

1975

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Recommended Citation

Covington, James W. (1975) "Fort Sullivan," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol2/iss1/2>

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Fort Sullivan

By JAMES W. COVINGTON, Ph.D.

In 1929, the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a marker in honor of Fort Sullivan along the old military road which was the thoroughfare from Tampa to Kissimmee. Actually little was known about Fort Sullivan but local tradition indicated the location of the structure somewhat near Plant City in that approximate area.¹ Recently evidence has been found in the Military Records at the National Archives in Washington D.C. to indicate some of the fort's history but not its exact location. When Zachary Taylor succeeded Thomas S. Jesup in command of the Army of the South during the Second Seminole War, he submitted to Washington a plan approved on January 23, 1839 which would divide Northern Florida into squares and place a small post in the center of each square to provide protection against the Indian raiders.² In harmony with the containment policy, Taylor ordered forts be established in a line extending from Tampa Bay or Fort Brooke to Fort Mellon on the St. John's River. This line of fortification included sites at an old Indian settlement known as Hickapusassa, Cross, Davenport and Cummings.³ Seeds for gardens to be planted were provided so that each fort would be self-sufficient. Company G of the Third Artillery under the command of Captain Hezekiah Garner were sent to garrison Fort Hickapusassa which was soon known as Fort Sullivan in honor of the late Assistant-Surgeon Wade Sullivan, Medical Staff, United States Army.⁴ In line with orders from Fort Brooke Fort Sullivan was officially established January 20, 1839.⁵

In his first letter to Washington which was dated February 22, 1839, Garner noted that the road leading westward to Tampa and eastward to Fort Cummings was good and that several Indian towns in the neighborhood had not been occupied for at least twelve months. He saw the abundant supply of game including deer, turkey and fish and had planted corn and beans in the fertile soil. Garner believed that the gardens could provide food sufficient for the wants of seventy-five or eighty men.⁶

According to the post returns, the roster never numbered over fifty men but for brief periods the post had visitors that swelled the ranks.⁷ On March 4, 1839 Garner reported the arrival of the Second Regiment of Dragoons for duty.⁸ The isolation of the post caused Garner to become negligent in the writing of reports and he had to be reminded to send in the monthly reports and summaries of activities. Since there was no medical officer attached to the place, sick persons were sent back to Fort Brooke at Tampa Bay.

Soon Fort Sullivan began to take the form of an isolated military post deep in the Florida wilderness. It was situated in the middle of a small pine barren area with small grassy lakes, marshes, cypress hammocks and with a nearby stream running within two hundred yards away believed to be a tributary of Hillsborough River. The fort itself was made of pine logs one hundred and ten feet square with two blockhouses at the diagonal corners constructed of limestone. A small map drawn by Lt. William A. Brown showed the enclosed fort, attached stables, target range, Tampa-Fort Cummings road, Indian trails and two large gardens. A nearby well containing water with a sulphurous odor and iron taste supplied the water needs of the fort.

So far as can be determined, men from Fort Sullivan did not engage in a single engagement with the Seminoles and General Taylor decided to abandon the fort. In Special Order 128 dated

October 25, 1839, forts Davenport, Cummings and Sullivan were ordered abandoned and Major William L. McClintock of the 3rd Artillery was ordered to take the garrisons to Fort Brooke.⁹ When Garner realized the fort was to be abandoned, he wrote to Washington requesting a transfer to the Quartermaster Corps. Finally on November 5, 1839 Fort Sullivan was decommissioned and Garner and his men marched to Fort Brooke on the same day.¹⁰

Actually the Seminoles had retreated southward and there was little need for additional forts near Fort Brooke. Fort Sullivan was part of a general plan to capture or defeat the Seminoles by placing forts throughout Florida but it failed just like the plans to use blood hounds and friendly Indians failed.

About the Author
Dr. **JAMES W. COVINGTON**

When James W. Covington showed up for his first teaching job at the University of Tampa 25 years ago, he thought he would not be here long. But here it is a quarter of a century later and he continues as a Professor of History, loves the University, the state of Florida and everything about his work and living.

A native of Missouri, Dr. Covington earned his Ph.D. at the University of Oklahoma, doing his dissertation on Indian relations. He developed a fondness for the colorful history of the Indians in this effort and has continued to study them to this day. He writes about them, too, and only recently helped them to form an Indian Historical Society. Parallel to his interest in the Indian tribes, he also is interested in the military affairs of the United States during the Seminole wars. He is an authority on old Fort Brooke here in Tampa, and in this issue of *The Sunland Tribune* he tells us about Fort Sullivan near present day Plant City.

Dr. Covington, president of the Tampa Historical Society, is author of five books, including a definitive account of Southwestern Florida. He also has co-authored a history of the University of Tampa. And, the professor also has authored 50 or more scholarly articles. One of his important achievements was serving as Historian for the Apollo Launch Facilities at the Kennedy Space Center.



Dr., Covington also is interested in anthropology, and just this year began offering a course in the subject at the University. This, in addition to the history courses he teaches. He is past president of the Florida Anthropological Society.

¹ W.P.A. Papers Hillsborough County Historic Sites, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, no page number.

² John K. Mahon History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842, (Gainesville, 1967), 249.

³ General Order Number 9, Headquarters Army of the South, February 9, 1839. Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Register 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Hezekiah Garner had been commissioned a captain in July, 1838 and died in October, 1841. Francis O. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army to March 2, 1903, I* (Washington, 1903), 447.

⁵ See Roll 617-1544 Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Letters received, AGO 1839 Microcopy 567, hereafter cited as R.A.G.O.

⁶ Garner to Adjutant General Jones, February 22, 1839 G 49. *ibid.*

⁷ Post Return of April 30, 1839 G 105. *ibid.*

⁸ Garner to AAG Jones, March 4, 1839 G 61. *ibid.*
Garner to AAG Jones, September 1, 1839 G 196. *ibid.*

⁹ Special Order 128, Army of the South, October 25, 1839. Records of the Secretary of War, Register 75.

¹⁰ Garner to Jones, November 5, 1839 G 244. R.A.G.O.