

1983

James Thompson, Pensacola's First Realtor

Robin F. A. Fabel

 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.

Recommended Citation

Fabel, Robin F. A. (1983) "James Thompson, Pensacola's First Realtor," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 62 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol62/iss1/6>

JAMES THOMPSON, PENSACOLA'S FIRST REALTOR

by ROBIN F. A. FABEL

THE accompanying document was published first in the *New York Journal*, November 5, 1767, and was reprinted without alteration half a dozen times. It appeared for the last time on March 24, 1768.¹ It is the first known private advertisement for real estate in the history of the British colony of West Florida. James Thompson, the man who submitted it, was not the first land speculator in the province, but, in his search for customers among the general public in other parts of America, his readiness to cultivate customers of limited means, and his care to advertise property as attractively as possible, his methods resemble those of a modern realtor.

Information on Thompson's early career is fragmentary. He was born in Ireland in 1728, emigrated to New York at an unknown date, and established himself as a merchant. In 1753, he married Catherine Walton.² During the Seven Years War Thompson supplied flaxseed to Charles McManus of Londonderry, drew bills on William Caldwell of the same Irish city, and imported wine from Messrs. Lemar and Hill of Madeira.³ In 1762 he infuriated the British commander in chief in North America by trading with the French enemy on St. Domingue.⁴ In 1764 he advertised that he had a cargo of indentured servants, both men and women, imported in the schooner *Expedition*, to dispose of. In the following year he showed a connection with West Florida when he advertised that the *Expedition* would be

Robin F. A. Fabel is associate professor of history at Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

1. The dates were November 5, 12, December 3, 10, 1767, and January 7, March 24, 1768.
2. Frederick A. Virkus, ed., *The Compendium of American Genealogy: First Families of America*, 7 vols. (Chicago, 1937), VI, 449.
3. Gerard G. Beekman to Alexander and White, September 12, 1757; Beekman to Moses Frank, June 26, 1758; Beekman to Lemar and Hill, January 16, 1759; Frank to James Beekman, July 13, 1757; in Philip L. White, ed., *The Beekman Mercantile Papers, 1746-1799*, 3 vols. (New York, 1956), I, 306, 328-29; II, 587.
4. Jeffrey Amherst to Cadwallader Colden, April 16, 1762, Great Britain, Public Record Office, C.O. 5/62:209.

sailing from New York for Pensacola and Mobile. The *Expedition*, which was captained by Joseph Smith, was probably owned by Thompson, and he probably went along on the voyage. The vessel did not leave New York until late October, and Thompson is known to have arrived in West Florida on November 22.⁵

He presented himself, surprisingly, in the capacity of indentured servant to one William Satterthwaite about whom nothing is known except that he owned a moderate amount of land and that he strongly resented the way in which Governor George Johnstone was administering West Florida.⁶ Even in a pioneer colony social distinctions were extremely important in the eighteenth century. Usually an indentured servant was in no position to acquire land for himself until his period of servitude had expired. Instead his master would include him on his own petitions for crown land as a member of his "family," and the servant would entitle him, as would a blood relation or a slave, to an extra fifty acres of land.⁷

Thompson, however, was no ordinary indentured servant. Initially he seems to have persuaded the provincial council whose responsibility, among others, was to consider applications for crown land, to doubt that he was a servant of any sort. On January 7, 1766, it granted him Pensacola town lot number 254 which is described in the accompanying document.⁸ It was on the eastern side of the town, was eighty feet by 200 feet deep, and faced Pensacola harbor. It backed on swamp. On February 25 the council granted him fifty acres to the northwest of the town on the condition that he was not Satterthwaite's servant. The suspicion implicit in this proviso proved to be well founded, and, as a result, Thompson was deprived of the tract on July 30. It was given instead to Arthur Gordon, one of the more influential

5. *New York Mercury*, October 15, 1764, September 23, October 21, 1765.

6. Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Mississippi Provincial Archives: English Dominion* (Nashville, 1911), 1, 306, 508, 509. Hereinafter cited as *MPAED*.

7. Great Britain, Public Record Office, CO. 5/634:451. For example, when Bernard Lintot applied for a family right grant of land on the Ticksaw River in West Florida, his "family" consisted of himself, his wife, his seven children, two indentured servants, and seven slaves. He received gratis 950 acres, 100 as head of a household, and fifty for each member of it.

8. Clinton H. Howard, *The British Development of West Florida, 1763-1796* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1947), 68.

lawyers in West Florida, who showed that Thompson had been included in the family of Satterthwaite in a grant request of February 11 and thus had used up his entitlement.

By then it scarcely mattered to Thompson because he had won the favor of the most important man in the colony, Governor Johnstone, who, on July 28, made him a member of the West Florida council, thus conferring on him the provincial equivalent of cabinet rank. On the very day of his appointment, he received a grant of land to the west of Pensacola, and on the 30th, the day when he lost his title to one piece of land, he received title to two others, the swampland flanking the capital to its east and west, in place of a Patrick Reilly who forfeited them because he had failed to do what all grantees of crown land agreed to do, develop his property.⁹ Full title deeds to these lands were not available until January 10, 1767, when it was discovered that, thanks to a clerk's incompetence, the original papers about them had been lost. On occasion, few individuals could insist more on punctilio than George Johnstone. He might well have insisted that Thompson go through the tedious and expensive process of applying for the lands all over again. Instead he and councillor Thompson withdrew from the meeting so that the rest of the council might decide, without undue influence, whether it would be acceptable to deliver the deeds to Thompson or not. They decided in his favor.

As the governor recalled it for the benefit of councillors not then present, Thompson had offered to take up neglected lots on behalf of numerous friends and kinsmen in New York and was prepared to post bond to ensure that they were built on within a year.¹⁰ Such a scheme was bound to interest Johnstone who customarily gave strong support to any measures which would swell immigration to his colony. That Thompson could post bond for his relatives indicates that he was prospering in Florida, as does the fact that in 1767 he paid the poll tax on four slaves.¹¹ If they were able-bodied males, the slaves alone would have been worth 800 Spanish milled dollars.

Thompson was involved in a number of complicated trading ventures. Some light is thrown on them by a surviving list of

9. *Ibid.*, 70, 76, 77.

10. C.O. 5/632:188.

11. C.O. 5/577:76.

transactions in which he engaged in 1766 with the Pensacola merchant, Nicholas Talbot, who traded with the Spanish province of Campeche in Mexico. On the debit side Thompson owed Talbot for a cargo of Campeche logwood, for goods, mostly textiles, sold by the Mobile firm of Clark, Pouset and Driscoll to Talbot but actually received by Thompson, and for cash paid by a Spanish customer to Thompson which was supposed to go to Talbot. The total debt was \$3,700. On the credit side, Talbot owed Thompson money for the use of the schooner *Expedition*, for delivering logwood, and for provisions and supplies used on the *Expedition's* trading voyage, which seems to have been partly for Talbot's benefit and partly for Thompson's. When credits and debits were offset, Thompson owed Talbot \$321.

Complicating the situation was Thompson's role as agent for the Philadelphia merchant William Richards who was owed money by Clark, Pousett and Driscoll. The Mobile partners tried to settle their debt with goods which, since Thompson himself was in a hurry to leave for New York, were passed on to his friend David Hodge to sell.¹² The payments involved concerned bills of exchange that could be cashed only in Britain, which led inevitably to long delays in settling accounts. Keeping careful track of them was necessary and difficult.

What makes it worthwhile to recall and disentangle these small transactions of long ago is the evidence that they provide for two things. The first is that the hoped-for trade with Spanish America that lured so many immigrants to Florida and of which little evidence has survived was not a complete chimera. The second is the extensive trading network of which West Florida was a part, involving New York, Philadelphia, Mexico, and London.

Thompson dealt in a variety of goods other than textiles and lumber. On March 23, 1767, just before leaving for New York, he assigned a stock of assorted items to the New Orleans resident, Patrick Morgan, of the celebrated partnership of Morgan and Mather, to sell at a commission rate of five per cent. Apart from small quantities of nails, tobacco, playing cards, and biscuit, the bulk of the items consisted of shingles, casks of liquor, and, above all, barrels of New York beer. Their total value was rather less

12. C.O. 5/613:204.

than \$1,000, no doubt the remnant of a much larger and more valuable stock.¹³

The last occasion on which Thompson attended a council meeting was March 9, 1767. Governor Johnstone had left West Florida for good on January 13.¹⁴ Before departure he had given Thompson a year's leave of absence from his councilar duties so that he could return to New York.¹⁵ It was while he was there that Thompson published the accompanying advertisement. Many of the lots described in it were not his own. It may be presumed that many grantees were early settlers who had changed their minds about living in Pensacola, knew full well that they would not themselves develop their properties and, rather than forfeit them, would prefer to rent them. Vagueness of description makes it difficult to ascribe the advertised lots to individuals with certainty. An exception is François Caminada, a French Protestant who was in Louisiana, where he had lived since 1748. Governor Johnstone persuaded him to migrate to Pensacola where he served on the council briefly in 1765 before deciding to transfer his business back to New Orleans.¹⁶ Potential renters were instructed in the newspaper advertisement to apply either to Thompson in New York or in Pensacola to David Hodge and George Raincock, whom he had provided, on March 24, with power to act for him.¹⁷

Both Hodge and Raincock were among Pensacola's solidier citizens. Hodge was a member of the provincial council, the owner of large acreage, and an enterprising merchant who traded with the Spanish colonies.¹⁸ Raincock came from Liverpool.¹⁹ In West Florida he was a partner with William Godley in trade. In July 1772, Raincock acquired a 1,000-acre plantation on the Amite River.²⁰ Later he became a justice of the peace.²¹ At the onset of

13. *Ibid.*, ff. 16-17.

14. Philadelphia *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 9, 1767.

15. Robert R. Rea and Milo B. Howard, Jr., *The Minutes, Journals, and Acts of the General Assembly of British West Florida* (University, Alabama, 1979), 74.

16. *MPAED*, I, 151, 255, 285; C.O. 5/632, Council Minutes for January 7 and February 28, 1765.

17. C.O. 5/613:18.

18. Rea and Howard, *The Minutes, Journals and Acts*, 95.

19. Montfort Browne to the Earl of Hillsborough, August 20, 1769, C.O. 5/586:309.

20. C.O. 5/591:153.

21. C.O. 5/630, Council Minutes for May 16, 1774.

the American Revolution he would resign his seat on the West Florida Council to return to England.²²

Thompson's advertisement is interesting as a guide to the state of development of Pensacola something short of four years after the first arrival of the British. He referred to a public market area, to swampland as having been entirely cleared, and to the successful cultivation and sale of a variety of garden fruits and vegetables. He mentioned ten streets named after contemporary British politicians and members of the royal family. At the same time Thompson was trying to attract customers, and undoubtedly, in seeking to portray a growing and thriving community, he allowed himself to exaggerate. Those streets that he called George, Charlotte, Prince's, Granby, Pitt, Mansfield, Cumberland, and Johnson, which correspond to modern Palafox, Alcaniz, Garden, Intendencia, Government, Zaragoza, Baylen, and Barcelona streets, existed with buildings on them, but Grafton and Conway streets, which he also mentioned on an equality with the others, were projected rather than actual. No map shows them as having buildings. They were intended to run parallel with Prince's Street at the north end of the town but probably comprised no more than surveyor's stakes in the sand. At the same time Pensacola undoubtedly had other streets which Thompson did not mention, but they were at the eastern end of the town where he had little property to rent. Pensacola probably, therefore, had a dozen or so recognizable and built-on streets, and it was reported in the spring of 1768 that nearly 200 houses had been erected in the town in the previous eighteen months. This was a very considerable improvement on the fort and scattering of huts which was Pensacola prior to 1763.

Thompson also exaggerated the prospects for market gardeners in Pensacola. The high prices he quoted for vegetables, poultry, and meat, which were meant to suggest prosperity to migrating New Yorkers, actually sprang from hardship and privation. The summer of the year in which he wrote was particularly arduous. For months there was a lack of provisions of every kind, and had it not been for the arrival of a schooner from Philadelphia on June 6, 1767, there would not even have been any flour.²³

22. C.O. 5/602:373. C.O. 5/631, Council Minutes for May 28, 1776.

23. *New York Journal*, July 16, 1767, April 9, 1768.

It is impossible to say how much success Thompson's advertisements enjoyed. The probability is little, although it is true that a surprisingly large number of New Yorkers were to be found among the inhabitants of British West Florida, and some may have been inspired to go there by the attractive description of Pensacola written by Thompson, although the careful newspaper reader could have found plenty to darken that glowing picture. Nevertheless the flaw in Thompson's scheme was that it depended for success on the continued and steady expansion of Pensacola's population. If that had occurred, since the land available for expansion inside the Indian boundary was limited, there might indeed have existed a great demand for rentable property. In fact, although the initial development of Pensacola was rapid, the pace thereafter slowed for three reasons.

One was that the Spanish trade, which was seen as Pensacola's main *raison d'être* and which was a prime motive for early immigration, never acquired the hoped-for dimensions, with the result that many merchants left Pensacola.²⁴ A second reason for slow population growth, of which Thompson must have been aware but about which he understandably wrote nothing, was that the mortality rate was high. The climate of West Florida was particularly devastating to immigrants from colder regions. In 1765, in a battalion of 500, ten to twelve soldiers a day were dying at Pensacola. Of six officers' wives who came with the battalion, five were soon dead, and the other seemed ill beyond recovery.²⁵ Because of sickness, nearby Mobile in 1766 was deserted by all except a dozen families and the garrison. A letter from Pensacola in August 1767, revealed a similar story: "It is very sickly here at present . . . many people have died this summer."²⁶ A third reason for population stagnation in Pensacola was that, in spite of Thompson's tributes, its inhabitants had become aware that the richest soil of West Florida lay in the western portion of the province. Those who wanted to prosper from farming saw the wisdom of migrating there. In either case, whether near Natchez or in Pensacola, the availability of land

24. This was made clear in a speech Governor Johnstone gave to the merchants of Pensacola. He urged them to delay departure until the legal aspects of trading with the Spanish were clarified. *Scots Magazine*, XXVII (July 1765), 385.

25. *Annapolis Maryland Gazette*, October 31, 1765.

26. *New York Journal*, December 11, 1766, December 3, 1767.

was such that it could be obtained free from the crown; there was no need to rent it.

On the expiration of his leave of absence Thompson returned to Florida. On November 28, 1768, with John Thompson, a kinsman, he successfully applied for 500 acres of land on the Escambia River near Pensacola, after which he vanished into obscurity as far as West Florida was concerned.²⁷ In 1773, when his daughter Polly married in New York, a local newspaper referred to her father as "formerly of this city." Perhaps he remained on in the colony he did so much to publicize.

27. *Ibid.*, March 25, 1773.

TO BE LET *New York Journal*, Nov. 5, 1767

On reasonable terms, and long leases will be given to those who intend valuable improvements, many very valuable and well situated lots, not already tenanted (several of them being on the next street to the harbour) near the center of the city of Pensacola, in West Florida, within the following bounds, viz.

Three hundred and forty feet on the east side of Cumberland Street, taking in the whole space between Pitt Street, and Mansfield Street, with the corners at each of those streets; eighty Feet on the north side of Mansfield Street, adjoining Cumberland Street; eighty feet on the south side of Pitt Street, adjoining Cumberland Street, including the corner lots; one hundred and sixty feet on the south side of Pitt Street, adjoining Cumberland Street; one hundred and seventy feet on the south side of Cumberland Street from the corner of Pitt Street, towards Mansfield Street; one hundred and sixty feet on the south side of Granby Street, one hundred and seventy feet deep, between Cumberland Street and Johnson Street; eighty feet on the South side of Princes and from the corner of Prince's Street, one hundred and seventy feet fronting the square lay'd out for a public market, eighty feet fronting the harbour, extending two hundred feet back to the east swamp and fresh water river; three hundred and fifteen feet on the south side of Grafton Street, by two hundred and eight feet deep, with three streets running through this space,

and adjoining a fresh water rivulet on the east side; one hundred and five feet front on the north side of Grafton Street, by two hundred and eight feet deep on the South side of Prince's Street, with a fresh water rivulet running through these lots also; one hundred and five feet front, by two hundred and eight feet deep on the south side of Grafton Street, near Charlotte Street; one hundred and five feet front, by two hundred and eight feet deep, on the north side of Conway Street.

ALSO, the east and west swamp, adjoining and encompassing about two thirds of the city of Pensacola, on the land side; each of them has a fresh water brook running through the center of them known by the names of the east and west brooks, they bound on the east and west harbours, and are esteemed the best adapted lands in the whole province for gardens: they are so level that water can be led from the brooks into trenches through every plat in the gardens; the timber, brush and under-wood is entirely cleared off them; the soil is black mould, and easily cultivated and in such esteem that the inhabitants carry the mould from these swamps, to improve their gardens in the town:— As there is little winter in that climate the gardens may be kept in continued culture the whole year— Arbours of vines would form a profitable shade from the summers over the garden plats — grapes — oranges — lemons — limes — pomgranates — citron — almonds — olives — figs — pistachioes — peaches — nectrins — plumbs — apples — lettices, radishes, mellons, cucumbers, cabage, turnips, potatoes of the Irish and Carolina kinds, and almost all other fruits and vegetables produced anywhere on the continent of America, or West-Indies, thrive extremely well at Pensacola, where they have the advantage of a good soil.

Likewise a tract of land about 300 yards from the town, on the bayside, fit for gardens.

There is also a very fine stream fit to erect saw-mills on, with three thousand acres of fine wood-land of cedar, live oak and pitch pine on the banks of the river, leading into the east bay (by which conveyance plenty of those timbers may always be had) about four miles from the town of Pensacola. It can be asserted that there are few places in the world, where gardeners could make a greater profit from their labour than at Pensacola, for on enquiry it will be found the following prices have generally been given for vegetables at that place, viz. For potatoes, before the

North American ships arrive with them – 9d per pound, after those from the shipping are sold, bad and good, as they come to hand, at one dollar the bushel; turnips at 4d. half penny per pound; a good cabbage sells for half a dollar; radishes a bitt a bunch, and all other vegetables in proportion; fat chicken and young ducks sell from 8 to 12 bitts a piece;– notwithstanding beef and plenty of venison is sold from 4d. half penny to a bitt per pound; plenty of good oysters for the gathering, and many kinds of very good fish, as cheap as at New York. So that at that place industrious, sober, and frugal people cannot fail of soon growing rich.– As there are no lands in or near Pensacola, but such as are private property.– Those who intend to go from these parts to settle at that place, will have great advantage in making their terms before they set out for any of the above premises, with JAMES THOMPSON, at New York, and those who are on the spot, can view the lots, and may apply to the Hon. David Hodge and George Raincock Esqrs. at Pensacola, who are empowered to rent them.