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Samuel Spencer: The Indian Agent Who Did Not Want to Come to Tampa

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In March, 1849, supervision of Indian affairs was transferred from the War Department to the Interior Department. After the last agent to all of the Seminoles, Wiley Thompson, had been murdered by the Indians in 1835, the post of agent had usually been filled by an Army officer who was in charge of feeding the Indians during a short stay in Tampa and placing them aboard a ship bound for New Orleans thence to Indian territory. The one who had the job in 1849 was capable Captain John C. Casey who had served in that post for some time.

With the transfer of authority from the War Department to the Interior Department some fresh persons were appointed to the posts of Indian agents including Samuel Spencer as sub-agent to the Seminoles. Since Spencer's salary was $750 a year, he proposed in his first letter to Secretary of the Interior Thomas Ewing that he be permitted to remain in Jacksonville and appoint from there the merchants needed to manage trading posts established for the Indians. In his reply dated June 7, 1849, Ewing informed Spencer that he should make the decision concerning the establishment of trading posts but he must reside near the territory of the tribe for which he was agent and could not leave the bounds of the reserve without permission.

SPENCER DELAYS MOVING

In response to Ewing, Spencer wrote the following letter:

“I deem it proper to inform the department that I have not yet removed to Fort Brooks for a few very good reasons.

The health of my family will not permit a removal at this time.

There is no residence at Tampa which I can obtain for myself and family. Major Morris has proposed building in the garrison for the accommodation of the officers located there, and offers to prepare a building for myself.

While absent from Tampa I can have a person engaged at the trading house, who will give me every information required, or send me an express at my expense if necessary. I shall have a person at Tampa, and probably one at Enterprise for the same purpose, as persons who trade or trespass in the Indian territory enter or return in the neighborhood of these places, and it is the same in reference to the Indians. From Jacksonville the communication almost daily and very rapid to every important point in this state and four times per week to Washington; with this arrangement and visiting them regularly every three months I am certain I can discharge the duties of subagent as well or better than if located where they are.

I understand the law to direct that the sub-agent shall give a bond of one thousand dollars, and shall reside in the Indian territory or at such place as the President shall direct.
In undertaking the duties of the office, I intend to perform them perfectly and promptly, and whenever I find I cannot do so I shall resign most cheerfully upon the slightest intimation from the Department to that effect.”

Realizing that he should visit his Indian wards, Spencer left for Fort Brooke which he called by mistake "Fort Brooks" where he met a well-informed merchant Thomas P. Kennedy. The pioneer trader told him that the Indians were busy hunting to get deer for the annual "green corn dance" and the women busy cooking for the same event and as a result could not meet Spencer. Major W.W. Morris at Fort Brooke told Spencer that he had $200 for purchase of goods needed by the Indians. At this point Spencer returned to Jacksonville.

**CAN'T LIVE IN JACKSONVILLE**

A second blow came to Spencer when Commissioner of Indian Affairs Orlando Brown informed Spencer that he should write to Brown, the immediate supervisor, and not to the Secretary of the Interior. Brown pointed out that Spencer could not live at Jacksonville and keep his job. He was to keep intruders away from the "neutral ground" located to the north of the reserve and from the reserve proper. When Spencer claimed that intruders had settled on the neutral ground J. Butterfield, Commissioner General Land Office, replied that no such land claims could be filed and troops should remove any such intruders.

In September Spencer reported to Brown that he had appointed Colonel Elijah Mattox to the post of Indian trader but Brown replied that the laws of Florida had been extended to the Indian reservation and the Federal government had no authority to license trade in the Indian land.

**"A HARSH WELCOME"**

In September 1849 Spencer made his second visit to Fort Brooke where he received a harsh welcome. Spencer informed Brown that he could get permission to trade with the Indians from the Governor of Florida and planned to open two stores, one on Peace River and the other on the Caloosahatchee. Spencer stated that he would not go into Indian territory unless protected by an armed force of fifty to sixty men but since Major General David E. Twiggs would not provide him with any regulars he would need a volunteer force. Finally Spencer boasted that he could bribe the Indians to leave Florida in six months or force them out in twelve. In conclusion, he promised to resign by November and suggested the names of several persons to replace him. Spencer at this time could get little help from Major William Morris or Casey who were able to understand Spencer's limitations.

Spencer's days were numbered for he had committed the unforgivable sin of visiting Washington in September, 1849 without being instructed to do so from Commissioner of Indian Affairs Orlando Brown. After receiving such information from Brown, Thomas Ewing relieved Spencer of his duties, the sub-agency was discontinued and all duties, public funds and property of the office returned to Captain Casey. It was another case of a person with an inadequate background being appointed to a governmental post and by several actions showing his unfitness.
FOOTNOTES


2 Ewing to Spencer, June 7, 1849, SED 49, 108.

3 The hurricane of September 25, 1848 destroyed most of Fort Brooke and it took some time to rebuild what had been swept away by the wind and water. Karl Grismer, Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida (St. Petersburg, 1950), 112-115.

4 Spencer to Ewing, June 29, 1849, SED 49, 109.

5 Thomas Pugh Kennedy had maintained a sutler’s store at Fort Brooke during the final years of the Second Seminole War. In 1848 he opened a general store at Tampa in cooperation with John Darling and an Indian trading store at Charlotte Harbor. Grismer, Tampa, 313.

6 Actually the Green Corn Dance held during June or July of each year would have been an excellent opportunity to meet the Indians before they entered the area restricted only to the Indians.

7 Spencer to Ewing, June 25, 1849, SED 49, 111-112.

8 Commissioner of Indian Affairs Orlando Brown to Spencer July 25, 1849, SED 49, 113-114.

9 In 1842 the Indians had been given a 4,000,000 acre temporary "hunting and planting" reserve in southwestern Florida. In 1845 to protect the reserve from white intruders President James Polk had designated a twenty mile neutral zone of more than 3,000,000 acres which was to the north of the reserve.


11 Spencer to Brown, September 15, 1849, and Brown to Spencer September 13, [sic] 1849, SED 49, 138.

12 Spencer to Brown, October 1, 1849, SED 49, 138-139.

13 Brown to Ewing, September 19, 1849, SED 49, 139.

14 Ewing to Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs A.S. Loughery, September 27, 1849, SED 49, 140.