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Paul Eugen Camp
University of South Florida

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THE ATTACK ON BRADEN CASTLE: ROBERT GAMBLE'S ACCOUNT

By Paul Eugen Camp

Fast becoming one of the leading tourist centers on Florida's west coast, Bradenton is nationally known as "the Friendly City." In 1856, however, the area that is now metropolitan Bradenton hardly qualified for that name. In March of that year the Third Seminole War was at its height, and the attire of the well-dressed citizen of Manatee ("Braidentown" did not come along until 1878) usually included a loaded gun. Families in settlers' cabins and plantation manors alike sat down to meals with rifles by their sides. On March 31, 1856, the community's fears were justified when a raiding party of seven Seminole Indians attacked Braden Castle, home of Dr. J. A. Braden, the man for whom modern Bradenton is named. A manuscript account of this attack was later written by Braden's neighbor, Major Robert Gamble.¹ Major Gamble's account, now in the collection of the Florida Historical Society in Tampa, provides an enlightening link with this minor but colorful incident in Manatee County's past.

In the 1850s the area around Bradenton was a place of curious contrasts. After the end of the Second Seminole War in 1842, white settlers had moved into the region south of Tampa Bay and set to work incorporating it into the plantation economy of the Old South. Rather than King Cotton, however, sugar was the root of Manatee's prosperity. During the 1840s several large scale sugar plantations were developed in the area. In spite of its stately mansions, however, Manatee was still very much of a frontier settlement. The large plantations and humbler farms were surrounded by an almost virgin wilderness. Indians were a familiar sight on the streets of Manatee. Billy Bowlegs, paramount leader of the Seminoles, visited the area on several occasions.² With the outbreak of the Third Seminole War on December 17, 1855, the planters and settlers of the Manatee region found themselves on the front lines of an Indian uprising.

Virginia-born Dr. Joseph Addison Braden owned one of the Manatee region's largest plantations. He came to the area from Tallahassee in 1843, settling on a 1,100 acre plantation near the confluence of Braden Creek (now Braden River) and the Manatee. In 1845 construction began on the centerpiece of his enterprise, an impressive mansion that became known locally as "Braden Castle." In spite of its name, Braden Castle was a gracious residence rather than a crenellated fortress. Braden's "castle" was a two-story structure measuring about a hundred feet on each side.³ Its massive, twenty-inch thick walls were made of "tabby," a concrete-like mixture composed of sand, lime, and crushed shell in equal proportions. Local shell provided both lime and fill for the castle, while most of its timbers came from the surrounding forest. Numerous holes were left in the castle walls during construction, giving rise to much modern speculation. The favorite theory advanced is that they were gun-ports to be used in repelling Indian attacks. Unfortunately for such romantic notions, the mysterious holes were actually left by wooden forms or braces used in constructing the walls.⁴

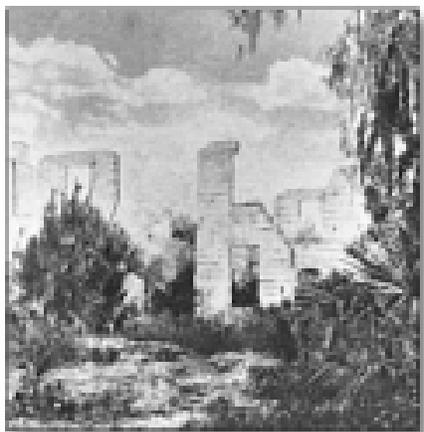


Picnic party at Braden Castle in the 1890s. Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society

When completed in 1851, the castle had four rooms on each of its two floors, grouped around spacious central hallways running front-to-back. All eight rooms were of the same dimensions, twenty feet square. The castle also boasted four chimneys and eight fireplaces.⁵ To pioneers used to the doublepen pine log cabins standard on the Florida frontier, Braden's masterpiece must have seemed a castle indeed.

Early on the morning of April 1, 1856, a runner brought startling news to Manatee. The note which he carried from Dr. Braden reported that hostile Indians had attacked Braden Castle during the night, and it asked that aid be sent immediately. Word of the attack sent a hastily mustered body of militiamen on the marauders' trail and brought settlers scurrying to improvise forts. The main place of refuge was Dr. Franklin Branch's fortified home. Although pursuers caught up with the Indian raiders, killing several and recovering Dr. Braden's stolen property, the shock of the raid and others that followed kept Manatee's citizens huddled in their forts for around nine months. When the stockaded home of Dr. Branch at Manatee became inadequate to hold the number of refugees, the substantial walls of Braden Castle were pressed into service as a place of refuge.⁶

The unit that successfully pursued the Indian attackers was composed of local volunteers led by Captain John Addison. They caught up with the raiders on the south bank of Big Charley Apopka Creek.⁷ The Indians had stopped for a meal of barbecued beef and were caught totally by surprise. The Seminole band, seven strong, seems to have lost at least two and possibly as many as four men killed. Leading this raiding party was Oscan Tustenuggee, one of the principal Seminole war chiefs. Though he lost his pony, he managed to escape by swimming the creek.⁸ Recaptured were seven slaves, three mules, and a good deal of miscellaneous loot, along with a pony. One of the two Indians killed was first wounded and then fatally shot when he proved unable to march with the militia column. Both dead Indians were scalped, and "one scalp was sent to Manatee with the party who conveyed the stolen property to its owners and the other was



Ruins of Braden Castle, circa 1907.
Photograph courtesy of University of South Florida Library



Braden Castle as it looks today. Photograph
courtesy of Hampton Dunn

sent to Captain Hooker, at this place Tampa. The later [*sic*] has been exhibited to all persons having the curiosity to examine it."⁹

Although both the state of Florida and the United States Army put vastly superior forces in the field, the small band of Seminole warriors led by Billy Bowlegs fought a guerilla-type war that dragged on for nearly two years. Only when the Seminole leader and most of his surviving fighters surrendered in the spring of 1858 was the fear of massacre removed from the South Florida frontier.

During the financial depression of 1857, Braden was financially ruined. Florida financier, Daniel Ladd, foreclosed the mortgage on Braden's plantation, but he did not evict him from the property. Although a party from the Federal schooner *Stonewall* raided the area on August 3, 1864, Braden Castle survived the Civil War unharmed. In the same year Dr. Braden left the Manatee area for Texas.

Following the war the Braden Plantation was sold to Mrs. Mary Pelot for \$2,000. She in turn sold Braden Castle and 320 acres surrounding it to her father, General James G. Cooper. The general made several improvements to the building, adding a wooden cupola or lookout to the roof. During his life the castle figured actively in the social life of the community. After his death on June 20, 1876, however, the building was abandoned and began to deteriorate. It was gutted by a woods fire in 1903, leaving only the concrete walls standing. In a few years they crumbled to picturesque ruins. In 1924 the castle and its surrounding land were sold to the Camping Tourists of America.¹⁰ The historic ruins of Braden Castle are located at the corner of Plaza Street and Braden Castle Drive in Bradenton. The walls of the old castle are protected by a fence, but they are easily seen from the barrier. They are an interesting link with a very colorful epoch in Bradenton's past and are well worth a visit.

In 1856, Major Robert Gamble was Dr. Braden's neighbor across the Manatee River. His 3,500 acre sugar plantation was the largest in the region and was centered around a stately, columned mansion (now Gamble Plantation State Historic Site). Worked by up to 300 slaves, Gamble's

plantation produced as much as 1,500 hogsheads of sugar annually.¹¹ Gamble was an interested observer of the events surrounding the attack of his neighbor's residence in 1856. Since it was the nine-shot repeating rifle he had loaned Dr. Braden that the good doctor used in repelling the attack, Gamble doubtlessly got the story from Braden when the gun was returned. In writing some reminiscences of the Seminole Wars years later, Gamble included in his manuscript the tale of the attack on Braden Castle. This undated manuscript now forms part of the Richard Keith Call Papers housed in the library of the Florida Historical Society at the University of South Florida.¹² Entitled "Some recollections of the Seminole Chief Arpioka - Bowlegs - and his war with the States," Gamble's manuscript sheds an interesting light on the Braden Castle attack. After a brief, somewhat muddled passage relating to the Harney massacre during the Second Seminole War, Gamble turned to the attack on Braden Castle.

Arpioka, prior to these events, visited the settlement on the Manatee [*sic*] river, where I had established a sugar plantation.¹³ He was a very handsome man somewhat above the medium stature, strong and active, bright, cheerful and pleasing in manner and at that time in his prime, about 35 years old. After living in fortified houses during the long 7 years war on the Middle Florida frontier,¹⁴ I was again compelled to the same anxious and trying life, and being strongly prepared and with arms for my Negroe [*sic*] men I was not disturbed by the enemy. Not so with my neighbor Dr. Braden. Dr. J. A. Braden lived on the oposite [*sic*] side of the river in a large concrete building of two stories. A wide hall ran through the house from front to rear, dividing the rooms on both stories; the pine forest sparsely timbered, reaching to his door. The dining room was on the front facing the forest, and the windows opened upon an open porch raised some three feet from the ground, the door opening on the central-hall. One lovely moonlight night, the family had just seated themselves at the supper table.¹⁵

In the hall in the upper story a servant woman was sitting looking out upon the grassy glades of the open forest; her mind preoccupied, she was scarcely conscious of the landscape. She noticed unheeding several dark objects in the distance, appearing and disappearing at intervals, but apparently slowly approaching the house; she deemed them to be calves or cattle belonging to the household. Presently her attention was aroused by seeing the figure of a man dart from the cover of a tree to another. Instantly divining the truth, she rose quietly, descended to the lower hall, now quite alight with the moon, and in full view of the advancing Indians, she leisurely reached the door, entered, and reaching the table, blew out the light, and whispered to the Doctor the single word "Indians." The Indians supposing they had not been discovered, had softly reached the porch and were approaching the open windows. At the sudden extinction of the light, the sound of several men jumping from the porch was distinctly heard. The Doctor and his little son, seized their guns, the Indians fired in at the windows and their fire was returned. Fortunately I had let the Doctor have a gun of mine, a rifle of peculiar construction, capable of delivering nine charges in rapid succession.¹⁶ He thus discharged it, and the number of shots delivered in so short a period evidently impressed the Indians with the belief that there were many men in the house, and after some desultory firing they retreated and going to the plantation a mile away plundered some cabins and carried off the Negroes.¹⁷

A small party hastily assembled, took the trail at daylight, pursuing all day and the following night, and at sunrise of the second day came suddenly in view of the camp of the Seminoles. The captive Negroes discovered their approach, and came running to them. The Indians thus made

aware, fled, plunging into a deep creek on the bank of which they were encamped. The whites delivered their fire, killing one or two of the Indians, who sank in the deep water, others escaping to the scrub beyond.

¹ Major Robert Gamble is often confused with his uncle and first cousin of the same name. Although Robert Gamble of Gamble Mansion fame was the son of John Gratton Gamble, he was known during the lifetime of his uncle as Robert Gamble, Jr., even in legal documents. His first cousin Robert H. Gamble served in the Confederate Army and fought at the battle of Olustee. He also lived in Leon County, which compounds the problem of keeping things straight. He died in the 1880s. The Major Robert Gamble of Manatee County, writer of the account of the attack on Braden Castle, served as an aide to General R. K. Call during the Second Seminole War, fighting with distinction at the Battle of the Withlacoochee on December 31, 1835. For his outstanding services, he was later granted a pension by the United States government. After the failure of his Manatee enterprise, he returned to Tallahassee where he was a prominent citizen for the remainder of his life. He died in Tallahassee at the age of 95 and is buried in the Episcopal Cemetery. Biographical information relative to Gamble and the Gamble family may be found in "The Gamble Mansion," a pamphlet published by the Florida Board of Parks.

² Lille B. McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee* (2nd ed. Bradenton: Manatee County Historical Society, 1961), pp. 88-89.

³ Thelma Gray, "Braden Castle," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 15 (April 1937): 252-53.

⁴ "Tabby" construction was used widely throughout the Southeast. A concise description of tabby construction appears in Albert C. Manucy, *The Houses of St. Augustine* (St. Augustine: St. Augustine Historical Society, 1962), p. 164. A sketch illustrating how a tabby wall was built appears on page 32 of Manucy's book. This sketch illustrates the origin of the puzzling holes in Braden Castle's walls.

⁵ Gray, "Braden Castle," p. 253.

⁶ McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee*, p. 95.

⁷ McDuffee identifies this as Joshua Creek (p. 93). Another historian tentatively identifies it with "Charlo-Popka-Hatchee-Chee, or Payne's Creek." James W. Covington, "An Episode in the Third Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 45 (July 1966): 52.

⁸ Covington, "An Episode," p. 52; *Florida Peninsular*, April 12, 1856.

⁹ *Florida Peninsular*, April 12, 1856.

¹⁰ Gray, "Braden Castle," p. 254.

¹¹ Jean Miller, "Mansion Houses Memories of Early Days," *St. Petersburg Times*, July 6, 1975, pp. 1F-2F.

¹² Richard Keith Call was territorial governor of Florida in 1836 and again in 1841. Gamble was well acquainted with Call during his years of residence in Tallahassee. Call's daughter, Ellen Call Long, was well known for her interest in, and writings of, Florida history, and she was probably responsible for the presence of the Gamble manuscript in the Call Papers.

¹³ Gamble confuses the Seminole leader Arpieka (Sam Jones) with Holatter Micco (Billy Bowlegs). By the 1850s Arpieka's influence among the Seminoles had waned due to his advanced age, and he was replaced as paramount leader of the Seminoles by the much younger Billy Bowlegs. For a concise history of the Third Seminole War, see James W. Covington's "An Episode in the Third Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 45 (July 1966) : 45-59.

¹⁴ Gamble was a prominent citizen of Tallahassee during the Second Seminole War. Other sections of his manuscript deal with his experiences during that period.

¹⁵ Although Gamble does not mention it in his account, Braden had as his guests on the evening of the attack two prominent citizens of Tallahassee, the Reverend T. T. Sealey and Mr. Furman Chaires. McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee*, p. 91.

¹⁶ While repeating handguns were relatively common in the early 1850s, effective multishot longarms had not yet been developed. Thus, there are few candidates for Gamble's "rifle of peculiar construction" that played such a significant role in repelling the attack. Of the repeating rifles available, most can be ruled out as holding either too many or too few charges (most held from 5 to 8 shots). The most likely candidates would be either the Cochran nine-shot turret rifle (patented 1837) or the 1851 Porter turret rifle. These weapons were certainly of "peculiar construction," having disk-shaped revolving breech blocks with chambers radiating from a central pivot. As the breech block revolved, the chambers lined up successively with the barrel as in a regular revolver like the Colt. Turret rifles did not gain wide popularity, as an accidental multiple discharge (a not unlikely occurrence in cap-and-ball weapons) would spray balls in all directions, including directly back at the firer. See James E. Serven, ed., *The Collecting of Guns* (Harrisburg: Stackpole, 1964), for a description of these weapons.

¹⁷ McDuffee gives the number of blacks carried, off by the raiders as seven, six belonging to Dr. Braden and one to H. Wyatt. McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee*, p. 91.