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NANCY JACKSON – 1815-1907

A Pioneer Eye Witness to Tampa’s Beginning
"I can hardly realize I’m the person I’m talking about".

Written by MARTHA LESTER NELSON

Nancy Jackson was a pioneer of courage and fortitude, who possessed an indomitable spirit for all of her ninety-two years. She was born January 22, 1815 in a deserted cabin in the vicinity of the St. Mary’s River. Her parents, Levi and Nancy Dixon Coller were fleeing for their lives as the Indians were seeking American scalps for a bounty. While the men in the group stood guard around the house, the babe was delivered, and mother and child escaped harm.

After peace was restored, the Coller family lived in Alachua County. When Nancy was seven years old, her father and his two brothers-in-law set out on horseback to choose a home near Tampa, for Levi had heard that the salt water would be beneficial to his health. He selected a site near the mouth of the Hillsborough River. Unfortunately, he failed to file his preemption papers before returning to Alachua "to make one more crop".

In 1829 the Coller family moved to a tract of land on Six Mile Creek, then known as "Coller's Creek". Here the family prospered for several years. Levi had a large farm "where he cultivated the first cotton planted in South Florida, which was used for home manufacture and consumption."³

In 1900 Cynthia K. Farr had a lengthy interview with Nancy Coller Jackson. As the result of that, a booklet was published "Tampa's Earliest Living Pioneer". This conversation with Cynthia Farr will furnish much about Tampa's past that could only be learned from such an eye witness as the old pioneer Nancy herself.

In 1824 the Coller family moved across the river and built a log cabin. Mr. Coller raised vegetables, planted cotton, ginned it himself, and Nancy, her mother and sister Cordelia spun 'dyed it and wove it into cloth for the family's use. Levi and Nancy Dixon Coller and their five children had the distinction of being the first Anglo-American family in the Tampa wilderness.²

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MARTHA LESTER NELSON is a fifth generation Tampan who was born and raised in Hyde Park. Nancy Jackson was her great grandmother.
At this time only a small force of soldiers was at the garrison. One company was under Major Dade, and the other was Major Belden - or Belton. All was peaceful until about 1835. A friendly Indian came to the Coller home to warn them of the danger as hostile Indians were on the warpath.

They were preparing to burn and pillage the houses of all white settlers. This warning was not taken seriously until the Collers found that their horses and boats had been stolen. Then they realized that they must flee to the garrison at once so as to have the protection of the soldiers. The Rev. Daniel Simmons, a Baptist minister, and his wife and daughter had come by ox cart some fifteen miles east of Tampa, for they, too, had received a warning. The two “terror stricken” families felt their escape was doomed until two soldiers from the Fort arrived with a small boat to rescue them. The twenty-one men, women and children had barely reached the safety of the Fort when they saw the reddened sky and the black smoke coming from the destruction of their home. All the years of hard work and the accumulation of necessities and a few luxuries was gone.

The Collers, along with the Simmons, were given temporary quarters in the hospital building. The family drew rations from the government, and Levi Coller became a valuable guide for the troops. He was not only familiar with the country, but knew a great deal about the Indians and their whereabouts.

The day the families arrived at Ft. Brooke, they found that preparations were being made for one of the two Companies to go to Ft. King (near Ocala). Captain Francis Belton refused, saying that before he would go and face certain death for himself and his men, he would resign his commission. But Major Dade would not be called a coward, and said he would "die first" before he
would refuse to obey an order. In Nancy Jackson's words, "These things were said in my hearing - just at our door. My sister Cordelia and I sat up all night and made 100 sacks for powder for Major Dade and his company, and saw them start off. The soldiers stood in a line while the Major and his officers came and bade us all good-bye. His words at parting were very brave, and tears were in many eyes. But before he got half way to Ft. King, his company was massacred.

"John Frazier (Captain Upton Fraser) was one of Dade's men. He was kind of my sweetheart then. He was killed with the rest. The scene of the massacre was where Dade City is now located. The place was named for the fallen hero.

Nancy continued: "After that we moved into two little tents at the fort for safety. We stayed there for about three weeks, and were in constant fear of death. We did not dare go out or cook a mouthful, but did very well on hard bread and water. We could see the heads and shoulders of the Indians moving about one of the bluffs. Belton burned several houses in the garrison thinking the Indians would make batteries of them. I tell you it was a glad day when General Gaines came with his soldiers to relieve our little Company. This gave courage to us all."

For awhile the Collers - along with their nine children lived aboard the ship of Captain Crowell. After its departure with Indians bound for Arkansas, the family was asked to move into rooms in General Jessup's quarters. In Nancy's words, "If it had been the family of a general, they could not have done more. My sister and I - quite proud ladies - felt awfully lifted."

This period of happiness was brief as an epidemic of measles and "camp fever" overtook many of the soldiers.

Nancy's family was not exempt as the four younger brothers and sisters - Sara Anne, Edward, Matilda, and David - died. Their mother became desperately ill, and were it not for the good care of Dr. Robert Jackson, the surgeon's chief steward, she too, would have died. Dr. Jackson was described as a "handsome young man with fine manners". He had been a student at West Point having previously graduated from Rutgers College in New Jersey. Robert Jackson was in the government employ as "compounder of medicines and surgeons chief steward or interne".

Robert Jackson had arrived at Ft. Brooke in 1834, the same year the territorial legislature of Florida organized the County of Hillsborough.

Following the epidemic at the fort, Nancy and Robert Jackson fell in love. They were married in September 1836 in Judge Augustus Steele's office in the garrison. This was the first recorded wedding on Florida's West Coast.

Dr. Burns, chief surgeon, had a room in the hospital vacated, white washed and fitted up for the bride. As the room was adjoining the surgeon's, Nancy was aware of all that was being done. As the wounded were brought in, Robert Jackson not only administered medicines, but assisted in determining whether the injured were living or dead. Nancy relates how there were instances when a scalped soldier was pronounced "hopeless", but Robert used his skill and saved several. His abilities did not go unnoticed, and he found himself in great demand.
At this time General Taylor - later President - was in command with headquarters at Ft. Brooke. Nancy Jackson became acquainted with Mrs. Taylor and her daughter Mrs. Wood, the wife of Dr. Wood one of the fort’s surgeons. The Taylors gave the Jacksons a barrel of dishes as a wedding gift, and when the first baby arrived, Mrs. Wood gave the child a beautiful robe. Nancy and Robert Jackson lived at Ft. Brooke until after the birth of their first child - Mary Josephine - in 1837.

Note - According to my mother - Mary Jackson Lester - the child was the first Anglo-American child born in Hillsborough County. This information came from Nancy Coller Jackson - my mother's grandmother.

In 1838 Robert Jackson asked to be relieved of military duty, and moved near the outlet of Spanishtown Creek. This was about the junction of Verne Street and Plant Avenue. Later he built a house as a "squatter" on the west bank of the Hillsborough River where its waters flow into the bay. Here the family improved a beautiful tract of land - about 160 acres - known by older residents as Jackson’s Point. He became judge of the probate court of Hillsborough County, and in critical cases of illness was called in for consultation.

I would like to digress from Nancy herself, though this does concern her father. Levi Coller was perhaps the first Tampa Bay pioneer to receive a government job. During the Indian War a lighthouse was erected at Egmont Key. Several ships bringing supplies had missed the channel and were stranded on sand bars. It was here at Egmont Key that Levi had the job of lighthouse keeper. But he also acquired lands along the west bank of the Hillsborough, keeping many diversified interests. In the Hillsborough County Court records is a deed from Levi Coller selling all rights of title and claim to that "parcel of land known as Ballast Point and being situated on the west side of the Hillsborough Bay commonly called Tampa Bay in the county and state aforesaid". The sum Levi Coller received was $50.00.

As for Mary and Robert, they were themselves quite remarkable folk, offering some unusual surprises in their lives. To me one of these concerned a foster child, Victoria Montes de Oca. Her father was Don Juan Montes de Oca - a "Spanish gentleman of high family" who settled at Spanishtown Creek before the coming of the Americans.

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Nancy Jackson on the porch of her last home at 205 Platt Street. She is surrounded by her four sons, left to right, William P. “Captain Bill”, Oscar, Robert A., and Jhon B. Jackson. This is the small cottage that is still standing. -- photo courtesy of Martha Lester Nelson

Don Juan became an interpreter for the Army at Ft. Brooke, and was highly regarded by both Americans and Indians.

Before Indian hostilities began, he met an Indian maiden from the village at Lake Thonotosassa, and they were married. A daughter Victoria was born to the couple. While still quite young the mother died leaving Victoria - only a child herself. Nancy and Robert Jackson took the girl into
their home and reared her. Victoria married Alfonso de Launay, a lawyer from Virginia who came to Tampa in 1848. He operated the Palmer House and was active in city and county government affairs. He is best remembered as the second mayor of Tampa. Victoria and de Launay are buried in the Catholic section of Oaklawn Cemetery.

In September of 1848 Nancy and Robert Jackson's family were prosperous and happy with their five children. One day a strong wind developed to gale proportions. The four older children were so frightened that Robert took them to a nearby store to divert them. Nancy remained at home with a sleeping baby William. As the weather became worse, it was apparent it could well be a tidal wave. Robert realized the threatening situation, and he sent an employee to bring the mother and child to safety. When the man reached the house, he saw the "ways" floating. The mother had not realized the danger. She grabbed the baby, and with the help of the employee, she crawled out of the house. Just as she got a few feet away, huge timbers from a nearby shipyard knocked the house off of its foundation, and in a short time it went swirling down the bay. That baby she carried to safety was my grandfather, William Parker Jackson, who had been born in November of 1847.

Accustomed to hardships and trials, the Jacksons stood this as they had stood others. "So thankful", says Nancy, 11 that our lives were spared that we could not mourn for what we had lost, though everything went - money, valuables, bridal gifts and all. Surgeon Wood, General Taylor's son-in-law, thought a great deal of Mr. Jackson, and as a token of his high esteem, he gave him a very large solid mahogany wardrobe, and some fine decanters and other keepsakes, which we prized very highly. But we were never able to find anything of any value. A door of the wardrobe, a child's hat, and a few articles of little value were all that were found".

Once again the family began to build their lives. They erected a more substantial home away from the river bank. They used every means of economy, and began to see to the needs of their ever growing family - eight in all. Their children were educated in private schools, some even had college courses. As Robert Jackson was in failing health, the full responsibility was that of Nancy's.

And then came the Civil War. Tampa was not the scene of bloody conflicts. Nancy remembers that there were three attempts by Union vessels down the bay to bombard Ft. Brooke which was held by the Confederates. The shells fell in the water or unexploded on the land. Because there was some danger, Nancy would load her pony with supplies, gather the children and walk to a friend's home a few miles away and spend each day. At night the family returned home feeling they were safe after dark. Robert remained at home to watch for shells that might fall and ignite the house.

The family was not exempt from involvement in the war. Two of their sons enlisted in the Confederate Army. Oscar - born in 1841 and living in Georgia - served there. The other, John, was here with his family and a young man. Nancy recalls the incident, "When my John enlisted with the Confederates, I thought I could not have it so. His father was sick then, and I knew they were to be sworn in that day. I slipped out just from my own impulse to where Captain Robert Thomas had the boys in camp. John was under age - only a school boy. I was his mother and I was going to forbid them taking him away. When I got near enough, I saw them all in a line with their hands raised to he sworn in. I knew I was too late. I
nearly fainted. I stopped where I was under a tree, and finally got back home." 

This son, John Brown, served in the Confederate forces with distinction. He was a member of Co. K - 7th Florida infantry, and participated in the battle of Chicamauga, and other famous engagements. In the latter part of the war, he was transferred to the Confederate Navy, and took part in many coastal battles. One of his most memorable times was the boarding and capturing of the Union gunboat Water Witch. He served until the surrender. 

Though Robert Jackson’s health was poor, he did Home Guard duty. My grandfather William was only fourteen when hostilities broke out. However, at age sixteen, he too, joined the Home Guard. It was his habit to slip home after dark for supper. One night he was discovered and captured - a frightening experience for one so young. He was carried to a house used for prisoners, and upon his arrival, he found his father had also been captured. Robert assured his son there would be no violence. And they were both treated quite well. Robert Jackson’s health declined rapidly and he died in March of 1865 not realizing his wish to see the hostilities end, which did so about a month later.

Now Nancy Jackson was really alone, left to accomplish the things necessary to insure her future. As yet she had no legal claim to the land where her home was built. Under the new homestead act, she endeavored to secure title to the land the family had been occupying and developing - much of it planted in orange trees. She had intended entering 160 acres as her homestead, but through the unscrupulous dealings of men she had trusted even some government agents, she was forced to do two things that were foreign to her nature - yield and compromise. She relinquished half of the 160 acres rather than incur litigation, and settled for the remaining 80. There was an "inexcusable failure" of the proper official to record her name as homesteader. Following an appeal to Washington, she finally secured her acreage which bordered the Hillsborough River and bay.

In order to continue to secure an independent life for herself and her children, Nancy would sell a portion of her homestead to some who wanted to hasten the growth and development of Tampa. One of these enterprising men was O. H. Platt of Hyde Park, Illinois. In early 1886 he purchased 20 acres of the original Jackson estate, subdivided it and named it Hyde Park after his home town. Hyde Park Avenue was the first street opened.

What used to be called Jackson’s Point is now Hyde Park Avenue, Beach Place, Plant Ave., Platt Street, Cardy Street and Parker Street. Nancy Jackson’s last home still stands at 205 Platt Street - the scene of the interview with Cynthia Farr. Cardy Street was named for Joseph Cardy, the husband of Nancy’s first child Mary. This was the location of their home. Parker Street near the Tampa Tribune got its name because that was a family name of Robert Jackson. Theresa Tinney - a granddaughter of Nancy Jackson resided on Parker Street until her death in 1940.

Nancy saw seven of her eight children reach maturity - only one - Parker - died at age thirteen. Of her boys she could be justly proud. Oscar was a successful business man in Georgia, remaining there after his Confederate War days. We know that John Brown distinguished himself in his military days. William - my grandfather who was affectionately called "Captain Bill" - became a captain of several ships coming into
Tampa. These ships were bringing all the mail and passengers from Cedar Keys and New Orleans as those were the nearest railroad points from the north and west. He also substituted on ships traveling to Havana, Cuba. In 1914 he was elected to the board of county commissioners to represent his district. Robert, the youngest son was twice elected sheriff of Hillsborough County. In 1887 the Tampa Electric Company was organized by five men who were responsible for bringing the first electric lights to Tampa. One of these men was Robert A. Jackson.\textsuperscript{11}

As Nancy Jackson finished her interview with Cynthia Farr she said, "I can hardly realize as I tell over my past life that I am the person that I am talking about." It is a wonder indeed! This lady should certainly be recognized as a unique human being who faced every challenge. She was a living witness to many of the tragic scenes of Tampa’s past; yet she had the ability to rise above all these troubles and disappointments with renewed hope and courage. Her fondest wish was that she might live her remaining years in quite serenity in her own home. This she did until her death in 1907. She was buried in Oaklawn Cemetery beside her beloved Robert. The large stone reads: "In memory of our mother and father, Nancy Coller 1815-1907 and Robert Jackson, 1802-1865" - Buried in the same plot are their children: Parker, Oscar, Mary, William, Cordelia, John and Teresa.

This poem appeared in \textit{The Times} newspaper following the death of Nancy Jackson – March 24, 1907. She had always considered \textit{The Times} staff as her protégés. She always backed her own birthday cake, and say that a large portion was shared by the “folks at \textit{The Times}”. This custom she continued for her last birthday in January of 1907.

**THE VICTORY**

(Dedicated to the lamented Mrs. Nancy Jackson, Tampa’s most beloved pioneer.)

She fell asleep in the autumn of life,  
When the harvest was garnered clean;  
She passed, like a soldier, from the field of strife,  
Passed with a faith unmoved, serene.  
The harvest which she garnered from the fields of human needs,  
Was a harvest rich, in value—a harvest of good deeds.  
Like the tired knight who rests on his shield  
When the din of the battle is o’er,  
She sleeps in peace on victory’s field—  
Sleeps to awake on earth no more.  
But her victory was not earthly—her triumph was from above;  
Her weapons were not for carnage—they were weapons of tender love.  
You have seen the age-worn roses fade away,  
Beneath Time’s hand their petals droop and fall;  
You have seen their tints turn ashen grey,  
In their death you have felt the funeral pall.  
But in passing, they have left a fragrance rare  
A perfume in memory’s garden, in the heart a lasting prayer.  
So ’twas with this rare human flower,  
That bloomed in the Garden of Life;  
That gave hope to its comrades each hour,  
That attained beauty and strength through strife.  
What nobler battle was e’er fought—what greater victory won—  
Than in gaining the master’s plaudit—than in hearing His words, well done?"  
-F. L. Huffaker
NOTE

This article would not be complete without giving special thanks to my late mother Mary Jackson Lester - granddaughter of Nancy Jackson.

My mother spent many years researching family history - authenticating her dates, events, and all material so that it would be absolutely accurate. She carefully collected this information, including conversations with Nancy Jackson, Mary Cardy (my mother’s aunt), and her own father "Captain Bill". It is this detailed information that has helped to make this story possible.

REFERENCES

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8 Ibid.

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11 Ibid.