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The Final Years of Fort Brooke

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With the discovery of more than 100 skeletons in downtown Tampa, on a site being paved for a parking garage, some of them buried alongside Indian artifacts and in coffins and others wearing clothes of possible military origin, the belief was entertained by some present-day Tampa history buffs that the Fort Brooke Cemetery was abandoned by the military when it moved from Fort Brooke and turned the area over to civilian control. Such was not the case. In 1883 the remains of the 20 or more officers and enlisted men in the Fort Brooke Cemetery were removed to Barrancas National Cemetery near Pensacola.

During the Second Seminole War 1835-1842, there were 4,000 or more troops at Fort Brooke and the numerous buildings were kept in good condition. However, six years after the war had ended, the buildings had gotten into such a bad shape that Colonel John T. Sprague complained that two buildings were in a condition that was dangerous.
LAND FOR TOWN SITE

After the hurricane of October, 1848, had leveled most of the Fort Brooke buildings, 35 citizens of Manatee (Bradenton) sent a letter to the Secretary of War pointing out that the people of Tampa did not want the fort for they needed the land for a town site. The Manatee people listed the good points of a Manatee River location including a nine foot deep water channel.1 Somehow, however, their request was denied but the Fort Brooke area was reduced in size and influence.

When the people of Tampa did get most of the military reservation for a town site, the military saw little hope for further use for the base. By August, 1850, Major David Twiggs wrote that the post of Fort Brooke was to be broken up and the chaplain transferred to Camp Twiggs, MissisSippi.2 Yet, the post remained opened used as headquarters for the Indian emigration agent during the 1850s and played a fairly

SALUTING THE DEAD

Tampa Historical Society President Kenneth W. Mulder opens special memorial services remembering the 102 "unknown soldiers and settlers " reburied from the old Fort Brooke cemetery in Oaklawn Cemetery on May 3, 1981. Members of the Rough Riders Association look on. A slab marking the reburial site is shown at left.

-Photo by HAMPTON DUNN
important role in the last Seminole War 1855-1858.

After military units were transferred from Fort Brooke in 1858, the place was leased to Captain James McKay but his stay was interrupted first by Confederate and then Union troops. When the fort was occupied by the Confederates, the place was bombarded several times by Union warships. At the conclusion of the conflict, Union troops used the post as a base of operations for the military occupation of the area until 1869. By 1873, the buildings were unoccupied and James McKay was given a lease to use the wharf and one-half of the warehouse for his cattle shipping operations. Captain McKay at this time had the largest fleet of schooners and steamers in the state of Florida.

RESERVATION REDUCED

In 1877 the size of the reservation was reduced to 148 acres. Although the buildings were in deplorable condition, troops from Key West used the place as a refuge when yellow fever was prevalent on the island. People from the town of Tampa had roamed through the deserted post carrying away boards and bricks for use in their homes. One who became concerned about the condition of the area was Charles Hanford who commanded the Union troops at the fort when they occupied the place. He noted the grass and weed-ridden cemetery noting, "No longer is it a fit resting place for soldiers." The cemetery, one-fourth of an acre square was located one-fourth of a mile from the reduced military reservation. In response to his letter to the Army command, $200 was spent by the Quartermaster Corps to improve the conditions. In an inventory of the standing buildings made during the 1870s the following valuation was made: officer's quarters, 85 x 46, $3,000; barracks, 110 x 50, $1,500; hospital, 42 x 30, $500; mess hall, 50 x 25, $500; bake house, 50 x 25, $300; storehouse, $50; commissary, $100; flag staff, $500; four wooden cisterns, $480 and boardwalk, $50, making a grand total of $7,180.

In 1883 the War Department relinquished title to the Interior Department and the reservation was opened to homestead applications at the Federal Land Office. The 20 or more bodies in the Fort Brooke Cemetery were moved to Barrancas National Cemetery at Pensacola. The most famous remains to be moved was that of Captain Upton Fraser who had been killed at the Dade Massacre in 1835. As a result of the disclosure of the closing of the cemetery, it is clear that in the 1850s Tampa had three or more cemeteries, one for the military, one for the older Tampa families - Oak Lawn - and at least one for the Indians and those who for one reason or the other could not be placed in the other two.

"UNKNOWN" SOLDIERS AND SETTLERS' 
... bodies transferred to Oaklawn

-Photo by HAMPTON DUNN
FOOTNOTES

1 Petition of E. Glazier and 35 others to Zachary Taylor, August 13, 1849, Letters Received Adjutant General’s Office, 1822-1860, B115-445, Microcopy Roll 400, 258, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

2 Major-General David Twiggs to Adjutant-General’s Office, August 18, 1850, Historical Information Relative to Military Posts and Other Installations, 1700-1900, Volume A-B, Microcopy Roll 661-5511, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

3 Charles Hanford to Major General Emery, October 20, 1874, ibid.

4 List of buildings at Fort Brooke and their valuation, 1874, ibid.

5 Disposition of bodies in the Fort Brooke Cemetery, 1883, ibid.