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Fort Brooke: The First Ten Years

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When the United States acquired Florida in 1821, the Tampa Bay region was intermittently infested with pirates, fugitive slaves, slave-smugglers, Indians, contrabandists and adventurers.

Pirates and slave-raiders used the coves and inlets along the Gulf Coast for rendezvous and hideouts. The presence of these ruffians and the increasing resentment of the Seminole Indians towards the encroachment of white settlers posed a thorny problem for the United States.
During this period officials in Washington began giving serious consideration to the establishment of a military outpost on the wild and remote shores of Tampa Bay "as an aid to defense from possible foreign invasion" and to prevent the Indians from acquiring arms and rum from unlicensed Cuban traders, who were inciting them to rebellion.

The Niles Weekly Register in its March 24, 1821, issue suggested that Tampa Bay would be an ideal location for a state capitol. "Its shores are not inhabited, and would be a good place for seat of government, and as the southern Naval depot of the United States." This suggestion must have attracted the attention of Federal officials to the geographical importance of Tampa Bay. Three years later the Americans appeared on the bay.

On January 10, 1824, Colonel George Mercer Brooke received orders to proceed with four full companies of the Fourth Infantry Regiment to Tampa Bay. Within two weeks the expedition cruised into the beautiful dark green waters of Tampa Bay and landed at Gadsden Point, now the site of MacDill Air Force Base. The troops promptly trudged through the palmetto scrub up the eastern shoreline of the Interbay peninsula to the mouth of the Hillsborough River. As they skirted the shoreline they...
came upon a brilliant spectacle of "beautiful flamingos which appeared in long files drawn upon the beach like bands of soldiers in red uniforms." Arriving at the river they found its waters infested with alligators. The precarious crossing was made without incident.

Colonel Brooke situated the military post on the east bank, at the mouth of the river, the site of an ancient Timuquan Indian village. The embryo station became known as Fort Brooke. The date was January 22, 1824. This date commemorates the birth of the community that would become Tampa. The fort is the keystone in its founding, even though at that time the city that would become Tampa wasn't even a prologue to a dream.

Within the grounds of the military post dominating the open bay stood a Timuquan ceremonial mound, the relic of a vanished race. A large gumbo-limbo tree, atop it, was used by soldiers as a lookout for incoming boats. As soon as vessels came in sight the sentinel called out, "Sail Ho!"

When the Americans arrived they found "fish ranchos" along the shores of the bay. These fish camps were inhabited by Spaniards who were assisted by Indians. One of these "fish ranchos" known as Spanishtown Creek was located near the fort at the mouth of a creek on the bay shore just east of what is today known as Magnolia Avenue. In 1843, Harriet Axtell, the 13-year-old daughter of Reverend Henry Axtell, the Army chaplain at Fort Brooke, described Spanishtown Creek in a letter to...
At about a quarter of a mile from the fort, lies a small collection of huts formed of palmettos. These are inhabited by Spaniards, who subsist by making palm leaf hats and baskets for the settlers. A few rods further, stands a dilapidated cottage in a grove of fig and orange trees. A long wharf extends out into the water, in front, to which the fishermen have tied their boats.

Soon after the American arrived, the fishermen from Spanishtown Creek came to the fort to ask Colonel Brooke to make them American citizens. It is believed that Spanishtown Creek had come into existence sometime after 1783, during the Second Spanish Period. These fishermen were the first white people to live within the present boundaries of Tampa.

**MULTILINGUAL SPANIARD**

When the Americans arrived the Spanish fishermen told them the rumor that "a ship’s crew had been murdered by pirates off the mouth of the bay not very long before." In a report to Washington Colonel Brooke reported, "the coast is inhabited entirely by persons speaking the Spanish language only, and are frequently robbed by pirates - they look to Fort Brooke for protection."

In 1830, an interesting Spaniard from Spanishtown Creek appeared upon the scene. He was Juan Montes De Oca, a man versed in the Seminole, Spanish and English languages. Colonel Brooke employed him as an army guide and interpreter. On his frequent visits to various Indian villages, Juan traveled on horseback through the pine woods that is the Ybor City area today. On one of his official visits to the Lake Thonotosassa Indian Village, he met a pretty Seminole girl, "lovely of soul, as well as of person." It was love at first sight, and soon thereafter they were married. From this union, a girl was born, and she was named Victoria. A few years later, the young bride died. The motherless little girl was not forsaken. The pioneers of the area raised her, thereby preventing Tampa’s first romance from becoming a total tragedy. Victoria grew into a beautiful young lady and married Alfonso de Launay, Tampa’s second mayor.

Jose M. Casanas was another colorful figure of Spanishtown Creek. In 1911, Mayor D.B.
McKay wrote that Casanas memory of Tampa went back to the days when “the leading citizens gathered on the porch of the local general store, whittled sticks, chewed tobacco, and enjoyed life along rural lines generally.”

THE CAT MAN

In the old days, Casanas had several fishing and hunting camps at Spanishtown Creek. An eight story building will soon be built on that site.

Casanas was known as "Catahana," a sobriquet given him on account of the tribe of more than one hundred cats which swarmed the fishing village feasting on discarded fish heads. Casanas fished in the waters of Hillsborough Bay, and peddled his

FIRST BREWERY

Government Spring served as an Indian encampment, and a source of water for Fort Brooke. With the passing of time the spring was utilized for an ice plant, swimming pools, and finally the site of Florida’s first brewery. Today a historical marker on 5th Avenue and 13th Street commemorates the site of the historic spring.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
catch in the village of Tampa in a small wagon drawn by an immense Saint Bernard dog. His fish sold for two cents each.

After the Civil War Casanas left Spanishtown Creek and settled on Anna Maria Island. There he continued fishing, making charcoal, which he sold on the Manatee market. He homesteaded a sizeable section of land on the key, and when he died his estate included a large area of valuable beach-front property.

The pine wilderness which later became Ybor City was about two miles from Fort Brooke and was located within the confines of the military reservation which had been set aside by President Andrew Jackson. The first reference to the land of Ybor City was made by Colonel Brooke in a report dated February 5, 1824, to Major General Jacob Brown, from "Camp on the Hillsborough." His report unveiled the mystery of the Ybor City region and stated that "immediately in the rear of this place (Fort Brooke), say two miles, there is a ridge of pinelands with very fine springs, and should the slightest disease manifest itself we will retire on it with our tents." This ridge is noticeable when driving on Interstate Four through Ybor City and Tampa Heights.

IN DRESS UNIFORM
General George Mercer Brooke, U.S.A. (1785-1851), founder and commanding officer of Fort Brooke from 1824 to 1829. This portrait was presented to the Tampa Historical Society by Colonel George M. Brooke, Jr., professor of history, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, VA, at the Sesquicentennial celebration of Fort Brooke in 1974.

LIVED OVER SPRING
Don Jose Acosta, the famous restauranteur, who was featured in Ripley's "Believe It or Not!", erected his home over "The No Name Springs" at 10th Avenue and 16th Street. He had to reinforce the foundations with annoying frequency. Acosta is the father of Mrs. Tony Pizzo.

-Photo from thNe TONY PIZZO COLLECTION
This high rise of land was densely covered with pines until the early 1890s, and was destined to attract the fancy of Don Vicente Martinez-Ybor, one of the great pioneers and founders of Tampa's cigar industry. Ybor was so impressed by the magnificent view of this high land, that it prompted him to build his palatial residence on its crest. When the streets and sidewalks were paved, the children of Ybor City utilized the hill on Seventeenth and Eighteenth Streets to coast down on their bicycles and roller skates.
Skinned knees received on the "hill of thrills" were regarded as badges of youthful fun.

A corduroy road was built from the fort through the salt marshes of what is now the Ybor Estuary to a large spring at the present site of Fifth Avenue and Thirteenth Street. Since the spring was located on government land, the spring was named Government Spring. This two-mile strip of road was the first to be built in South Florida, and provided a shortcut from the fort to the spring. The water was transported in barrels on mule-drawn wagons.

Many notable military men and scouting parties stopped at this historic spring to fill their canteens and water their horses before leaving on expeditions into the forest.

On July 12, 1884, Cyrus Snodgrass built the first ice plant on the west coast of Florida at the spring site. The plant supplied ice for the several fish companies which had moved to Tampa with the coming of the railroad.

In 1885, the Ybor City Ice Works built two natatoriums (swimming pools) at the spring - one for whites and one for blacks. The pools were supplied with 10,000 gallons of spring water per hour. The admission fee was twenty-five cents. The pools were open to gentlemen from 7 A.M. to 1 P.M., ladies from 1 P.M. to 6 P.M. Sundays were for gentlemen only from 7 A.M. to 5 P.M. Captain L. Penotiere was the lifeguard and gave swimming lessons. In 1895, the natatorium for blacks proved to be a financial failure, and the site was converted into a "modern steam laundry."

The first brewery in Florida was built at the Government Spring site in 1897. For many years the Ybor family supplied Florida, Georgia and Cuba with La Tropical beer. This refreshing beverage complimented the pleasure of El Principe De Gales Cigars, the pride of the Ybor Company.

ANOTHER SPRING

Colonel Brooke referred to another spring a short distance from the Government Spring, but the name of this one is unknown. This small spring was located at Tenth Avenue and Sixteenth Street. Its waters were visible until several years ago at Fourth and Fifth Avenues as it trickled toward the Ybor Estuary. Two magnificent buildings, El Centro Espanol and La Logia del Aguila de Oro, now the Labor Temple, were erected over the creek fed by this spring. Don Jose Acosta, a former owner of the famous Gran Oriente restaurant, and later the celebrated executive chef of Las Novedades restaurant, built his home over the spring’s source. Through the ensuing years the sidewalk and the street in front of the house continued to sink, a condition which forced Acosta to reinforce the foundations to his home with annoying frequency.
The Spaniards, Seminoles and fugitive-blacks living on the fringe of Fort Brooke were soon joined by the traditional camp followers, gamblers, traders, and mercenaries. This polyglot group of characters in time were augmented by God-fearing settlers who gave the emerging village of Tampa the strength to develop into a viable community.

The first civilian to arrive in the environs of Fort Brooke was Levi Collar. The Collars with their five children settled at Craft’s Spring near the mouth of Six Mile Creek. They built a log cabin and lived on the site until the outbreak of the Second Seminole War in 1835. Collar became a successful farmer. He sold his produce to Fort Brooke and to government vessels which frequently came into the bay. He also raised a large number of hogs and cattle. Collar also shipped his products by fishing schooners to Key West.

HOMESTEAD BURNED

In 1835, when the Seminoles were preparing to go on the warpath because of unfair treatment by Americans, a friendly Indian came to the Collar home to give warning. He left three sticks on the doorstep, a signal that the Indians would attack in three days. The terror-stricken family was rescued by two soldiers who came by boat to take them across the McKay Bay to the safety of the fort, a distance of six miles. As they neared Fort Brooke, the reddened sky in the east gave testimony of the destruction of their homestead.

Collar’s oldest daughter, Nancy, married Robert Jackson. This was the first recorded marriage on Florida’s West Coast. The Jacksons had eight children. A large number of descendants are residents of the Tampa community today. Through the years they have been prominent in the social, civic and cultural life of the city.

In 1963, H. Grady Lester, Jr., a lineal descendant of Levi Collar, attained the highest social distinction in the community when he was elected King of Gasparilla. He also received the greatest civic award as Tampa’s Outstanding Citizen (the Civitan Man of the Year Award).

During its first ten years, Fort Brooke was a "good-duty post," with a garrison of some two hundred and fifty permanent men. Life at the outpost was peaceful, leisurely and pleasant.

VIVA ANDREW JACKSON

The first Fourth of July celebration at the fort in 1824 was indeed a bang-up affair that reverberated throughout the wilderness. The forty-eighth anniversary of American Independence was celebrated in high fashion. Officers, Indian chiefs and civilians attended a sumptuous dinner. After eating heartily of wild game and exotic seafood, emulating the Roman emperors, they feasted on delicate flamingo tongues. The feast was followed by twenty-one toasts. Each toast, presumably with Cuban rum, was greeted with music, cheers and artillery fire. The honors of the day included toasts to the heroes of the Revolution, the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson, Lafayette, James Monroe; to the newly-freed South American states, and to "the fair (ladies), their absence ever makes the steam of life flow dull and cheerless." Jumper, a Seminole Indian chief, toasted the President of the United States, while Colonel George Mercer Brooke held his glass high and toasted, "The first American flag that ever waved o’er the wilds
of Hillsborough. Long may it float o’er them who are ever ready to defend it.”

On this day, for the first time, the guns of freedom echoed through the lonely forest and glittering waters of the bay, heralding the baptism of this new land as a territory of the United States of America.

Life at the Garrison was very pleasant with ample time for diversion. An officer referred to the pristine area as "a paradise for those who love to live in the open air." On March 15, 1826, the soldiers organized a three-day horse race meeting. This is probably the first horse race held in Tampa. The Pensacola Gazette of April 15, 1826, gave the following account of the event:

"First day - Mr. Page's horse Baccus, Mr. McCall's horse Packingham and Captain Dade's horse Richard The Third were entered for the three-mile heats-won by Baccus in two heats, which were well contested.

"Second day-Captain Yancey's horse, Uncle Sam, Mr. Collins' horse Beppo, and Mr. Morris' horse Bob Logic were entered for the two-mile heats. First heat won by Beppo. The superior bottom of Uncle Sam won him the second and third.

"Third day - Mr. Page's colt Keep Coming, and Mr. Collins' colt Go It were entered for a single mile. The race was handsomely run by both sides and was beaten by Go It a half neck only."

INDIAN VILLAGES

During this peaceful time there were several Seminole Indian villages in the vicinity of Fort Brooke. In addition to the village at Lake Thonotosassa, with two hundred Indians under the rule of Stout King, there was the village of Hickapusassa in the vicinity of Plant City. The Indians traveled the old trails which they had carved out of the wilderness leading to Fort Brooke, where they obtained their rations as provided by the Moultrie Creek Treaty.

The small village on the fringe of the fort prospered, and in 1831, took the name of Tampa Bay. The frontier village in the Florida wilderness soon became widely known as an Indian trading post, as Seminoles started coming in from miles away to barter alligator hides, bird plumes, deer skins and furs for bolts of gaily colored calico, arms and ammunition, cooking utensils, tobacco and countless other things.

Fort King, the Indian agency located near present Ocala, was about one hundred miles from Fort Brooke. Soldiers marching to Fort King from Fort Brooke had to struggle along a narrow, primitive Indian trail. This overland journey took five days.

A’MULE EXPRESS’

The first road connecting the two forts was constructed by the army in 1825, and ran through the heart of the Ybor City wilds, with two offshoots leading to the Government Spring. The Army borrowed one ox team and "hired a party of discharged soldiers and one or two Indian Negroes" to help construct the road. The new military artery followed the course of the old Indian route. This was a crude, sandy trail winding through the forest. During heavy rains it was reported that "teams have great difficulty in getting the fuel to the Garrison", and "when the earth is charged with water, out of the beaten path a horse mires directly". In 1826, the Quartermaster General authorized a "mule express" between Fort Brooke and St.
Augustine. The road became known as the Military Road and later as the Fort King Trail.

For the first ten years Fort Brooke remained secluded from the world. Nothing could disturb its peaceful state except an occasional cannon salute echoing through the forest, sinking to silence in the distant waves.

The period of tranquillity was coming to an end. The good-duty post had been one of routine army service, with ample leisure time for exploring, hunting, fishing, sailing and horseback riding. During the bitterly cold month of December, 1835, the ominous clouds of war began to gather. Tragedy was in the wind - years of bloodshed, fire and sword lay ahead.