

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 73
Number 4 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Volume
73, Number 4*

Article 7

1994

The Florida Diaries of Daniel H. Wiggins, 1836-1841

David J. Coles



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

Coles, David J. (1994) "The Florida Diaries of Daniel H. Wiggins, 1836-1841," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 73: No. 4, Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol73/iss4/7>

THE FLORIDA DIARIES OF DANIEL H. WIGGINS, 1838-1841

by DAVID J. COLES

Since Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his seminal 1893 essay on the significance of the frontier in American history, scholars have delved into virtually every aspect of the western frontier experience. Unfortunately, historians have neglected many issues surrounding southern frontier life in the early nineteenth century. Studies of the Florida frontier during this period are particularly few in number.¹ Recently, the work of several historians has heightened our appreciation of the importance of the frontier as part of Florida's heritage. Other than several county and local histories, however, little new work has been written on the original north Florida panhandle frontier since the 1944 publication of Sidney Walter Martin's *Florida during the Territorial Days*.²

Beyond the question of general histories, few pioneer settler accounts of the early territorial frontier in north Florida have come to light. One recently discovered source does provide new details

David J. Coles is a doctoral candidate in history, Florida State University, and supervisor of reference, Florida State Archives. The author wishes to thank Canter Brown, Jr., for his assistance with this project.

1. Malcolm J. Rohrbough's *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York, 1978) provides an overview with some discussion of the Florida frontier, and Richard A. Bartlett's *The New Country: A Social History of the American Frontier* is an excellent study written by a Florida-based historian. Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis is outlined in detail in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920).
2. James M. Denham's "The Florida Cracker Before the Civil War as Seen Through Travelers' Accounts," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 72 (April 1994), 453-68; and idem, "A Rogue's Paradise: Violent Crime in Antebellum Florida" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1988) provide insight into the nature of Florida society during this period. Local and regional studies include Jerrell H. Shofner, *History of Jefferson County* (Tallahassee, 1976); idem, *Jackson County, Florida: A History* (Marianna, 1985); Miles Kenan Womack, Jr., *Gadsden: A Florida County in Word and Picture* (n.p., 1976); Bertram H. Groene, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee* (Tallahassee, 1971); and Clifton Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida, 1528-1865* (Tuscaloosa, 1989). Julia Floyd Smith's *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1860* (Gainesville, 1973) is an excellent study of the "peculiar institution's" development in Florida. Though more than half a century old, Sidney Walter Martin's *Florida during the Territorial Days* (Athens, 1944) remains the standard work on the period.

on this subject. Daniel H. Wiggins, a New Yorker turned Marylander, lived in Florida for at least three years during the territorial period. In 1989 the Florida State Archives obtained a series of his diaries covering the period from around 1810 through the early 1840s. Five of these journals, numbering approximately 500 pages of text, detail Wiggins's experiences during his Florida sojourn and provide a fresh perspective on life in the developing frontier society. This article contains a sampling from some of the more descriptive diary entries.³

Like many new immigrants to the territory, Daniel Wiggins looked to Florida as a place for rapid economic advancement. Although its white population remained small throughout the territory's early years, by the late 1830s a burgeoning plantation society had developed in certain areas. Tallahassee, chosen in 1823 as territorial capital, dominated the area known as Middle Florida. Wiggins moved into the Tallahassee area in the late 1830s. His diaries portray frontier life not through the eyes of a member of the planter elite but through the experiences of a working-class artisan with many contacts. Wiggins spent a significant amount of time in Florida, and he familiarized himself with its people and culture. His viewpoints, therefore, might be considered more measured and reliable than those of travelers simply visiting the region.⁴

Wiggins was born at Greenport, Long Island, on March 14, 1795. As a young man he relocated to Baltimore, Maryland, and later to Annapolis where he worked as a millwright and wheelwright. Wiggins married Jemina Cross in 1821, but she died three years later. In January 1826 he married Wilhelmina Welch. The couple had five children: Margaret Ann, John F., William P., Henrietta Low, and Mary Elizabeth.⁵ In 1838 Wiggins left his family and traveled to Middle Florida, apparently at the urging of Thomas

3. The Florida State Archives obtained the Daniel H. Wiggins Diaries, M89-32 (hereinafter, *Wiggins Diaries*) in 1989 from Mr. and Mrs. Ben Demby, Jr., of Miami, Florida, who are descendants of Wiggins. In the early 1900s the diaries were in the possession of Mrs. W. B. Demby, the granddaughter of Daniel Wiggins. The Miami *Daily News* published selected portions of the diaries in 1926, but the great bulk of the volumes has remained unpublished.

4. Martin, *Florida during the Territorial Days*, 97-197; Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth*, 9-27.

5. Undated clipping in *Wiggins Diaries*; Robert Harry McIntire, *Annapolis Maryland Families* (Baltimore, 1979), 762.

Randall, an Annapolis acquaintance. Randall was a prominent Floridian, serving as a superior court judge. He also owned two plantations in Jefferson County. Randall's wife, Laura Wirt, was the daughter of former United States Attorney General William Wirt, himself the absentee owner of a large Middle Florida plantation. Randall evidently convinced his friend Wiggins that in Florida he could find steady employment in his trade. Wiggins also hoped to market an improved cotton press for which he had developed plans.⁶

Wiggins's Florida adventure began on September 30, 1838, when, "after a week of toil and anxiety," he left Annapolis for Baltimore. Upon leaving, he admitted to his diary that he felt "a little low on account of leaving my family— but I pray and trust the Lord will protect and comfort them."⁷ Wiggins, a Methodist, held devoutly religious beliefs, and his diaries are filled with biblical references and comments on religious activities. While at Baltimore he completed final preparations for the long journey. He loaded his tools aboard the schooner *Joseph Harker*, which was bound for Tallahassee's port town at St. Marks. Wiggins left Baltimore for Savannah, Georgia, on October 5 aboard another ship, the *Duclas*, which he described as a "very fine looking vesel [and] perfectly new."⁸ His companions included nineteen cabin passengers, three steerage passengers, one dozen slaves being sent to Florida owners, and a ten-man crew. Several horses, cows, and calves accompanied the human cargo. As the vessel passed Annapolis on October 5, Wiggins recorded: "So fare ye well my adopted city may the Lord preserve me to return to the embraces of my family in due time and may the Lord keep them in health and peace."

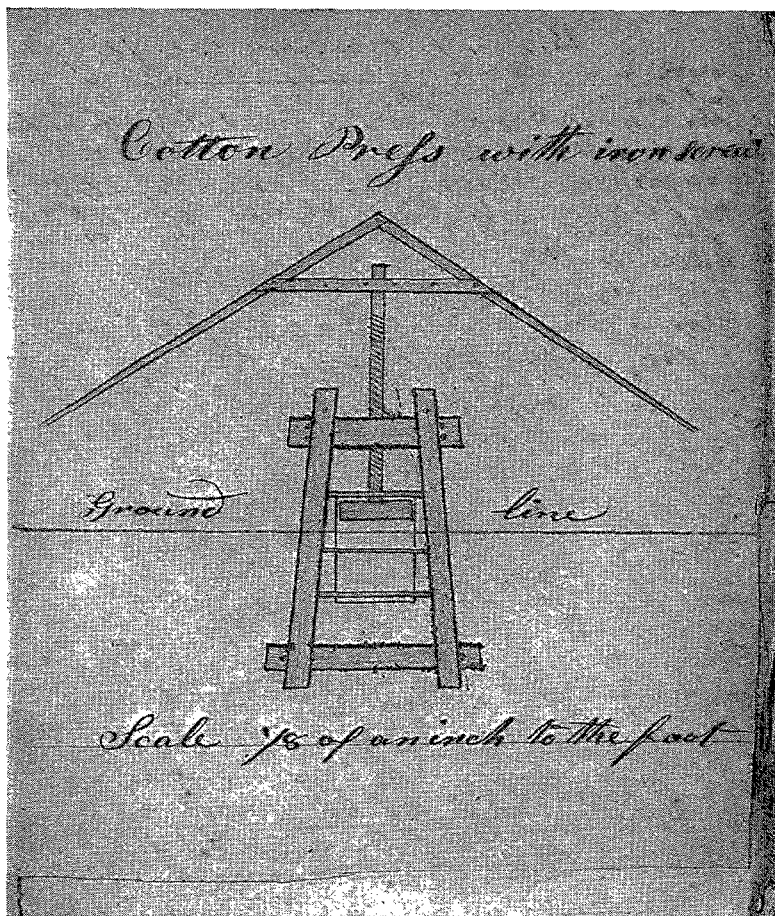
The ten-day voyage proceeded routinely. What Wiggins called the crew's addiction "to profane swaring" caused one problem. "I spoke to them about it," he commented, "and they acknowledged that it was wrong."⁹ Wiggins criticized other worldly activities: "Some of the passengers will play cards— and appear to think it is

6. *Maryland Biographical Cyclopedia of Representative Men of Maryland and the District of Columbia* (Baltimore, 1879), 531; Randall biographical material in collection of the Florida Supreme Court Historical Society, Tallahassee.

7. Wiggins Diaries, September 30, 1838.

8. *Ibid.*, October 2, 1838.

9. *Ibid.*, October 6, 1838.



Daniel Wiggins's design for a cotton press. Illustration reproduced from Daniel H. Wiggins Diaries, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

no harm. I am satisfied it would be better if they would play less and pray more."¹⁰ Many of the passengers, including Wiggins, suffered mild cases of seasickness when the ship encountered heavy weather off the coast of North Carolina. While sailing near the South Caro-

10. Ibid., October 12, 1838

lina coast, he confided that he was not far from the point where his father had drowned in a storm some thirty-six years earlier. With little to do aboard ship, Wiggins experienced a bout of depression. "I have felt very sad and melancolly," he explained, "partly on account of my family. While I was with them I did not know how much I loved them but being absent I feel more sensibly for them. I trust the Lord will ever protect them."¹¹

The *Duclas* passed over the Savannah bar on Sunday, October 14. "How glad I shall be to get on terriferma again," Wiggins commented upon sighting land. "I intend never again to make another sea voyage if I can help it."¹² Reaching Savannah the next day, he found himself agreeably surprised with the town: "[I am] much pleased with its apearance so far as I have seen[,] [with] streets broad and straight and crossing each other at right angles and shaded on each side with wide spreading trees— which gives it a cool and pleasant appearance. I think it a place of much business."¹³ More ominously, he added: "Soldiers are going from here to the Florida War— it is reported that the indians have come over into Georgia— may the Lord preserve us from our enemies."¹⁴

Wiggins soon left Savannah for the overland journey to Middle Florida. He brought with him twelve slaves to be delivered to territorial owners, seven of which belonged to his friend Judge Randall: "I am very buisey in preparing to Start on our journey. About 4 oclock we take up our line of march for Florida, our company consist[s] of 4 men 1 boy & 7 women— their names 3 men belonging to Mr. Willis [?]- John Simon & Daniel 1 woman belong to Mr. Willis— name Sally and child 6 women and 1 boy belonging to Judge Randal[,] Willy- Matilda- Sophia- Mary- Hester- and Martha & Frederick a boy- and a man John belong[ing] to a woman in Savannah. We have a horse and dray- and a horse and carry all- we go a bout 5 miles and stop under an oak tree where we made a fire and cooked and eat our supper and retire to rest. It has been a very pleasant day[.] I feel in good spirits I pray the Lord to protect us and give us a prosperous journey."¹⁵

11. *Ibid.*, October 13, 1838.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, October 15, 1838.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, October 16, 1838

The party averaged twenty to twenty-five miles per day, passing mostly through a region Wiggins described as “thinly settled and very little improved with the exceptions of a few plantations.”¹⁶ He found the land “very level— covered with pine trees averaging from ten to thirty feet . . . and without underwood. The whole expanse is covered with grass.”¹⁷ The trip’s monotony affected the temperament of his charges, and on October 19 Wiggins revealed that the slaves were “very much disposed to be quarrelsome with one or two exceptions [and] I have [had] to threaten to whip them.”

Nevertheless the party continued on and reached Monticello, Florida, on October 26, 1838. About noon the following day Wiggins arrived at Belmont, Randall’s plantation home south of Monticello. “I find it a very pleasant place pretty well improved,” he noted. “I am now at my Journey’s end for the present— I have been traveling 10 days in succession— and the charge of 12 coloured people on my mind— I some times had to interfere to keep them from coming to blows. Some of them are very wicked and most of them quarelsome. I now feel quite relieved but need rest as I have not slept soundly for some weeks past. I expect to stay at Judge Randalls for several days— Judge Randall leaves home this evening to attend his courts— I feel quite at home.”¹⁸

Wiggins remained with Randall for several months, then intermittently over the next three years. He worked on his friend’s plantation at various odd jobs, including carpentry and machinist work. Particularly interested in developing a more-practical cotton press and cotton gin, Wiggins devoted much time to experimentation in this area, including the building of a working model. When not at Randall’s, Wiggins traveled throughout Jefferson, Leon, and Gadsden counties, working as a wheelwright or millwright and attempting to interest often-skeptical planters in his cotton press designs.¹⁹

While in Florida, Wiggins detailed his perceptions and adventures through regular diary entries. He commented on the people, climate, and terrain of the territory and the prospects the region held for industrious men like himself. “There is a great scarcity of mills here,” he noted for example. “Water courses are apt to get dry

16. *Ibid.*, October 17, 1838.

17. *Ibid.*, October 19, 1838.

18. *Ibid.*, October 27, 1838.

19. *Ibid.*

in the summer and fall— I think a . . . mill might do well.” He believed Florida to be a place of great opportunity for men with mechanical ability: “I think that an industrious man would make about 10 dollars per day at such work— I intend to put up a press upon my own plan which I think will be much better than those now used— if I have my health I calculate making my fortune in a little time.”²⁰

Wiggins described Thomas Randall’s plantation as “about 1500 acres of land in one body about 300 under cultivation— and clearing more every year— makes from 100 to 150 bales of cotton worth from 4000 to 6000 dollars— it is preferred in clearing land to cut and burn the brush and deden the large trees.” He added, “It is said that leaving the large trees standing prevents the sun from burning the vegetation.”²¹ The 1850 census reveals that Randall’s two plantations worked 65 slaves on 4,400 acres of land (750 improved), which produced 173 bales of cotton. Even these impressive statistics did not place Randall among the absolute elite of Middle Florida planters.²²

Although cotton served as the primary cash crop, Wiggins found that “almost every thing grows abundantly in Florida except wheat— corn is one dollar per bu. sweet potatoes 50 cents, beaf about 5 dollars per hun. flour about 15 dollars per bar.” The costs of living accordingly were low. “Most of provisions [are] as cheep as in the north and labour about twice as hight [with] plenty of good land at 1,25 per acre [and] timber standing for little or nothing— horses are high[,] mules are mostly used for plantation work— oxen are also used— Judge Randall milked this summer— 22 cows— sheep do well [and] goats and hogs are raised in abundance without feeding.”²³ The visitor found that garden vegetables, sugar cane, peaches, oranges, and figs also grew well, as did various types of timber.

Randall’s plantation consisted of mostly fertile soil, but Wiggins noted the “great veriety of soil in florida from the best to the poorest.” He further commented: “Generally where the best soil is

20. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1839.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh United States Census, 1850*. Jefferson County, Florida (slave and agricultural schedules); Paisley, *Red Hills of Florida*, 143, 224.

23. Wiggins Diaries, November 5, 1838.

the climate is the most unhealthy. Elevated ground and moderately good soil is considered the most healthy." He described Randall's soil as "mostly a mixture of red clay and sand— the low ground are of a darker colour and much richer— but the high lands are thought to be more healthy so it is hard to find a place where all advantages concentrate." Yet, he concluded, "With industry and care and the blessing of the Lord a man may easily procure all necessary comforts of life in this country."²⁴

Despite the economic opportunities that he found in Florida, several aspects of life in the territory troubled Wiggins. The Second Seminole War, which had begun in 1835, still raged three years later. While the Seminoles, Creeks, Mikasukis, and their black allies slowly were being pushed southward down the peninsula, attacks on isolated farms and plantations in Middle Florida still were fairly commonplace.²⁵ "I am now on the extreme frontier— not a settlement between us and the hostile indian," Wiggins reported on October 28, 1838, "but we have a few sol[d]ier[s] between us. One of them dines with us today, he is directly from camp [and] said the indiens have not been seen for sometime past [and he] thinks the war will soon be closed." Not convinced that the danger had passed, Wiggins admitted shortly thereafter: "I some times have apprehension of danger from the hostile Indians they have from time to time committed with in a few miles of this place [the] most shocking cruelties upon individual families— murdering in the most barbarous manner men, women, and children."²⁶

Predictions of a quick end to the Seminole war proved incorrect, and in late 1838 and early 1839 word spread throughout Middle Florida that Indians were in the area. Strange fires seen in the evening only added to the suspicions and fear. "There is a report to day of the indians having been seen in this neighbourhood a day or two past," Wiggins confided on November 14. "We feel some apprehension of danger here— we go armed both night and day."²⁷ Sev-

24. *Ibid.*, November 5, 12, 1838.

25. John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842*, rev. ed. (Gainesville, 1985), especially 245-327. In the present issue of the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Canter Brown, Jr., examines the background causes for the Middle Florida Indian raids. See "The Florida Crisis of 1826-1827 and the Second Seminole War."

26. Wiggins Diaries, November 5, 1838.

27. *Ibid.*, November 12, 1838.

eral weeks later he recorded: "Judge Randall continues at home and has had his house barricaded again to guard against the Indians— it is reported that they are still disposed to remain hostile."²⁸ Occasional patrols by United States troops partially alleviated the settlers' fears. "A detachment of soldiers stopt here for the night," Wiggins wrote on November 5, 1838, "they are on their way from St Marks to Dedmans bay. They number about 20 under command of Lieutenant Todd— I talked with some of them. They say they have seen stiff times for 18 months past in persuing the indians."

Wiggins's description of a February 1839 Seminole attack on a Jefferson County farm constitutes one of the most graphic entries in his diaries: "After breakfast I went with most of Mr. Raney's family to the Freemans and there we beheld a melonally and shocking sight. A mother and her suckling child lay a corps on the same board— the woman is Mrs. Swan— daughter of Mr Freeman— they were killed yesterday by a hoard of blood thirsty savages— she was shot in tow places and stabed and tomahawked— and her throat slightly cut besides her arms much brused and pinched; and the poor harmless child brused all over the face and tomahawked in three places on the head— Mr. Swan the husband of this woman was with them and has not as yet been found. One of the wagoners has been brought [in] dead, and there is one still missing— some people had a fight with the Indians near Tallahassee and killed one or two and one white man was killed— about 100 soldiers are just arriving from Welane. They intend to scout the country. The people are geting much alarmed none feels safe either at home or abroad. We carry our guns with us wherever we go— I think I shall keep close to quarters for a while than I have for some time past."²⁹

The next day searchers found Mr. Swan's body, along with the wagoner, who was "dreadfully" wounded but alive. According to the wagoner, he and Swan had been away from the house when the ini-

28. *Ibid.*, December 9, 1838.

29. *Ibid.*, February 20, 1839. Other attacks took place in the same area and time. See Tallahassee *Floridian*, February 16, 1839; St Augustine *News*, March 2, 1839; and St. Augustine *Florida Herald and Southern Democrat*, February 28, 1839. The Mr. Raney mentioned by Wiggins was the overseer of Thomas Randall's plantation.

tial attack began. The pair ran into the woods to hide, but after “hearing the screams of his wife and child [Swan] turned to go to them when the indians took after him overtook and kile hime.” The wagoner secreted himself in a swamp but “was within hearing of the whole of this awful transaction and expected every moment those blood thirsty wretches would be upon him.”³⁰

Although such attacks occurred rarely in Middle Florida, they remained a threat until the Second Seminole War ended in 1842, and travelers had to be constantly on alert. This concerned Wiggins, as he often journeyed from one plantation to another to ply his trade. After the Freeman attack, he noted that he would stay closer to Belmont. In response to a second attack he slept with five loaded guns in his room. Other Floridians organized militia companies to protect themselves. “The people are not satisfied with the regulars,” Wiggins revealed, “[and] think they are too dilatory and do not feel a sufficient interest in the welfare of the country.”³¹ To increase protection, planters like Randall transformed their homes into fortresses: “The Judge has a new fort erected round his house— much better than any he has yet had . . . the fort encloses the mansion house [and] the overseers house . . . it incloses some thing like half an acre of groun[d]. At one corner is a block house.”³² By early 1841, fortunately, it appeared to Wiggins that the worst of the Indian attacks had subsided. “We hear that the indians are coming in,” he reported optimistically. “There is now a good prospect of the war coming to a close— when peace shall be established it is thought that Florida will be improved very rapidly.”³³

Although Indian attacks remained the most obvious threat to life on the frontier, other aspects of territorial society angered Wiggins. “[I] feel the want of religious society,” he related. “No meeting within reach but I have free access to a great verietiy of books.”³⁴ He later added: “There is a want of schools and religious institutions— which no doubt would soon be established if indian hostili-

30. Wiggins Diaries, February 21, 1839.

31. *Ibid.*, February 26, 1839.

32. *Ibid.*, December 17, 1840.

33. *Ibid.*, January 22, 1841.

34. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1838.

ties were brought to an end— the inhabitants are mostly emigrants and tolerably well enlightened and would willingly support institutions of learning and religion— may the Lord hasten the day when war shall cease in this otherwise favored land.”³⁵

In addition to the lack of religious and educational institutions, a popular Florida sport angered Wiggins. Gambling was commonplace throughout the territory, and the religious Wiggins commented extensively about the activity in his diary. He saved his most venomous words for those individuals who gambled on Sunday: “I am now more than ever astonished at the wickedness of the wicked— I have always thought that gaming was wicked on any day— but now within my hearing on the evening of this sacred day, men who would be gentlemen are at their gaims— they seem to be absorbed as tho engaged in an enterprise of the utmost importance O the bewitching influence of gambling money, rest, peace, body & soul time and eternity are all sacrificed to this hideous demon— O! virtue how amiable But sin how detestable!”³⁶

The sin of alcoholism also met Wiggins’s wrath. On February 4, 1840, he recorded his observations of a supper given by several planters for their slaves. His comments illustrate some prevailing racial attitudes of the day: “[The slaves] had plenty to eat and a great deal too much to drink. They danced, quareled and fought alternately throughout the night without regard to the sabbath. Both men and women fought like savages fine comment on whiskey— how true it is that the devil often runs into the man through the foul stream of alcohol— yet unaccountably strange [how] men will still countenance the use of it— I feel more and more established in my resolutions to maintain the principles of total abstinence— it requires but little knowledge of the world to know that the use of ardent spirits is a great curse it tends to povity and disgrace destroys health and intelect is a sworn enemy to religion and social happiness it begers children and often turns them into the streets clothed in rags and leaves them to grow up in ignorance and in vice that often leads to the prison and the gallows— it breaks

35. *Ibid.*, November 12, 1838.

36. *Ibid.*, August 16, 1840.

more than the widowed heart and leads to a premature grave often unmourned and unemented and last but not least [it] peoples hell with [its] victims— now who would countenance much less be a companion of such a monster— A drunkard stop and think before you fa[r]ther go.”

Interspersed throughout his diaries are revealing comments made on race relations in Florida. Although he held paternalistic and predominantly negative attitudes towards the slaves in which he came into contact, Wiggins did show an interest in their religious education. In early 1839 he attended a church meeting in which a black performed part of the service, and he also organized services for area blacks. “The soul of the slave is of as much value as the master,” he wrote, “yet [how] neglected. Too generally they are looked upon as mere beasts of burden— it appears to me that slavery and tyranny are almost inseperable and ignorance is the father of them both.”³⁷

Most of Wiggins’s observations, however, were highly critical of the behavior of slaves. While staying at Judge Randall’s, Wiggins observed that “tow of [the] negroes have had a fight— a slave will not do without a master. What a wreched creature is man when unrestrained by divine grace and led captive by the will of the Devil.”³⁸ He added the following month: “The negroes were fidling and dancing most of last night, wretched disipline with respect to morality— masters and overseers appear to have but little concern for the interest of their own souls, and less for the slave.”³⁹ But most revealing is Wiggins’s description of a slave beating in January 1841: “Last night after 12 oclock I woke up and heard the negroes dancing (as is often the case till nearly day on Sunday morn). I fell asleep again and after a while was woke by the cry of a man as tho in great destress— at firs[t] I thought it was some one in liquor . . . [but then] I heard blows which I took to be the sound of an ax— after a while the nois seaced for a moment— and then commenced a gain. I then discovered the blows to be the sound of a whip and the crying of a man occasioned by the whip. It appears that two strange negroes had come on this place and one without a pass and the

37. *Ibid.*, June 30, 1839.

38. *Ibid.*, December 28, 1839.

39. *Ibid.*, January 20, 1840.

overseer was informed of it and caught them and he and his leader whipt one pretty severly— no doubt justly under ixesting circumstances. They who are bound must obey.⁴⁰

On a separate occasion the actions of white intruders upon the slave quarters aroused Wiggins's attentions: "We were much disturbed through the latter part of last night by the frolicing of negroes and some 5 or 6 profligate soldiers at one of the negroes quarters. They have been ordered heretofore to desist from such conduct but it seems they are disposed to serve the devil . . . they seem to get worse and worse. Mr. Raney sais he is determined to break it up or quit the place. I hope he will succede for I think [it] is awful wickedness as well as disgracefull and dangerous to society— destroy[s] the obligations of morality and how long would it be before sivil society would sink into the grocest barbarism."⁴¹

Although Wiggins stayed at Belmont for much of the time he lived in Florida, he made plans to build, with the help of Randall and a friend, a sawmill at Richmond, a small settlement on the headwaters of the St. Marks River east of Tallahassee. Randall and a Colonel Braden were to purchase the land, while Wiggins would operate the mill and receive an equal share of the profits.⁴² In early February 1839 Wiggins journeyed on horseback from Belmont to Tallahassee, with a stop at Richmond en route. He described the trip and his impressions of both locations: "After breakfast, I set out on Judge's horse for Tallahassee via richmond. Miss my way a little in going to Richmond I past a number of houses and farms that has long been abandoned for fear of the indians. I saw the remains of some which they had burnt. After riding nine or ten miles I came to Richmond— it consists of one open shed[,] a pile of shingles[,] one mill stone [,] and at the landing 2 or 3 old boats. I rode up and

40. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1841.

41. *Ibid.*, April 15, 1840.

42. Wiggins may be referring to Joseph Braden or his brother Hector W. Braden. Middle Florida planters until the early 1840s, they moved to the Manatee River to develop sugar plantations. Janet Snyder Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay, 1528-1885* (Tulsa, 1983), 132, 135, 151-62, 155-57, 163-64, 186-87, 203-05, 224-27; Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth*, 130-132; Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida*, 88.

down for some distance on the east side and then rode over to the west side and after viewing the place for a while I struck on a tolerable plain path for Tallahassee. I rode a good many miles without seeing any inhabitants after which I came into a country where sivilized people live. A little before I got to the Augustine road I passed by a large and elegant house that belongs to Mr Ben [S]hears heirs very rich people. It is the best dwelling house I have seen in florida— the body of the house [is] brick and each side and the whole length of the house is a porch or piazza supported by long brick columns.⁴³ After going a little further I came to Mr Gambriels steam saw mill.⁴⁴ I examined it— wants more power— I then rode about 3 miles further which brought me to Tallahassee. I rode through the principle streets in order to see the place and then stopped at the city hotel kept by Brown.⁴⁵ They charge for man and horse 5 dollars per day and but common living— I suppose there were 100 boarders.⁴⁶

Wiggins remained hopeful that the Richmond enterprise would prove his great opportunity in Florida. "If I have my health I calculate making my fortune in a little time," he wrote. "I hope I shall have grace and wisdom to make a right use of it."⁴⁷ Meeting in Tallahassee with Randall and Braden, the latter of whom he called "a rich man and very much of a gentleman," Wiggins's future appeared even brighter. He returned to Belmont to begin preparations for what he called "the Richmond company."⁴⁸ Sadly, the plans never materialized. Continued Indian attacks made Randall

43. Wiggins was describing Verdura, built during the early 1830s as the plantation home of Benjamin C. Chaires. At the time of his death in 1838, Chaires owned nearly 10,000 acres of land and eighty slaves. See Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth*, 125-27, 135-36; Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida*, 89-90.

44. This is probably either Robert Gamble, the son of John Gratton Gamble, or his cousin Robert H. Gamble. They operated plantations in Middle Florida before moving to the Manatee River. See Janet Snyder Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness*, 152-53; Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida*, 142-44.

45. Thomas Brown moved to Florida in 1828 where he established a sugarcane plantation in Leon County, which he lost after a freeze. He then operated the Planters and City hotels in Tallahassee. The Virginia native became active in politics, holding positions in the legislative council, the 1838-1839 Constitutional Convention, and the state house of representatives. From 1849 to 1853 he served as governor. Paisley, *The Red Hills of Florida*, 89, 184-85; Groene, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee*, 29, 42, 44, 94, 112, 151-55; Allen Morris, comp., *The Florida Handbook, 1993-1994* (Tallahassee, 1993), 320.

46. Wiggins Diaries, February 5, 1839.

47. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1839.

48. *Ibid.*, February 6, 11, 1839.

and Braden concerned for their investment. "Judge Randall . . . sais we shall postpone our works at Richmond for the present on account of the unsettled times," a dejected Wiggins wrote on March 10, 1839, "but thinks to commence some time this year— he sais I can continue working at his place at wheelwrighting and also putting up my cotton press."⁴⁹ In addition to Indian threats, the national economic depression resulting from the Panic of 1837 already had begun to damage Florida settlers' often fragile prospects. Under the circumstances, Wiggins thereafter employed himself at odd jobs for Randall and other planters, while trying to market his cotton press.⁵⁰

In late 1840 Wiggins considered a move to Quincy, the Gadsden County seat located twenty miles west of Tallahassee. An acquaintance had given Wiggins "a very favourable account [of the town] and I intend to visit it an judge for myself— I think strongly of locating my family there."⁵¹ He traveled there in December 1840 and obtained a bond to purchase a lot along with lumber to build a house for his family and structures for his business enterprises. By early February 1841 he had begun construction, borrowing a wagon from Judge Randall to haul his few belongings from Belmont. Living initially in a neighbor's corn shed, Wiggins soon erected a cabin. He proclaimed himself "quite comfortable," but lonely for his family: "I sometimes have meloncolly feelings on account of my continued absence from my family but then I take courage and hope for better days."⁵²

Quincy impressed Wiggins, as did the surrounding countryside, and he left a detailed description of his impressions: "Between Tallahassee and Quincy there are several streams of water and one considerable river— the Ocklockny. It is crossed on a bridge at this place the banks are from 20 to 30 feet high the stream is 50 yard wide and has a very slow current. Both above and below the bridge

49. Wiggins still held out hope for the Richmond enterprise. On January 12, 1840, he wrote that Randall "assures me that I may depend on the situation at Richmond as soon as the war closes."

50. Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., *Richard Keith Call, Southern Unionist* (Gainesville, 1961), 108-34; Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth*, 132-33, 167; J. E. Dovell, *History of Banking in Florida, 1828-1954* (Orlando, 1955), 23-40; Martin, *Florida during the Territorial Days*, 124-64.

51. Wiggins Diaries, December 17, 1840.

52. *Ibid.*, March 28, 1841.

the trees and bushes hang many feet over the water and thickly hanging with moss— this river heads in the state of Georgia better than 100 miles from its mouth which is 30 miles below the bridge and near the town of St Marks— it is navigable by steemboats to the bridge. The bridge is 8 or ten miles from Tallehassee— farther on we cross 2 or 3 other bridges of less not[e]— the bridges are all narrow and mostly without side railing which (according to my opinion) makes the crossing of them some what dangerous— I invariably walk and lead my horse.⁵³

Of the community where he was about to make his home, Wiggins explained: “The town of Quincy is almost surrounded by small streams and springs of good water— 4 or 5 grist and saw mills are in operation within about six miles— lumber is now 10 dollars per thousand— there is an abundance of good timber (of almost all kinds) in the neighbourhood— I have the offer of as much as I shall want without cost. The town is butifully situated on a plain— most of the streets crossing each other at right angles runing with the cardinal points— the great stage road from St Augustine to New Orleans passes through the town— the town has 3 large and hansome churches (one for the Episcopalians, one for the Presbyteriens, and one for the Methodist)— There are 2 academies— 2 or 3 taverns a number of stores, but no grogshops which the people will not allow which speaks much for their morality— it is reported to be a very healthy place. Many strangers come here in the summer for their health— a good brick yard is much needed— also the making of lime would be very profitable— I understand there is lime stone in the neighbourhood.”⁵⁴

For reasons unexplained in his diary, Wiggins’s family never joined him in Florida. Although he enjoyed Quincy, particularly because of the increased opportunity for religious activities in the town, he again decided to move. By May 1841 Wiggins had made plans to build another cotton press and to establish himself at Port Leon, a burgeoning new cotton shipping town on the St. Marks River south of Tallahassee.⁵⁵ “I have toiled hard and long,” he wrote, “and do really think that I shall realize some of my anticipations.”⁵⁶ On May 14 he sent his cotton press plans to the United

53. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1841.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Groene, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee*, 84-85, 91.

56. Wiggins Diaries, May 9, 1841.

States Patent Office. A few days later he commented: "I hear that the prospect for cotton is good— I have positively engaged to build a press for Messrs Mose and Formon. I am excited to put up a compress at Port Leon— I intend to go to Tallahassee this week to see about it— I have a letter (written by Judge White⁵⁷) to Governor Call.⁵⁸ The people here think well of my plan. One gentleman, a wealthy planter and lawyer Col. Dupont,⁵⁹ pronounced it to be perfection itself— I still hope to soon realize a reward for all my labour and privation."⁶⁰

Despite his continued optimism, Wiggins had little to show for the nearly three years he had spent in Florida. In late May he left Quincy for Tallahassee, from whence he intended to travel to Port Leon. His experiences suggest the difficulties involved in territorial travel even in the best of circumstances: "I set out on a mule for Tallahassee. I had a bundle of modles & c [and] after traveling a mile or two I overtook Mr Bettes— [and] I went on in company with him, without any difficulty until we got to little river bridge and just before I got over my mule began to rare jump kick and pitch and off I went— but it did not hurt me. Mr Bettes helpt me cetch him and I mounted again but had not rode more then two miles when the devil got in him again and off I came and lit upon my shoulder. I got up immedeatly but found I was badly hurt. I caught him but rode no more. I led him about two miles and stoped for the night at the plantation of Forman and Muse— managed by Mr Cain."⁶¹ The next day, with "my shoulder hurt[ing] me some," Wiggins walked the rest of the way to Tallahassee. Upon

57. A North Carolina-born physician and Methodist minister, Dr. David L. White moved to Gadsden County in 1822 and helped lay out the town of Quincy three years later. He also served as a justice of the peace and judge. Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, 2 vols. (Atlanta, 1902), I, 722-24; Womack, *Gadsden*, 14-18, 23, 46-47, 154.

58. Richard Keith Call served as a member of the legislative council, as Florida delegate to the United States Congress, and as the third and fifth territorial governor of Florida. See Doherty, *Richard Keith Call*.

59. Charles Henry DuPont came to Gadsden County in 1827. He served in the legislative council during much of the 1830s and early 1840s and sat as a member of the Supreme Court of Florida from 1854 to 1868. Womack, *Gadsden*, 25, 30, 39-40, 63, 78, Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida*, II, 86-89; 16 *Florida Reports*, v-xiii; *The People of Lawmaking in Florida, 1822-1991* (Tallahassee, 1991), 29.

60. Wiggins Diaries, May 23, 1841.

61. *Ibid.*, May 31, 1841.

reaching the capital he spent 6 1/4 cents for a “card of cake” for his supper and spent the night in “an irish boarding house pay[ing] 50 cts per meal and 25 cts per lodging pretty rough place.” While in the city he visited with Major George Ward, a prominent planter who told the mechanic that “he shall depend on me to put up a press for him of some kind this fall.”⁶²

From Tallahassee, Wiggins took the railroad from Tallahassee to Port Leon, leaving a colorful account of his journey: “On Wednesday I take pasage in the railroad car for Port Leon— leave the depot at 7 oclock— the car is drawn by two horses we move in a gentle trot. This part of the road is very much out of repair— timbers rotten and many of the iron rails loos and their ends sticking up 6 or 8 inches or more— after travling about 10 miles we stop for a few minutes at a steammill belonging to [a] rail road company— we then go on some two or three miles— when we overtake a train of baggage cars to which our car now becomes attached and the whole train drawn by a locomotive. From this place to Port Leon the road is repaired. We had not gone far before one of the baggage cars broke and the whole train was stoped for about half an hour— the broken car was taken off the road and left behind. Now we go on again but when about 5 miles from port 3 more of the baggage cars run off the road and broke to pieces. Providentially no one was hurt— the whole train (except the locomotive and one passenger car which was before those that broke) was left and all the pasengers except myself got into this car and went on— I chose to walk rather than run another risk of life. I find my shoulder hurts me much however I get along tolerably well [and] arrive at Port Leon about 10 oclock.”⁶³

62. Ibid. George T. Ward, a native of Kentucky, moved to Florida in 1825. His father, George Washington Ward, was register of the United States Land Office in Tallahassee. The younger Ward married a daughter of Benjamin Chaires, and by 1860 he owned three Leon County plantations totaling 4,200 acres. Active in politics, he ran unsuccessfully for territorial delegate, United States Senate, and governor. A Unionist, Ward reluctantly signed Florida's Ordinance of Secession in 1861. Briefly a member of the Confederate Congress, he then joined the Confederate army and was killed in Virginia in 1862. Ezra J. Warner and W. Buck Yearns, *Biographical Register of the Confederate Congress* (Baton Rouge, 1975), 248-49.

63. Wiggins Diaries, May 31, 1841. See also Groene, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee*, 83-92; Doherty, *Richard Keith Call*, 88-92; and Dorothy Dodd, “The Tallahassee Railroad and the Town of St. Marks,” *Apalachee, 1950-1956* 4 (1956), 1-12, for background on the Tallahassee-St. Marks railroad.

Upon reaching Port Leon, Wiggins met with Territorial Governor Richard Keith Call, who had shown an interest in Wiggins's cotton-press models. "He thought well of them," Wiggins remembered, "and said I should get up a company to build one at Port Leon and promised to help in the way of recommendation and credit."⁶⁴ After his meeting with Call, Wiggins found food and lodging at a nearby tavern, "for which I pay 3 dollars in paper money they said they would take half this sum if I paid in specie."⁶⁵ He then explored the town: "From what I learned Port Leon promises to become a place of much business— altho situated apparently on a salt marsh, yet vegetables gro well— and the rain water is excelent and I am told the older it is the better— there are good fish sold at the warf all most every day and tolerable reasonable compared with many other things. Enough perhaps to make a dinner for 6 men for 50 cts— sheepshead trout, black fish & c. very fat, may be caught all the year round, and at certain seasons there is great abundance of mullet caught with seins— oysters are plenty in their season goods, groceries, and provisions are high, but no scarcity— There has been as high as 40000 bales of cotton shipped from this place in one year— and it is thought there will be that much shipted this year should the end prove as good as the begining seems to be— and if there should be but one fourth of it compressed that would amount to 7500 dollars."⁶⁶

Like Port Leon, Wiggins's future appeared golden in 1841. Apparently, though, his plans for becoming rich by selling his prized cotton press never materialized. Florida's depressed economy during the late 1830s and early 1840s had made it more difficult for Wiggins to interest planters in his designs. Nonetheless, he returned to Quincy after his visit to Port Leon, and, by early September 1841, he was finishing a press for the company of Forman and Muse. Early tests seemed promising, but Wiggins's diary ends without providing further information. The last entries mention his continued longing for his family and statements about his poor finances. Fittingly, the final sentences outline Wiggins's plans to en-

64. Wiggins Diaries, May 31, 1841. Call served on the board of directors of the Tallahassee Rail Road Company, which developed Port Leon as a deep-water alternative to the town of St. Marks. Doherty, *Richard Keith Call*, 89-92.

65. Wiggins Diaries, May 31, 1841.

66. *Ibid.*

ter into a partnership to place a compress at Port Leon. Even if this plan had succeeded where so many before had failed, Wiggins's triumph would have been shortlived. A hurricane destroyed Port Leon in 1843.

Unfortunately for historians the surviving portion of Wiggins's diaries is not complete. The last book preserved in the Florida State Archives ends on September 20, 1841. How long Wiggins remained in Florida is not known, although he likely returned to Maryland in the early-to-mid 1840s. Since his wife frequently had urged her husband to return home to his family, he almost certainly did so for at least a portion of this period. One fact is certain, Wiggins did not earn his fortune in Florida as he had hoped, a fate that he shared with many others.⁶⁷ He returned to Maryland probably with a sense of disappointment over the years he had spent pursuing his dreams in Florida. Wiggins appears in the 1850 census in Annapolis with his family. His occupation is listed as merchant and he owned real estate valued at \$800.⁶⁸ According to a published source, Wiggins shortly thereafter traveled with Thomas Randall to the California gold fields. Then fifty-four years of age, Wiggins contracted an unspecified illness on the trip and died while aboard a coastal steamer. He was buried near Umpqua City, Oregon— his tombstone one of innumerable monuments to the nineteenth-century pursuit of fortune on the American frontier.⁶⁹

67. George W. Hendry, another Florida pioneer, bitterly remarked, "[Poverty] seems to be the inevitable doom of all pioneers in all countries." See George W. Hendry, *Family Record of Lydia Moody, nee Hendry, nee Carlton of Polk County, Florida* (Jacksonville, 1900), 37, 40-44.

68. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh United States Census, 1850*, Anne Arundel County, Maryland (population schedule).

69. Undated clipping in Wiggins Diaries.