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### Memoir of a West Pointer in Saint Augustine: 1824-1826

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MEMOIR OF A WEST POINTER IN  
SAINT AUGUSTINE: 1824-1826 \*

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IN MAY, 1824, SECOND LIEUTENANT Alfred Beckley of the Fourth Artillery, United States Army, reported for duty at Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida, where he remained until April, 1826. He was green and untried - a twenty-two year old West Pointer who had graduated ninth in the Class of 1823 - and except for his aversion to "French brandy" and "Old Sledge," he was perhaps a typical example of the officer-gentleman that was the backbone of the peacetime army of that time. Born in Washington City in 1802, Beckley could recall as guests in his home such dignitaries as Joel Barlow, George Clinton, and Thomas Jefferson, all of them political friends of his father, John James Beckley, one of the founders of the Jeffersonian Republican [Democratic] party.

Young Beckley grew up in Philadelphia and Kentucky, where his mother moved after her husband's death in the early 1800's. He attended the Kentucky Seminary in Frankfort until about the year 1819, when William Henry Harrison took an interest in him and urged President Monroe to appoint the boy to West Point. Harrison even went so far as to "adopt" Beckley for six months in order to permit him to make use of the Harrison family's tutor. In August, 1819, Alfred Beckley found himself en route to West Point, General Harrison having paid the transportation costs from his own pocket.

Following his graduation from West Point, Beckley served briefly on ordnance duty, but his first really important assignment was that of Fort Marion. Fortunately he left an account of his two years at this post, in the form of an incomplete autobiography written many years later, in 1886. Although he had to look back some sixty years, we are nevertheless astonished at his general accuracy, even in the matter of remembering names. There is no doubt that St. Augustine was the brightest spot in his military career, as he himself freely admitted. The climate, the color,

and above all, the people were in striking contrast with the harsh bastions of the upper Hudson and the rough forest of frontier Kentucky. It was, at times, like "the land of flowers, in the midst of an apparent earthly paradise."

The subsequent activities of Lieutenant Beckley are readily traceable. He served at Fort Monroe, at Allegheny Arsenal (near Pittsburgh), and at Fort Hamilton until his resignation from the Army in 1836. He had, in the meantime, married Amelia Neville Craig of Pittsburgh, and in 1838 moved to the wilderness of mountainous Fayette County, Virginia, to occupy lands granted by the Commonwealth of Virginia to his father. That same year he was authorized to lay off thirty acres as a town (the present Beckley, West Virginia), which became the seat of Raleigh County after its break from Fayette in 1850. In 1849 the General Assembly elected him brigadier general of the Virginia militia. After Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861, General Beckley campaigned in Western Virginia. Early in 1862 he resigned of his own accord and surrendered to a future President of the United States, Lieutenant Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes. After the war he became a prolific writer of editorials and verse for West Virginia newspapers and was honored as the "first man" of Beckley until his death in 1888.

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#### *Narrative of Lieutenant Beckley*

After a pleasant short voyage of two or more days we ran across the bar and rounding on our left hand Anastasia Island and passing in front of the old Spanish fort of St. Marks, then altered to Fort Marion <sup>1</sup> by the U. S. authorities, cast anchor a couple of hundred yards in front of the city. I soon disembarked and was introduced on landing to Dr. Richard Weightman, <sup>2</sup> sur-

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1. Under the American regime, the fort for over a hundred years was named Fort Marion in honor of Francis Marion, the Revolutionary War hero. An act of Congress, approved June 5, 1942, changed the name to Castillo de San Marcos.
  2. Richard Weightman (1793-1841). Appointed assistant surgeon, U. S. Army, June 1, 1821. Stationed in Florida many years, he died in St. Augustine, October 30, 1841. Thomas H. S. Hamersly (comp.), *Complete Army and Navy Register of the United States of America from 1776 to 1887* (New York, 1888); *St. Augustine News*, November 11, 1841. Subsequent identification of military personnel men-

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geon of the post, who gave me a cordial welcome and accompanied me to St. Francis Barracks<sup>3</sup> where I reported to the veteran, General Fenwick,<sup>4</sup> commanding a regiment of artillery. I was kindly received by the General, First Lieutenant Charles Despinville,<sup>5</sup> commanding G Company, Lieutenant J. B. Scott,<sup>6</sup> Horace Bliss,<sup>7</sup> Harvey Brown,<sup>8</sup> and Second Lieutenant Edwin R. Alberti.<sup>9</sup> I was assigned to Light Company A and was its only officer, but First Lieutenant Harvey Brown of G Company, owing to my youth and inexperience, was placed in temporary command of the company. However, in a few weeks he was appointed aide de camp to the Commanding General, Jacob Brown, and left for headquarters, and the company fell to my charge. I was appointed post adjutant. General Fenwick, Lieutenants Scott and Bliss left in a few days, and Lieutenant Despinville succeeded to the command of the post.

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tioned in this article is from Hamersly *Register* and/or *Register of Graduates and former Cadets United States Military Academy* (New York, 1946).

3. For 200 years prior to 1763 this was the site of the Convent of St. Francis, headquarters of the Franciscan missionaries in Florida. Constructed of coquina about 1756, the buildings were converted into military barracks by the British. After Spain regained control of Florida, Spanish troops were quartered here until the United States acquired Florida in 1821. The barracks remained a military post until 1900 when the post was abandoned by the U. S. Army. In 1907 they were leased to the State of Florida for military purposes and Florida's military headquarters was transferred there from Tallahassee. The interior was burned in 1915, but was restored in 1922 after Congress donated the reservation to the state for military use exclusively. It is now the Florida State Arsenal.
4. Brig. Gen. John R. Fenwick (? -1842). Transferred to 4th Artillery, June, 1821; Brevet Brig. Gen., 1823.
5. 1st Lt. Charles Despinville, graduated West Point 1817; 1st Lt., September 10, 1819; transferred to 4th Artillery, June, 1821; died in France, 1830.
6. 2nd Lt. John Benjamin Scott (1801-1860). Graduated West Point, 1821. Scott, a close friend of Beckley in West Point, encouraged him to apply for duty in Florida.
7. 2nd Lt. Horace Bliss (1802-1878). Graduated West Point, 1822.
8. Major Gen. Harvey Brown (1796-1874). Graduated West Point, 1818; transferred to 4th Artillery, August, 1821; 1st Lt., August, 1821. Married Ann Eliza Rodman in 1824, daughter of John Rodman, Collector of Customs in St. Augustine. Was in charge of repairing St. Francis Barracks, 1822-3.
9. 2nd Lt. Edwin R. Alberti. Admitted to West Point 1814 (did not graduate); 2nd Lt., Light Artillery, July 12, 1820; transferred to 4th Artillery, June, 1821. Accused of theft in 1826, he was tried by court martial, but was completely exonerated. Resigned July 31, 1827.

I found St. Francis Barracks a splendid, comfortable affair. It was originally an old Spanish monastery which the British in the Revolutionary War occupied as a barracks. It had become dilapidated excepting the walls, and when the U. S. troops took possession under the treaty of Cession was uninhabited. General Abram Eustis<sup>10</sup> had them completely and elegantly repaired. The Barracks had two wings of four handsome rooms connected by a central building in the form "H." The central portion was surmounted by a lofty and handsomely and tastily built cupola at least 100 feet above the barrack yard, the flag staff extending above from the centre. This cupola, with the help of a glass, commanded an extensive view of the ocean for thirty miles distance. . . . I often resorted to it with a powerful spyglass, anticipating and waiting on the arrival of the packet from Charleston and seeing the passing ships, in looking down on the white houses and the green orange and fig groves of the city or upon Fort Marion on the northern end of the city, the Island of Anastasia, and its lighthouse<sup>11</sup> opposite.

The soldiers occupied the lower floor of the two wings - G Company in the north wing and A Company in the south wing. The second story was divided into officers quarters, quartermaster, commissary, adjutant offices, mess room, store room, &c. The upper story was approached by stairways leading up on wide covered corridors or piazzas on both sides of the central building, the whole length of the south wing overlooking the garden, the privies, &c. The guard house and kitchen of the two companies occupied a one-story brick building extending along the south side of the parade ground on the west side of the barracks. There was a fine capacious garden laid off on the south of the barracks picketed in and separated by a wall from the yard near the south wing containing the officers' privies, kitchen, &c. and opening into the gardens. My room was in the south wing adjoining the officers mess room. The commanding officers quarters were in the eastern part of the same wing, but Lieutenant Despinville occu-

10. Col. Abraham Eustis transferred to 4th Artillery, June, 1821. Lt. Col., May, 1822; Brevet Col., September 10, 1823. Commanding Officer, 4th Artillery, in 1821, for St. Augustine and Amelia Island.

11. Rehabilitation of the old Spanish watchtower on Anastasia Island had just been completed by the U. S. Government at a cost of \$5,000. On April 5, 1824, the tower was illuminated for the first time.

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pied a room in the north wing assigned to the officers of G Company. The surgeon, Dr. Weightman, had a room in the same wing and Lieutenant Edwin Alberti had his quartermaster and commissary office in the same. St. Francis Barracks was in the southern end of the city, and Fort Marion was north of the city, about one mile distant from the barracks. We had our magazine there and had a daily corporal's guard mounted there and kept our prisoners there.

I found St. Augustine to be all that my friend Lieutenant J. B. Scott had represented in his letters, a very delightful and salubrious station, the mild tropical climate so different from that in which I had heretofore lived. The cool, refreshing daily sea [breeze] from the Atlantic Ocean moderated the intense heat of the tropical sun, while the night breeze across the peninsula from the Gulf of Mexico kept the nights cool and pleasant, so that though sleeping under musquito [*sic*] bars, a light blanket was not oppressive. Then the delicious fruits of the tropics—the oranges and figs so refreshing to a relaxed system, and the variety and abundance of fine fish and game. Then the striking appearance to a Northerner of this ancient city, the first city of this Southern country, founded in the year 1565, with its snow white houses built of a concretion of sea shells most likely antediluvian. When dug out of the earth so soft and pliable as to be shaped by the axe, but after exposure to the air [the stone] becomes hard as flint.<sup>12</sup> The narrow streets and access to the houses by way of gates through the walls of the yards. The manners and customs of the proud old Spanish families and the Minorcan<sup>13</sup> settlers (the latter fishermen). The females of both classes so graceful in their manners and of such dignity of deportment blended with those of the American families which had settled in the city since the cession of Florida to the Union. All constituted a striking, unique, and very attractive station to a youth of twenty-two years. I was in the land of flowers, in the midst of an apparent

12. Called *coquina* by the Spaniards. A conglomerate composed of fragments of marine shells.

13. Colonists from the Mediterranean area brought to New Smyrna, in 1768 by Dr. Andrew Turnbull. Refugees from this unsuccessful venture emigrated to St. Augustine in 1777 and their descendants formed the nucleus of its resident population when the United States acquired Florida in 1821.

earthly paradise, and we gentlemen of the epaulet had the freedom of the city and went in and out among the upper [families], both Spanish and American, as well as among the more humble and illiterate, but no less graceful, Minorcan ladies.

I spent two years very agreeably in this ancient, most social and interesting city. My military duties were generally light and pleasant most of the time, and I was post adjutant, and acted as officer of the day in my turn. My brother officers, all older in rank as well as in age, were frank companions and while they played cards at a high figure and imbibed more or less of "l'eau de vie"-French brandy-yet I must do them the justice to say they never tried to entice me into their habits of card playing and drinking brandy. I aimed at the character of a good, efficient officer, and I am sure my fellow officers accorded it to me.

Lieutenant Despinville, Canfield,<sup>14</sup> Dr. Weightman, and myself messed together, each of us in turn acting as caterer for a month, and we each paid monthly an equal share of the expenses. We had a black cook, named Joe, who could not be excelled in any cooking, but in turtle soup he was inimitable. We lived well though not without due economy and management, our pay then not being as good as it was afterwards. After some time Bvt. Major William Wilson,<sup>15</sup> an old veteran officer first commissioned as ensign by Washington, was assigned to the command. He was old, rheumatic and consequently very choleric and testy. When he arrived in the packet, he had to be carried from the barge to the barracks and put into his bed, to which he was confined five or six weeks before he could walk. As his post adjutant, I was with him a great deal and found him in possession of an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes and entertaining stories acquired during his long, diversified experience. He amused me for a season but sometimes I had some difficulties in our official intercourse owing to his hasty, testy humour. When enraged, he swore like a trooper, but we soon learned his peculiar character and his idiosyncracies, and by humoring him got along very well with

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14. 2nd Lt. Augustus Canfield (1801-1854) graduated from West Point in 1822, one year ahead of Beckley. Transferred to 4th Artillery, February, 1823.

15. Major William Wilson, Lt. Artillerists and Engineers, 1794; Major, 4th Artillery, May, 1822; died, September 15, 1825.



LIEUTENANT BECKLEY



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him. He was a man of a brave, magnanimous, generous, frank spirit, and when passion had subsided was always prompt to apologize and make amends for his ill temper. Being a bachelor, he joined our mess as an honorary member, merely paying his quota of the expenses. His health was very infirm during his stay among us, and in a year or so he had to leave on sick furlough and never returned to the command but died at Berkeley Springs in Virginia some time in 1827 [*sic*]. In his last moments he made the following characteristic nuncupative will - "A soldier's word is a soldier's will. I give all I possess to my sister Eliza." (The Major had several thousand dollars in banks saved from his pay, and his old maiden sister was made comfortable for the residue of her life.)

The native population were all Roman Catholic. They had an ancient, venerable cathedral built of the shell-stone, but by no means a "chef d'oeuvre" <sup>16</sup> in architectural design. When there was no Protestant service we attended it. And it was not an uninteresting spectacle to see the veiled Spanish Minorcan beauties gracefully kneel upon the hard stone floor during Mass, and they were not so devout as to preclude the telegraphic sign "sub rosa" between lovers. We occasionally had Presbyterian preaching and on one or two occasions we had Episcopal service by the Reved. Dr. Phillip Gadsden, brother of Col. James Gadsden, and afterwards Bishop of the Diocese of South Carolina. <sup>17</sup> During his visit here we visited with him the casemated dungeon in Fort St. Marks in which the British in the Revolutionary War immured his father, an eminent American patriot, for some months. There was a series of horrid, dark prison cells in the fort characteristic

16. "Chef-d'oeuvre": masterpiece.

17. Reverend Philip Gadsden, son of Christopher Gadsden, the Revolutionary War hero who was imprisoned in the Castillo de San Marcos for several months during 1780-81. Records of Trinity Parish Church state that he held services here from August 15 until October 26, 1825. Col. James Gadsden (1788-1858) was the son of Philip and grandson of Christopher. He opposed Joseph M. White and Joseph M. Hernandez in 1825 as territorial delegate to Congress and was defeated. (See Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., *Richard Keith Call: Southern Unionist*, Gainesville, 1961, 43.) *Trinity Parish Records* also state that James' brother, the Rev. Christopher Edwards Gadsden, while serving as Rector of Charleston's St. Philip's Church, visited St. Augustine, October 19, 1824, and administered the Holy Sacrament and baptised several children. It was the Reverend Christopher E. Gadsden who later became Bishop of South Carolina.

of that jealous, ironhearted Spanish people, the great promoter of the infernal Inquisition, and our English brethren in their bitter hatred of our Revolutionary fathers did not suffer these cells to fall into disuse. We also visited the grave of officers and soldiers, victims of the yellow fever in 1821,<sup>18</sup> just after the cession, interred upon the glacis of the fort.

During my residence at St. Augustine when Col. James Gadsden was a candidate for Delegate to Congress in opposition to the Hon. Joseph M. White (my old schoolmate at the Kentucky Seminary in Frankfort), the Colonel obtained Major Wilson's consent to his giving a military ball to the people of the city in Fort St. Marks (or Marion), and requested my brother officers and myself to act as managers. I was one of the most active managers and finding that there were stored away in an old disused magazine<sup>19</sup> south of the city in the fork of the Matanzas and St. Sebastian Rivers a 13-inch and a 5 1/2-inch brass mortar and a good many old bombs, I obtained permission from Major Wilson to entertain the company by throwing a few shells into the sea.

I had detached Sergeant Beale of Company G and under my instructions he and a party of soldiers filled more than a hundred shells, large and small, and fitted fuses to them. I mounted the mortars in the mortar battery in the southwest bastion and stored away the loaded shells in ammunition houses mounted on wheels, which the Spaniards and the British used to supply the 42-pounders mounted on the ramparts. These guns were very old, rusty, and honeycombed from long exposure to the weather and were mounted on old dilapidated wooden carriages like those used upon ships in old time. I had twenty of these cannon heavily charged with powder and hard wads, and stuck pieces of portfire<sup>20</sup> of different lengths to the touch-holes so that the first gun would not fire till the last portfire was lighted so that the guns

18. In the fall of 1821 St. Augustine experienced a disastrous epidemic of yellow fever. In addition to the military burials on the glacis of the fort, numerous civilian deaths necessitated opening a public burial ground just north of the City Gate, now called the "Huguenot" cemetery.

19. Probably refers to the Spanish Powder House which stood near the present site of the St. Johns County Senior Citizens' Home.

20. Portfires: A fire carrier; specifically a paper case filled with a composition of niter, sulphur, and mealed powder, used in firing guns.

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would be successfully fired like a salute and no danger to the soldiers from the bursting of the guns, of which there was some fear. Then I had large piles of firewood in the four bastions. The signal for the company to repair to the fort was the blazing of these bonfires and the discharge of the great guns in succession.

We fitted up the large casemate used by the Spaniards as the chapel of the fort for the supper room and had placed plank floors in several large casements<sup>21</sup> for dancing. Besides this, I had caused a large pile of old fuses, portfires, and several barrels of old rosin found in the magazine to be lighted while the company were dancing so as in my programme to startle the folks with a sudden dazzling, splendid illumination, which I the pyrotechnic projector honestly intended as the feature of the military ball.

The supper was a success. But while the ladies and gentlemen were whirling about on the "light fantastic toe," when fire was applied to the pyrotechnic pyramid there was an illumination but it was accompanied by an intolerable, dense, suffocating smoke. It was driven by the sea breeze upon the company and they had to make their way from the "terra plain" [*sic*]<sup>22</sup> of the fort by the sloping ramps up to the ramparts. I then, like a skillful general after being thus flanked by my failure, determined to make a diversion. I speedily marshalled the company into a promenade on the ramparts and just as the head of the procession had reached the front curtain<sup>23</sup> and the mortar battery was uncovered I called upon the bombardiers and bang went the 13-

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21. Castillo de San Marcos is a square fort with a bastion projecting at each corner. The interior is an open court (parade) about 100' square. Around this square are thirty-one rooms (casemates) most of which open upon the court. The roof over the rooms and the bastions is the terreplein or rampart of the fort, where the cannon are mounted.
  22. Lt. Beckley mistakenly refers to the "terra plain." From his description it is clear that the pyrotechnic bonfire was in the courtyard and the guests, after being smoked out of the casemates, came into the courtyard and went up the ramp to the terreplein which, since it is on the windward side, would be clear of smoke. They would have had a fine view of the bonfire in the open court below.
  23. The south wall of the fort is the "front curtain." The guests' consternation was completely justified. The thirteen-inch mortar was the largest weapon of its era. The mortars were in the southwest bastion, only 100-200 feet away from the procession as it marched along the south wall of the fort. Surely this was a memorable night for the civilians.

inch mortar, throwing a shell seaward. Such a consternation-screaming, outcry, and fainting - was caused by the stunning concussion of the air as to have driven away all recalling my pyrotechnic disaster. After recovering from the alarm, the ladies and gentlemen seemed amused and interested in my mock bombardment and watched the flight of the shells with their burning fuses and their bursting over the sea and in the marshes of Anastasia Island, causing the marsh hens to squall. Meanwhile our long continued bombardment disturbed the choleric commander at St. Francis Barracks and divers orderlies came to find Adjutant Beckley and have the firing cease. But somehow or other, the Adjutant was "non est inventus," being perhaps hid in the smoke of the smouldering pyrotechnic pile until the last shell harmlessly burst in the marshes. It was not difficult to appease the Major's anger. Our military ball was a very noisy, startling one, but the result was not more effective in Colonel Gadsden's favor than in my harmless bombardment, as Joseph M. White defeated him badly in the canvass.<sup>24</sup>

While there I joined a number of genteel, pleasant citizens in a Thespian association:<sup>25</sup> viz., Francis J. Fatio,<sup>26</sup> John H. Lawrence,<sup>27</sup> G. M. Wilson,<sup>28</sup> B. A. Putnam,<sup>29</sup> James P. Cot-

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24. Joseph M. White was elected territorial delegate to Congress in April, 1825. His opponents were Col. James Gadsden and former (appointed) Territorial Delegate Joseph M. Hernandez. White's election to the 19th Congress was the beginning of a distinguished career in the House of Representatives, which ended with his sixth term in March, 1837. Harry G. Cutler, *History of Florida Past and Present, Historical and Biographical*, 3 vols. (Chicago and New York, 1923), I, 113.
  25. The Thespian Society of St. Augustine.
  26. Francis Joseph Fatio (1793). Third generation of this Swiss family in Florida, the son of Philip Fatio and Jane Cross. A man of versatile talents and accomplishments, he held various positions in St. Augustine including those of alderman (1821) and public translator. Gertrude N. L'Engle, *A Collection of Letters, Information and Data on Our Family* (Jacksonville, 1951), 41.
  27. John H. Lawrence was from Charleston, and his wife was Maria Anadette Fuentes of St. Augustine. Lawrence was secretary of the Thespian Society of St. Augustine. *St. Augustine East Florida Herald*, July 19, 1825; *St. Johns County Marriage Bonds*.
  28. George M. Wilson was an attorney and esteemed member of the Thespian Society. He died July 18, 1825, at age twenty-five. *St. Augustine East Florida Herald*, July 19, 1825.
  29. Benjamin Alexander Putnam (1801-1869) was born in Savannah, Ga. He was a lawyer, soldier, member of Florida legislature, judge,

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ton,<sup>30</sup> Robiou Lewis Hugnon,<sup>31</sup> and Rodgers<sup>32</sup> (who was afterward murdered by Oseola). Fatio and Lawrence were excellent actors and I myself no slouch. Fatio could handle the brush and painted good scenery, especially a kitchen scene. My brother officers and the citizens contributed liberally and we rented a small tenement upon (and indeed over) the water,<sup>33</sup> which we humorously called "Fishmarket Theatre" after the celebrated London theatre. We sent to Charleston and bought some beautiful French landscape paper and fitted up quite a respectable [blank]. I find by reference to the minute book of the society, still preserved by me for sake of "auld lang syne," that we opened on Tuesday evening, the 8th of February, 1825, by performing the comedy of "John Bull, or the Englishman's Fireside"<sup>34</sup> [and?] the farce of the "Beehive Industry Must Thrive." Our seats were all crowded and nothing could exceed the delight expressed by the ladies, especially the Spanish ladies, our performance brought us the plaudits of the house, and we had assiduously devoted ourselves to make it a success. And now sixty years have elapsed, but doubtless a tradition exists to this day in St. Augustine of our "Old Fishmarket" and its actors, many of whom have long since made the final exit from the great mundane stage of human action. John H. Lawrence perished by shipwreck between St. Augustine and Cuba - "Poor Jack" as we nicknamed him was a frank, openhearted gentleman. G. M. Wilson died at St. Augustine, and Rodgers was murdered at Fort King by Oseola, the great brave of the Seminoles. After seven nights performance of various plays during 1825, the society ended on 5th April of 1826.

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and first president of The Historical Society of Florida, Putnam County, Florida, is named for him.

30. Probably James P. Cotter, who opened a private school of instruction in English and classical subjects in St. Augustine in 1823. At the time of his death in 1829 he was presiding judge of the St. Johns County Court. *St. Augustine East Florida Herald*, February 1, 1823; October 15, 1829.
31. Probably Lewis Huguen, a native of France, who died in St. Augustine in 1829. *St. Augustine Florida Herald*, August 19, 1829.
32. Erastus Rogers was killed by Indians on December 28, 1835. John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848), 89.
33. Not located.
34. "John Bull; or, The Englishman's Fireside" was a comedy in five acts written by George Colman and first performed in Covent Garden in London on March 5, 1803.

I have told about our amateur Thespian affair which pleased and electrified the people of the City, especially the Spanish ladies, but my enjoyment particularly of the customs, games, and sports of the carnival season, the masking parties - going every evening from house to house where the fun was to discover and unmask the maskers where they danced the fascinating Spanish fandango<sup>35</sup> and had music and refreshments. To prevent any abuse of the masking custom, the head of each masking party unmasked himself to the head of the family visited and was responsible for the genteel behaviour of his party that there may have been some small flirtations possible but the masking was innocent without the least scandal. The Minorcan ladies, though the best families held them as an inferior caste, were yet though very illiterate as dignified in carriage and as graceful as the superior caste. We officers of St. Francis Barracks associated with all classes and [were] friendly to each.

During the Carnival season the Minorcan ladies kept up for eleven nights what they called "Posey Dances." For the first dance they chose a Posey King and Queen and paid the cost by donations. But on the second night the Posey Queen holding two bouquets of Spanish pinks in her hands, by the presentation of these to any gentleman made him Posey King for the next dance and he chose his Queen by presenting one of the bouquets to any lady made her his Queen and he had to pay the costs of the Party. The Minorcan ladies prepared an altar of a number of steps or shelves called the Posey Altar, tastily and profusely decorated with the rich Florida flowers lighted up with wax candles, and it made a splendid spectacle.<sup>36</sup> There was a Board of the U. S. Land Commission sitting at St. Augustine, a tall awkward man named Allen,<sup>37</sup> who had very large feet, which the Spanish ladies consider very ugly, and he was of very close miser-

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35. Fandango: A lively Spanish dance performed by a man and a woman with castanets and in triple measure.

36. John Lee Williams, *Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837), 116. (New York, 1837), 116.

37. William Henry Allen was a native of Bel Air, Maryland. He was appointed land commissioner for East Florida, August 12, 1824, to examine claims for property under the Spanish land grant program. Clarence Edwin Carter (ed.), *The Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Florida, 1824-1828* (Washington, 1958), XXIII, 36-37, 216.

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ly disposition. When the first dance was about to open, the officers and a number of citizens were about the door and Allen among them. I tried every persuasion and inducement with Allen but he would not go in. It was proposed that we, the officers, should go in. We did so and while I was admiring the altar with its flowers and lights a young black-eyed Minorcan lady, the Posey Queen, presented me the two bouquets, constituting me *Posey King* for the next dance. It seems that seeing my efforts to catch Allen, they made a counterplot upon me. Well, I made the most of it. I went around among the ladies and after coquetting with a number I gave the bouquet to a pretty, modest young lady called Bonita [Nollia ?]<sup>38</sup> and getting the aid of my soldiers I had the room hung with evergreens, and the cost was under \$20 for the music and refreshments.

As I never drank intoxicating liquors and never played cards and was fond of my military duties, most of the infantry drilling and artillery practice devolved on me and usually filled up the hours of the day, and in the evening visited the young ladies and enjoyed with them many pleasant walks in the bright & splendid Florida moonlight, it so transparent and clear as to permit you reading the smallest print. The nights were so delightful with the cool Gulf breeze that you did not court sleep and in the night you needed a thin blanket, but always within the shelter of a mosquito net.

Upon the whole I never spent two more delightful and agreeable years of my life than I did among the flowers and fruits of the tropical climate, and my recollection of the amiable, friendly citizens of that ancient city of St. Augustine is among my most pleasant memories. Sometime in October, 1825, about 2 o'clock A.M., a West Indian hurricane or tropical cyclone from the northeast burst upon the harbor and the city. The waters of the Ocean immersed the northern end of St. Anastasia Island, leaving only the lighthouse in sight and fell upon the city in showers of salt water, falling not by drops but by buckets, biting the orange leaves like frost. The streets were all inundated, and thousands and ten thousands of oranges were blown off the trees and floated in the streets. The Ocean broke over the houses on

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38. Probably Miss Benita Noda.

the edge of the harbour with its foam and spray. The thunder was most astounding, attended with the keenest and sharpest lightning I ever saw. The wind blew with irresistible fury and five or six vessels at anchor in the harbour were driven high and dry upon the shore. The framework and timbers of the vast roof of St. Francis barracks and of the lofty cupola groaned and cracked fearfully, and we thought we would be unroofed, but the Storm King, after showing his power, quickly passed southwardly toward Cuba and the Keys, and strange to tell at 9 A.M. there was no vestige of the storm but the blown off oranges in the streets, the vessels ashore high and dry, but the sea was as smooth as a looking glass without the slightest ripple.<sup>39</sup> Such are the sudden changes in tropical climates.

(\*This excerpt from the Beckley autobiography was made available by Professor Paxton Davis, Washington and Lee University, great-great grandson of Alfred Beckley.)

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39. On Sunday, October 2, 1825, a strong wind raised the water in St. Augustine harbor about four feet above the high water mark. The resulting swell undermined the foundation of several houses along the bayfront, one stone building was demolished, and the market house in the Plaza was thrown down. Four schooners were forced ashore, one of which stove in an outbuilding. St. Augustine *East Florida Herald*, October 4, 1825.