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James W. Covington

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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF FORT BROOKE
THE BEGINNING OF TAMPA

From letters of Col. George M. Brooke

Edited by **JAMES W. COVINGTON**

The military post known as Fort Brooke which was located at the mouth of the Hillsborough River is one that played a most important role in the settlement of Florida's west coast. It served as a base of operations during the Seminole wars, and many famous military figures were stationed there during the middle third of the Nineteenth Century.

Due to the trade and protection offered by Fort Brooke, Tampa was born and slowly grew during the days before Tampa Bay was discovered by the tourist and cigar manufacturer.

Fort Brooke came into being as a result of the Seminole Treaty of 1823. The Seminoles agreed to move into a reservation which was to be located in the south central part of the peninsula. Commissioners representing the United States government in the negotiations suggested that a military post be placed at Tampa Bay to protect the Indians from outside elements.

Colonel James Gadsden,¹ one of the treaty commissioners, was appointed to survey the new reservation. He warned Secretary of War John C. Calhoun that the Seminoles would not move into the reservation if the United States government neglected to show "power and disposition to compel obedience."² Gadsden suggested that a military post be immediately established at Tampa Bay.

Secretary Calhoun had a high regard for Colonel Gadsden and accepted the suggestion. Orders issued from the Adjutant

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1. Gadsden assisted in the famous purchase in southern Arizona which bore his name. His colorful life is summarized in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.
 2. James Gadsden to John C. Calhoun, September 29, 1823, *Seminoles, 1823*, Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives.

General's Office on November 5, 1823,³ provided that Colonel George M. Brooke should proceed as soon as possible with four companies of the 4th Infantry to Tampa Bay where a military post would be established.

Surveyor Gadsden was notified of the orders to Colonel Brooke and he wrote the following letter⁴ to Brooke at Cantonment Clinch near Pensacola:

St. Augustine
1 December 1823

Dear Colonel

I have this day received a copy of an order from the Adj. General's Office stating that four companies of Inftry under your command has been detailed to occupy the post at the Bay of Tampa and that you were instructed to consult with me as to the proper site etc.

I lose no time in informing you that I leave this day with a small detachment for the Indian Nation and will be in the Bay of Tampa the early part of the ensuing Month. As I shall expect some facilities from your command towards the discharge of the duties as Indian Commissioner assigned me I have to request that you will endeavour to make as early a movement as practicable so as to meet me about the time contemplated - otherwise I may be much embarrassed in my operations if not much exposed to privations of a severe character - I feel the more anxious on this subject as the Indians South have of late exhibited something like an unfriendly feeling, and are unwilling that I should run the line immediately - your presence with troops will produce the most happy effects and to your exertions I may acknowledge myself indebted for the faithful and efficacious discharge of the most arduous service I have undertaken.

Your Obdt. Servt.

JAMES GADSDEN

3. These orders are printed in full in Karl H. Grismer: *Tampa*, St. Petersburg Ptg. Co., 1950, p 55.

4. James Gadsden to Colonel George Brooke, Records of the War Department, Office of the Adjutant General, Letters received 7-B-1824. Hereafter cited as O.A.G.

The task force left Pensacola on January 15, 1824, and made its way into Tampa Bay. Colonel Brooke wrote a detailed account of the landing and selection of a proper location, which is printed in full by Karl H. Grismer in his *Tampa*.⁵ In the same source is an account of Robert J. Hackley who was dispossessed of his dwelling and claim of the area on which the fort was established.

Thus, the cantonment was set up and conditions in the military establishment showed great improvement as seen in the next letter⁶ sent by Colonel Brooke.

Camp on Hillsborough Bay

4th April 1824

Genl.

Since my communication of Febr. 3 this is the only opportunity which has been offered me of addressing you (the arrival of Major Wright by water). The troops continue in good health, are well supplied with provisions, and are industriously engaged in the erection of quarters. Capt. D. E. Burch of the Quarter Masters Dept. at Pensacola has facilitated by every means in his power, the completion of our barracks by complying most promptly with all the necessary requisitions. By the middle of this month, the men will be in their quarters which are the best log buildings I have ever seen, both for health and duration. The rooms being large, high, airy and as well put together as possible, the whole 260 feet in length and 12 feet from floor to the loft. We have completed the Quarter Masters and commissary's store house, [and] bake house. The officers quarters have also been finished (viz. two blocks of it) in ten days. Considering that the first tree was felled on the 20th Feby. I have every reason to be pleased with the great industry of the officers and men, besides this each company has a large garden

5. Grismer, *op. cit.* pp. 56-58.

6. Brooke to Brown, O.A.G., 97-B-1824.

now in fine cultivation. I must beg leave to renew my application for two apt. surgeons for should any epidemic disease take place here, we should be in a most deplorable situation. I wrote to the Surgeon Gen'l. on this subject early in Jan. but he has not done me the honor of ever answering any letter. Should we be unfortunate to have the yellow fever, I shall feel myself relieved from all responsibility in as much as I have written repeatedly to the Surgeon Gen'l. on this subject.

The Indians appear to me, to be more and more displeased at the treaty and still more at the running of the line, and I am not unapprehensive of some difficulty. They have an idea, that the nation, is about to go to war with Great Britain, and was it to be the case they would most certainly join our enemy. In consequence of its having been reported to me, that a large number of Indians were seen near the Camp, after tattoo, who appeared to have an intention of taking us by surprise, the troops, were put under arms, and continued so during the night, a large party were also sent out some distance, but no Indians were discovered. So the man who reported it to me, came running in, and stated that he had seen them not more than 15 minutes before, an attack was calculated on most certainly. The officers and men turned out with an alacrity and spirit, which did them great credit, and I feel a confidence, that no Indian force in this country could meet us, with the least prospect of success, although they can bring at least 700 warriors. There is an absolute necessity of some field pieces here into the field and I beg, that the Commandg. Officer at Pensacola may be directed to have transported to this place, two six pounders, with a proper supply of ammunition and implements. We have discovered that this place, has been a depot, for pirates, finding the other day, the remains of three unfortunate persons who from the shot-holes, in their hats, and from stakes set in the ground, with ropes attached to them and the appearance of fire, that some of them

had been shot and others burned to death.⁷ There were near them two six pound shot, and an old looking glass. From the ropes and the burnt wood, it appears, it must have been done about four or five months since.

I have the honor to be
your respectfully
yr. ms. Obt. servt.

GEO. M. BROOKE

P. S. A copy of this letter has been addressed to Gen. Scott

Colonel Brooke, when he returned with his family, which had been left at Pensacola, wrote to Gen. Atkinson, his commanding officer as follows:⁸

Cantonment Brooke
18 January 1825

General

I returned to Pensacola from the country with my family on the 20th of October on my way to this post and could not obtain passage till the 10th of Dec. when I sailed and landed here on the 18th of the same month.

I found the troops in good health and the post in good order. From the last year it appears that this is one of the most healthy positions in the southern country. There has been less sickness here than at Cantonment Clinch although the number of troops was greater. . . . You will perceive by the monthly return of this post that our total is now 177 from which 9 have been discharged and 1 dead and 26 prisoners leaving our effective force 141. There will also be discharged in this and the following months viz. in Jany. 1825 6 men, in Feby. 5, March, seven, April five and May seven, making 30 leaving then the effective force at 101 men. It is necessary that the command be kept up as

7. Due to lax control by Spanish and American authorities the coast of southwest Florida had become a haven for "second-rate" pirates, smugglers and some honest fishermen.

8. Brooke to Brigadier General Henry Atkinson, O.A.G., 37-B-1824.

nearly to its full complement as practicable from the number of Indians who have been removed from the upper country by the treaty at St. Augustine, as well as those which were before in our immediate neighborhood making in the whole 6 or 700 souls. I am in no fear of the Indians at present, but should they at any time disclose dispositions or be guilty of improper conduct, it would be out of my power to make those arrangements which should put them down at once. The necessity of recruits is also increased by the probability of our being ordered to cut out those two military roads which are now surveying [*sic*] by Captain Clark of the Q. M. department. I therefore hope that a proper part of the recruits now making for the 4th Infy may be ordered direct to this place.

The few opportunities we have at this place for making known our wants, and the great length of time which we experience in receiving orders and answering them, I am fearful may produce a belief that we are not so prompt as we should be.

I have the honor to be very respectfully yr. Obt. Servt.

GEORGE M. BROOKE

to Brig Genl. H. Atkinson
Commg. Western Dept.