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SURVEYORS' FIELD NOTES AS A SOURCE OF  
HISTORICAL INFORMATION

by WILFRED T. NEILL, \*

No doubt many historians are aware of the information to be gleaned from surveyors' field notes. However, it seems desirable to call further attention to these documents; they should be of special interest to the student of local history, and to the archeologist who wishes to find sites of the Seminole period in Florida.

During the 1830's and 1840's, government surveyors were mapping parts of the state, establishing corner marks for the section-township-range grid which is still in use. Their progress was frequently interrupted by Seminole hostilities; nevertheless surveyors prepared many accurate maps showing portions of Florida in minute detail. Each map was accompanied by a set of field notes, describing natural features and man-made objects encountered while section lines were being run. A few excerpts from these notes will give an idea of their potential value.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, there were Seminole villages near present-day Ocala, Marion County, Florida; but the precise nature and extent of Seminole occupation in this area cannot be learned from historical accounts. Surveyors' maps and notes reveal that Indian settlement was mostly in T 15 S, R 22 E, and T 16 S, R 21 E. In the former township and range, there was an Indian (Seminole) field on the western edge of S 19, and two more along the boundary between S 29 and S 30. A path or road, called "Osceola's Trail," cut through the northwestern corner of S 36. In the latter township and range, there was an Indian field on the north-eastern corner of S 13; another on the western boundary of

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\* The author is indebted to William E. Franklin, Jr., of Marion Engineering Company, Ocala, Florida, for permission to examine photostats of various maps and field notes relating to the subject of this paper.

S 11, a little more than a half-mile north of the southwestern corner of that section; and yet another on the northern boundary of S 11, a half-mile east of the section's northwestern corner. There was also an Indian field on the northern boundary of S 1, a little more than a half-mile west of the section's northeastern corner. As S 1 was of irregular shape, owing to the encroachment of the Catalina de Jesus Hijuelos Grant, this field must have been on what is now the John W. Edwards property. As I have pointed out previously,<sup>1</sup> this was the location of a Seminole village, probably Osceola's Town. Unfortunately, when the survey was made (in 1843, by L. M. Prevost), the Indian settlements had been abandoned, although Seminole fields, gardens, and even dwellings were still to be seen at various localities in Marion County. The southern boundary of S 1 crossed "the road to Charley Emathla's town," according to the afore-said field notes.

One of the surveyors mapped a tract which he described as being "near Tuskanahaw Town on the west side of Big Swamp Hammock, eight or ten miles southwest of Camt. [Cantonment] King." This piece of land (the SW 1/4 and Lot No. 2, S 12, T 16 S, R 21 E) is the one which for a time belonged to David, Marcus W., and John Q. A. Reinhardt; it is the "Reinhardt tract" which I had previously mentioned in connection with the search for Osceola's Town.<sup>2</sup> "Tuskanahaw" is a variant spelling of "Taska Heniha," the name of a Seminole leader. Taska Heniha was, apparently, a Mikasuki; he is usually associated with the Seminole band on the St. Johns River.<sup>3</sup> So far as I know, there is no other indication of this Indian's residence near Ocala. The surveyor set the northeastern corner post of this tract in an

1. Neill, W. T., "The Site of Osceola's Village in Marion County, Florida." *Florida Historical Quarterly* (April-July, 1955), XXIII, nos. 3-4, 240-246.

2. *Ibid.*, 242.

3. Porter, K. W., "Origins of the St. John's River Seminole: Were They Mikasuki?" *The Florida Anthropologist* (1951), nos. 3-4, 39-45.

Indian field, and one may suppose that Taska Heniha's Town was nearby.

Some interesting notes pertain to the "Big Scrub" country, now the Ocala National Forest in eastern Marion County. Much of this area was surveyed by R. B. Ker in 1835. Ker's field notes contain more explanatory remarks than usual. They reveal, for example, how various natural features received their names.

In the Big Scrub Ker encountered a "fine sheet of water. There are no water marks on the timber at any point on this lake. It is a spring covered with ducks and filled with fish of the finest kind. I have named it after the present governor of Florida, Eaton. The Indians have no name for it - excepting their general appellation - wewa - which is the Seminolese for water." Thus Lake Eaton was named. Of the creek flowing therefrom, Ker remarked, "This creek is the outlet of a lake by the same name. This creek and said lake had no name - The Indians say so. I have named them after our present governor." Of Scrub Lake Ker observed, "No name, as usual, among the Indians for this lake. In consequence of its being surrounded with scrub I have named it as above, Scrub Lake." On his birthday Ker encountered a large, unnamed lake and could not resist calling it after himself. This explains the spelling, "Lake Ker," seen on early and some modern maps; the usual present-day spelling, "Lake Kerr," is erroneous.

There are a few references to Seminoles in the Big Scrub. On one occasion Ker was surveying S 19, T 14 S, R 24 E. At "72. chains west of the SE comer" of this section, he passed an "Indian's house," and when searching for a previously erected range line marker, he found only "the hole where the post had been. It was destroyed, I suppose by the Indians, and the numbers erased from the trees." Another surveyor, Paul McCormick, mapping T 14 S, R 24 E, in the year 1834, stated in his field notes, "Sections 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, and 36 not run

. . . because supposed to be in the Indian Territory.”

In S 24, T 14 S, R 23 E, McCormick indicated a tract of land belong to “Caldwell,” and the house of “Dr. Moore.” Apparently there were settlers in the Big Scrub at this early date.

Also of value were certain field notes pertaining to T 12 S, R 19 E, an area including portions of Marion and Levy counties. One of the surveyors was called upon to locate the Domingo Acosta Grant. In his field notes he remarked: “Ascertained the location of this grant from position of Bowlegs’ Old Plantation, well known as Wacahoota, and called for in the original Spanish plat.” (This was Old Wacahoota, not the present-day one in Alachua County.) Apparently Bowlegs’ settlement, one of the largest Seminole towns, was within the Spanish land grant. Guided by the field notes, I was able to locate an extensive Seminole archeological site in the vicinity of the grant, and to recover a good bit of material therefrom. A report on the site is in preparation.

Judging from the field notes, the surveyors often built mounds of earth to serve as corner markers when no sizable bearing trees were available. Some of the mounds were quite large, four or five feet high and as much as 15 feet in diameter. At present these structures might be erroneously attributed to the Indians who preceded the Seminoles in Florida. The so-called “domiciliary mounds,” devoid of cultural remains, in some cases may actually be surveyors’ corner markers.

The surveyors’ maps and notes portray and describe natural features, even very minor ones such as ponds, thickets, bayheads, fields, and the like. (L. M. Prevost, in his notes, provided subjective description also, referring to “damnable live oak scrub,” “miserable scrub,” “third rate pine,” etc.) The ecologist should find these documents of interest in connection with studies on plant succession. It would be worthwhile to compare the vegetation of the 1830’s with that of today, especially in an

undisturbed area such as the Big Scrub. Other minor changes in local ecology might also come to light.

The above comments give some idea of the information contained in surveyors' field notes and maps. Fortunately, these documents <sup>4</sup> are readily available. Photostats of them may be purchased from the State Department of Agriculture in Tallahassee, and often are on file in the offices of surveying and engineering companies.

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4. *Surveyors' Field Notes and Maps*. Archives of Field Note Division. Department of Agriculture, Tallahassee.