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SOME OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE HISTORY OF FORT BROOK AND TAMPA

By James W. Covington

There were two periods in Tampa's history that the availability of military land allowed the town situated on the river and bay to develop into a much larger center of commerce. The first period came between 1824 and 1883 when the town and later city was born and grew on what had been Fort Brooke land. The second came between 1945 and 1960 when Hillsborough Community College, the Tampa stadium, University of South Florida and the Busch complex developed on former military land, became elements that were essential to Tampa growing into a leading city in the southeastern part of the United States.

Military land was procured in the Tampa Bay area after the Seminoles had signed the Treaty of Moultrie Creek in 1823 and began to move into a reservation provided for them in Central Florida. So that a military presence would be useful to keeping the Indians on the reservation, the whites who had negotiated the treaty recommended that a fort be established on the western side of the reservation.¹

James Gadsden who had been in Florida marking the boundaries of the reservation came to Tampa Bay on January 8, 1824 and recommended to Colonel George M. Brooke "a point of land at the mouth of North Hillsborough river at the head of the Bay of the same name as the site for the military post."² The site appeared to be healthy place and the land seemed fertile.

After meeting with Gadsden on January 22, 1824, Brooke liked the place, for the land

had been cleared and there was good land and water available for consumption and to power a grist and sawmill.³ After this selection Gadsden took off for other places but he would always be remembered in the area because he left a letter for Brooke attached to a post at a place that would become known as Gadsden Point.⁴

In their correspondence at this time neither Brooke or Gadsden mentioned the fact that the land selected for the fort had been cleared by Robert Hackley, who afterward erected a barn, house and planted orange trees and crops. Hackley believed that he owned the land for his father Richard Hackley had purchased the land under terms of a land grant made by the King of Spain in 1818 to the Duke of Alagon.⁵ The military authorities used the Hackley house as their base and no one notified the Hackley's but that was not necessary, for under the terms of the Adams-Onis Treaty such purchases made after a deadline were null and void, and Hackley's purchase fell after that deadline.

By January 24, 1824 men of the Fourth Artillery from Pensacola moved into Cantonment Brooke (name nominated by Gadsden in honor of Brooke), and began setting up tents to house themselves, supplies and medical needs. Although the actual limits of the Cantonment Brooke had not yet been established, settlers showed little fear of being removed by the Army and moved near the post. Levi Collar, wife and five children established a farm just across the Hillsborough River from the post. Under

terms of the treaty of Moultrie Creek the military allowed William Saunders to open a general store, but others soon began to use this opening to establish shoe repair shops, laundries, a boatyard and hotels near the store of Saunders.⁶ Of course no legal title to the land could be filed at this time and evictions could take place. Nevertheless, the town of Tampa City was laid out on Federal land and lots were sold through the efforts of one of Tampa's first judges, Augustus Steele.⁷

With these intrusions into the military reservation taking place, it might be well to question the legality of the military claim to the land. All that had been done at this time was the selection of a site by Gadsden and Brooke and the move of the troops into that site. Somehow there had been no survey or designation of the reservation boundaries and it appeared at that time to be part of the public domain and open to general settlement. When persons who settled on the land began to sell whiskey to the Indians, Colonel Brooke decided in January, 1829 to establish a firm claim to the land so that the purchasers could be removed from land that they did not own.⁸ As a result Colonel Clinch had the land about the barracks surveyed and it showed that the reservation included an area sixteen miles by sixteen miles with the barracks and officers' home in the exact center. After Clinch submitted the survey, an endorsement was added by President Andrew Jackson creating the reservation on December 10, 1830.⁹ Still, civilians who took advantage of the land law of May 29, 1830 could file for land in the public domain until the General Land Office had surveyed the land in the area, but it appears that no claims were filed.

Part of the reservation was a beautiful place with orange and lime trees planted by Hackley, several springs, a winding creek

and an Indian mound.¹⁰ Yet, there were few soldiers sent there in the period from 1827-1834 and at one time was virtually abandoned. The fort was reactivated in 1834 and within a short time Fort Brooke would be the command headquarters during the Second Seminole War 1835-1842.¹¹

When it seemed apparent that an Indian war would commence, four regular companies were added to the United States Army in Florida and five hundred volunteers enlisted in the militia and were taken into Federal Service. eight officers and one hundred enlisted men were sent towards Fort King at Ocala from Fort Brooke, but moved into an ambush and all but one were killed in the so-called "Dade Massacre" near present day Bushnell.¹²

When news of the defeat reached Fort Brooke houses erected close to the fort were destroyed, pits with stakes in the bottom were dug along the fences and concealed with straw and the barracks fences were strengthened. The central defensive area in the fort was a block house built on top of the Indian mound. Brevet Major General Winfield Scott placed in charge of the Florida theatre of war planned that three columns of men would move into the Cove of the Withlacoochee which was the center of Indian resistance.¹³

Acting under misdirected orders Brevet Major General Edmund Gaines moved with a large force to Fort Brooke and proceeded towards the Cove of the Withlacoochee where a battle took place in February 27, 1836 which lasted for eight days. When the battle ended, Scott's men returned to Fort Brooke for supplies. With its excellent port and dock available, Fort Brooke had become the supply center for the war. When regular and volunteer soldiers moved out from the

fort in campaigns, marines and sailors became principal members of the garrison. As the pressure mounted on the Seminoles, Fort Brooke became one of several posts from which the Indians were shipped after they had surrendered to the soldiers. Usually the horses and cattle were brought along with the Indians to Tampa where they were sold to various bidders. Often hostile warriors had their arms and legs placed in manacles and chains at Brooke before they were loaded in small boats and taken to ships anchored in the bay.¹⁴

When it became apparent that all of the Indians could not be removed from Florida, negotiations to end the war were begun at Ft. Brooke on July 21, 1842. Under terms of the agreement concluded at Tampa and Cedar Keys the Indians were given a hunting and planting reserve in southern Florida and allowed to visit a trading post that would be established at Fort Brooke.¹⁵ This agreement brought to an end a war that had lasted seven years and cost the lives from wounds and disease of nearly 1,500 white persons. The black and Indian people may have lost just as many persons.

Once the Second Seminole war was concluded Fort Brooke was exposed to elements that would ultimately cause its demise. Most forts erected as defenses against the Indians ultimately were closed by the military when the Indian threat diminished. Even during the Third Seminole War 1855-58, Fort Brooke was not very important as a base against Indians and Fort Myers located one hundred miles to the south took over as a major scene for operations.

The second force that would bring about a reduction in size of the reservation and ultimately its termination would be the growth of Tampa. When the officials of

Hillsborough County were elected for the first time in 1845 they needed money for the construction of a courthouse and secured the grant of 160 acres which could be sold and money obtained used for the construction of the courthouse.¹⁶ The reservation was reduced in size to four miles by four miles, and the new borders marked by Major Whiting. Shortly thereafter, John Jackson laid out the town of Tampa and lots were made available for sale so that the courthouse could be constructed. Although the sale was completed, a hitch developed when President James Polk did not sign the bill on time, but everything was corrected by July 25, 1848 and lots sold had a firm legal basis for the first time.

The actions by the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida in locating the county seat at Tampa and petitioning the Federal Government for 160 acres of the military reservation was not pleasant news to military authorities. Brigadier General William Worth claimed that the act passed by the council on February 27, 1845 that placed the courthouse one half mile from the mouth of the Hillsborough river would "defeat the purpose and object of said reservation."¹⁷ He concluded that it would be better to abandon the post. General Winfield Scott pointed out that Judge Steele had been allowed to erect a building on the post because he was a customs officer but subsequently became an agent of Hackley and his claim to the land. Steele strengthened his claim by filing a pre-emption claim to the land.¹⁸ Scott concluded his protest to the Secretary of War by maintaining that "the territory of Florida has legislated the U.S. out of our reserve and military post."

Virtually all of the buildings of the fort were destroyed in September, 1848, when a terrible hurricane hit hard at the warehouses,

horse sheds, officers' quarters, barracks, wharf and hospital destroying or heavily damaging virtually all of the buildings. After the high winds had died, the standing buildings were repaired and other buildings including the wharf, barracks and officers' quarters were rebuilt, but Fort Brooke had been greatly reduced in size both in extent of land and number of buildings by the storm and actions by Congress.¹⁹

By 1860 when there were no soldiers on the place, the area was placed under the jurisdiction of the Interior Department by the War Department. Anything that could be removed had been taken away by the military and Captain James McKay leased the reservation.²⁰ McKay could not make much use of the leased land for the onset of the Civil War prevented any plans being made and units of the Confederate Army moved into the barracks. Several cannons had been sent to the fort by Jefferson Davis but the place was not much of a defense against Union forces that attacked Tampa several times.

When the Confederates withdrew from Tampa in 1864, the Union forces occupied the fort briefly and then left but returned when peace was declared. When the occupying troops left Fort Brooke during Reconstruction days, the land was declared part of the public domain. The military authorities regained control when the President of the United States set aside in January 22, 1877 and May 29, 1878, one hundred and fifty-five acres for military purposes and the remaining land transferred to the public domain which became known as the town of Fort Brooke when the sub-divided lots were sold to the public.

When yellow fever became a grave problem for the artillerymen stationed at Key West, military authorities searched for a nearby

place where most of the men could be moved during the so-called "sickly season." During the winters of 1878-79, and 1879-80, the Key West garrison was moved to Tampa where it remained until traces of the disease had disappeared from Key West. Believing that the seasonal move from Key West to Tampa would become an annual event, the quarters at Fort Brooke were given a thorough evaluation by military authorities.²¹

The years had not been kind to the fort with its glorious history. During the time that the post had been deserted, people of Tampa had roamed through the grounds removing windows and doors so that they could be used in their homes. Such removals were commonplace and one of the most thorough sackings took place at Fort Myers one hundred miles to the south where the former military buildings were virtually wrecked by the townspeople. Insult was added to injury at Fort Brooke when citizens deposited their night soil on the grounds.

Captain Jacob Rawles of the Fifth Artillery made a thorough inspection of the one hundred and fifty-five acres with its rundown buildings, Indian mound, scattered live oak and orange trees, dock, cemetery, springs, winding creek and thick woods to the east of the buildings. In his report dated September, 1880 Rawles noted that there were no storehouses at all on the site. Quartermaster supplies for the troops from Key West were either placed under tents or in an old log stable and food stored in an old guard house building. Officers' quarters likewise in poor condition, consisted of one building containing a hall and four rooms on the first floor, and four attic rooms on the second. Two kitchens to prepare food for the officers were located twenty feet from the building, but under a common roof that needed shingles.²²

Only one large wooden building served as housing for the artillerymen from Key West. The doors and windows had been stolen and the sills under them were in a rotten state. New floors and a roof were needed. The hospital consisted of a small wooden building which contained a dispensary, beds for twelve patients and erected nearby was the kitchen. On December 24, 1880 the Secretary of War authorized the expenditure of one thousand dollars for the repair of the buildings and detailed sketches of proposed barracks buildings planned for Fort Brooke can be found in the military records at the National Archives. The troops from Key West remained in Tampa from May 1880 until 1882 when they were transferred during the "sick season" to St. Augustine and Mount Vernon, Alabama.

When the troops left Ft. Brooke and the land was put under the control for the Interior Department, Tampa citizens sought the help of Senator Wilkinson Call to change the military reservation into a public park. Their plans failed when Call conspired with Dr. Edmund Carew of Gainesville, Florida to file a homestead application that gave him the best part of the reservation.²³

Carew and family moved into the officers' quarters and the others who wanted the land erected tents and shacks on desired tracks, but soon businessmen purchased lots driving out the intruders, tearing down the ruined buildings and erecting buildings that served as bases for the many firms that were moving to Tampa.

Today one may dig into a vacant lot in downtown Tampa and find traces of the military occupation including buttons, bullets, shells and military equipment. Fort Brooke was given a lasting memory with a parking garage named in its honor, but little else remains of Fort Brooke. Many years

ago it was James Gadsden who upon seeing the home of Hackley decided that the fort should be built there. Had he selected sites at or near Bradenton, Sarasota, Clearwater or St. Petersburg, Tampa probably would not have become the leading city of the Tampa Bay area.

¹ James W. Covington "The Establishment of Fort Brooke," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 31 (April, 1953), 273-78.

² James Gadsden to the Secretary of War, January 27, 1823 (1824), *The Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington, 1956), edited by Clarence E. Carter, Vol 22: 841-842, hereafter cited as *T.P.*

³ George M. Brooke to the Commanding General *T.P.*, 22: 844-846. The first heavy armaments requested by Brooke were two mounted six pounders. One was captured and destroyed by the Indians at the "Dade Massacre" in 1836.

⁴ Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 59.

⁵ Grismer, *Tampa*, 51-59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 61-67.

⁷ Covington, "The Hackley Grant, The Fort Brooke Military Recreation and Tampa," *Sunland Tribune* 6 (November 1980), 8.

⁸ Brooke to the Adjutant General, *Passim*, January 2, 1829, *T.P.*, 24:128.

⁹ It would seem likely that Jackson would issue a proclamation reserving the land but the only official action was the endorsement. *Ibid.*, note 51.

¹⁰ Although there were two small springs located near the barracks, the soldiers depended upon a large spring located in present day Ybor City for water supplies.

¹¹ Grismer, *Tampa*, 63. By 1838 Fort Brooke was one of the largest military establishments in the United States.

¹² Frank Laumer, *Dade's Last Command* (Gainesville, 1995), 39-47.

¹³ John Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War* (Gainesville, 1967), 143-144. No one wanted the dogs that had accompanied the Indians to Tampa and as a result the canine population of Tampa was greatly increased.

¹⁴ The best account of the surrender and shipment of the Seminoles is found in Grant Foreman *Indian Removal: the Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.

¹⁵ Covington "The Agreement of 1842 and it's effect upon Seminole History," *Florida Anthropologist* 31, 8-11.

¹⁶ Grismer, *Tampa*, 106-108

¹⁷ Worth to the Adjutant General, May 12, 1845 *T.P.* 26: 1073

¹⁸ Scott to the Adjutant General, May 12, 1845, *T.P.* 26: 1073-1074

¹⁹ Grismer, *Tampa*, 112-113

²⁰ The reservation which had been greatly reduced in size, included the limits of the military quarters, as stipulated by Congress, July 25, 1848. On July 24, 1860 what was left of the military reservation was relinquished by the War Department to the Interior Department and McKay was able to lease the land, which included approximately an area about one hundred and fifty acres.

²¹ Colonel H.J. Hunt, Fifth Infantry to the Secretary of War, March 7, 1882, Abandoned Military Reserve File, Fort Brooke, Office of War Department Records, National Archives.

²² Inspection Report, September, 1880. Captain Rawles, Fifth Artillery, Abandoned Military Reserve file.

²³ Grismer, *Tampa*, 168-169.