The Oaklawn Cemetery Ramble - 1994

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By ARSENIO M. SANCHEZ

The Tampa Historical Society had its Annual Oaklawn and St. Louis Cemetery Ramble on April 24, 1994.

The Knights of Columbus Honor Guard and students from St. Joseph School dedicated the raising of the United States flag for the first time at the cemetery. The students recited the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, and sang patriotic songs.

The students were guided by Sister Isabel, principal and superior of St. Joseph School. They received the support of Sisters Wilma and Inez and Barbara Rebon music teacher of the school.

A memorial monument for Levi and Nancy Coller was also unveiled at the Oaklawn and St. Louis Cemetery Ramble. This monument was a culmination of the efforts of Charles Brown, President of the Tampa Historical Society, Julius J. Gordon, Jo Ann Haskins Cimino, and former THS president George B. Howell and the contribution of Myrtle Hill Memorial Cemetery. Great-great-great-grandson, Patrick T. Cimino gave a history of the role of the Coller family at Fort Brooke and in early Tampa.

Levi Coller is considered to be the first Anglo-American to permanently settle with a family in the Tampa area, initially coming to the area in 1823.

Genealogical notes written by a descendant in the 1920s and based on family Bible records, since destroyed, indicate, that Levi
was born in Springfield, Massachusetts on March 19, 1791, the son of Uriah Coller a Revolutionary War veteran, and his wife, Betsey Manning. Uriah and Betsey are known to have lived near Orange, Massachusetts, and the family appears there on the 1790 Census.

Levi Coller left Massachusetts about 1812, when he was about 21 years old and traveled to what was then Spanish East Florida, arriving in the vicinity of the St. Mary's River, north of present-day Jacksonville. On March 22, 1813, Levi married Nancy Dixon, the daughter of a local landowner, John Britton Dixon and his wife Sophia Knight.

It may well have been Florida’s newly acquired status as a U.S. territory that encouraged Levi Coller to begin seeking new land, although some reports say that he wanted to be near water for his health. Coller, along with a few other pioneers, made at least one scouting trip to the Tampa area, leaving his wife and children behind. In late 1823, he came upon Tampa Bay and the location of present downtown Tampa. Although the site was deep in Indian territory, Levi chose a home-site near the Mouth of the Hillsborough River. He returned home, packed his family and their belongings and returned to Tampa in April, 1824. Upon their arrival, the Coilers found that the U.S. Army had moved in and appropriated their selected site for what was to become Fort Brooke. The Spoilers located another site directly across the river from the fort and built their initial homestead there. About four years later they moved to a site seven miles east of the fort to what was later known as "Craft's Spring," on Six Mile Creek.

The Collers established a farm where they are supposed to have cultivated the first cotton in South Florida and supplied foodstuffs to the army and visiting ships. At the outbreak of the Second Seminole War, the Coller homestead was burned by an Indian raiding party, but the family escaped injury, having received warning and taken refuge at Fort Brooke. In later years, Levi Coller became keeper of the lighthouse at the mouth of Tampa Bay.

Levi and Nancy Coller had eleven children, seven of whom grew to adulthood and married the children of other early settlers. Today, their descendants in the Tampa Bay area are numerous, bearing the surnames Bell, Cimino, Covacevich, Haskins and Jackson, among others. Levi and Nancy are buried in Oaklawn Cemetery, Tampa.

JoAnn Haskins Cimino provided the historical data on the Coller family for this article.