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THE EARLY SUGAR INDUSTRY IN FLORIDA *

by WILBUR SIEBERT

DURING THE score of years of British occupation little sugar was produced in Florida. The cultivation of sugar-cane was tried only experimentally and was practically limited to small plots of land on the plantations of Lieutenant Governor John Moultrie and Richard Oswald, Esq. In 1776 only one hogshead of sugar and another of molasses were exported, although the number of barrels, casks, and puncheons of rum shipped totaled seventy-eight.¹

It was not until the early years of the nineteenth century, during the second Spanish period and especially after the acquisition of Florida by the United States, that the planters paid serious attention to sugar-making. However, as will appear in the following account, their ventures involved them in financial difficulties, which were manifested in the mortgaging of crops, lands, and the equipment necessary for the manufacture of their products. Sometimes these planters became so deeply involved that their estates had to be sacrificed to their creditors.

In 1803 Samuel and William Williams, who had lived in East Florida late in the British period, returned to the province and obtained grants of land for the purpose of producing sugar. William took up a tract of twenty-two hundred acres at New Smyrna, near Mosquito (now Ponce de Leon) Inlet, by a grant of July 21, 1803, and another of the same size at Spring Garden, on St. Johns river, in December, 1822. Samuel obtained a tract of thirty-two hundred acres on the upper part of Halifax river in April, 1817. The latter died before long, leaving several sons and a daughter. One of the sons, Samuel Hill Williams, operated the plantation with its sugar works. Late in August, 1834, he gave a mortgage on five hundred acres, which formed a part of his orange grove bordering the west side of Halifax river, as also on all of his buildings, sugar works, and other improvements to

*Many items in this paper are derived from notes taken from the Deed Books in Tallahassee by Miss Emily L. Wilson, former Librarian and Historian of the St. Augustine Historical Society.

1. Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, 1774, I, 69, II, 30.

his brother-in-law, Vanancio Sanchez, "to have and to hold." The mortgaged orange grove was William's place of residence at this time.²

When William Williams died he bequeathed his New Smyrna and Spring Garden estates to three nephews, William, Abner, and William Henry Williams. Abner inherited one-third of the Spring Garden plantation (seven hundred and thirty-three and one-third acres) and a small quantity of land at Mosquito Inlet. At his death he left these properties to his mother, Hannah Williams, and his sister Sarah, the wife of William C. Thomas.³ The operations of John T. Williams, another of Samuel's sons, will be mentioned later.

The widow of Samuel married General Joseph M. Hernandez, who obtained the grant of a large tract of land at the head of Matanzas river and Graham's swamp from the Spanish Government in 1816. About seven hundred acres of this tract the General cultivated as a sugar plantation, calling it the St. Joseph plantation. In 1818 he brought from Francis Ferreyra two other places, one nearly eight hundred acres named *Mala Compra* and, adjoining it, the former country estate of John Moultrie called *Bella Vista* and containing at this time three hundred and seventy-five acres.⁴

In 1826, General Hernandez formed a partnership with Matthew J. Keith for the management of the St. Joseph plantation, the amount invested by the latter being \$10,750. Five years later the partnership was dissolved, and Keith took a mortgage on the place from Hernandez and his wife. About the same time Keith and his wife sold out their interest to Daniel S. Griswold for \$10,500, but later returned it and the mortgage to Keith, who took a note from Hernandez for what was due him. In 1832 Griswold mortgaged his share of the crops, sugar, rice, etc. to Benjamin D. Heriot on the property itself for money advanced for the purchase of supplies for the plantation.⁵

2. Escrituras of 1813-1814, f. 157; *American State Papers Public Lands*, III, 667, IV, 421; Deed Book D, 86; Deed Book B and L, 5, 7-8.

3. Deed Book E, 177-180.

4. Escrituras of 1813-1814, f. 157.

5. Deed Book I and J, 101, 134, 145, 149, 150, 211-272-276, 326-327, 361.

Before long John T. Williams bought from Griswold half of the St. Joseph plantation, on which he gave a mortgage to Wragg, Heriot, and Simmons of Charleston. Another mortgage held by Griswold from General Hernandez and his wife on this property with its house, sugar mill, engines, buildings, etc. was transferred to Williams. In 1817, Williams had acquired from Martin Hernandez a tract of land at Matanzas, at the head of Northwest or Pellicer's creek, with its old mill. This tract Williams conveyed to Griswold, thus completing their trade. Williams employed Abraham Dupont to cultivate his crop on the St. Joseph plantation for \$936.⁶

At length the General decided to settle his remaining accounts with his creditors, namely, with Dupont for the hire of negroes and with Griswold, Heriot, Keith, and Joseph Lawton for other items. He also decided to buy out John T. Williams's half-interest in the St. Joseph plantation and pay him for all the buildings, mills, and sugar houses he had purchased from Griswold. Accordingly in 1835, he borrowed \$38,000 from the Union Bank of Florida, for which he executed a mortgage on his plantations of *Mala Compra*, *Bella Vista*, and *St. Joseph* and on the sugar houses belonging to the last one. The payments for all of these purchases seem to have totaled only \$11,172.02.⁷

Meantime John T. Williams had surrendered to Wragg, Heriot, and Simmons for a debt of \$1,900 his undivided half of the eight hundred and ninety-four acres of the St. Joseph plantation, which Griswold had brought from William J. Keith. This surrender included all the houses, sugar works and mill, and other buildings, the engines, furnaces, and kettles on the place. The outcome of the General's transactions with the Union Bank of Florida seems to have been that the Bank found it necessary or expedient to take over the properties on which it held the mortgage.⁸

Another planter who is said to have cultivated sugar-cane was Samuel Betts, a native of Milton, Connecticut. In 1803 he received from the Spanish Government a grant of two thousand acres west of where the village of New Smyrna had been. In

6. *Ibid.*, 403, 437, 438, 439; Deed Book K, 8, 233.

7. Deed Book L, 150-159.

8. Deed Book B, and L, pp. 40-45, 52, 150-158 Deed Book J, p. 134; Deed Book M, pp. 15, 35.

1791 this tract had been granted to Hepworth Carter, who erected buildings on his place and cultivated it. How extensive Betts's operations may have been is not shown in the available documents, but it is certain that they ran him into debt. In 1815 he was living at Fernandia, where he formed a trust of one-fourth of his property to meet his liabilities, naming as his trustees Fernando de la Maza Arredondo, Francis Philip Fatio, and George Fleming. In the following year he sold two-thirds of his land for \$40,000 to Joseph P. White of New York City.⁹

In 1804 John Bunch had received a grant of twenty-one hundred and sixty acres on Mosquito and Halifax rivers, which he sold to Colonel or Captain Thomas H. Dummett, late of Barbados, in 1825. The former also acquired by purchase a tract of 975 acres opposite Pelican island in Halifax river from Patrick Dean, which the latter had obtained by grant in 1804. This tract was later sold by J. and C. Lawton to Sarah P. Anderson, wife of George Anderson of Mosquito County. On May 3, 1832, Mrs. Anderson died, and in February, 1835, we find two-thirds of her estate in the possession of James K. Anderson, who may have been her son. He soon mortgaged this property and two-thirds of all the houses, sugar-mills, works, boilers, kettles, engines, and other machinery of the entire tract to the Southern Life Insurance and Trust Company.¹⁰

At the time that Captain Dummett purchased the tract of John Bunch, he also bought another belonging to John Addison from his administrator, Thomas Addison. The *East Florida Herald* of February 8, 1825, had announced Dummett's two prospective purchases at Tomoko, including the ninety negroes of Addison and Bunch, six months before they were consummated. It had also stated that the purchaser intended to put on the two plantations about one hundred more slaves and devote "his attention to the rigorous cultivation" of sugar-cane and the manufacture of sugar.¹¹

It would appear that in buying John Bunch's tract Captain Dummett acted merely as the agent for his relative, Douglas

9. Deed Book C, pp. 14, 18, 188-189; Deed Book D, p. 77; Charleston Miscellaneous Record Book BBBB; *American State Papers*, Public Lands, IV, No. 18, Report No. 2 (1824), 225-237; *Harpers' Monthly Magazine*, LXV, 223.

10. Deed Book AA, 16; Deed Book I and J, 284; Deed Book M, 299.

11. Deed Book F, 250.

Dummett, who settled there and before long gave a mortgage on the land, including its buildings, sugar works, and other improvements. At length, in 1829, Douglas conveyed the property to Captain Dummett and his wife Mary.¹²

James Williams and Mary, his wife, came from Harford County, Maryland, and engaged in sugar-making. In 1829 the husband acquired from John E. and Gabriel W. Perpall a tract of five hundred acres in Graham's swamp in trust for his wife. They named it "Harford plantation." The tract was near the line dividing St. Johns and Mosquito counties and was bounded on the east by the road leading to the landing-place, on the north by land belonging to General Hernandez, on the west by vacant land, and on the south by a tract belonging to George J. F. Clarke. In 1836 there was still a debt of \$3,389 on the Harford place and its sugar-mill, machinery, and fixtures. Shortly thereafter James Williams died, and his widow disposed of the property with all its buildings, sugar-mills, and machinery to John H. Prince, a former resident of Maryland.¹⁴

We have very little information about the sugar plantation of William Travers and Mattheo Solana, which was located a mile south of Black Creek. It was operated under a partnership agreement for a time, which was finally dissolved. By the settlement then made Travers took the sugar-mills and other improvements, the utensils, the sugar crop of fifty barrels, all of the molasses, and one-half of the crop of provisions, leaving the plantation, any slaves who may have belonged to it and the other half of the provisions to Solana.¹⁵

Ambrose Hull had been the recipient of a grant of eleven hundred and fifteen acres at New Smyrna, the southern boundary of this tract being a canal that also formed the southern boundary of the land deeded to William DePeyster and Mrs. Henry N. Cruger, formerly of New York. This property passed into the possession of Mary Dunham, the widow of David Dunham, late of New York. By a deed of trust, in 1833, and by her last will and testament, dated 1834, Mrs. Dunham authorized David R. Dunham of New Smyrna, probably her son, to sell any

12. Deed Book N, 169.

14. Deed Book N, 251; Deed Book I and J, 31, 31, 347; Deed Book H, 206.

15. Deed Book I and J, 392.

of her lands with their buildings and rights. He seems to have sold the Hull plantation to Christopher Andrews and John S. Lytle, for whom he was trustee in 1837.¹⁶ This tract was probably operated to produce sugar, like the DePeyster and Cruger plantation adjoining it.

INDIAN DEPREDATIONS

The fate of these plantations with their appurtenances is told by Mrs. Jane Murray Sheldon, who removed with her husband and her mother from Mandarin, on St. Johns river, to New Smyrna in 1835, and occupied the Cruger and DePeyster residence, known as Dr. Turnbull's castle, which stood on the hill overlooking Mosquito (now Ponce de Leon) Inlet. Mrs. Sheldon's husband, John Dwight Sheldon, had been placed in charge of the Cruger and DePeyster sugar plantation and learned on the morning of December 24 that nine Indians with painted faces had appeared the night before at a dance that was held at Mr. Hunter's place, a mile north of New Smyrna. This was so ominous a sign of hostilities that Hunter and Sheldon decided to take their families and portable effects at once across the river to Captain Dummett's house. After the trunks on a lighter had been plundered by a small party of Seminoles, Sheldon and his ladies went on board a small schooner in Mosquito Inlet and proceeded up Halifax river to Bulow's landing for safety. The Indian marauders were secreted by Cruger and DePeyster's slaves until a large body of Seminoles joined them at night and burned the houses of the village, after which they destroyed the neighboring plantations on the mainland. Ere long they crossed the river and ravaged Captain Dummett's place. The ruins and broken machinery of a brick sugar works standing on the border of what is now known as Ponce de Leon spring, a few miles east of DeLand, shows that the savages extended their depredations twenty-five or more miles inland.¹⁷

After spending six weeks at Bulow's and two years in St. Augustine, during a considerable part of which time Sheldon acted as guide for the United States troops that were engaged in fighting the Indians, the Sheldon family returned to their old

16. Deed Book M, 309.

17. *Florida Historical Quarterly*, (April, 1930), XIII, 188-190.

home near Mazarin. Scarcely had they settled there when a party of eighteen savages killed a family two miles away and destroyed the farms in that neighborhood. An appeal sent to St. Augustine brought a body of troops, which captured most of the party near Picolata.¹⁸

Troops were also kept at New Smyrna and in 1839 more came in a small schooner, which was much tossed by the breakers until the rising tide gave a depth of nine feet over the bar at the mouth of the inlet. Then it entered the channel and moved up the river. On the left a little, wooded bluff was seen upon the summit of which a low paling encircled the graves of some seamen who had been killed by the Seminoles. In the previous autumn their bodies had been found and buried by the soldiers. The town was in ruins, except the fort and a few small buildings occupied by the members of the garrison and a collonade of six white Doric columns that stood in bold relief against a dark cope & live oaks and other evergreen trees.¹⁹

After the fresh troops had disembarked and gone to their quarters, several of their officers crossed the canal for a stroll. A few rods to the north they came upon the ruins of the Turnbull mansion, which from the top of a small rise of ground commanded "an extensive prospect over the lagoons and marshes to the Eastward." Passing on through several old fields and tracts of hammock land, they saw the small ruin of the Hunter house, which had been burned by the Indians. Later they made an excursion to the impressive ruin of the Cruger and DePeyster sugar works, a mile or more to the southwest of New Smyrna. They were astonished at "its massive wall and finished arches, all of hewn stone, standing forth in strange and solitary grandeur amidst a wilderness of pines." They were looking of course at the wreck of the old Spanish mission building, which had been first fitted up either by Messrs. Cruger and DePeyster or a Mr. Stamps from South Carolina with a furnace, steam engine with a walking beam, and immense iron kettles for making sugar. To this mill the Seminoles had set the torch and everything combustible had been consumed, but "all the iron work and machinery, especially the new steam engine" had been left "comparatively unharmed." *This destruction marked the end of the sugar industry in the New*

18. *Florida Historical Quarterly*, (April, 1930), VIII 190-193.

19. *Army and Navy Chronicle*, (January 16, 1840), X, 42.

Smyrna region. Inside the walls of the old mission today may be seen a part of the brick furnace and the concave surfaces where the great iron cauldrons stood, while in the rear of the building lie the walking beam and two cauldrons, mouth downward.²⁰

In October, 1843, the Sheldons returned to New Smyrna, where there were still three companies of United States troops. For some time Mr. Sheldon was employed as pilot for their vessels. Six years later the troops were moved down to Fort Capron, at the mouth of Indian river. Shortly after this Mr. Sheldon was appointed deputy collector of customs and purchased the site of Turnbull's castle, of which nothing but the "lordly foundations" and the stone-lined wells remained. During this period and down to the end of the year 1856 the Indians committed occasional murders. Thereafter the inhabitants had no further trouble with them.²¹

20. *Ibid.*, 43; *Florida Historical Quarterly*, (April, 1930), VIII, 194 N.

21. *Ibid.*, 193-196.