whose existence is documented in the 1801 appraisal.

The appraisal also lists materials for fourteen dormer windows, which indicates that there were seven on the north slope of the roof and seven on the south. There were sixteen gallery columns totaling 304 feet, or nineteen feet in length for each column, two-stories high, on both the north and south galleries. Two hundred forty feet of Chinese balustrades are listed, probably similar to those described by C. C. Robin as seen on houses on Bayou St. John when he arrived in New Orleans in 1803.²² Such balustrades, as shown in the sketch, Charles Alexandre Lesueur made in the 1820s of the Albin Michel house on the

21. Samuel Wilson, Jr., ed., *Impressions Respecting New Orleans by Benjamin Henry Beneval Latrobe, Diary and Sketches, 1818-1820* (New York, 1951), 17.

22. C. C. Robin, *Voyages dans l'interieur de la Louisiane, de la Floride Occidentale, et dans les Isles de la Martinique et de Saint Dominique pendant Les Années 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805 et 1806*. 2 vols. (Paris, 1807), II, 63; Stuart O. Landry, Jr., ed. and trans., *Voyage to Louisiana by C. C. Robin, 1803-1805* (New Orleans, 1966), 30.

bayou, a cross pattern balustrade in the Chinese Chippendale taste.²³

Exterior stairways are listed and were probably located within the galleries as was the usual practice in southern houses of this period. The lattice work listed was possibly used for enclosing the space beneath the stairways. The balusters and railings in all likelihood were also used for the stairways and for surrounding the stairwells on the second floor level. The mill work listed includes doors, windows and shutters, baseboards, cornices, etc.

The building shown in the left foreground of figure 1 is identified by Sutton as the original kitchen of the Panton mansion. The 1801 appraisal seems to corroborate this position, although its hipped roof and small dormer windows are more French than English in character. The sketch included herein as figure 2 suggests the appearance of the Panton mansion, but it is only conjectural. Further research and analysis would be required to make a more authentic reconstruction of this important house.

Appendix, from AGI-PC legajo 58, document F

Appraisal which, by order of the Señor, Governor of this Plaza was made by the undersigned, of the dwelling house of Don Juan Forbes, in the presence of the Engineer Commander who also signed.

MASONRY

[pesos-reales]

For 447 Castilian varas of walls of two bricks and a half of thickness for the principal house, two divisions; in the lower story, they are of the same thickness and room partitions of 137 varas; those forming the rooms in the upper story are of a half brick in thickness.	1933 - 0
For 1167 varas of floors.	383-4
For two double chimneys and two from the second floor.	680-0
For two kitchen walls that contain 246 varas of	

23. Musée de l'Histoire Naturelle, Le Havre, France, Lesueur Collection.

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two bricks in thickness.	632 - 0
For a chimney in the same; two ovens and a cooking grille with ten grates.	300 - 0
For 80 varas of floors in the upper story of same.	40 - 0

CARPENTRY

For 3500 feet of boards in the floor of the first story.	420 - 0
For 3500 ditto of ditto in the second.	280 - 0
For 3500 feet of ceiling in the first floor.	525 - 0
For 3500 ditto of ditto in the second.	525 - 0
For 640 ditto frames of windows.	192 - 0
For 384 lights 12 inches by 16.	184 - 2 1/2
For 12 casement doors.	109 - 3 1/2
For 20 jalousie doors.	380 - 0
For 12 ditto for rooms.	120 - 7 1/2
For 4 double architraves.	30 - 5 1/2
For 14 ditto for doors to rooms.	95 - 3
For 22 ditto for windows.	126 - 6 1/2
For the forms of three principal mantelpieces.	180 - 0

* * * * *

For 14 door frames.	124 - 2 1/2
For 210 feet of base.	67 - 1 3/4
For 210 ditto of single moulding.	20 - 2
For 150 ditto of double cornice.	20 - 3
For 85 ditto of single cornice.	5 - 1 1/2
For 4 partition walls.	9 - 0
For 5 doors.	50 - 3 1/2
For 15 frames.	24 - 6
For 42 feet of single architrave.	20 - 1 1/4
For 14 garret dormer windows.	43 - 1 1/2
For 14 frames for ditto.	10 - 4
For 168 lights.	67 - 1 1/2
For 14 sides for the dormer windows.	43 - 1 1/2
For 489 feet of single mouldings.	62 - 3
For 7436 feet of roofing for the house.	223 - 0
For 672 ditto ditto for the dormer windows.	40 - 2 1/2
For 285 ditto of cornice of the roof.	68 - 3 1/4
For 20 outside architraves.	63 - 6 3/4

For 20 doors.	84 - 0
For 5 door frames.	69 - 0
For 5 doors for the storehouse (or wine cellar).	58 - 5
For 4 ditto in the partitions.	49 -
For 1 partition wall wainscot.	173 - 6 3/4
For 1 partition wall with posts.	173 - 6 3/4
For 130 feet of bases.	10 - 3 1/4
For 1056 superficial feet of the outside stairways.	506 - 7
For 108 feet railings.	51 - 6 3/4
For 96 ditto of posts for ditto.	14 - 3 1/4
For 420 ditto of small railing.	52 - 4
For 104 ditto of side mouldings.	15 - 4 3/4
For 240 ditto of sheathing under the stairway.	14 - 3 3/4
For 240 ditto Chinese railing.	115 - 1 1/2

* * * *

For 4 doors under the stairways.	14 - 3 1/4
For 74 feet of base.	14 - 6 1/2
For 120 feet of single mouldings.	15 - 0
For 244 feet 6 inch cornices.	137 - 1
For 168 ditto of gallery railings.	80 - 5
For 16 Gallery columns - 304 feet.	45 - 4 3/4
For 231 feet of lattice.	231 - 0
For 84 feet of mouldings for the capitals of the columns.	28 - 4
For 36 feet of ditto smaller moulding.	12 - 2
For 667 1/2 ditto of partition wall in the third story.	100 - 1
For the work in forming the two chimney fronts.	20 - 0
For 144 feet of ladder.	69 - 1

* * * *

The undersigned guarantee of having proceeded faithfully and legally in the evaluation we have made, following our understanding and knowledge, of the residence of John Forbes, and the property of Panton, Leslie and Company, in Pensacola on the 14th of March, 1801.

(s) James Wilkins

(s) Florencio Ximénez
(Rubricado)(s) Nicolás López
(Rubricado)