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Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Cummings and the Fort Brooke to Fort Mellon Road

Dr. Joe Knetsch

The author of the following document, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Cummings, was a proud veteran of the War of 1812 who began his long and illustrious military career in 1808 as a Second Lieutenant of the "Light Dragoons". Prior to the War of 1812, he had received two promotions (First Lieutenant and Captain), which was a difficult task in the days of the small army. The native of Ireland worked hard during the war and was rewarded with a transfer to the 4th Regiment of Infantry in 1815. Within four short years, he had risen to the rank of Major of the 8th Regiment of Infantry, transferring to the 7th Regiment of Infantry in 1823. In 1828, Cummings received a promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel of the 2nd Regiment of Infantry. Assigned to Florida duty in November of 1838, as he notes below, he immediately set out for his post at Fort Brooke, Tampa Bay. The uncertainty of travel on Florida waters during the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) is well illustrated in the following document. After the completion of this road, Cummings returned to Fort Brooke and was rewarded for his diligent attention to duty with a full Colonel's rank in December of 1839. He did not have the pleasure of enjoying this rank for too long. Alexander Cummings passed from this earth on January 31, 1842.¹

The route depicted on the map includes a number of place names which currently exist on the map of Florida, including the city of Maitland. However, some of the other spots are foreign to our current experience. Forts Sullivan, Cummings, Gatlin, and Mellon no

longer exist. Luckily, historian Canter Brown Jr., in his award-winning volume, Florida's Peace River Frontier has identified these places for us. The old Indian town of Itchepuckesassa/Fort Sullivan is today's Plant City; Fort Cummings is known to all today as Lake Alford; and Fort Davenport gave its name to the community of Davenport in northeastern Polk County.² Fort Gatlin is reputed to be the original home of today's Orlando, while at the eastern end of the road, Fort Mellon became the nucleus for the city of Sanford. This war-time road became an important route for the early settlers of the area and greatly facilitated communication between the settlements, which relied heavily upon the troops stationed at Fort Brooke for protection once the war had ended. An important part of the route is still in use as State Road No. 92, connecting Lake Alford with Davenport and Kissimmee.

In the document that follows, the reader will see the rough frontier of Florida in its most raw form. The road was constructed in essentially virgin territory [as the Army and white population understood the term]. The low, boggy and muddy wetlands were a major impediment to road construction. The men labored nearly as long constructing some of the bridges and causeways as they did in building Forts Sullivan and Cummings. What is more remarkable about the document is that this construction took place at the beginning of what was the rainy season in South Florida. The fact that the weather is not mentioned is a good indication that this year was one of the few dry years during that long and tragic war. Additionally, it should be kept in mind while

reading this report that the entire enterprise was done under the watchful eyes of the Seminoles and their allies. Just because the Army officers make little or no mention of their immediate presence does not mean they were unobserved. The fact that recent horse tracks were noticed headed toward the Big Cypress clearly indicates their presence. The tenacity and bravery of the men of Cummings' command cannot be doubted under these telling circumstances.

*Head quarters, Eastern District
of Florida,*

Fort Heileman, June 10, 1839,

Sir,

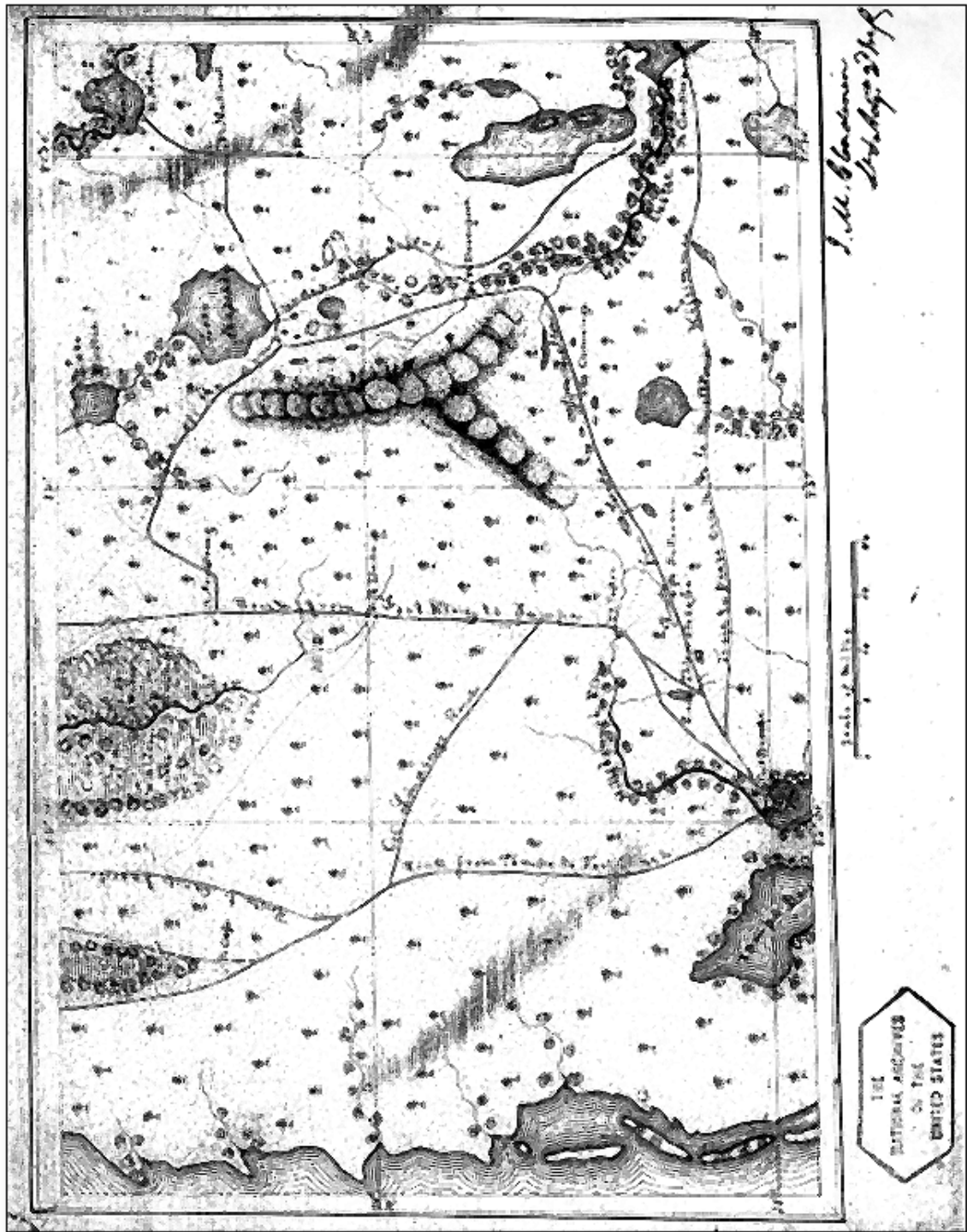
In obedience to a circular dated Head quarters, Army of the south, Fort Brooke 23d May 1839, requiring a report of my operations in Florida from the commencement of the campaign last fall to the present time, giving as far as practicable the movements of the several detachments, under my command, the number and extent of bridges, causeways, Blockhouses built &c. I have the honour to state, that I arrived in Florida on the 8th of November last at Garey's Ferry, and was informed that Genl. Taylor had left directions that I should repair to Fort Brooke on the 12th of Nov. I set Out with my staff for Fort White [on the Santa Fe River, where I expected to find a steam boat for Tampa Bay, in this however, I was disappointed, and after remaining there four days with a hope that a boat would reach the place, I retraced my steps to Newnansville, & from thence to Micanopy & continued on to Fort Clinch [on the Withlacoochee River] where I met with Genl. Taylor who was on his way to the Suwannee & Middle Florida. From (Genl. Taylor I received an order for my Government in obedience to which, I

proceeded on to Fort Brooke, being accompanied as far as the Anuttelaga Hammock by Captain Garrett of the 1st Inf, with his company, who was directed to establish a post at this point. I reached Fort Brooke on the 8th of December, where I found about 260 Indians & negroes assembled for emigration, Captain Abercrombie had not returned from the Sanybal [Caloosahatchee River], to which he had been sent by Genl. Taylor with a view to prevail on the hostile Indians to come in. The command at Fort Brooke being small I was desirous that the Captain should return with his company before I should set out on the duties assigned me by the General. I deemed it hardly safe to leave the post without a sufficient force for its protection while there was so large a number of Indians & negroes, some of whom, it was believed, were not too well disposed towards us.

Major McClintock with four companies of the 3d Regt. of Artillery, arrived at Tampa Bay about the middle of Dec. which with the three companies of Infantry, made the command appear large on paper, it must be understood, however, in speaking of companies, that none of them were complete the Artillery averaging about forty, & the Infantry a little over fifty men to a company.

On the 7th of January 1839, three companies of Arty & two of Inf. marched out in the direction of Hitchpucksassa with Brevt. Major Wilcox & I joined them in the evening, the train consisted of thirty four wagons loaded with provisions & forage, the road was accurately measured & marked by Lieut. Ketchum, Actg. Topographical Engineer.

8th. The troops were under way at daylight & left the Peace creek road 11 miles from Tampa Bay, two miles farther we came to



This finely detailed map, prepared by Adjutant Clendenin, 2nd Regiment of Infantry, United States Army, clearly shows the locations of several fortifications on the Florida frontier. Forts Mellon, Maitland, and Gatlin are in the top right section. *Lake Ahapopka* is due west of Fort Maitland. Tampa Bay, the Hillsborough River, and Fort Brooke can be seen in the bottom left. Fort Dade is just up from center. Fort Cummings, known today as Lake Alfred, was named for Lt. Col. Alexander Cummings. (Map from the National Archives courtesy of the author.)

the Plantation of Mr. Simmons, which had been abandoned soon after the commencement of the war, the Indians had destroyed all the buildings fences &c &c. from this place the road was opened as we advanced, at the distance of 15 miles we came to a small stream with muddy bottom over which was thrown a bridge of rough logs, two miles farther brought us to Buzzard creek [Baker Creek], which empties into the Thono de sassa lake, the stream was deep & muddy on each side, here we made a substantial bridge about 200 feet in length with a causeway on each side which enabled us to pass the wagons over in safety. Encamp at this creek where we were engaged two days in building the bridge.

10th. Pass through low grounds & swamps, the pioneers had heavy work in opening the road, progress about 5 miles.

11th. Made an early start & after passing over & through swamps & Hammocks arrive at the old settlement of Hitchpucksassa, where we commenced building a Fort 110 feet square, with two Block houses & two Store Houses.

12th. This morning I made an excursion in the direction of the Sand Hills, with the mounted company, passed over a high ridge with a lake on each side, this was the commencement of the Sand hills, after riding about 15 miles returned to camp in the evening, where the troops had been busily employed at the work & had made considerable progress.

13th. Returned to Fort Brooke in company with Adj. Clendenin intending to come out again in a few days.

23d. In conformity with previous intentions I set out this morning with a small escort of Dragoons, the post at Hitchpucksassa was

completed & was named Fort Sullivan, Captain Garner with his company 3d. Arty were left as a Garrison to the Fort. The work was in fine order, the block houses were used as quarters for the soldiers in which they were very comfortable & two good & substantial Store houses were put up for the preservation of the public property.

24th. Leave Fort Sullivan at an early hour, having dismissed my escort of Dragoons, & continued my journey in company with Lieut. Hoffman. In passing the Sand Hills we are most of the time in view of a large pond or Lake, the water of which is very good & they abound in fish of various kinds. about the middle of the day I came to the camp where I found Major Wilcox busily employed, the Fort was pretty well advanced, the Block houses & store houses nearly completed. This post is situated on the point of the ridge, with a Lake on each side and a beautiful sheet of Water in front covering about 300 acres, abounding in fine fish & turtle.

Between the lake which lies on the north side of this post & that in front, there is a stream which connects the two, about 200 yards in length with a dense Hammock through which a road was cut & a strong bridge built between 200 & 300 feet in length which required great labour, this is 46 1/2 miles from Fort Brooke, the country in advance is unknown to us & to our guides, no white man had yet passed through it.

26th. Set out with the intention of ascertaining the situation of Fort Gatlin, from the best information I could obtain it was about 23 miles S. W. of Fort Mellon, I had with me Lieut. Anderson of the 2d Infy. & 30 mounted men with a negro Interpreter & an Indian guide, neither of whom know anything of the country nor (apparently) of anything else. our course at first was about

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On the 7th of January, 1839, three companies of Art'y &
 two of Inf. marched out in the direction of St. John's Pass,
 with Brevt. Major Wilcox & I joined them in the evening -

A reproduction of page two of Lt. Col. Alexander Cummings' report of June 10, 1839 to Brig. General Zachary Taylor, Commanding Army of the South, Tampa Bay. Cummings writes, "I reached Fort Brooke on the 8th of December, where I found about 260 Indians & negroes assembled for emigration, . . . I deemed it hardly safe to leave the post without sufficient force . . ." (Reproduction of the document from the National Archives courtesy of the author.)

N. F. & continued so bearing a little to the north all day, passed two streams within the first 4 miles & two others at the distance of 15 & 20 miles all of which would require bridging.

27th. At 12 O'clock struck Genl. Jesup's road which passes down to To hop ke laga, on which we travelled four of five miles after leaving this road discovered a large trail of mounted men who had recently passed in the direction of the Big Cypress.

Owing to the ignorance of the guide we were led out of our way & passed on the north side of lake Ahapopka, on discovering this mistake, I concluded to go on to Fort Mellon, the Hammock which leads off from the north end of the lake, is about a mile wide, in passing through which we crossed two small streams of clear running water. encamp on the bank of a handsome creek about 30 feet wide which our guide said was the outlet of Ahapopka Lake.

28th. Pass through several Hammocks some of which are wet & boggy, about noon came to a handsome stream about 25 yards wide with a thick Hammock on each side, which was difficult to penetrate owing to large vines & cypress knees. The ground also, was deep & boggy, this stream rises or rather issues from a spring a short distance above the crossing. arrive at Fort Mellon at Sundown. I only remained at this post one night, it did not strike me as a favourable location for health, the place being low & the country immediately round it wet & muddy.

29th. Set out on my return taking the south side of Lake Ahapopka, to Fort Maitland 14 miles the direction is nearly south, here we left the road & took a course West, South West, without a trail. in camp at a pond of bad water.

30th. About two & half miles, brought us to Genl. Jesup's road, which we struck at the South end of Lake Ahapopka, continued our course about two miles farther when we came to our trail outwards, about 8 miles farther encamp between two ponds which afforded protection to our front & rear, on a handsome knoll of land, and only required a Sentinel on each flank.

31st. Arrived at Camp where Major Wilcox had completed the Fort which he named Fort Cummings.

Leaving one Company of Artillery at this post under the command of Lieut. Bragg, I directed Major Wilcox to proceed in the direction of Fort Maitland & establish another post between twenty & thirty miles in advance of Ft. Cummings & to build bridges over the Streams which he has done, the station is named Fort Davenport.

Each of these three posts viz. Fort Sullivan 26, Ft. Cummings 46 1/2, & Fort Davenport 66 1/2 miles from Fort Brooke is Garrisoned by one company of Artillery (3d. Regt.) & is commanded respectively by Capt. Garner, Lieut. Bragg & Lieut. Wyse & have so far proved healthy.

Between Fort Brooke & Fort Davenport there has been six strong bridges build besides causeways.

The distance from the Gulf to the St. Johns by this route is 120 miles over a sandy pine barren most of the way, the numerous lakes gives the country a picturesque appearance, along the borders of these lakes & on the small streams, there are thick Hammocks, some of which afford good land for cultivation but I should think it impossible that anything like a dense settlement can ever be formed on this route.

Since my return to Fort Brooke I have remained in command of the district which embraces the three posts above named as well as Fort Cross 45 miles N. W. of Tampa Bay. The troops at the different posts within the district have been engaged so far as their means would enable them in scouring the country in their vicinity.

*Respectfully Submitted
Alex. Cummings
Lt. Col. 2d. Injy.*

*Brigr. Genl. 7. Taylor
Comg. Army of the South
Tampa Bay
E. F.*

ENDNOTES

Dr. Joe Knetsch is a Senior Analyst with the Bureau of Survey and Mapping, Division of State Lands, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and is a regular contributor to *The Sunland Tribune* and other journals of Florida history. Knetsch has been published in each of the last eight issues of *The Sunland Tribune* and this volume contains two of his articles. He received his B.S. from Western Michigan University, his M.A. from Florida Atlantic University and his Ph.D. from Florida State University.

¹ Francis B. Heitman. *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, Volume 1* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903) 344. The writer would like to thank Ms. Leslie Lawhon and Mr. Wilburn Bell for their assistance in the preparation of this piece.

² Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991) 53-54.