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ROBERT AMBRISTER'S REPUTED STORE AT TAMPA BAY

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In several of the various books written about Florida since 1817, there are mentions of a store that was established by Robert Ambrister at Tampa Bay. It is the object of this article to examine the available facts and make a conclusion concerning the existence of such a store.

In the book *Territory of Florida* published by John Lee Williams in 1837 there is a statement that lying between "Oyster River" and another river on the southwestern side of Tampa Bay is Negro Point. According to Williams, Arbuthnot and Ambrister had a plantation there cultivated by 200 blacks and the ruins of the cabins can still be seen.¹ In a book published in 1986, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands* written by William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson there is a statement that Robert Ambrister established a small settlement at Tampa Bay in March, 1818.²

BRITISH DEFEATED

In order to fully understand this matter of Ambrister and Arbuthnot at Tampa Bay, the events that took place in Florida during the War of 1812 should be reviewed. In November 1814 the British established a fort at Prospect Bluff some 30 miles up the Apalachicola River from its mouth where food, clothing and arms were distributed to the Indians and Blacks.³ Such efforts represented a desire that the Indians and Blacks would harass the American frontier while the British made a landing to destroy the American army. Of course, these efforts were in vain for the British suffered several defeats including one at New Orleans and the peace treaty previously signed at Ghent relinquished all British claims to southern land. By June, 1815 the British had left

Florida and the Blacks and Indians had no foreign allies.

Brevet Captain George Woodbine of the Royal Marines who had trained the Blacks and Indians at Prospect Bluff, returned to Nassau but still entertained a desire to make a successful conquest of Florida. In June, 1817 a force led by an adventurer Gregor McGregor captured Fernandina and raised a Green Cross flag to proclaim the establishment of a new state but, becoming discouraged with discipline and financial problems, left the scene with his followers for Nassau.⁴ Back in Nassau McGregor met with Woodbine and the two worked out a plan by which they would conquer Florida. An army composed of British veterans would be raised in the Bahamas and landed at Tampa Bay where, assisted by a combined force of Blacks and Indians, the army would march over land and capture St. Augustine from the small Spanish garrison. Tampa Bay was selected as the landing spot, for it had one of the largest harbors along the coast and was within the land reputedly given by the Indians to Woodbine during his War of 1812 service.⁵

The first step in his plan took place when Woodbine was able to get passage aboard the schooner of Alexander Arbuthnot, a Scottish trader who was opening a store on the Suwannee River. When the schooner was anchored at the mouth of the river, Billy Bowlegs, leader of Indians in the area, and men loaded in five canoes came aboard and talked with Woodbine all night. On the following days Woodbine met with Cappachimico and other Indian leaders from northern Florida. During this voyage Woodbine may have left some Blacks brought from the Bahamas at Tampa Bay. Arbuthnot was not pleased with his passengers Woodbine and the Blacks for they paid no money and were given a trip

and food for more than two months. So far as can be determined, Woodbine's trip was purely a preliminary one to lay the groundwork for the second and more decisive phase.

The second phase of the Woodbine-McGregor plan called for a landing at Tampa Bay and the mobilization of the joint Indian-Black force. Plans were set for the landing of a force under McGregor on May 1, 1818 at the middle island at the entrance to Tampa Bay, the reading of a proclamation to the people of Florida and subsequent march towards St. Augustine. Robert Chrystie Ambrister who had served at Prospect Bluff as an officer returned to service with the British Army and was wounded at Waterloo. After the battle, victory and return to Nassau he met Woodbine and McGregor. The adventure in which Florida would be conquered thrilled Ambrister and he joined the Woodbine--McGregor force where he was given the commission of captain. It was to be Ambrister's job to train the Blacks and Indians for their role in the conquest of St. Augustine. The invasion of Florida in the spring of 1818 by Andrew Jackson with eight hundred regulars, 900 militiamen and 300 Indians crushed the planned seizure of Florida. On April 6, Jackson's army captured St. Marks and from there units raced for the Suwannee River where Black and Indian settlements were believed to be located.

MOVES FROM TAMPA

Ambrister who had come to Tampa in March, 1818 to gather up the Blacks left there by Woodbine in the fall of 1817 and his men moved northward to the mouth of the Suwannee River where the anchored schooner Chance owned by Arbuthnot was seized.

Ambrister and the Blacks sailed the Chance to St. Marks where they hoped to capture the place but were prevented by an American blockade. When the schooner returned to the Suwannee for a trip to Tampa it was captured by Andrew Jackson's men on their way to destroy Black and Indian villages along the river and used to carry the wounded and sick to St. Marks.

TAMPA STORE DOUBTFUL

More evidence as to the duration of Ambrister's stay in Florida was disclosed at his trial in April, 1818 at St. Marks. In the hearing Ambrister claimed to have come to Florida on or about March 1, 1818 and it was on March 20 that he seized the Chance. Consequently, there was little or no chance to establish a store at Tampa Bay in 20 days. Woodbine had more time but his dependence upon Arbuthnot's schooner both in 1817 for himself and 1818 for Ambrister shows that he had limited means of transportation. There was no available evidence to show how many Blacks Ambrister picked up at Tampa from the earlier Woodbine visit but it certainly was not a large number. There is considerable evidence that Black people fleeing slavery established villages at or near Tampa Bay in the 1810-1820 period and these inhabitants fled south or to the Bahamas when the United States took over in 1821.

Altogether, it seems that the Woodbine-McGregor plan failed because few or no veterans could be recruited in the Bahamas, sufficient funds could not be raised to create a suitable naval force and the invasion of Florida by Andrew Jackson stopped all assistance by the Seminoles. Tampa had lost a chance to be where

McGregor could have proclaimed the creation of another Republic of Florida.

FOOTNOTES

¹ John Lee Williams *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837), 299-300.

² William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Borderlands* (Pensacola, 1986), 320.

³ John Sugden "The Southern Indians in the War of 1812: the Closing Phase," *Florida Historical Quarterly* (January, 1982), 299-300.

⁴ Charlton W. Tebeau *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 112.

⁵ *Niles Weekly Register* (Microfilm) X111 January 18, 1818 Letter of Thomas Wayne to Benjamin Homans September 17, 1817.