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THE CREATION OF FORT SULLIVAN: Document and commentary

Dr. Joe Knetsch

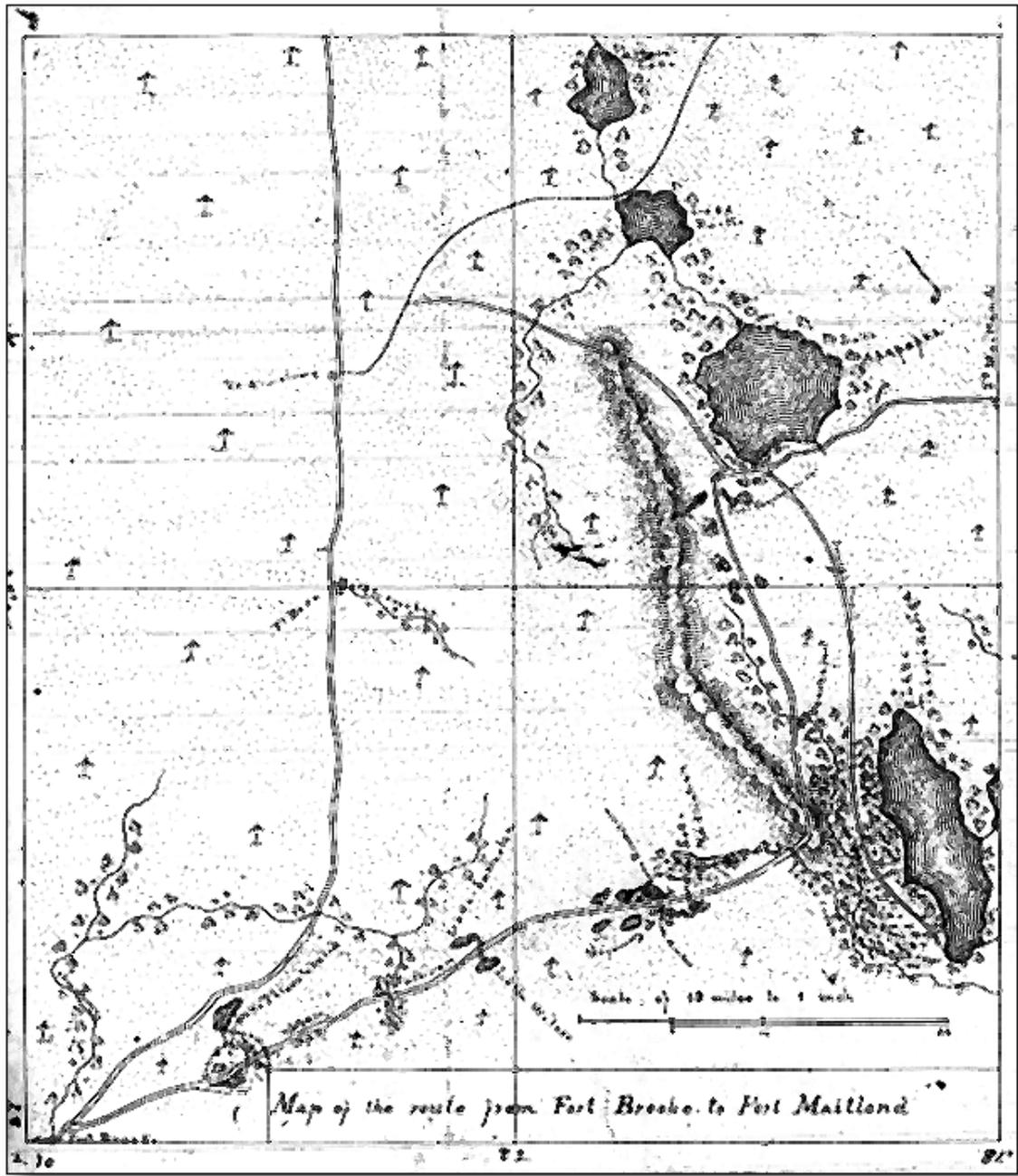
Fort Sullivan, like many of the fortifications on the Florida frontier created during the Seminole Wars, was a temporary structure. It was not meant to be a permanent home for the military serving this vast wilderness. In the documents that follow, the purpose of the fort was clearly set out, it was to be a part of the line of defense for the settled areas of Florida. It was not a pretentious building campaign and would serve only as long as the "Indian menace" remained a threat to the settlers. Other forts established on this "chain of posts" included Fort Cummings, Fort Davenport, Fort Gatlin, Fort Maitland and Fort Mellon. Significantly for the future of Florida, almost every one of these fortifications became the focal point for later settlements. Fort Gatlin became the basis for modern Orlando, Fort Maitland became part of the city of the same name and Fort Mellon, after passing through the hands of Henry A. Crane, became the foundation for today's Sanford. It almost goes without saying that the western end of this chain of posts was Fort Brooke, in the heart of modern Tampa.

The chain of posts grew out of a desire to protect the frontier settlements and was part of a larger strategy conceived by General Zachary Taylor. The main thrust of Taylor's plan was the famous construction of one post per twenty mile squares stretching from the Gulf to the Atlantic and from the Georgia line south towards the Fort Brooke [Tampa] to Fort King [Ocala] road.

The road along which Fort Sullivan was located was meant, originally, to stretch only

to Fort Gatlin, however, as supplies came to that post overland from Fort Mellon, on Lake Monroe, it was later decided to continue to the construction of the road and posts to Fort Mellon. Part of the delay in first constructing the road and the posts was the want of medical staff to take care of the troops. On January 10, 1839, Taylor's adjutant, Lieutenant William Grandin, notified Lieutenant Colonel Cummings: "As Dr. Worrell has arrived at Tampa there is no necessity for delay in opening the road and establishing the Posts between Tampa Bay and Fort Gatlin, besides which so soon as the General knew that no Medical Officer had accompanied Major McClintock, Dr. Archer was ordered to report to you. It is therefore hoped and expected that said road if not completed is in a great state of forwardness, and that at the Central post or that nearest Lake Ahapokha 10,000 Rations of provisions and 5000 of forage will be deposited as soon as it can be conveniently done by the Qr. Mts. Dept."¹ At this point in time, the Tampa Bay to Fort Gatlin road was the southern most line of defense for all of Florida, the posts along the Caloosahatchee and other points south having been either abandoned or reduced to supply depot status.²

Although Fort Sullivan was meant to be a temporary post, it is interesting to note, both in the letters and on the sketch, the existence of large gardens, sufficient to feed "75 or 80 men". According to an Act of Congress passed in 1819, only permanent posts were to be allowed to grow such vegetables and forage. In Florida, because of the lack of local production (and population) and the expense of shipping supplies into the



Copy of the "Map of the route from Fort Brooke to Fort Maitland." The forts were meant to be a line of defense for the settled areas of Florida, not a "permanent home for the military serving this vast wilderness."

(Copy of sketch courtesy of author.)

Territory, the U. S. Army was very lenient in allowing this slight transgression of the general regulations. There is abundant evidence in the reports found in the Adjutant General's Office to verify the regularity with which such gardens were founded in so-called temporary posts.

Fort Sullivan E Florida

February 22nd 1839

Sir

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of Genl order No 60, calling the attention of Commandants of Posts to par 2 Art 19 Genl regulations and in obedience thereto have the honor to report that this the first in a line of Posts established from Tampa Bay to Fort Mellon. Its distance from Tampa Bay is twenty six miles, the road generally good, the next post in advance of this (Ft. Cummings) is twenty miles the road to which Post I have learnt is good, there are the remains of several old Indian towns near this, but from appearance they do not seem to have been occupied for the last twelve or eighteen months. This section of the country is generally flat Pine woods, Dry hammocks, ponds of water & cypress swamps, near this there are a stream of water running North Westerly direction supposed to be the main branch of the Big Hillsborough river, its power or junction with other Streams hav[sic] not been ascertained. Game is abundant, such a[sic] Deer, Turkey, Fish &c. The land at, and near this, is more fertile than any I have seen in C. Florida. I have now under cultivation between 6 & 10 [unclear] acres planted in Garden seeds, Corn & Beans, which I think will yield vegetables sufficient for 75 or 80 men. I regret that I have not been able to make a more full and complete report on the various points enumerated in consequence of my

Knowledge of the Topography of this section of the Country being confined alone to the vicinity of this Post.

Genl R Jones }
Aat. G1 Washington }

Very Respectfully yr ob Servant
H Garner Capt 3 Arty

Fort Sullivan E. Fl.

Sir.

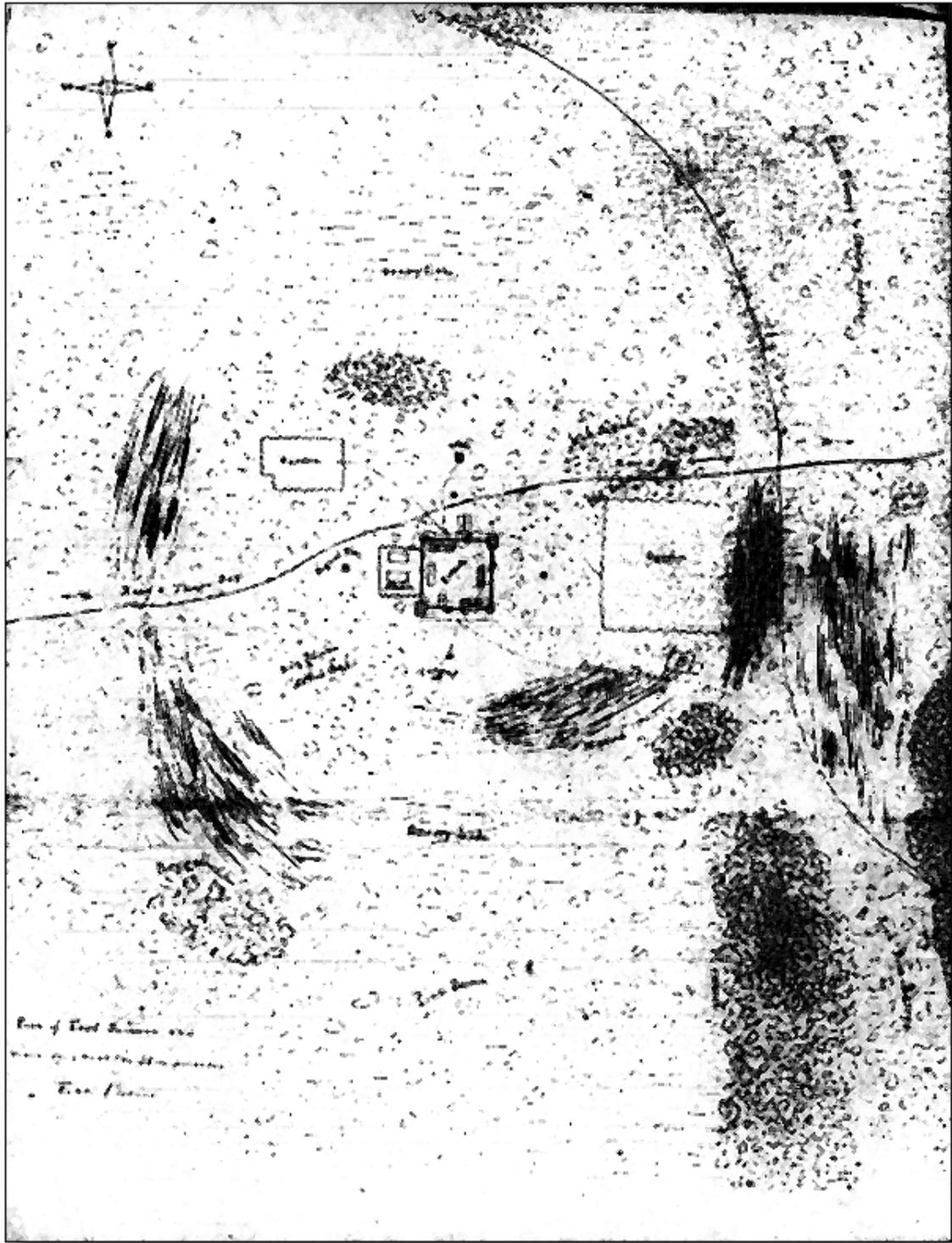
I have the honor to Transmit herewith a sketch of Fort Sullivan E.F. and the surrounding country prepared by Lt. W. A. Brown 3d Arty,

Very respectfully
Yr ob Servant

H Garner
Capt 3d Arty

Gnl R. Jones
Aat. Genl
Washington

"Fort Sullivan" is the first of a chain of posts extending from "Tampa Bay" to Fort Mellon (on the St. Johns). It is 26 miles from and in a direction a little E. of N E. of Tampa Bay, and 72 miles from Fort Mellon. Fort Cummings is the next post on the line, twenty miles distant & nearly due north. The roads both east and west are generally good. First post (Fort Sullivan) was established by Col. Cummings command of Artillery & Infantry in the month of January last & is garrisoned by Comp. G 3d Artillery under the command of Capt. Garner. The work is a pine picketing 110 feet square with two block houses at diagonal corners & store houses at the extremity of the other diagonal.



Copy of a "sketch of Fort Sullivan E. F. and the surrounding country prepared by Lt. W. A. Brown" United States Army 3rd Artillery sent on August 31, 1839 to Captain Garner. The locations of the gardens, target range, well, stable and parade ground are clearly drawn. Note the "Road to Tampa Bay" marled by an arrow leading west from the fort.

(Copy of sketch courtesy of author.)

The fort is situated in the centre of a small pine barren, encompassed with wet & dry marsh & small hammocks. The surrounding country is generally low and flat consisting of Marshes, Grassy Lakes, Cypress Hammocks & Pine Barrens. A small stream called the Hichipucassa passes within 300 yards of the fort running in a north westerly direction; this stream was supposed to be the main branch of the Big Hillsborough, (which empties into the gulf at Hillsborough Bay) but from the fact of its being dry in April last, whilst the Hillsborough was in its usual state, precludes the idea of a connection with it at *all seasons*. The land in the vicinity of the post is very fertile, some points having before been cultivated by the Indians: many kinds of vegetables are produced in abundance in the gardens cultivated by the command. The water is obtained from a well near the fort: it possesses a disagreeable flavor and odour, passing over Rotten Lime Stone, & appears to be strongly impregnated with a Sulpheric of Iron, up to this period its use has not been attended with bad effects; on the contrary

the command has enjoyed excellent health, though from the nature of the surrounding country and the waters, a different result was anticipated.

There are remains of two or three Indian villages, about two miles from the fort in a south-westerly direction and one close to the fort; these are supposed to have been deserted about two years since. The features of the country for a considerable extent around the post are similar to those already described.

For/Capt. Garner 3d Arty Commanding Post 31st in August 1839.

W. A. Brown
Lt. 3d Arty

The above is an accurate sketch of Fort Sullivan and the surrounding country.

H Garner
Capt. 3d Arty

ENDNOTES

[Source: Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1822-1860. Roll 187. Record Group 94. G 1-200, 1839. National Archives Microcopy 567. Washington: National Archives and Records Service, 1964.]

¹ Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1822-1860. Roll No. 196. Record Group 94. S 355 - T 60, 1839. National Archives Microcopy No. 567. Washington: National Archives and Records Service, 1964. Letter of January 10, 1839. Grandin to Cummings.

² For a general discussion of the strategy used by Taylor, see K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton

Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 75-95. Also, see John Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War: 1835-1842* (Revised Edition) (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1985) pp. 245-73. Finally, see Joe Knetsch, "General Strategy and the Second Seminole War." Unpublished paper presented to the combined Marion County and Micanopy Historical Societies, June 19, 1999. Copies are available at the University of South Florida Library, Special Collections, Tampa, Florida; and at the University of Florida George Smathers Libraries, Special Collections, Gainesville, Florida.