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He Built a Fort in the Wilderness

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Col. George Mercer Brooke was a professional soldier who saw a lot of action in the War of 1812 against the British, but this new kind of duty in peacetime pioneer America did not match his expectations.

The army of 6,000 men was assigned to guarding the frontiers, that "cutting edge" where white settlers met the Indians. Except for preserving the peace, the soldiers' job was boring and uneventful. There was little prestige connected with the Regular Army. They laid out roads, cleared land, built temporary forts, cut wood and planted vegetable gardens.

In the 1820s, there was political pressure to move the Indians southward and westward. Many of the Seminoles harbored runaway slaves, and the Southern planters were frustrated that some of their "property" had strayed over the Florida line into Spanish-held territory and out of their jurisdiction. It was a relief when Florida became part of the United States in 1819 and Andrew Jackson became the dynamic force moving for Indian Removal.

Far south in the Tampa Bay peninsula, some Cuban fishermen and a few pioneer families were concerned about the bad feelings brewing between Seminoles and settlers. Isolated from the rest of the nation, they watched warily for signs of uprisings in the nearby Seminole camps. News from North Florida of uprisings and massacres spurred them to petition the United States government for protection.

In answer to their plea, Col. George Mercer Brooke was dispatched from Pensacola to establish a garrison for them near Tampa Bay. It took many months to secure the needed building supplies, equipment and provisions, and the colonel was in no hurry to face the challenge of the mosquito-ridden wilderness, but he landed with his men at Tampa Bay Jan. 22, 1824.

"We found a jungle-like land with giant live oaks spreading enormous limbs as big as tree trunks, hung with pendants of Spanish moss and yellow jassamine," he wrote in his journal.

The best site for the encampment turned out to be a piece that was previously claimed and cleared by Robert Hackley, an Englishman who had purchased it from Spain but lost his rights to it when the United States acquired Florida in 1819.

Col. Brooke spent the first month landing supplies, clearing the "worst undergrowth he had ever seen," and planting gardens. He wrote that the Indians appeared "to be more and more displeased with the limited land of their reservation in the center of the state."

In spite of the lack of trees for lumber and clay for making bricks, Fort Brooke, named for its commander, was finished by September 1824 and stood where Florida and Eunice streets intersect in today's downtown Tampa. A marker near the Platt Street Bridge marks the company's landing.
The settlers had close ties with the garrison, providing the soldiers with fresh vegetables and fruit until their gardens produced, and Cuban fishermen such as Maximo Hernandez provided fish and succulent turtle steaks.

Col. Brooke had many personal tragedies during the six years at the fort. His wife Lucy was too frail for the steaming jungle climate and the ordeals of frontier life. Their fourth child, John Mercer Brooke, the first resident to be born in Tampa, was delivered Dec. 18, 1826, but by the next year Lucy had to return to Pensacola for her health and Col. Brooke went on furlough to be with her. Lucy lost two of her children to fever and another son was stillborn. The tragedies overcame her and she died in 1839, only 35 years old.

Much of their life together had been spent at Fort Brooke. Though there were Indian troubles, there was no war. In early 1829, he became a brigadier general and was transferred North, leaving this key outpost that was destined to play a major role in the Seminole Wars - the fort that would be the embryo that would blossom into the thriving port that is today’s Tampa.