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Settlers from Connecticut in Spanish Florida, 1808-1816

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Letters of Ambrose Hull and Stella Hall Hull 1808-1816 $Edited\ by\ Robert\ E.\ Rutherford$

Part II

Ambrose Hull was one of the Protestant Americans who answered Spain's call of 1788 for immigrants to settle and develop the Florida lands. Hull obtained a grant of 2,600 acres in the New Smyrna area early in 1801 and began building his settlement, as narrated in Part I in de last issue of this *Quarterly*. Unfortunately, his first attempt was cut short by an Indian raid in which he suffered damages amounting to several thousand dollars. Nevertheless, Ambrose and his wife, Abigail, with her sister, Stella Hall, soon began rebuilding. The letters previously published relate the story of their early years in Florida, or until 1806. In that year, on a trip to Hempstead, New York, Abigail passed away. Stella, who accompanied Abigail and Ambrose to Florida in 1801 and then returned with them to Hempstead in 1806, married Ambrose before the year ended.

The following letters relate the story of Ambrose and Stella after their return to Florida late in 1806, and continue until 1816. These were years of both happiness and misfortune. After the so-called Patriot War in 1812, the Hulls left their plantation near New Smyrna and made their home at St. Marys, Georgia. However, even though they lived in the United States, their lives centered about the Florida scene, so they may still be considered as a part of the Spanish-Florida story. While living in St. Marys, the Hulls often longed for their old Florida plantation, and so, on December 10, 1820, Ambrose purchased three hundred acres on the west side of the St. Johns River, and later on March 7, 1821, he obtained two hundred additional acres in the same area. ¹

^{1.} Petition by William Gibson, executor of the last will of Ambrose Hull. Spanish Land Grants in Florida. Historical Records Survey, WPA, (5 vols., Tallahassee, 1941). Vol. III, Confirmed Claims, 295-296.

FLORIDA HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

Stella Hall Hull to Ruth Hart

New Smyrna May 25th 1808 ---

Dear Sister Ruthy--

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... I am very impatient to hear once again from your quarter of the World - and am much surprized and not a little hurt that I have not had the satisfaction as yet, of a single line from our Sister Hannah or Brother Edmund - I have written repeatedly to them as well as yourself since we arriv'd in Florida - and really think I have some reason to complain of the neglect of Friends that are so near and dear to me - and who cannot but be sensible how much it is in their power to contribute to my happiness in this particular, and that it cannot fail to afford me inexpressible pleasure to hear frequently of their Health and Prosperity -

I am very desirous to hear from Edmund, and to know how he has disposed of himself as he did not appear altogether determin'd when he left Hemp. - what course to persue - I wrote him sometime in Janry and endeavor'd to persuade him to make us a visit - as it must now be very dull in the United States, I think he had better try his Fortune this way - at any rate he may come and see us without any great sacrifice of time or money - and he will then be enabled to judge for himself what can be done -- I wou'd not be understood that the times are very bright and lifely with us -- but we are jogging on in a sober quiet manner, and trust that with the smiles of a good Providence our persevering Industry we shall be able in a few years to acquire an Estate sufficient to support us through life (not in splendour) but in ease and independence - it is a great point gain'd when we can bend our desires to our circumstances when we are so far contented with our condition that we can enjoy all the good, and pass lightly over the evil that happens to fall in our way - Yet how many miserable beings there are who seemingly in the possesion of every Earthly blessing - are not

capable, - are not wise enough to enjoy any thing, but go on growling to the end of the chapter - but enough -- $\,$

I must now inform you that I send this letter by William Hull who is going on to Connectt with his Br. Abiather by way of N. York if a passage can be obtain'd to that place if not via. Charleston - Mr Hull is writing by this conveyance to Mr Hart - he joins me in love to you and all our Brothers and Nephews and Sister Hannah -

Yours Affectionately Stella Hull

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PS. I wish you to desire Br Edmund, or Cousin William or some one of your household, to examine at Waits Lottery Office in Maiden Lane, the fate of a Ticket which I hold in St. Marys College Lottery Baltimore - the number 7028. you see I'm still dabler in a game of hazard - it is well enough now and then to try Fortunes caprice, she may by chance throw something in ones way - you will write me soon, I have a right to expect so at least

Stella Hall Hull to Ruth Hart

New Smyrna Apr 3d 1809

Dear Sister Ruthy,

I imbrace the opportunity that now offers of writing you a few lines by Br Edmund - who is on the Wing for your place of residence - I am extremely sorry that it is not in our power to detain him longer with us - but he seems determind on trying his fortune in the Western part of your State

I was very glad to hear that your prospects were so favourable, and I really hope that in order to enjoy the benefits thereof you are more attentive to your health than you use'd to be - as for our prospects they are not quite as incouraging as I cou'd wish, but bad as they are we are not yet on the forlorn *hope* - Fortune has long frown'd upon us and she still knits her brows

- but so long as we are permitted by the blessing of Heaven to enjoy health and provide comfortable for our dear little Babe we shall not repine --

You have undoubtedly heard before now of our family addition - but to discribe the endearing quallities, the pretty looks and playfullness of my little Mary - a Mother cou'd not do her justice on a whole sheet of paper, I must therefore refer you to Brother Edmund for particulars as I believe he thinks her if not one of the handsomest, at least one of de best children in the world, she is about eight months old and in the midst of teething, but with very little difficulty - Mr Hull appears to be as fond of her as a reasonable Father shou'd be of such a child -

I shou'd be much pleas'd to make you a visit this season cou'd we do so with propriety, but it seems to be absolutely necessary for us to continue here this season whatever we may think proper to do the next if it shou'd please God to prolong our lives . . . remember me affectionately to your *good Husband* and *dear Children* - and believe me -

Yours Unalterably, STELLA HULL

Stella Hall Hull to Ruth Hart

St. Augustine May 19th 1810

Dear Sister Ruthy

I have delay'd writing you for a length of time - as we were expecting every week to come to Augustine - to which place we have at length removed, and where we calculate to spend the Season - our Plantation at Smyrna goes on as usual, Mr Hull has hir'd an Overseer to superintend the place in his absence - we made a good crop the last season - which has long since been prepar'd for Market - but have not been able to dispose of it as yet - In the present perplex'd state of things here it is impossible to make any new arrangements in the way of business -

we can only wait and see what will be the final issue of the great Patriotic struggle - and the consequent disposition of these Provinces, we shall then be able to judge what course to persue - we do not calculate to remain here after this season, unless a favourable change takes place - now all is doubt and uncertainty there are various conjectures concerning our political destiny - some are of opinion that we shall come under the influence of the English Government - others say the Mexican - and some are sanguine in the opinion that we shall at last breathe the air of Freedom, under the protecting wings of the American Eagle -

It appears from some late accounts that the Island of St Martins is in the hands of the British - which has open'd a communication with the Island of New Providence - as we have considerable intercourse with the latter, I think it strange that we hear nothing from Nancy - I know not what to think of Hempstead - it is almost two years since I have recei'd a line from that quarter you seem however inclin'd to observe a profound silence, whatever your reasons may be for so doing, I cannot conceive they are altogether justifiable on christian ground I'm sure they are not - I have felt extremely hurt I assure you - but I forbear to complain - I hope you are all well -

Mr Hull desires to be affectionately remember'd to you and yours --

Your Sister, STELLA HULL --

NB. BrEd inform'd me that Mr Hart had exchang'd my low prize Ticket in the Baltimore Lottery which I sent on to him for Ticket No 12024 in the B. River Lottery which was drawn the last season - the event of which I have not yet heard

Ambrose Hull to Seth Hart

St Augustine 18th Feby 1812-

Brother Hart -

Your favor of the 13th ult of brotherly enquiries & communications was received last evening, and perused with many pleas-

urable sensations - And to show you that I am equally well disposed to a renewal of brotherly correspondence - I embrace this early opportunity of conveying a line even towards you -

It is true, there has been a lengthy lapse of time since we have been favored with a line from you or your family, or any one of that connection Altho' I have written you occasionally, as had Stella her two eldest sisters - invariably unanswered -

For the last twelve Months, I have not written you, to my recollection

Time & distance were begining to erase former impressions, - and later scenes & connections are succeeding to those which have passed away--

It will always be a source of sincere satisfaction to me, brother Hart, to hear of you, as well as from you, & especially of the prosperity of yourself & family, - in which I can truly say, I have ever felt an unfeigned interest - And it gives me real pleasure to be informed that your prospects are brightening, and that you have, already, so ample a competency so well assured - and also, that your sons (God bless & preserve them) bid so fair to become usefull & ornamental to themselves & family - not forgetting the dear little after crop to enliven your tender & pleasurable solicitudes --

As to my own little family, aside of the past, no man can be more fortunate or happy in an most ammiable wife, and most excellent Mother of two fine little daughters - Mary Street, and Carolina Augustina Antonia Arredondo - the oldest is considerably advanced in her fourth year, and the youngest in her second - And altho' initiated members of the Catholic and truly Apostolic Church, - I hope our good protestant Sisters, will consider them no less entitled to their charitable good wishes - ²

^{2.} Even though Ambrose Hull was a Protestant and was permitted a "liberty of conscience," according to the instructions for the administration and distributions of lands, dated September 9, 1797, the toleration of the settler's religious faith on the part of the Spanish officials was not to extend beyond the first generation: American State Papers, 16th Cong., 1st Sess., H. Doc. 114.

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SETTLERS FROM CONNECTICUT IN SPANISH FLORIDA

I experienced some considerable losses of property & other difficulties for a time after I returned from the Northward, as you have been informed - but my affairs have since taken a more favorable turn -

I have shipd, upwards of one hundred Bales of Cotton within a few weeks past, a considerable production of which, had been long on hand, & altho the markets are still moderate, it will probably nett me a handsome amt, payable quarterly - And have lately obtained titles in fee simple, from this government, to an estate in lands, which, in the event of the political change, so long contemplated, will probably be a competent security, at least, for the common necessities of my little family - ³

We anticipate, at times, the satisfaction of again visiting our northern friends, - but the difficulties which present themselves, on such, particularly as it respects our little brood with necessary attendants, unless we could have a direct conveyance from this to N. York, which seldom occurs, - that we continue to pospone it - and as to removing much further northward, at my time of life, after having been so long accustomed to a milder climate, is an idea that I have not latterly indulged.

You have no doubt considered yourself more particularly neglected by me, on the sum of my pecuniary obligations to you and I confess, with apparent reason - tho' I have been more perplexed in the subject than I ever was, on any other of the kind - It has not been for the length of time past, because it was difficult or inconvenient for me to show that amt, or that my accustomed views or impressions on the subject of punctuality had forsaken me - but the utter impossibility of conveying that sum to you, for want of opportunity & a suitable medium - I returned last week from St. Marys & Amelia Island, at both of which places I received considerable sums of money - and during

^{3.} Ambrose Hull must have known that according to international law, if his land titles were properly recorded, when the change of flags occurred there would be no question concerning his ability to retain his lands.

my stay there which was nearly three weeks, I tried my utmost to procure Bank notes to the acct of your dun, to enclose on to you - & could not obtain them - The circulating Medium both here and there, is almost solely Spanish gold, in which there is a considerable loss in remitting further North, - in consequence of which, every description of Bank paper is greedily snatched up for the purchase of remittances - Some expedient, however, shall be shortly concerted & executed to the effort of discharging this long, & unintentionally protracted obligation - Your sister Stella desires to be very affectionately remembered to her Sister Ruthy & yourself- - While I am, as ever, your Sincerely, affectionate brother - -

AMBROSE HULL

Ambrose Hull to Seth Hart

St. Marys 25th June 1814

Brother Hart

Your letter of the 26th Feby. of friendly and brotherly enquiries & communications, came duly to hand, & was a source of mingled pleasure & regrets - I should have replied without delay had not Stella been in daily expectation of being confined - the result of which I was anxious to know, & which she has since communicated to her Sister Nancy - & other circumstances, have led me to delay writting till this time - in short some recent expectations of being able to communicate a more favorable turn in my affairs, has been the cause - but the iron hand of fate, still holds her inexorable grasp - The last letters we received from you, were the two of which you desire information, under date of July 1812 - and which we found in Octr following, when we came to St Marys - These letters were not answered, - not for want of goodwill & the best dispositions toward you & yours but from an unwillingness to pain you with a new detail of disaster & misfortune - I had resolved to write no more, unless I

could, at least, for once, find something desirable to communicate -

[Patriot War]

The last letter I wrote you, was in Feby 1812 at St Augustine just after my return from Amelia Island, - where I had shipd for Charleston upwards of 100 Bales of Cotton, which we had saved from a wreck to the southward of my place, including my crop of the season before - I had at the same time & place hired out my Negroes for the ensuing year at great wages, in quarterly payments - & was then progressing with the government for titles to my original grant of 3000 acres of land - all which, seemed to presage a favorable issue to the incessant & indiscribable difficulties, perplexities & misfortunes which I had been subjected to from the time I first came to this Country - And on the very day in which I had secured my land titles an express arived anouncing that the U.S. Troops has taken possession of Amelia Island & that a considerable force, joind by the people in the Northern part of the Province were in rapid march to take possession of St Augustine - I confess, to me the information was not unwelcome, (leaving the propriety of the measure to the governments to adjust) neither was it to the actual Spanish inhabitants - business there, had been long at a stand - and those in the employ of government had long been suffering for large balances due them and no prospect of obtaining them - The town, & province might have been taken possession of without the loss of a single life, as nothing more than a show of resistance was contemplated - Tranquility could have been immediately restored & preserved, - & every man left free & undisturbed in his pursuits - Instead of which, a detachment of U. S. Troops encamped before Augustine, together with a large party of Patriots, as they ridiculously stiled themselves, idled away eight long months, without a single attempt upon the town - and then sneaked off, like a parcel of Poltroons and Vagabonds - during this period,

both ludicrous & distressing - we were cooped up in St Augustine, with the misserable inhabitants - I then obtained permission to come on to St Marys with my family, to look after my Negroes &c; - I found them, it is true - but there wages, which amounted to nearly \$2000 - I could not obtain a cent of - My Cotton Consigner in Charleston - after paying a balance due for my Negroes, & some others which I had directed - tho' still with a balance in his hands of \$1000 - which I had reserved for a number of very necessary purposes, among others, to pay your unfortunately procrastinated balance thought proper to stop payment - & which sum, I have not yet received - The disturbances and disorganization still continuing in E. Florida - I obtained permission from that government, to remain on this side - I rented a plantation here the last season, & was progressing with a very promising crop till the 16th Septr., when the whole was swept by the most terrible hurracane that was ever known here - I then hired out a part of my Negroes, & rented another plantation for the present season, where we now reside, & are employing the remainder --

This, brother Hart, is a faint outline of my progress in the west[?] since I wrote you last - and a summary of the reasons for my long silence -

 $\,$. . . should life & health be continued, - my intentions are either to return with my family to St Augustine, or remove them to the neighbourhood of Augusta in this State, - according to the aspect of the times & my own affairs -

... I enclose you \$50 - which with the \$50 - you received thro' Edmund, you will please endorse on my note - I will endeavour to send you another \$50 - within a more conscionable [time] Your Sister Stella joins me in most affectionate remembrances to her Sisters, yourself & all the little folk - Our little ones are incessantly asking me, when I will carry them to the *Norra'd* to see their Uncles & Aunts & little cousins - would to God, I could give them a favorable answer - Let me hear from you often - &

believe me as I am, most sincerely your affectionate brother -- **Ambrose Hull**

Rev. Seth Hart Hempstead Long Island State New York

Ambrose Hull to Seth Hart

St Marys 17th June 1815

Brother Hart

Time, altho' it drags heavily - still glides swiftly - I did not think, when I wrote you last - & received your answer - that another year would so nearly elapse - before there would be another interchange of communication between us - I have been long since worn out, with the almost eternal subject of misfortune, in its seemingly endless variety of shape - And presumed, that my friends must have been also - For this, & no other reason, - since I, for some years past, written them only at long intervals - It would be truly a source of pleasure to me, to write frequently could I have any thing ordinarily pleasing to communicate or could we even regain our former tranquil ground of medium competence & security - I have had an almost perpetual struggle since I came to this southern quarter - not only with the elements - but brutal man, even to preserve life, independent of the ordinary means of subsistance - Murder & robbery has become so rife in this neighborhood that we feel little security, especially at night - A very worthy young man was murderd and robbed by 6 Spaniards, a few hundred yards from my field, about a fort night since & a neighbours house attempted by two others, a few nights after - Since my evil genius led me hither - a comer of the world, where the traces of a divine superintendance, are hardly discernible - I confess, I have had much cause of thankfullness for the preservation of life, particularly - And could I be permitted to realize my property,

& there by render that Justice so long due, & which I so ardently desire to every description of human beings, who have even a benificent claim upon me - I should be quite satisfied about the things of this world - This, as yet, not being the case - & being also a point, beyond my controul, is a sourse of unavoidable & unceasing disquiet - agravated, not unfrequently, with fair, but illusive prospects - It is true, we possess our ordinary means of subsistence - deducting our accustomed drawbacks some out of which, under the head of losses, & other disappointments, I have from time to time furnished you - we are not able as yet, to command but very little beyond it - I would not complain even of this - were there no pressing demands upon me -Beside those of high pecuniary obligation - I am under others, that, morally & beneficently, are equally binding - In consequence of hiring out the principal part of our Negroes last year at high wages, & business being tollerably brisk - we calculated upon a considerable balance over current expenses, & that payments would be promptly made - This no doubt would have been the case, had it not been for the predatory visit at St Marys, about the time wages became due - Altho' every person there, suffered more or less, I am convinced, those indebted to me, might have paid their several balances long before this -Their losses have been made an apology for delay - had we even as yet, prevented doing what we intended - Stella had set her heart so much upon doing something for her more unfortunate Sister and is so much hurt, with the momentary disappointment - that she can not even bring herself to write - till she can do something better -

Fair words, are said to be cheap - & promises predicated upon solemn obligations are but too often lightly regarded - & misfortune may have led mine to be so esteemed - [torn] I trust, a favorable change will prove, that the misfortune was the only cause - I feel [torn] I had no inconsider-

able cause of complaint against you, for neglect of writing - you dwell in the scene of our fathers, brothers, & old acquaintances - & could hardly touch a subject, but would be more or less interesting - & I have no other connection, with whom to correspond, except my Sister - My dwelling is in a strange land - & to you a land of strangers - & about which, you can feel little interest, except so far as it may concern my little family - I beg you will therefore, write me frequently. . . . Stella joins me in much love & goodwill to Br Hart her two Sisters - & our three little brilliants send dutifull respects to their uncle and Aunts, & love to their little cousins -

Yr affectionate br - A HULL

Reverend Seth Hart Hempstead Long Island State N. Yourk

Stella Hall Hull to Ruth Hart

St Mary's May 25th 1816

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Dear Sister Ruthy

Your letter of Feb. 18th was received late in March - & nothing short of severe indisposition cou'd have prevented my acknowledging earlier, your kind & sisterly communication - I have been frequently subject, since the birth of my second Daughter, to very severe turns of rheumatic & nervous affections - which have, at times, reduced me to the verge of life - I have now a grateful interval of relief - tho' weak & debilitated --

.... I have three daughters - Mary, Caroline, & Cornelia - who in general are remarkably healthy children - & cou'd we be so fortunate as to see the Stars and Stripes waving upon the Fortress of St. Augustine - we shou'd have a reasonable assureance of duly providing for them -

We still remain at this place, as a healthy comfortable situation

- altho' the greater part of our Negroes are this year employd on the Florida side of St. Marys river - & we shou'd have return'd to that Province this season - had their affairs been even tollerably regulated - our situation after all the variety of wayward fortune we have heretofore experienced - has now become truly tantalizing - the price of cotton, for the first time since Mr Hull undertook planting has become ample, & bids fair to continue for years - we are under the necessity of planting poor land & paying an exorbitant rent - instead of planting our own ground, which is of the first quality - & availing ourselves of the new kind of culture - that of Sugar cane - which from the experiments made, might enable us in one year to redeem all our past misadventures - how long this state of things is to continue, time will determine - & persevereance may obtain its just reward

> Your truly Affectionate Sister STELLA HULL

Summary

Ambrose Hull died in November, 1821, 4 at the age of fiftyseven. 5 while visiting in New York. Shortly thereafter, in June of 1823, Stella Hull passed away on her plantation on the St. Johns River. 6

Ambrose, Abigail, and Stella Hull typify, in many ways, the early settlers who dared venture to a new frontier. Leaving the comforts of their established life behind them, they accepted the challenge of an unknown land. Ambrose Hull gave up the relative ease and security he enjoyed among his friends as a Protestant Episcopal minister to become a cane and cotton planter in a foreign land. Harassed by Indians, rampaging "Patriots," a

^{4.} Petition by William Gibson, Spanish Land Grants in Florida, Vol. III, Confirmed Claims, 291.

Ibid., Vol. II, Confirmed Claims: A-B-C, 241.
John Rodman to Daniel Boardman, St. Augustine, July 8, 1823, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

hurricane, and marauding Spaniards, he nevertheless carved from the Florida wilderness, an extensive and successful plantation and built a spacious stone house for his family. These letters to their friends and relatives tend to show that, in spite of their misfortunes, they did not give up hope nor did they become too much discouraged, but were often thankful for the blessings which came to them.

Spain made a wise decision when Ambrose Hull and other Americans were invited into the Floridas, as their Yankee ingenuity and industry made a beginning towards developing the land and populating the area. However, to expect that these Anglo-Americans would become loyal Spanish subjects, to the extent that they would sacrifice their lands, or even their lives, to defend a border against another flag, especially that of the land of their birth, was not to know the American settler. The settlers who came to Florida did not become ardent Spanish patriots when they declared their loyalty, nor were they flagwaving Americans. Ambrose Hull was interested only in a way of life for which he searched from Connecticut to Florida. The particular flag he saluted made little difference. He preferred that the Stars and Stripes fly over the fort at St. Augustine, but he remained aloof from the radical "Patriots." As a result his home was destroyed by those who could not wait for the United States to take over Florida peaceably. Most of the early American settlers who left the United States to settle in the Floridas came in search of a way of life, be the flag what it may.

APPENDIX

Memorial of Benjamin A. Putnam, Adm. of Estate of Ambrose Hull, deceased. 7

^{7.} St. Johns County Court House, Office of Circuit Court (vault) "Spanish Papers." Ambrose Hull in the year 1812 was subjected to and sustained of his own property, goods, chattels, and estate in East Florida the losses, injuries and damages herein set forth, to wit:

45 acres of Sea-Island Cotton planting and growing, equal to 5625 lbs. or 16 bales containing each 351# at \$.60 per w \$3330.00 [sic:\$3357.00]	01
20 do. of common, equal to 200 Bush ^s at \$2. 400.00	-
2 acres of Sweet Potatoes, equal to 500 Bush ^s at 25 125.00	
Garden Vegetables equal to say 50.00	
4 Horses at \$50.00 each 200.00	
Stock of provisions on hand left by said Hull in his flight,	
consisting of corn, potatoes flour, etc. 250.00	
40 Bales of Short Staple Cotton on hand, 14000 w at 31	
cents per w 4340.00	
4 Hogsheads of Jamaica Rum, say 120 gals. each at \$1.25	
per gal. rum 600.00	
Large Stone dwelling house nearly destroyed, damage at a	
reasonable calulation 2000.00	
Negro houses destroyed, reasonable amount of damage 500.00	
Quantity of valuable furniture left in house, lost or destroyed 700.00	

\$12534.00 [sic:\$12540.00]

All of which damage and injuries to the said Ambrose Hull was occasioned by the Troops of the United States protecting, supporting and encouraging those Lawless Marauders who called themselves Patriots at that time traversing the country and committing every species of havoc and devastation to the property of peaceable Spanish subjects, in the said year 1812.

Your Memorialist further shows that no part of said Losses, Damages, and Injuries were sustained by Ambrose Hull previous to the entrance into East Florida of the Troops of the United States or their agents in the year 1812. Ambrose Hull was an actual subject of the Spanish Government, and residing on his plantation at New Smyrna in East Florida with his family where he was attacked by persons styled Patriots associated with and protected by the Troops of the United States in the year 1812, and compelled to fly with his family and such of his property as he could save, and take refuge in the City of St. Augustine.

That as hereinbefore stated his very valuable Dwelling House was nearly destroyed, the furniture entirely, and outhouses, Negro Houses, crops, provisions on hand, horses, etc. all destroyed, taken and carried away.

Said Hull, by these causes, was entirely broken up and ruined, being so reduced as to be unable to repair his damages . . .

Approved 26 June 1834. All which is respectfully submitted by your Memorialist. Dated at St. Augustine 11th., September 1834.

BENJ. A. PUTNAM

Admstr, etc. of Ambrose Hull, Dec'd

To Hon. R. R. Reid, Judge of Superior Court for the Eastern District of Florida.