Some Petitions Relating Tampa Families and the Disposal of Fort Brooke Lands, 1882-1883

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With the end of Indian hostilities in South Florida long since concluded and the withdrawal of all federal troops from the South in 1877, the U.S. War Department began the deactivation of many southern military posts. Among them was Fort Brooke at Tampa which had been established in 1824 and is considered to be the founding of Tampa as a town.

The question of what to do with the federal lands associated with the fort brought forth many petitions, and genealogists have another resource in the names on the petitions. Two such documents are in the Special Collections at the University of South Florida Library, Tampa.

In 1882 the last federal troops departed from Fort Brooke, according to local historian Anthony P. Pizzo in his book *Tampa Town, 1824-1886* (Miami: Hurricane House, 1968), and in 1883 the War Department deactivated the old fort. Its 16 square miles of reserved land on Tampa Bay became open for private development. At the same time Henry Bradley Plant was completing his Jacksonville to Tampa railroad. Many citizens feared the fort lands along the bay would fall to
the railroad or manufacturing establishments served by the railroad. The first petition deals with this fear.

TO THE HONORABLE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES IN CONGRESS ASSEMBLED
THE PETITION OF THE CITIZENS OF THE TOWN OF TAMPA IN THE COUNTY OF HILLSBOROUGH IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA.

The petitioners show that they are citizens of the said town of Tampa. That at the present time existing on the Southern boundary of the said town are about 160 acres of land which is known as the Fort Brooke Reservation being a plot of ground now used as a Sanitary Station for the troops at Key West. It is understood that this land is about to be abandoned by the Military Authorities of the United States as a Military Station and your petitioners are informed and believe that efforts are being made by persons who are desirous of acquiring the same to have said lands transferred from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior so as to vest the same in the public domain and then purchase the said reservation for speculative purposes or otherwise. Or that Railway Companies which are building roads out of the immense grants of lands made to them for that purpose by the State of Florida are desirous of absorbing said reservation for their purposes and your petitioners show that the said grounds occupy a position of great beauty and now and always would afford a place of recreation for the inhabitants of said town as a park and as there are ample lands without defacing or cutting these lands into lots in the neighborhood for building purposes.

Your petitioners therefor pray that the said lands be either retained by the Military Authorities intact or should they be handed over to the public domain that your honorable body will pass an act vesting the said lands in the said town of Tampa on condition that said land is retained unsubdivided as a park of public pleasure ground for the inhabitants of said town forever giving to the said town however the right to allow certain slightly public buildings to be erected thereon in such a manner as to not detract from the beauty and usefulness of said grounds.

And your petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray.

November 13th 1882

TO THE HONORABLE THE SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES CONVENED:

The undersigned citizens of the Town of Tampa, County of Hillsborough and State of Florida respectfully represent that Louis Bell a citizen of the United States and residing in the Fort Brooke Reservation adjoining said Town of Tampa that said Louis Bell has resided in said Reservation for many years, that he has been in the service of the United States for serving in the Mexican and Seminole Wars, that he is now old and infirm and unable to work for a living, that he has a dwelling, out houses, fruit trees and a garden in the premises from which he derives a scanty subsistence, that said Louis Bell is an honorable and worthy citizen and has always been true and faithful to the government of the United States.

Your petitioners therefor pray that your honorable bodies grant to the said Louis Bell such relief in the premises as you think meet and just, allowing him possession of the land he now occupies as a home in the event that the Fort Brooke Reservation- is sold: the age and record of the valuable services of this old man will be found in the War Department and many of the old Army officers who served in the war aforesaid knew him personally.

And your petitioners shall ever pray &c.


Thus from the Fort Brooke reservation petitions genealogists have another source of Tampa family names of the 1880s, and historians have information about the social consciousness of Tampa citizens regarding public land use in a developing southern town.

* Parentheses and question marks are used to denote illegible names or letters.

**About the Author**

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Martin M. LaGodna is Assistant Professor of History and Director of the Oral History Program at the University of South Florida. He specializes in state and local history, oral history, and historical administration. Having served as Assistant Director of the American Association for State and Local History, he has a continuing interest in the work of historical societies. He received his Ph.D. in American history from the University of Florida in 1970. He has compiled and edited one book and written several historical articles and book reviews. His most recent project is co-authoring a book of biographies of Florida governors for publication in the spring of 1976. He is married and the father of two children.