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THE EARLY CAREER OF EDWIN T. JENCKES
A FLORIDA PIONEER OF THE 1830's

by EARL C. TANNER

A leader of the eastern faction in early state politics was Edwin T. Jenckes, known to his adversaries as "the fat man of Florida." Jenckes was a delegate to the St. Joseph Constitutional Convention of 1838-39 and apparently commanded a large following, for he was designated chairman of two committees. According to the opposition press, he weighed 450 to 500 pounds and was "the greatest" man at the convention. It was alleged that he "retained in his own person, all the management, tact, industry and talent of the whole eastern delegation" and that he, himself, voted five proxies. In case of "any little splitting" between the middle and the western delegations, Jenckes' "aye or nay, which reverberated through the halls like hoarse thunder, gave law to the whole body. . . ." ¹ Despite the palpable exaggeration of these charges, it is clear that Jenckes was a power in the politics of the period; from the Constitutional Convention, he went on to a career in the State Legislature.

Jenckes' public life is a matter of record, but little has been known of his origins or of his private life. The recent discovery of a collection of Jenckes' letters in the archives of the Rhode Island Historical Society has materially supplemented the scant data previously available and has made possible the reconstruction of Jenckes' career up to the time of the St. Joseph Convention. The following biographical sketch, based almost wholly on Rhode Island sources, will be devoted to Jenckes' background and, more particularly, to his first years in Florida. ²

1. *Apalachicola Gazette*, June 8, 1839.

2. Except as otherwise noted, this article is based on the Nightingale and Jenckes papers at the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island. In the interests of intelligibility, some minor alterations

Edwin T. Jenckes was born at Providence, Rhode Island, on March 20, 1797.³ Two years later, his father, a sea-going merchant, died on the island of St. Thomas,⁴ leaving the family in comfortable circumstances. Young Jenckes received a good education including a French school and, probably, a period of commercial apprenticeship with the Providence firm of Edward Carrington & Co. At the age of twenty, he sailed from Providence as clerk of the Carrington ship *Lion*, bound for the West Coast of South America and for Canton. The *Lion* arrived in Chilean waters just a few months after the liberation of Valparaiso from Spanish colonial domination and before Spanish sea power in the area had been destroyed. By good luck the *Lion* safely ran the Imperial blockade and entered Valparaiso, where the captain and Jenckes traded their Providence cargo for Chilean silver and copper, articles intended for the China market.

The *Lion* slipped out of Valparaiso and, again eluding capture, proceeded safely to Canton. There vessels from Providence had been regular visitors for thirty years. The distribution of "gifts," the sale of the ship's cargo, and the purchase of teas, nankeens, and chinaware were all reduced to a routine and caused the young clerk of the *Lion* less difficulty than he had experienced on the coast of Chile. From Canton, the *Lion* returned to Providence with a cargo so satisfactory to the owners that Jenckes was promoted to the rank of supercargo and given full responsibility for the business of the company's brig *Viper*, bound, like the *Lion* before her, for Valparaiso and Canton.

This time, Jenckes did not return to Providence for six

have been made in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling of passages quoted from Jenckes' letters. Our appreciation and our thanks are expressed to that Society.

3. William W. Chapin, *Genealogy of the Nightingale Family* (Providence, 1912), 11. Typed manuscript at the Rhode Island Historical Society.
4. *Providence Gazette*, June 1, 1799.

years. The *Viper* sailed from Providence to Chile (which had lately been freed from Spanish blockade by Lord Cochrane and the Chilean navy); from Chile to China; and from China back to Chile. At Valparaiso Jenckes sold both cargo and brig, remitting the proceeds to Edward Carrington & Co. in Providence. Then, with the company's approbation and good will, he settled down to an independent business career in Chile.

Jenckes' residence on the West Coast coincided with the wars for independence in the Republic of Peru: a period of high profits for merchants familiar with the markets, the language, and the right people. Jenckes was such a merchant. He joined another American to found the house of Frost and Jenckes, commission agents for trade through Chile to Peru or China. In a few strenuous years, Jenckes succeeded in acquiring the basis for a very substantial fortune. Then, while business prospects continued excellent, he began to notice disturbing signs that his health was failing.

In March, 1825, Jenckes' letters to Providence first hinted that he might give up his career and come home. He was on a business voyage from Chile to Peru when he wrote, "I have suffered severely in my health and find it indispensably necessary that I should leave the sea and become fixed for a while to some more steady and regular life. My wishes all point toward home, but my interest that I should remain in the Pacific." A few months later, he hesitatingly made the decision. He wrote to Providence of his intention to "go and see fairly for myself if I can live at home or not." Late in 1825, he took passage on the brig *Fame* of Providence, bringing with him a young Chilean gentleman who wished to learn English.

After an appropriate period of rest and reunion in Providence, Jenckes made an excursion to Philadelphia for the

dual purpose of turning in some South American metal at the mint and consulting Dr. Philip Physick, the most celebrated physician in the country. Negotiations at the mint were successful, but Physick, who was a strong advocate of bleeding, advised Jenckes that his circulatory system was badly damaged and beyond any hope for improvement. Jenckes sadly reported to his uncle in Providence, "Whilst I have been pursuing fortune with unremitting exertions, I have neglected the only thing that could render it worth attaining by enabling me to enjoy it - health."

Jenckes returned to Providence and for two years tried to enjoy his enforced retirement. He married his cousin, Hannah, and lived on a farm. His mother was in town and her house was available for short visits. This leisurely routine was varied on one occasion by a sight-seeing excursion to the Catskills; the ladies were delighted, but not Jenckes, who had visited Chile and China at the age of twenty.

By the fall of 1828, Jenckes was so depressed that he could no longer face the prospect of living out his life in retirement. He found himself longing for the excitement of active life and for the mild climate he had experienced in Chile. But there were the problems of his health and of his family. At this point, a possible solution occurred to him: why not try Florida? After preliminary investigation, he felt fairly confident that his capital invested in a sugar and cotton plantation would yield a good living. "At any rate," he wrote, "if I were sure of not having a six pence in six months from this time, I would not pass another two years with no employment for my mind - nothing at stake - nothing to hope for - to sit quietly and brood over my bodily infirmity month after month - in fact business of some kind and a warm climate are indispensable for me. . . ."

By November, 1828, Jenckes was en route to St. Augustine.

In Savannah he learned that he would have to purchase horses and a wagon and complete his journey by land; otherwise, he would be without transportation when he reached Florida. Savannah was, at the time, suffering from a severe epidemic of dengue. According to Jenckes, seven-eighths of the inhabitants were sick or had been so, but he, himself, was not affected. "My own health," he wrote, "is . . . decidedly much better than it has been for a year past - the weather is delightfully warm and pleasant. . . ."

Jenckes' next message was dated six weeks later from Charleston, South Carolina. He had been to St. Augustine, and wanted the family to know, "I have purchased a plantation in E. Florida and shall pay here [in Charleston] \$4000 cash and shall further require \$15 or 16,000 more for negroes and outfits." He requested his uncle to start disposing of securities to the amount required.

Three days later, Jenckes wrote again in high spirits. He was feeling better than he had felt for years, "in fact far better than I ever expected to be when I left Rhode Island." He confided to his uncle that if Florida had not pleased him, he had been determined to sail for Chile in the spring. But Florida did please him, and "the facility of getting backwards and forwards with the constant and easy communications by water and mail has had great influence. . . ." Jenckes' immediate plan was to obtain negroes and supplies in Charleston and to return to Florida for planting. "The principal object," he wrote, "is to get in sufficient cane for seed as it takes several years to get a sufficient stock grown for grinding and so many are entering into it that the seed cane is procured with difficulty. . . ." He was convinced that cane could profitably be grown in northern Florida.

A few days later, Jenckes was at his new home, Waterford Plantation, St. Johns County, Florida. Almost immedi-

ately, a number of difficulties presented themselves. The area experienced what Jenckes called a "most unlucky and premature frost." He had scarcely anything in the ground himself, but the incident was disturbing. A load of bricks which he ordered to be delivered by water was lost when the vessel carrying it ran onto the bar. Only by the greatest exertions was he able to get enough seed cane to plant a few acres. "For some of it I went 60 miles with my boats and other have carted long distances and paid high prices." Building materials and labor were also expensive, but he did not feel discouraged. "I have plenty of employment for body and mind and enjoy better health than I have done for several years."

Later in the month, Jenckes made a short business trip to Charleston, but he was soon back at Waterford supervising the planting and the building operations. In February he was able to report considerable progress.

I have been here several weeks with my negroes and have had so far less trouble than I anticipated in breaking in and managing a gang strangers to the place, the work, and to each other. We have got some land cleared, fenced and planted, negroes houses etc. put up and a good deal of other work done. So soon as I have finished planting and got them fairly underway, I shall leave the place in charge of an overseer to go on clearing and making provisions and return to R. I. for the summer.

It was not long before Jenckes was taking part in the life of the district, for in March of 1829, a few months after he had established himself at his plantation, it is recorded that polls were opened for election of a delegate to represent Florida in the 21st Congress with a polling place "at North

River at Jenckes' house," and he was appointed one of the inspectors at this election.⁵

The only other notable development of the year was a contract to supply the Army with firewood at \$4.00 the cord. This brought in \$400.

Jenckes spent the summer of 1829 in Providence with his family and friends, including the young Chilean, who was getting ready to enter Brown University. Then, in the fall, he escorted his wife to Waterford. He soon had occasion to write back to Providence, "Altho I thought I had provided for everything necessary for my buildings, plantation, and family . . . yet something is constantly wanting or falling short and I have to pay enhanced prices for everything bought here or in Charleston. . . ." Work on the buildings took much more time than had been anticipated. The workmen (some of who he had brought from the North) were skillful, but the weather was warm and "the mosquitoes begin to bite sharp." He observed that "You cannot drive work as you would in R. I." The 1830 crop consisted of 43 acres of cane, 26 acres of cotton, 20 acres of peas and pumpkins, and 3 acres of garden stuff. Jenckes placed particular confidence in 700 new orange trees. "I consider them the most certain and productive of any kind of planting. There has been some increase to the grove planted, but it bears no proportion to the increased demand for the fruit."⁶ The Army firewood contract was renewed but with the price raised to \$5.00 the cord.

The first few years at Waterford Plantation called for hard

5. St. Johns County Court Records, File P-s.

6. In 1831, Jenckes' enthusiasm was still strong: "There has been an unusual demand for that fruit this year being all sold, gathered, and shipped before it was near ripe and at very high prices. (The fruit from one acre has been sold for \$1000 Dollars on the trees.) I shall continue to increase and improve my grove in the hope we may sometime or other benefit by it altho it will very likely be overdone like everything else." Edwin T. Jenckes, Waterford Plantation, to Samuel Nightingale, Providence, R. I., Dec. 25, 1831.

work and were far from profitable. Once Jenckes wrote, half seriously, "If I should make no crop for a year or two to come I shall have to come to R. I. and get the benefit of the insolvent act." But he was no victim of nostalgia. In June, 1831, he wrote "Neither Hannah or myself will probably ever return to Rhode Island." In August he wrote still more emphatically, "I must sink or swim with Florida and altho in a pecuniary point of view I was better off in R. I., yet I would not return if I could be placed in my former situation tomorrow." This declaration was made in the face of a 50% drop in sugar prices accompanied by an equal rise in the cost of most every article needed on the plantation. Later that year, the bulk of the cane crop was lost to an unexpected frost. Jenckes, who had been more foresighted than his neighbors, saved 90 barrels of sugar, 20 barrels of 4th proof rum, 2 hogsheads of syrup, and 10 hogsheads of molasses.⁷

By 1832, prospects were improving, though summer failed to bring the usual rains. The following paragraphs extracted from a letter of June 16 illustrate the problems and the progress of Waterford Plantation in the fourth year of its operations.

The weather was severely cold and unusually dry during the winter leaving the ground illy prepared to sustain the drought which has followed. My cane has never looked well, but a field of nearly 100 acres of corn (all tasselled out) which looked finely is now nearly or totally destroyed.

The negroes have had sundry alligators killed and turned with their bellies up in the field for several weeks which is an infallible method of bringing rain, but "all signs fail in a dry time." I am embanking low ground and clearing more upland, having planted a light market crop and a large

7. Early in 1832, Jenckes reported, "I sold in town one-third of my sugar and molasses at 8 cents and 28 cents and have been waiting for some time to ship the remainder to Charleston. . . ." Edwin T. Jenckes, Waterford Plantation, to Samuel Nightingale, Providence, R. I., Feb. 6, 1832.

crop of provisions to allow time for that purpose. The loss of both, however, will be an ugly "back set" . . .

My cane last season produced me about 2000 Dolls. That with 2000 more I have invested in negroes, calculating to scratch along with my expenses by selling wood and other odds and ends. I have many calls and ways of getting *rid* of money and I find the only way of keeping along (and I hope gaining a little to windward) is never to have any. This doctrine is one the ladies disapprove in toto, therefore plan to keep my secret. If I should lose my crop *entirely*, which I have no doubt of, I shall have *hard scratching* for money this year.

We are getting to live very comfortably now, almost entirely from the plantation. With more cleared land, and more stock, and an orange grove coming on, if I live a few years longer we shall be as well off as planters generally are. I have now over 1000 orange trees alive and growing and shall have as many more this season.

By 1832, Jenckes had long since ceased to consider himself a Rhode Islander. To his uncle he wrote, "I am a southerner-a free mason-a Jackson man and make rum into the bargain."⁸ Still, old ties could not be immediately and wholly dissolved. Jenckes' relations with his former home were on a pattern that has since become standard. For example, there was the problem of the farm outside Providence. The first years, Wilson, the hired man, was left in charge with directions to sell the apples, cider, potatoes, squashes, etc. Jenckes requested his uncle to take an occasional look at Wilson and, "should he behave improperly, discharge him." In a postscript added, "There is some celery at

8. Next year Jenckes apparently sided with Carolina in the nullification controversy: "The political aspect of affairs makes everything uncertain and gloomy in the extreme. Nothing but a miracle can save the country from a civil war. If it comes to that, Carolina will not stand alone." Edwin T. Jenckes, Waterford Plantation, to Samuel Nightingale, Providence, R. I., Jan. 8, 1833.

the farm at your service." By 1831, Jenckes had begun to find his northern property a troublesome responsibility. "It is, as it lays, totally unproductive . . ." He ordered it sold.

Though no longer residents of Providence, the Jenckes family could not get along without the Providence papers. "I paid my bill for the *Phoenix* up to the time I left Providence last (and I think a month or two ahead)," wrote Jenckes. And he continued with some irritation, "Both that and the *Journal* are recd so irregularly that I hardly know if I am a subscriber." On another occasion he wrote, "'will you be good enough to stop my *Daily Advertiser* and take the semi-weekly *Journal* in the room of it? The ladies have rated it a bore all winter." The ladies referred to were Mrs. Jenckes and certain relatives who came south to spend the winter on Waterford Plantation. Finally, as might be supposed, Jenckes regularly sent oranges to family and friends back North.

The Seminole War

By 1836, Jenckes had long since transferred both his estate and his loyalty to Florida. When the Seminole War swept over the state, Jenckes' reactions were those of a complete southerner. Driven from his plantation by fear of an Indian attack, he took temporary refuge at Camp Long Beach, near St. Augustine. The letter that follows was addressed to Jenckes' uncle in Providence and offers a vivid picture of a planter's fortunes at the height of the Seminole War.⁹

Camp Long Beach, Near St. Augustine
February 7, 1836

Dear Sir,

Since I wrote you a few days since, every thing has gone as badly as possible & the whole of East Florida with the exception of 4 or 5 towns in the possession of the Indians. Never was there so blundering a piece of business as our

9. The following letter is complete except for the first paragraph, which deals exclusively with personal finances and has been omitted.

government has made of this. Urgent requisition for aid was made by the commanding officer here as early as last November and the only troops yet actually joined is one company of 50 men and another just arrived at St. Augustine & unable to join Genl. Clinch. We observe the Secretary at War says "I have placed 14 companies or 700 men at Genl. Clinch's command which will be ample to restore peace to Florida," (3000 U. S. Troops will hardly do it) but he does not say that these 14 companies are yet scattered over the U. S. from Chicago to Arkansas. Of the 6 companies stationed here under Genl. Clinch the rattle and the fever has left from 150 to 180 men only & they are shut up at Camp King unable to prevent the Indians from burning store houses within musket shot of them. We have just received the disastrous news of 2 companies U. S. troops comprising 120 officers & privates who were landed at Tampa and marched to join Clinch, & within 18 miles of the ground of the last battle of Outhlacouchy were attacked and murdered only 3 covered with wounds escaping to tell the tale. From the aggression of the Creeks on the Georgia frontier there is little doubt that they are in union with the Seminoles in this business and our only well settled portion of the country has been obliged to withdraw their troops and we are left to be plundered. The country has been kept in ignorance until these devils have gathered strength and force under the *paternal system* of our government. Had we been left to ourselves these hell hounds would have been driven into the sea long since. The remark of the French King "God preserve us from our friends and we will take care of our enemies," is truly applicable in this case. The whole U. S. arms, military stores and provisions for the campaign deposited at Picolata 16 miles from this have been saved by a few militia from St. Augustine first, and subsequently by a

small volunteer artillery company from Savannah, their post surrounded by Indians and so daring as to murder and scalp a man 100 yards from the post in the day time. All communication with the country except by an armed force is cut off in every direction and we listen morning and evening for the sunset and sunrise gun of this handful of men with as much fear as hope. A company of young men from St. Augustine 30 or 40 strong commanded by Mr. Putnam (the same that came passenger with mother) were endeavouring to protect the removal of some articles (in which duty they have been employed near 2 months) from Anderson's place (the same Anderson that was passenger with Susan) were attacked by 150 Indians and after a severe action and killing a good lot of them came off with 2 killed (a son of Judge Gould's is one) and 18 wounded, some mortally. They have just arrived in town and the whole South is now abandoned to the Indians this being the last port in that quarter from Cape Florida to the gates of the city. They have destroyed the lighthouses along the coast. One family with whom I stopped whilst on my Southern tour last summer are amongst the murdered. They had left New River where I knew them and gone to Key Biscayne for safety.

I fell in last summer near the Everglades with this same gang of Indians who have been amongst the worse and altho they were then rather sulky and considered dangerous they did not molest me altho all night encamped near them and far from any assistance in a wild swamp at the head of New River.

In one sense I have perhaps been fortunate as I was prepared and just starting with an exploring party (partly in boats, partly by land) through the thickest of the Indian country. We were accidentally detained a few days and then disturbances broke out. Otherwise as we should have

been absent 2 mo. and unaware of hostilities we should all doubtless have been massacred.

Great alarm exists even in St. Augustine. They are busily palisading the old works across the Peninsula on which it stands and many sending their families off to Charleston and every man in the place is under arms day and night. The population as you are aware is almost entirely composed of people who depend for their daily bread upon their labor, their little gardens, and fields and fishing and hunting (with a population of 2000 there is not one pauper.) Their groves destroyed last year and this winter shut up in town and prevented by their military duties from doing anything else great distress for provisions has been endured by many. Last week unsolicited and unlooked for a steam boat arrived bringing as a present from the citizens of Charleston to the needy of the town 1000 bushels corn, 100 barrels flour, 50 bbls. pork, 20 casks rice &c. &c. This was nobly done and ample for this occasion.

As regards our own affairs, we are still encamped here as I consider it at least as safe as St. Augustine and more convenient and in the crowded state of the town about as comfortable. We have built a number of large and small camps and are very well covered from the weather, better than you would suppose possible when the only material is the brush wood and some palmetto which grows upon the ground and the only tool used a hatchet.

I applied to the General for a guard for our neighborhood and 16 mounted men were assigned and stationed at Michlers. I go backward and forwards as often as I can do it with safety which is when the guard are enabled to scour the woods around us and ascertain that no Indians are lurking about. As the guard, however, have their own concerns to look after and join in the escort of the mails, ex-

presses, transport of arms and provisions, and other duties, I have been enabled to remove but little from home and fear I shall not be able much longer even to draw our supplies and provisions from home but leave all to its fate. As I can only employ a few of my most trusty hands and that with caution and much exposure to night and bad weather, if they burn us up it will be nearly a total loss. They have been in a swamp about 8 miles from us and perhaps nearer and no house between us and them.

The season for planting cane has long passed and we have not a hill planted and the seed is rotting in the banks. Our potatoes should now be planting, and another fortnight brings corn planting time and we have not yet commenced clearing up the ground for it. A sorry prospect for the coming year and yet we are amongst the fortunate few who have not yet lost home and our negroes. The general plan of the Indians has been to lurk about the plantations until they can kill the few whites to found and then by force and persuasion carry off the negroes who are immediately painted and armed. In this way near 400 have been already lost in E. Florida and there is not now in all the country east of the River St. Johns a person attending to his usual avocations. The larger portion guarding the towns and a few mounted rangers form the balance to keep information of the enemy and communication open as far as possible. Please to show this to mother and *assure her that I think we are personally as safe as if in St. Augustine*, and although it is not very pleasant to be driven from home to live on the beach with the gofers, to boat about the river when one had rather be in bed, to carry a horse load of arms day and night, and gun in hand to be peeping into every palmetto by the road or bush by the river side expecting to start red shanks instead of partridges and ducks, yet so far we are

none the worse for it, and hope for the best. If the worse happens, it will only be exchanging a clapboard house for a log one and eating our hominy and syrup, venison or oysters from white earthen instead of blue China.

With my affec. regards to all, your

E. T. JENCKES

P.S. 4 P.M.

Two steam boats and a schooner have just arrived bringing four companies volunteers from Charleston with arms and stores. All Hail Carolina - true to herself - true to her friends! May God preserve her and her chivalric people and their institutions for ever, is the heart felt prayer that rises from the lip of many houseless wanderers this night.

After the above report from Camp Long Beach, the Nightingale and Jenckes correspondence is abruptly broken off. It may be inferred, however, that Jenckes' term as a refugee was not prolonged much after the date of his last letter: next year the Seminole menace receded and soon Jenckes was ready to enter the arena of state politics. The only later document in the series is a brief note from Mrs. Jenckes to Samuel Nightingale dated Waterford, July 13, 1848. Mrs. Jenckes asked for some advice on investment problems and incidentally confessed that her health and spirits were poor. She was suffering from chills and fever and was taking quinine. She was probably lonely, for, though the letter makes no mention of the fact, Edwin T. Jenckes had died in St. Augustine on November 4, 1847.¹⁰ The Florida career of this colorful figure, beginning less than ten years after the Purchase, provides an early illustration of a northern businessman turned southern planter and politician.

10. Chapin, *op. cit.*, 11. *Florida Herald*, Nov. 9(11), 1847.