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### The Legendary Visit of Emerson to Tallahassee

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Downes: The Legendary Visit of Emerson to Tallahassee

THE LEGENDARY VISIT OF EMERSON  
TO TALLAHASSEE  
by ALAN J. DOWNES

Among the pioneers in the perennial migration of winter visitors to Florida was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the beloved philosopher of American ideals. In 1827, ten years before the flowering of the stirring essays on "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance," the unknown tubercular youth sailed into castle-shadowed St. Augustine harbor seeking the healing climate of the newly-acquired Florida Territory.

During his ten-week stay the future scholar as a matter of habit recorded his random thoughts and his impressions of life around him in a series of journal entries, notebook jottings, and letters. These writings, now published in relative completeness, constitute an important historical source, first because of their record of Emerson's momentous meeting with the atheistic Napoleonic prince-in-exile, Achille Murat; and second because of the light they throw upon social life in the old Spanish town just following American occupation.<sup>1</sup>

Among these several dozen items stands a very picturesque description of Tallahassee, the newly-founded territorial capital, which has the misleading appearance of an eye-witness account. This striking bit has become the basis of a popular notion, understandable but erroneous, that Emerson made a side-trip to visit Prince Murat's plantation near Tallahassee. The document is here quoted in full:

Tallahassee, a grotesque place, selected three years since as a suitable spot for the Capital of the territory, and since that day rapidly settled by public officers, land

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1. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, eds., *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820-1872, with Annotations*, 10 vols. (Houghton Mifflin, 1909-1914), II, 149-190; and Ralph L. Rusk, ed., *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 6 vols. (Columbia University Press, 1939), I, 186-195.

speculators and desperadoes. Much club law and little other. What are called the ladies of the place are, in number, eight. "Gov. Duval is the button on which all things are hung." Prince Murat has married a Mrs. Gray and has sat down in the new settlement. Tallahassee is 200 miles west of St. Augustine, and in the journey thither you sleep three nights under the pine trees. The land in its neighborhood is rich. Here is the township of Lafayette.

I saw here a marble copy of Canova's bust of Queen Caroline of Naples, Murat's wife. It did not strike me as at all wonderful, though Canova's busts of the Buonapartes are said to be his finest works.<sup>2</sup>

Out of thirteen writers who touch on Emerson's Florida sojourn, six assert, primarily on the basis of this passage, that the poet did visit Tallahassee;<sup>3</sup> while six others avoid or omit any mention of such a trip.<sup>4</sup> The only published negation is a two-line footnote in the six-volume edition of Emerson's letters, which asserts cautiously that it seems "very improbable that Emerson visited Murat at Tallahassee, as some have believed."<sup>5</sup> It seems worthwhile to resolve the conflict and to show definitely

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2. *Journals*, II, 161. Queen Caroline was the wife of Joachim Murat, king of Naples - that is, Achille Murat's mother.
  3. The originator of the idea was apparently James E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 3 vols. (Houghton Mifflin, 1887), I, 126. Most important propagators were the editors of the *Journals*: see II, 161, footnote. The most recent and probably the most influential in Florida was Mrs. H. L. Richmond, "Ralph Waldo Emerson in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* (October, 1939), XVIII, 81. See in addition the biographies by Garnett, by Russell, and by George E. Woodberry.
  4. Most significant of the silent six is Alfred J. Hanna, *A Prince in Their Midst: The Adventurous Life of Achille Murat on the American Frontier* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), where, in a whole chapter devoted to the Frenchman's relations with Emerson, Hanna scrupulously avoids the question of the legendary visit. Unfortunately Ralph L. Rusk in his new biography, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), takes no positive steps to discredit the legend. See also the biographies by Gay, by Firkins, and by Michaud, as well as the recent history of Florida by J. E. Dovell.
  5. *Letters*, I, 194, note 3.

that Emerson did not visit Tallahassee.

Beyond the equivocal description quoted above there is no evidence to support the legend. Emerson mentions the town in only one other place - a passing reference to it as the home of Murat, in the course of his later description of the Prince; and nowhere does he speak of having been there.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the style of the description is peculiar. Would a young man who had just enjoyed plantation hospitality have written afterwards of his hostess as "a Mrs. Gray"? Why does he put the characterization of Governor Duval in quotation marks, as if he had heard it from someone else? So suspicious are these elements that even the original proponent of the legend remarked that "it is not quite clear that he is speaking of himself."<sup>7</sup>

There is very good reason for doubting that Emerson spoke of himself. He had come to St. Augustine as an invalid, physically incapable (according to his own belief at least) of enduring the exhausting two-hundred mile ride over a wheel-rut trail, sleeping in the open in the middle of winter - even a Florida winter.<sup>8</sup> A poem he had written upon arrival at St. Augustine ended with the words

... I feel

In spite of hope, these wishful eyes no more

Shall see New England's wood-crowned hills again.<sup>9</sup>

And even on the eve of departure two months later his optimism could rise only to "I fancy myself better lately. . . ." <sup>10</sup> These are not the feelings of a pioneer sightseer.

The really conclusive evidence is given by Emerson him-

6. *Ibid.*, I, 194; also *Journals*, II, 161, footnote.

7. Cabot, *op. cit.*, I, 126.

8. Calendaring of his writings shows only two gaps long enough to allow for the trip - one immediately after his arrival in January, the other in mid-February.

9. *Journals*, II, 151.

10. Letter to Mary Moody Emerson, St. Augustine, [March 25?], 1827 in *Journals*, II, 179.

self when, in a letter written after his return to Charleston, he describes rhapsodically his intimate conversations with Prince Murat. The Frenchman and his wife, married the previous summer, left St. Augustine for their belated honeymoon on the same ship with the Yankee poet, only to find themselves becalmed for several days at sea.<sup>11</sup> Emerson records, “. . . My kind genius had sent me for my shipmate, Achilles Murat, the eldest son of the old king Joachim, who is now a planter at Tallahassee and is at this time on his way to visit his uncle at Bordentown. *We boarded together in St. Augustine but I did not become much acquainted with him till we went to sea.*”<sup>12</sup> The sentence here italicized provides in Emerson’s own words the two vital facts necessary to explain away the ostensible eye-witness description of Tallahassee upon which rests the notion of Emerson’s visit. The youth could not have been a guest in the Murat home near Tallahassee, viewing there the treasured sculpture of Murat’s mother, yet at the same time not “become much acquainted” with the Prince until they went to sea six weeks later. On the other hand, the fact that the two men boarded together - eating at the same table, relaxing in the same parlor - helps to explain the puzzling local color in the “description” of Tallahassee. It now becomes clear that these notes, like so many of Emerson’s entries, were made from hearsay, perhaps from remarks of Murat himself. Their boarding together also accounts for Emerson’s statement that he “saw here a marble copy of Canova’s bust of Queen Caroline of Naples. . . .” Obviously he saw it - could only have seen it - exhibited by Murat at their hotel.

In the face of such facts, how could the legend have arisen? The truth is that the facts were not available until 1939. For some reason not yet explained the single crucial sentence

11. Hanna, *op. cit.*, pp. 122, 128.

12. (Italics mine.) *Letters*, I, 193-4. “Achilles” is Emerson’s spelling.

concerning Emerson's becoming acquainted with Murat was omitted from the versions published by Cabot in 1887 and in the *Journals* published 1909-1914, and did not appear until Rusk included it in the 1939 edition of the letters.<sup>13</sup> Hence it may be said that the legend of Emerson's visit to Tallahassee was an honest effort to explain a mutilated text. With a true text and a new explanation in hand, the time has come to abandon the legend.

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13. Cabot, *op. cit.*, I, 126-7; *Journals*, II, 182; *Letters*, I, 193-4. Rusk does not explain the previous omission of the sentence.