

1950

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Recommended Citation

Bullen, Ripley P. (1950) "Fort Tonyn and the Campaign of 1778," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 29 : No. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol29/iss4/5>

FORT TONYN AND THE CAMPAIGN OF 1778

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Fort Tonyn, a small British fort during the American Revolution, is believed by some to have been located on Amelia Island at the site now occupied by Fort Clinch. The probable reason for this tradition is the fact that it is so located on a map prepared by W. G. F. Wallace, Esq., and included by Burton Barrs in his *East Florida in the American Revolution*.¹ No substantiating evidence for this location is given by Barrs and it may be stated categorically that Wallace's map is incorrect in this respect.

Named for the last British governor of East Florida, Fort Tonyn was, apparently, never recognized as a fort by the British. At least I have been unable to find such a designation in any of the original British sources. It appears to have been a name applied by Americans to a British outpost.

While the exact location of Fort-Tonyn cannot be determined at this time, evidence can be marshalled to demonstrate it to have been about 25 miles up the St. Marys River. To do this it is necessary to trace, as well as can be done, the route of General Robert Howe's campaign of 1778 to attack East Florida. The accompanying map shows the location of the Kings Road in Florida and my interpretation of the route taken by the main part of Howe's forces which, in general, seem to have followed the Kings Road in Georgia.

British preparation for the expected invasion is summed up in the following quotation from Brig. Gen. Augustine Prevost's letter of June 5, 1778 written from St. Augustine to Gen. Sir William Howe (British).

"Men who were coming to invade this Province have halted on the other side of the Altamaha River, the preparations with the Augmentation of our Forces, I sup-

¹ Barrs, 1932 (See Appendix) pp. 18-19.

pose has deterred them from proceeding in their operations, intentions was to let them advance as far as St. Mary and by no means save them any trouble, there we should have begun to oppose them and disputed our ground every step. Governor Tonyn's Rangers was to have opposed their passage over that river and were to be supported by about. two hundred and fifty loyal Carolinians, part of them Light Horse Men, * * * the retreat of this body was secured by a small Fortification on the northside of the river St. John, and that post by an armed Vessel ; on the southside of this river, I have erected Batteries at such places as it was probable and practicable for them to cross the river, supported by two detachments of Regulars, and ten miles behind them, I proposed taking post with all the -Men from the Garrison, leaving only the number to garrison the fort. *** as what is between St. Mary and St. John was abandoned before I came here. '2

There is no indication in this quotation of Fort Tonyn nor of any other fortification north of the St. Johns River. There exist, however, many references to Florida Rangers at the St. Marys River. No doubt they had a fortified dwelling or other establishment which the Americans dignified by calling a fort.

The American view, given by Col. Pinckney's letter to Gen. Moultrie, written May 24, 1778 from Fort Howe? does not consider Fort Tonyn a formidable post. Parts of this letter follow:

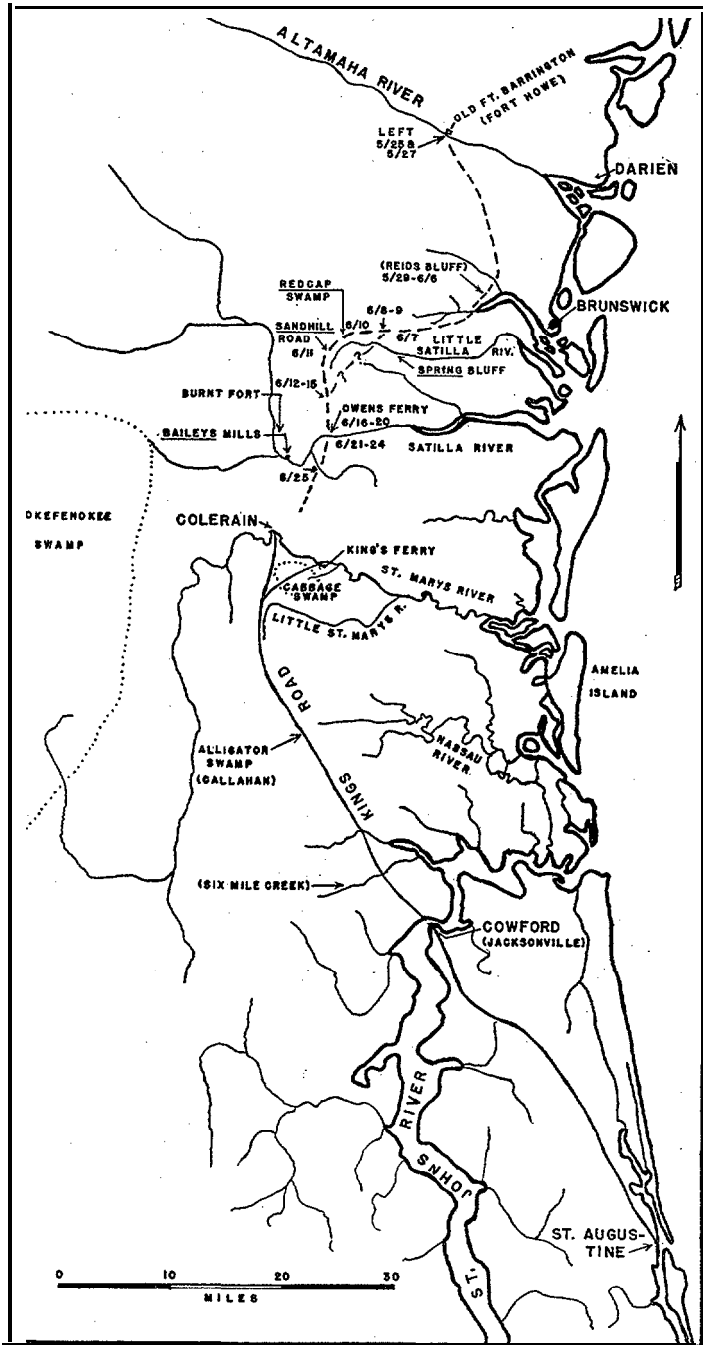
"We shall proceed with all possible expedition for St. Mary's where we shall have some amusement by the attack on Fort Tonyn. ***By intelligence from St. Augustine the enemy's force is as follows: 300 regulars at Fort Tonyn, on St. Mary's; 60 at St. Johns, 320 at St. Augustine, 80 to the southwest of St. Augustine.'3

Before taking up the route of the American forces a few comments about the accompanying map are in order.

2. Hist. Manus. Comm., 1904, pp. 260-261.

3. Jones, 1833, p. 292.

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In tracing this route I have followed the order book of Col. Samuel Elbert, commander of part of Howe's troops. Modern terms, as found on topographic maps of the U. S. Geological Survey, which seem to be cognates of places mentioned by Elbert, are underlined. The Kings Road from St. Augustine to Colerain follows Tanner's 1839 map⁴ and a photostat of a map belonging to the Florida Historical Society and marked in pencil "De La Cruz, 1821." The fork in this road to King's Ferry is shown on the latter map. Various maps show the King's Road from Colerain to bend to the east, to cross the Satilla and Little Satilla Rivers, and to end at Fort Barrington.

From Elbert's order book⁵ we find that early in April, 1778, troops were ordered south from Savannah and supplies sent on flat boats up the Altamaha River. By the 14th these forces had arrived at Fort Howe on the Altamaha River which I assume, following Barrs, to be the same as Fort Barrington.⁶ Reinforcements arrived and preparations were made for the campaign. By May 24th everything was ready and 100 men started for Reids Bluff on the 25th, followed on the 27th by the main army.

I have been unable to locate Reids Bluff but as there are numerous references to boats at that place and it appears to have taken Elbert two days to get there, I believe it to be somewhere at the head of the short river or inlet to the west of Brunswick. Elbert's order book continues.

June 6—Reids Bluff; general marching orders.

June 7—Camp Spring Branch.

June 8 and 9—Camp at Werts Old Cowpen.

June 10—Camp at Red Cap Branch.

June 11—Camp at Sand Hill Branch.

June 12 to 15—Camp within three miles of Old Town.

June 16 to 20—Camp at the Cowford ; men sent across the river to protect the engineer and his workmen.

June 21—Camp, Satilla River.

4. American Atlas.

5. Coll. Geo. Hist. Soc., Vol. V, No. 2.

6. Barrs, 1932, p. 27.

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June 22 to 24—Camp at South Side of Satilla; the army to leave camp at 5 :00 to-morrow morning.

June 25—Camp, Bayley 's Branch ; the army marches to-morrow at sunrise.

June 29—Camp at Fort Tonym.

June 30—Camp at Fort Tonym ; “he (the engineer) is also to survey the fort and report to the Genl. whether it can be repaired, and what additional work may be necessary.”

July 1 to 14—Camp at Fort Tonym; “the Genl. leaves the army to-day (the 14th) ” and the army started to return northward.

Comparing the above itinerary with the map shows certain modern names, Spring Bluff, Redcap Swamp, Sand Hill Road, Satilla River, and Baileys Mills, which occur in the same order, from northeast to southwest, as Spring Branch, Red Cap Branch, Sand Hill Branch, Satilla River, and Bayley's Branch, listed by Elbert. These similarities are sufficient to indicate Howe's line of march within certain limits.

As Sand Hill Road extends easterly across the upper part of the Little Satilla River and as maps show the Kings Road crossing this river, it is likely the army crossed the Little Satilla at Werts Old Cowpen where they were for two nights. This name has not survived to appear on modern maps.

Where the army crossed the Satilla River is not certain. Elbert's Old Town may refer to Burnt Fort (Fort McIntosh, previously destroyed by men from Florida). Three miles from that point, as indicated by Elbert's book, would place the army on the road to Owens Ferry which I believe is Elbert 's Cowford. Bayley 's Branch may be either of the tributaries of the Satilla River shown to the east and to the west of Baileys Mills. The more eastern branch is preferable as it produces a shorter line of march and agrees more nearly with where the Kings Road is supposed to have gone. If the army went further to the west, Burnt Fort would be Elbert's Cowford.

While this interpretation is less likely it produces the same result as far as Fort Tonym is concerned, both place the army south of Baileys Mills on June 26th.

Elbert's order book is silent concerning the three day period, June 26th to 28th, during which the army marched to Fort Tonym. To judge from their previous rate of travel it would have taken this length of time for them to reach the St. Marys River from Bayley's Branch. It is reasonable, therefore, to believe Fort Tonym to have been located on the St. Marys River south of Baileys Mills.

There are three possibilities for this location; King's Ferry, Orange Bluff, or one of the landings south or southwest of Colerain. Orange Bluff, between King's Ferry and Colerain, may, I believe, be eliminated because of the swampy terrain and because the 1821 map shows the King's Road going to Camp Pinckney (near White Sand Landing) and King's Ferry but not to Orange Bluff.

The arrival of Howe's army forced the Florida Rangers to withdraw into Cabbage Swamp.' If Fort Tonym had been at King's Ferry it would seem these Rangers would have retreated along the eastern fork of the Kings Road. However, if the fort were opposite Colerain, an attack, with cavalry sent a short distance to the south along the road, would quite likely have forced the Rangers into Cabbage Swamp and have prevented their egress by road. This seems to be what occurred, as Gen. Prevost (British) subsequently wrote Sir Henry Clinton under date of July 11, 1778 from the Cowford (Jacksonville), St. Johns River:

"After the Rebels had advanced to this side of the St. Mary's River, Major Prevost was directed to advance towards St. Mary as near as he could prudently venture in order to favor the retreat of Governor Tonym's Rangers, to cover a few inhabitants on the Branches of Nassau in bringing off their effects, and if a favorable oppor-

7. Mowat, 1943, p. 122.

tunity offered to check or cut off any partys the Enemy might push forward. ’⁸

This action succeeded in extraditing the Rangers but they were attached by American cavalry at Alligator Bridge (Alligator Swamp near Callahan) as they were joining Prevost’s main party. Repulse of the Americans here was communicated by Col. Brown of the Rangers to Gov. Tonyn on June 30th from Alligator Creek Bridge.⁹

Gen. Prevost’s letter continues :

“The principal object for which Major Prevost was advanced being effected as far as circumstances would permit, and finding it difficult to maintain a proper communication with him at the distance of Twenty-three miles, from the Smallness of our Number, he was directed to fall back to a strong Situation within Six Miles of this place. ’¹⁰

Twenty-three miles from the Cowford (Jacksonville) is very close to the actual distance from the latter place to Alligator Swamp at Callahan.

Gen. Howe (American) also refers to this skirmish in his letter of July 5, 1778, written from Fort Tonyn to Gen. Moultrie :

“The enemy were 2 or 3 days since at Alligator Creek, about 14 miles from this place. ’¹¹

Fort Tonyn then was about 14 miles north of Alligator Swamp which would agree with the location suggested earlier, between King’s Ferry and Colerain. That the fort was on the south side of the river is evident from a note in Elbert’s order book. The entry for July 8th at Fort Tonyn includes the following:

“He (the Quartermaster General) is also to go with the engineer this afternoon to mark out a road from the landing opposite Fort Tonyn to the road cutting by the militia pioneers towards Saint Illas (Satilla River). ’¹²

8. Hist. Manus. Comm., 1904, pp. 271-2.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 272-3.

11. Jones, 1883, p. 296.

12. Coll. Geo. Hist. Soc., Vol. V, No. 2.

Anyone who follows Elbert's list of dates and camps is immediately surprised by the slow progress of Howe's army. Five miles seems to have been a good days march. No doubt they had to improve or even make a road as they proceeded. Their artillery, consisting of "three brass field pieces, two iron two pounders & two swivel cohorns"¹³ also may have delayed their progress substantially.

Fort Tonym was located on the south side of the St. Marys River near Cabbage Swamp. Probably it was on the high land southwest of Colerain. From Colerain a road extends northeasterly to cross the Satilla River at Owens Ferry. This road is marked "Old National Highway" on the Boulogne Quardrangle, U. S. Geological Survey map. It was probably along this road that the Americans approached Fort Tonym.

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