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## Memoir of a West Pointer in Florida: 1825

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MEMOIR OF A WEST POINTER  
IN FLORIDA: 1825

*Edited by* CECIL D. EBY, JR.

**I**N THE EARLY SUMMER OF 1825 the group of Seminoles relegated to the Big Swamp area of central Florida by the treaty of Moultrie Creek, signed two years before, were subjected to a drought so severe that nearly their whole crop was destroyed. Forced to subsist upon game, the Indians obtained permission from Major Gad Humphreys, their agent at the post that later became known as Fort King, to send hunting parties beyond the boundaries of their reservation to the north. While the incursion of Indian hunters into territories belonging legally to white settlers was absolutely necessary for the survival of the Seminoles and was approved officially by an agent of the Government, the whites greeted these parties with increasing alarm.

Early in June occurred an incident that nearly precipitated a war between the United States and the Seminole Nation. One Philip Solano, a planter of the St. Johns region, reported to the commander of the garrison at Fort Marion (Castillo de San Marcos) that six Indians, searching for three Seminoles long overdue from a hunting expedition into Georgia, had threatened him and other settlers with reprisals if the missing Indians did not reappear. Federal Judge Joseph L. Smith of St. Augustine immediately authorized a detachment from the fort to bring in the six Indians for questioning. In the morning of June 22 Lieutenant Augustus Canfield with twenty soldiers, accompanied by Solano and other indignant citizens of the city, found the party at Cabbage Swamp, some twenty miles to the north. However, before Canfield was able to open communication with them, the Indians, suspicious of the hostile-looking whites, fled into the swamp. Solano fired his pistol at them, and the soldiers and citizens followed his example by unleashing an unauthorized volley that brought down one Indian with a broken arm. Two other Seminoles were captured, one of whom was sent by Canfield to assure the others that the volley was accidental. Since the Indians had a pass from Major Humphreys, they were permitted to return to the reservation but their report of the white men's

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belligerence angered the other Seminoles, who immediately prepared for war. Humphreys was compelled to call for assistance from the military garrisons at Fort Marion and Tampa Bay. An Indian War seemed imminent to the panic-stricken white settlers who fled to the towns throughout East Florida.<sup>1</sup>

The march of Captain Francis L. Dade with two companies from Tampa to the Agency was executed promptly and efficiently. His appearance among the Seminoles proved that Major Humphreys could rely upon support from the main arm of the United States Army in Florida. But the march of the Fort Marion contingent, led by Lieutenant Alfred Beckley - a green West Pointer commanding his first detachment in the field - became a notable example of a campaign that failed. In four days he got only as far as Palatka, distant from St. Augustine about twenty-five miles as the crow flies. While en route, Beckley was recalled because the three missing Seminoles had been found, one of whom had been rushed to the Agency to placate the indignant Indians. Furthermore, Surgeon Richard Weightman of Fort Marion was sent to tend the Seminole wounded at Cabbage Swamp. A war with the Florida Indians had been averted by a narrow margin.

While historians of the Second Seminole War have recognized that the Cabbage Swamp affair was a prominent incident in the misunderstandings between the Indians and the white settlers which ultimately led to the outbreak of 1835, the role of the Fort Marion detachment has nowhere been chronicled. The lieutenant himself left behind a report of his march in an unpublished autobiography, discovered only in 1961. His account is particularly important in demonstrating how green and untried soldiers were incapacitated by impossible roads, a rudimentary system of logistics, and the rigors of the climate and terrain of Florida.

Alfred Beckley (1802-1888), who graduated ninth in the class of 1823 at West Point, was stationed at Fort Marion from 1824 to 1826 as a second lieutenant of the Fourth Artillery. His later service included two years at Fort Monroe, five years at Allegheny Arsenal (near Pittsburgh), and one year at Fort Hamilton, before his resignation from the army in 1836 in order to oc-

1. For brief discussion of the Cabbage Swamp incident see John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848), 28-32, and Mark F. Boyd, "The Seminole War: Its Background and Onset," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXX (July, 1951), 38-39.

cupy the family lands in Fayette County, Virginia. During the Civil War he campaigned in western Virginia as a brigadier general of Virginia militia.<sup>2</sup> His unfinished autobiography, from which the following narrative is taken, was begun in 1886, but he may have referred to an earlier journal kept during his Florida service. The present editor has taken no liberties with the Beckley manuscript, except for brackets indicating materials not in the text.<sup>3</sup>

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[NARRATIVE OF LIEUTENANT ALFRED BECKLEY]

Some time in June 1825 a Spanish Planter named Solano came before Judge [Joseph L.] Smith of the U. S. District Court for the Territory of Florida and made oath that a party of six Seminole Indians armed had called at his plantation some ten miles or more from St. Augustine in the direction of the St. Johns River enquiring for three young Indians, sons of the chiefs who had some months previous left the Reservation & gone on a hunting expedition towards the frontier of Georgia, and having been absent two or three moons over their time, The Nation was fearful that some harm had befallen them. Solano also swore that the six Indians had threatened that if they failed to find the three missing Indians, on their return they would take vengeance on him & the other settlers.<sup>4</sup> Upon this sworn statement the Judge made a written requisition upon Lieut Edwin S. Alberti then in temporary command of Fort Marion at St. Augustine for an officer & detachment of soldiers to arrest this scouting party & bring them before him as the civil officers were unable to serve

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2. Incomplete biographical information about Alfred Beckley may be found in Virgil A. Lewis, *History of West Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1889), 709-713, and Georgia W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U. S. Military Academy* (Boston and New York, 1891), I, 305-306. For Beckley's short-lived military career in the Civil War see Hila A. Richardson, "Raleigh County, West Virginia, in the Civil War," *West Virginia History*, X (April, 1949), 249-250.
  3. I am indebted to Professor Paxton Davis of Washington and Lee University for permission to use this autobiography of his great-great grandfather.
  4. In July, 1825, Major Gad Humphreys wrote to Judge Smith, claiming that Philip Solano had deliberately fabricated the threats of the Indians and charging that Solano had stolen their skins and meat after their capture. See Sprague, 32.

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the process upon armed savages and as Maj Genl [Edmund P.] Gaines commanding the Eastern Department had left written information to the Commandant to aid the civil authorities when called upon by the U. S. District Judge.

Lieut Alberti dispatched Lieut Augustus Canfield<sup>5</sup> with 20 Men who embarked in two barges & ran up the Matanzas River & small arms of the sea along the coast towards the mouth of St Johns River and with orders to intercept the six Indians, arrest them and bring them before the Judge. Lieut Canfield being popular with the young men of the City very unadvisedly permitted a number armed with shot guns and pistols to accompany him. They left in the evening and by rowing all night just as the day dawned they espied the Indians encamped on the edge of a large swamp at no great distance. Canfield and his City friends advanced rapidly upon them, the 20 soldiers with their shining muskets following closely. The six Indians naturally took the alarm (and the more so, as it was said that the negro Interpreter who accompanied the party was instructed to hold his tongue when the Indians asked him what it meant) & fled to the swamp leaving their guns and blankets. Some of these embryo soldiers of the City blazed away with their shot guns &c, & the soldiers following their lead, gave the fugitives a volley. They however escaped into the swamp, but one had his arm badly shattered by a musket ball and made their way to the Nation. Of course their not finding the three missing Indians and being thus rudely interrupted in their search and fired upon by Canfields party gave great offence to these irascible spirited Seminoles & those around the Agency at Fort King began to show symptoms of hostility sending their women and children into the swamps painting themselves & dancing the war dance &c. Greatly alarmed, Maj Gad Humphreys the Indian agent sent expresses to Major Dade at Tampa Bay and to Lieut Alberti [at] Fort Marion for aid under Genl Gaines instructions. Lieut Alberti gave me orders on the 5th July 1825 to make up a picked company from the men of my own light Compy "A" & Company "G" and with a six pounder make a forced march to Fort King.

5. Augustus Canfield, a native of New Jersey, had graduated from West Point in 1822, one year ahead of Beckley. He was transferred from Fort Marion in 1826 and later became a topographical officer engaged in the construction of canals and harbors in the Great Lakes. In 1854 he died in Detroit.

The QrMaster of the post could only furnish me with two badly harnessed horses to draw my gun and two carts to transport my provisions ammunition & a little baggage with one horse each as no wagon could be had for love or money in the City. As there was no road to "Buena Vista" & Pilatka [Palatka] for artillery only a bridle path I was compelled to make a detour to the North and pass thro' 12 Mile Swamp so as to strike the head of Six Mile Creek, the main drain of the swamp and there embark in a large timber scow & proceed down the Creek to the St Johns River and thence up that river to Picolati [Picolata] & Pilatka. Some hours before I started I sent Orderly Sergeant Beale of "G" Company with the larger part of my men to Picolati with orders to send a large timber scow of Messrs Riz & Cowley down the River & up Six Mile Creek to the landing or head. With the residue of my Command, consisting of Sergeant Prager of my own light Compy "A" and fifteen men with the 6 pounder & the baggage cart I marched from Fort Marion at 3 P.M. on the 6th day of July 1825 (the day of the week disremembered) for 12 Mile Swamp some 4 miles from the City. After experiencing a smart shower of rain & losing some time by taking the wrong road owing to my guide's inability to join me in time and being much delayed by my untried horses unwillingness to pull such unreasonable loads as were in the urgency & hurry of the occasion imposed upon them I was compelled to encamp for the night a short distance beyond Redhouse branch about five miles from St. Augustine. During the night we had several severe showers of rain for two hours.

At 2 o'clock A.M. of the 7th July on arousing the party to resume the March I was mortified to find that by the culpable carelessness of the Men in not securing my artillery horses, they had strayed off and could not be found in my immediate vicinity which I had searched in every direction. I then mounted my guide on one of my cart horses and an hour after another man on the other cart horse, and dispatched them to trace up & pursue some fresh horse tracks on the road leading to Solanos ferry which crossed the road upon which I was encamped, a short distance from the City as far as the City, if necessary. This accident detained me much to my chagrin till 4 o'clock P.M. when the guide & man rejoined me with the two strayed horses and an additional horse which Lieut Alberti had sent me as an

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addition to my small artillery team. I recommenced my march under as I thought more favorable auspices but owing to the very bad condition of the roads and to the horses proving refractory & stubborn besides the Heavens pouring upon us a deluge of rain the whole time I halted for the night just before dark, having only advanced from three to four miles after having my tent pitched near a rousing fire around which the soldiers preferred bivouacking to the trouble of pitching their tents. By the cheering influence of the fire I made shift to dry my dripping garments & after a hearty supper I had a really comfortable nights rest on a bed of Palmetto. My tent I never used again as the musquitos drove me into the smoke of the bivouac fire by their bites. My ammunition cart owing to the horse giving out in consequence of the roughness of the muddy & wet road did not come up till near daylight.

I resumed my March at 6 A.M. on the 8th July and after again losing my way a mile or two by the ignorance of my guide and halting an hour or so in the extreme heat of the day for rest and food, I reached 6 Mile Creek landing by 2 P.M. There I found a party of my men with the timber scow from Picolati, a clumsy vessel nearly as broad as long of double the necessary weight doubtless suitable to bring live oak timber out of the swamps but very unsuitable for military transportation & dispatch. I at once dismounted the 6-pounder & laid it in the bottom as ballast & taking the wheels from the other two carts and packed the carts & artillery carriage with all my provisions ammunition and baggage &c. and after sending a corporal & three men with my horses around by land to "Buena Vista" I began my voyage down 6-Mile Creek, a stream little wider at the head than my scow scarcely more than 25 feet. The trees & bushes from the swamp on both sides overhanging & shading the dark inky water covered on the surface with large floating leaves of aquatic plants. It looked like Virgils description of the descent of Erebus the empire of Pluto. We pulled along by the branches until it gradually widened out enough to put out & ply our long sweeps or oars two on each side. This is a most remarkable Creek, increasing its breadth & volume of water in stretches from 1 or 200 yards to half a mile until with another drain of considerable size coming in a short distance above its mouth the two drains or creeks discharged their waters into the Noble River St Johns by

an *embouchure* of more than a mile in breadth. Previous to its confluence with the river its course presented for a mile or two elegant water prospects rendered quite interesting to me by its dark turbid water & the hosts of alligators which ever & anon displayed above the surface their scaly coats of mail and rolled their great protuberant eyes upon you, depriving you of all desire to share their refreshing bath. After leaving the creek, we made our way slowly up the St. Johns four or five miles in width in the face of a strong southerly wind by the constant plying with our sweeps, propelled by successive relays of rowers. One of our sweeps was repeatedly broken.

We arrived at Picolati just after 1 o'clock A.M. on the 9th July having been favored by star light the first part and by moonlight the latter part. After mooring a suitable guard I proceeded to join the main body of my command which I found in occupation of a house situated a mile from the river in pine woods belonging to Messrs Riz & Cowley which those gentlemen were kind to offer to my men they being without their tents. It being a healthy situation I determined to remain there until the arrival of my horses and the two Indians from Judge Fatio's, <sup>6</sup> two of the three missing Indians the third having been sent express with the care of Mr. Dexter <sup>7</sup> to Fort King. They coming in at this juncture happening very providentially for my soldiers and myself as they reached St. Augustine as I was on the marching when Lieut. Alberti employed Mr. Dexter to take one on a swift horse to the Agency & directed me to take the other two with my detachment. <sup>8</sup> Just as I was about sending a boat after them they reached my encampment & soon after between 10 & 11 A.M. my horses arrived and after hiring a Mr Crispen to guide two of my men with the horses by land to "Buena Vista" opposite to Pilatka, I embarked the whole detachment & started up the river

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6. Presumably this was Francis J. Fatio of St. Augustine, a prominent citizen who had helped allay civil tension in East Florida after the territory had passed to the United States. See Walter Hartridge, "The Fatio Family," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXI (October, 1952), 143.
  7. One Horatio S. Dexter had witnessed the Treaty of Moultrie Creek, signed on September 18, 1823, which had arranged for the removal of the Seminoles into the interior of Florida. See Sprague, 20.
  8. The first of the missing Indians reached the Agency on July 8, thereby terminating the threatened uprising and cancelling Beckley's march. See Sprague, 31.



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to Pilatka at 10 minutes past 3 and after halting a few moments occasionally I reached there at 5 P.M. on the 10th July.

Finding Mr. Dexter not yet returned from the Agency I landed the troops, mounted the 6 pounder & having obtained a wagon in place of my carts I had our provisions ammunition and baggage loaded upon the wagon and while busied in pitching my tent in the pine woods 200 yards from the river or soon after Mr Dexter arrived and handed me a dispatch from Major G. Humphreys dispensing with any further advance of my Detachment to Fort King as the difficulties with the Seminoles [had ended] owing to the safe return of the three young Indians and to Dr. [Richard] Weightman having been sent to Fort King to set the Indians broken arm & the agent distributing new guns & blankets to the six Indians and the more so the three young Indians made very favorable statements as to their kind treatment by the Georgians & the St Johns river inhabitants.

These things pacified these Indians for the time being,<sup>9</sup> but this affair was perhaps one among subsequent difficulties with these Indians a sort of mongrel tribe between the Creek Indians & other tribes which culminated in the tedious bloody expensive war commencing about 1835 in which this small Seminole tribe owing to their position amid the lakes, swamps and hammocks of East Florida difficult of approach very defensible & suitable to their rapid, cunning, sneaking mode of warfare kept the whole military force of the United States at bay for a longtime tho' commanded by Generals Gaines, [Duncan L.] Clinch, [Thomas] Jesup, [Zachary] Taylor & other distinguished leaders. The affair in which I was engaged I shall always believe arose from the fact that the Spanish planter Solano who made the sworn complaint did not understand what the Indians said or purposely exaggerated matters to get up an Indian War so that the whites might possess themselves of many valuable negroes, runaways from their Masters. It seems very unlikely that 6 Indians with a regular pass from the Agent would threaten peaceable inhabitants within a few miles of the Garrison at Fort Marion. It is

9. Depredations continued, however. In 1826 the inhabitants of St. John's County wrote to the President complaining that slaves were being enticed away from their owners. The continued unrest led to the garrisoning of the Agency, which became Fort King in 1827. See Sidney W. Martin, *Florida During the Territorial Days* (Athens, Georgia, 1944), 229.

doubtful whether the further advance of my detachment & the 6 pounder toward Fort King would have had a favorable effect unless its prompt junction with the two Companies which under the command of Major Dade had reached Fort King from Tampa Bay the day I reached Pilatka, would have shewn to the Indians that the Agent had within his reach military aid from both east and west. But as yet the Seminoles had not been harrowed up by the encroachment of the authorities whose policy was to remove the tribe, Nolen Volens, from Florida to the west to that pitch of exasperation to which they had attained ten years afterward, when in the year 1835 in the line of Oseola, Major Dade in attempting the same march, after being earnestly dissuaded from the attempt by the friendly Indians, was ambushed and surrounded by the incensed and furious Seminoles led by Oseola, who had been roughly treated by the Indian Agent [Wiley] Thompson, who had succeeded Major Gad Humphreys & after a gallant hopeless defence his officers 8 in number & 100 soldiers were cut off, all but one man, who badly wounded had feigned death, till the Indians left the battleground, crawled on his hands and knees by night, concealed himself in the day back to Tampa Bay. Had the Seminoles been as enraged in 1825 as they were in 1835, Maj Dade and his Battalion & myself with my detachment would have been ambushed and cut to pieces! With this digression I resume my diary.

On receipt of Major Humphreys dispatch I immediately reimbarbed everything but the tents preparatory to my early return. At 8 A.M. embarking my men and tents I pushed off on my descent of the river again, not unlike a King of France who marched "his army of 10000 men up a hill, & then marched down again." After a passage of 27 hours & ten minutes I made 6 Mile Creek landing. The tide being in my favor and an occasional breeze filling a sail extemporized out of a tent, the "Southern Engineer" made more rapid progress down. I made the landing about midday of the 12th of July, during which I narrowly escaped a shipwreck, or rather swamping of my vessel with the whole contents Commander, soldiers, artillery, and stores in the midst of the dark turbid waters of the St Johns & its ferocious alligators. While sailing down the broad river of 4 miles width about the middle I suddenly found myself on a very ugly chopping sea caused by an adverse easterly wind blowing

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up the river & as my gunwale was only 9 inches above the water under the heavy cargo, shipping would have sent us to "Davys Locker" in a thrice. Taking down my sail turning the bows to the shore and double mooring my sweeps we soon reached the shore which I prudently hugged all the way. In reascending 6 Mile Creek we amused ourselves, peace having succeeded threatened war, shooting at alligators. One of which we killed & as he sank covered the surface with blood, the water being four feet deep the foolish soldiers wanted to jump in & fish the alligator up. I am sure we fired some dozen musketballs at a monster alligator which from the back he shewed could not have been less than 20 feet long. But the balls glanced off & he crossed the Creek and plunged out the swamp with a loud flounder.

At the landing I found my horses which I had sent back by land from "Buena Vista." After employing an hour or two in disembarking my piece of artillery, my stores, and baggage, in remounting my 6 pounder & the two carts, I recommenced my return march to St Augustine distant about sixteen miles. After advancing 7 or 8 miles very slowly as my horses evinced much fatigue I was compelled to stop about 7 P.M., & pitch my encampment in a pine barren near the road. Next morning 13th July 1825 about 6 A.M. I was again in motion and after a slow & toilsome march owing to the horses being scarcely able to put one foot after the other and during this days march as well as my previous marches thro' the 12 Mile Swamp I had to attach my men with bricoles to the 6 pounder carriage I reached the City between 11 & 12 M. having previously at Redhouse branch 4 miles distant unlimbered my cannon and firing once, announced my return. A much more safe discharge of my cannon than if I had been surrounded by hostile Indians among the hammocks & undergrowth of Florida. What a folly to send artillery against Indians in that region. Major Dade the gallant lamented martyr to this delusion, was destroyed and with all his command shot down by endeavoring to fight these Indians with two pieces of artillery. I had instructed my soldiers, that if we were attacked to give the cannon a wide berth and every man jump behind a tree, and fight Kentucky fashion.

Amid the kind congratulations of the people of St Augustine at our safe return from Indians and country fever, the latter as dangerous as the tomahawk, I quickly marched my men into

their pleasant cool quarters in St. Francis Barracks. And twas providential that alternately wet to the skin by the sudden tropical showers and scorched by the sun in July we all escaped from country malaria, & all the inconvenience we experienced was that we looked more like Moors or Indians than White Men. Thus ended my little expedition into the interior of the territory of eight days.

When I made my sudden march towards Fort King there was a great deal of alarm among the people, and the militia were called out, & I left them drilling in the Public Plaza, and they assured me that when I reached Pilatka their bugle at "Buena Vista" across the river should assure me of their cooperation in the campaign and while I was gone daily bulletins were posted at the East Florida Herald printing office of my progress & distributed among the Citizens but when my sunburnt soldiers and myself returned the militia were still drilling and drawing rations. Had there been fighting these Heroes would have gone out with shovels and spades to gather up the remains & bury them of the unfortunate lieutenant and his soldiers victims of Seminole treachery & ferocity unaided and [not] reinforced by these Citizen soldiers. But afterward in the progress of the war these gentlemen became brave and skillful Indian fighters.