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Daniel Newnan: A Neglected Figure in Florida History

by JOHN K. MAHON

There is a lake in Alachua County, Florida, named for Daniel Newnan of Georgia. Called Pithlachocco on early maps, it was renamed for Newnan because he led a Georgia detachment that fought the Alachua Indians near there in September 1812. Although it has long since disappeared, there was also a town named Newnansville which was the Alachua County seat until 1854. The county seat of Coweta County in Georgia is also named for him. But neither in Florida nor Georgia is there much in print about this man.

Daniel Newnan, the son of Dr. Anthony Newnan, was born in North Carolina in 1780. During 1796 and 1797 he attended the University of North Carolina. On March 3, 1799, during the undeclared war with France, he became a second lieutenant in the 4th Infantry Regiment of the United States Army. After two years and nine months, he resigned as a first lieutenant on January 1, 1802.

Soon thereafter he moved to Georgia, acquired land and slaves, and made his living as a planter. Meanwhile he became so active in the militia that in four years he was appointed adjutant general of Georgia, a position he held from December 13, 1806 to November 10, 1817.¹

Newnan entered Florida history when he led 250 Georgia volunteers into Spanish Florida late in the summer of 1812. One purpose of the invasion was to aid the Patriot cause. The Patriots were Americans, living in Florida and in the United States, who were dedicated to detaching Florida from Spain and adding it to the United States. A second, and very important, purpose of the invasion was to punish the Florida Indians for welcoming and keeping slaves who had run away from Georgia owners. For a time, the Patriots had the clandestine support of the administration of Presi-

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1. Biographical data is from 3x5 card file in the Georgia Department of Archives and History and *The Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971* (Washington D.C., 1971), 1468, 1469.

dent James Madison, but the excursion was not officially authorized by the government of Georgia.²

Payne, the hereditary chief of the Alachua Seminoles, preferred to remain aloof from the fight between Spain and the Patriots, but his brother, Bowlegs, wanted war. Following Bowlegs, the Alachuas destroyed the property of whites on both sides of the St. Johns River during July and August 1812.³

On August 15, the first of Newnan's volunteers reached the United States blockhouse on Davis Creek. There they were placed under the command of Colonel Thomas Adam Smith, commander of the United States troops in Spanish Florida. Smith favored the Patriot cause but had no clear directive from the War Department telling him what to do or not to do for it. On August 21, Smith ordered Newnan to destroy the Indian towns near the Alachua Prairie. Five days later, just as Newnan was ready to advance, he received another order from Smith. It directed him to come to Smith's aid because his troops were immobilized by the Indians. Newnan succeeded in relieving Smith and his 130 men and 25 horses.⁴

Colonel Newnan then pleaded with his volunteers to extend their tours in order to advance against the Indian towns. To influence them, he stressed the danger to the Georgia frontier posed by the cooperation of Indians and Negroes in Florida. As an inducement, he promised land— Spanish though it was— that they would wrest from the natives. He displayed surveying instruments to prove his intention.

Most of the volunteers refused because they had only one week left to serve, but 84 extended their tours for another three weeks. Colonel Smith added 24 volunteers, and nine Patriots attached

2. The definitive account of the Patriot cause and the Patriot War is Rembert W. Patrick, *Florida Fiasco: Rampant Rebels on the Georgia-Florida Border, 1810-1815* (Athens, 1954). Later Newnan requested compensation for one of his Negroes killed by the Seminoles. The response was that "the expedition was not under any known order of Georgia" so that the state could not pay. It referred him to the general government.

3. *Ibid.*, 180, 186.

4. The account of the excursion is drawn largely from Newnan's report, Newnan to Governor David B. Mitchell, October 19, 1812, in "U.S. Troops in Spanish East Florida, 1812-1813," T. Frederick Davis, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 9 (July 1930), 146-155. Newnan's report also appears in *Niles Weekly Register* December 5, 1812, 235-237.

themselves to the excursion. Thus Newnan left Picolata on the St. Johns River on September 24, with 117 men eager to chastise "those merciless savages." Organized into three companies, they marched single file through open pine woods where flankers were not needed. At night they camped in a triangle, the men facing outward, sleeping fully dressed and hugging their muskets. Newnan expected an easy victory for he carried rations for just four days. Only ammunition was in adequate supply. By Sunday night, September 26, the invaders had left the open land and found an extensive swamp on their left. They were within eight miles of the nearest Indian town.

On Monday, September 27, as they filed along a trail, they suddenly saw 75-100 mounted Indians coming toward them. The Indians had apparently been unaware of their presence. Chief Payne, conspicuous on a large white horse, ordered the Alachuas to attack. They dismounted, "trimmed their rifles," and opened fire.⁵ Repeated charges by the Georgians forced the Indians back about 200 yards to the edge of a swamp. There they strung their line out for about half a mile. The first firing was over in two and a half hours. The Georgians lost three killed and seven wounded. Newnan saw Payne knocked from his horse. Nine Indians were left on the ground and the volunteers scalped several of them.

Ominous quiet settled on the field until half an hour before sunset when the Indians commenced an ear piercing din: animal screams, howls, roars. More Seminoles and some Negroes had reinforced them. Opening fire again, they advanced to within 200 yards of Newnan's position. This second assault lasted until 8:00 P.M. and cost the Georgians two more killed and another wounded. Fearing that the "Makasukie Indians" might join the Alachuas, Colonel Newnan's troops worked all night on a breastwork of logs and dirt. Captain Whitaker started back at dusk to ask for help from Colonel Smith. Five other men— one of them a surgeon— left with him, taking with them the best twelve available horses.

The dwindling detachment of Georgians spent seven days behind their earthwork. With their provisions long since exhausted, they lived on horseflesh, alligator and palmetto hearts. The Seminoles systematically shot the rest of their horses. More men became

5. Letter from an Officer of Rank, October 7, 1812, in *Niles Weekly Register*, November 14, 1812, 177.

ill, Newnan concluded that he had to leave the protection of the breastwork and retreat to the St. Johns River.

At 9:00 P.M. on October 3, the detachment began its retreat, the able men taking turns carrying the litters of five wounded. After eight miles they were halted by exhaustion and hunger, but they had to summon the energy to build a second barricade. They were not able to leave it until 3:00 P.M. the next day.

Newnan, with a high fever and too weak to carry his own musket, walked in the rear with an escort. After five miles, while passing through timber felled by high winds, they again came under heavy fire. Four men were killed, but they repulsed the attackers with a charge which Newnan later reported was so fierce that some Indians threw away their guns as they ran. The Georgians camped on that battlefield until 10 o'clock the next morning. That day, they walked only five miles, camped and raised another breastwork between two ponds. A relief column reached them there and they were taken safely to Picolata where they boarded a gunboat.

Newnan's volunteers had been out 18 days, lost nine men killed, eight wounded, and eight unaccounted for. They had neither aided the Patriots nor destroyed the villages of the Alachua Indians. What they had done was to undergo intense suffering and borne it bravely. A letter of October 7, 1812, in *Niles Weekly Register* printed in far off Baltimore, Maryland, and probably written by Colonel Smith, declared, "Too much praise cannot be bestowed on this detachment for its intrepid conduct."⁶ Newnan estimated that they had killed no less than 60 Indians. Newspapers picked up this figure and translated it into an overwhelming defeat of the Seminoles.⁷ Actually the Georgia detachment had narrowly escaped annihilation.

One hundred and forty two years later, the *Gainesville Sun* printed an article which rated Newnan's battle of September 27, 1812, as one of the most important of the early days "of colonization." Newnan's men, the article continued, showed courage seldom equalled against heavy odds. As always with such stories, nothing was said about the courage of the Indians or the justice of their cause.⁸

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Niles Weekly Register*, October 7, 1812, 125.

The Georgia legislature, unclear about the official status of Newnan's excursion, asked Governor David B. Mitchell to transmit information about it. Mitchell simply sent Newnan's report— on which this account of the battles is largely based— without commenting on what official sanction the invasion had had, if any.⁹

A war among the Creeks broke out in 1813, not long after Newnan's foray into Florida. One faction, known as the Red Sticks, had welcomed Tecumseh in 1811 and received from him a bundle of sticks, which were to be discarded at the rate of one a day. This bundle of sticks plus their red war clubs gave them their name.¹⁰ The Red Sticks were opposed to ceding more land to the United States and becoming Americanized. Mostly Upper Creeks from the Coosa River and Talapoosa River areas, the Red Sticks battled the Lower Creeks who were allied with the United States. Daniel Newnan commanded a regiment in an army that Georgia sent into Alabama under General John Floyd to fight the Red Sticks. The Georgia army consisting of 1100 militiamen and 600 friendly Creeks, engaged and defeated the Red Sticks at Autosse on November 29, 1813. The army burned two towns, killed 200 Indians, and wounded many others at a cost of eleven killed and 54 wounded. General Floyd was himself disabled, but Newnan served gallantly and escaped injury.¹¹

When the invaders began constructing a fort on the west side of Calabee Creek, the Red Sticks decided that they had to strike. This they did, with 1300 warriors, just before daylight on January 27, 1814. In the ensuing battle, the Georgians lost 17 killed and 132 wounded. Daniel Newnan was among the 20 listed as dangerously wounded. In time, he recovered but was never in combat again.¹²

After eleven years as adjutant general, Newnan resigned on October 1, 1817, and returned to civil pursuits. His livelihood still came from planting, but he became active in state politics. During 1820 and 1821 he was a representative in the Georgia legislature. From 1823-1825 he served as superintendent of the Georgia State

8. *Gainesville [Florida] Sun* May 2, 1954.

9. *Niles Weekly Register*, December 5, 1812, 235.

10. Frank L. Owsley Jr., *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands: The Creek War and the Battle of New Orleans* (Gainesville, 1981), 13, 14.

11. *Ibid.*, 54-56.

12. List of the killed and wounded in the action of the morning of January 27, 1814, (Georgia Military Record Book, 1775-1839, 140-143). Typescript in Georgia Department of Archives and History.

Penitentiary. He moved from that office on November 24, 1825, to become secretary of state for Georgia, serving until November 1827. While secretary of state he resigned as major general of the militia.¹³

Newnan then served one term (1831-1833) in the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia. Having supported John C. Calhoun's 1832 nullification efforts, he was defeated for re-election to a second term.¹⁴

When the Second Seminole war erupted in Florida in 1835, Newnan offered to become a soldier again.¹⁵ Governor Schley did not choose him for combat, but, on January 2, 1837, appointed him once again to be adjutant general. He remained in that position with the rank of brigadier general until the end of 1840. During the next decade he dropped out of public life, moved to an area near the Tennessee border for his health, and died there alone on January 10, 1851.¹⁶

His grave fell into neglect and remained so for three quarters of a century, but in November 1927, a bronze tablet was placed above the grave and a monument to the "Illustrious General" was erected nearby.¹⁷ Six years later, in Alachua County, Florida, the United Daughters of the Confederacy took title to a small plot of ground and erected a monument on what is assumed to be the spot where Daniel Newnan made his first stand against the Indians on September 27, 1812. A dedication ceremony was conducted on March 24, 1933.¹⁸ The concrete base of the monument still stands, but vandals have torn off the bronze plaque which described the action. Although the base is near Windsor Road (CR 234), it is difficult to find because of dense undergrowth.

13. *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971*, 1468, 1469, and 3x5 card file, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

14. Letter of Norbonne Berkeley, August 25, 1832, 3x5 card file, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

15. Newnan to Governor Schley, June 6, 1836, 3x5 card file, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

16. Biographical data, 3x5 card file, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

17. *Atlanta Journal*, November 21, 1927.

18. Address of T. Frederick Davis, March 24, 1933. Typescript in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.