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In Search of Community: Historic Preservation and the Quest to Recover Fort Gatlin

by Scott Eidson

In a city dominated by large numbers of transplant residents, very few citizens of Orlando know or care about the area's rich and colorful history or its historical figures. Local history is not taught in the Orange County schools "unless a teacher has a particular interest in the subject and makes a special effort."¹ Recently, efforts have been made to curb this trend. In 1997, a small organization known as the Fort Gatlin Historical Group sought to trace Orlando's origins through a community-wide effort to preserve the presumed site of Fort Gatlin, a United States Army fort of the Second Seminole War. In doing so, the group promoted a sense of community by uniting Orlandoans with their history and sparking general interest not only in Orlando's past but in its present and, more importantly, its future.

During the Second Seminole War, the United States Army constructed a string of military outposts that collectively challenged the authority of Osceola and the Seminoles. One was built in November 1838 on the high ground between Lake Jennie Jewel, Lake Gem Mary, and Lake Gatlin, roughly two miles south of what

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1. Mark Andrews, "Orlando's Pioneer is Often Neglected by History Books," *Orlando Sentinel*, 9 April 2000.

is today downtown Orlando.² The fort was named after Dr. John S. Gatlin, a captain in the U.S. Army during the Florida wars.³ Gatlin fought and died in the Dade Massacre on December 28, 1835, when Seminoles wiped out Major Dade's entire command, save a handful of soldiers. Among the survivors was Rawson Clarke who later gave accounts of the massacre. Clarke spoke of Gatlin as a brave man who "after being severely wounded, cried out, 'I can give you no more orders my lads, do your best!'"⁴

Its strategic impregnability and central location made Fort Gatlin key to the American war effort. The site could only be approached from three directions meaning that surprise attacks could easily be repulsed.⁵ Fort Gatlin also situated the Federal Army close to Fort Mellon (Sanford) and Fort Brooke (Tampa) and Seminole encampments near the Council Oak.⁶

A small civilian population concentrated around Fort Gatlin as a result of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, when the United States decided to force the tribes to migrate farther south by encouraging white settlement.⁷ The Act offered 160 acres to anyone who stayed five years, built a cabin, cultivated five acres of their land, and helped defend against Seminole attack.⁸ Among the many homesteaders were brothers Aaron and Isaac Jernigan who moved their families and seven hundred head of cattle to the area in 1844. By 1845, Aaron Jernigan became a captain in the volunteer army at Fort Gatlin and in 1845 served as Mosquito County's first representative when Florida entered the Union.⁹

2. "Narrative Statement of Significance," in Linda Stewart, comp., *Collection of Important Documents That Outline the Efforts of the Fort Gatlin Historical Group in Establishing Fort Gatlin and the Underwater Sound Reference Division of the Naval Research Laboratory as Historical Landmarks of the City of Orlando* (hereafter referred to as *CID*).
3. Eve Bacon, *A Centennial History* (Chulouta, Fla., 1975), 1; William Fremont Blackman, *History of Orange County, Florida* (Deland, Fla., 1927), 83.
4. Frank Laumer, *Dade's Last Command* (Gainesville, Fla., 1995), 239.
5. Bacon, *Orlando*, 2.
6. *Ibid.*, 2; Blackman, *Orange County*, 83. The Council Oak stood near present-day South Fern Creek Avenue. The tree is no longer alive, but a marker designates its original position. Cynthia A. Hill, "Central Florida Forts" (Individual Study Paper, Florida Technological University, 1974), 10, in *CID*.
7. Mark Andrews, "Site's Key to Orlando History: Fort Gatlin," *Orlando Sentinel*, 7 May 2000.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Kena Fries, *Orlando in the Long, Long Ago . . . and Now* (Orlando, Fla., 1938), 3-9; Stewart, *CID*.

The settlement around Fort Gatlin initially became known as Jernigan to honor Aaron Jernigan, but in 1857, citizens permanently changed the name to Orlando.¹⁰ Cotton and cattle quickly became the regional staples.¹¹ Cattle rustling was widespread, and Central Florida paralleled more western territories with its gun-fights and general lawlessness. Emancipation of slaves during the Civil War and a hurricane in 1871 destroyed the area's cotton industry, leading to the "orange fever" that seized residents in the 1870s. People began planting more and more citrus trees to meet the nation's demand for grapefruit, tangerines, and oranges.¹² The Great Freeze of 1894-1895, however, threatened the citrus industry.¹³ Numerous orange growers, like John B. Steinmentz, sought other means of economic survival. Steinmentz converted a portion of his property into a skating rink and bathhouse, added picnic facilities and built a toboggan slide for the nearby springs. Orlando's history as a tourist destination had begun.¹⁴

In 1926, Aaron Jernigan's daughter, Martha Jernigan Tyler, died. Tyler had seen the development of Orlando into a prosperous city with electricity, telephones, cars, and even an airport.¹⁵ As the last survivor of the Fort Gatlin days, Tyler had provided a living bridge to Orlando's history. As one of her last public actions, on March 27, 1924, Tyler joined fellow Daughters of the American Revolution in unveiling a marker on the site of Fort Gatlin.¹⁶

In the seventy years after Tyler's death, little was done to commemorate Fort Gatlin. Instead, the federal government built a naval research laboratory on the site in 1951 to serve as the sonar testing ground for atomic submarines. The lab remained active

10. There is an ongoing debate as to the origins of the name Orlando. Research shows that an Orlando Rees fought in the Third Seminole War, 1855-58; Mark Andrews, "Lore about naming of Orlando makes for some fine storytelling," *Orlando Sentinel*, 11 January 1998.

11. "Orlando: You Never Outgrow It," <http://www.orlandoinfo.com/cvb/pr/pr_kits/english/history2000.htm>, 5 December 2000.

12. Bacon, *Orlando*, 74.

13. *Ibid.*, 75.

14. "Orlando: You Never Outgrow It"

15. *Ibid.*

16. "Historical Resume of Fort Gatlin," in *CID*. The marker is located on Gatlin Avenue on the southwest corner of the Underwater Sound Reference Division of the Naval Research Laboratory, which is built partially on the presumed site of old Fort Gatlin.



In 1924, Martha Tyler Jernigan and her fellow Daughters of the American Revolution commemorated the site of Fort Gatlin with a stone marker that still stands today at the corner of Gatlin Ave. and Summerlin St. in Orlando. *Courtesy of the Historical Society of Central Florida.*

throughout the Cold War. It finally closed in the 1990s, a victim of the base closings of the Clinton administration.¹⁷

When, in 1997, the Naval Research Laboratory closing was announced, preservation of the site as a historical landmark sparked a community-wide effort to fund an archeological dig and preserve Fort Gatlin and the research laboratory. Based upon the findings of Gainesville archeologist Anne Stokes, who suggested that Fort Gatlin had probably stood within or near the naval compound, area residents founded the Fort Gatlin Historical Group “to locate, assess and investigate the possibility that the U. S. Navy’s Underwater Sound Reference Laboratory contains empirical archaeological evidence of historical Fort Gatlin.”¹⁸ Preservationists wished to investigate “the architectural signifi-

17. Mary Shanklin, “Pollution, fumes, asbestos plague new school offices,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 March 2000.

18. Kevin Spear, “Group: Halt plans while we look for historic fort,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 25 March 1997; Mark Andrews, “Old buttons, maps point way to Orlando’s origins,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 May 2000; “Fort Gatlin Historical Group Purpose,” in *CID*.

cance of the Navy Sound Lab main building” and “advocate for appropriate action following the investigation.”¹⁹

The group sent letters to Orange County officials requesting sufficient time to search for the fort prior to redevelopment of the Navy property.²⁰ Orange County, serving as the Local Redevelopment Authority, was charged with disposing of the research lab. Several options were being considered for reuse of the property: eight single-family homes, fifteen to twenty condos, or a park. Another possibility involved incorporating the area into the nearby city of Edgewood and moving its City Hall and Police department into the buildings of the Naval Sound Lab.²¹ The Fort Gatlin Historical Group feared officials would lean towards the condo plan since it was the least expensive alternative.²² Local opposition curbed any private building projects, however, and the presence of chemical pollutants in the lab forced the Navy to perform massive cleanups that slowed conversion of the property, affording the Fort Gatlin Historical Group more time to gather support.²³

One way to guarantee preservation was to place the site on the National Register. Established under the Historic Sites Act of 1935 and expanded by the National Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register promoted a mission that “historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.”²⁴ Cosponsored by the University of Central Florida history department and the Orange County Historical Society, the application emphasized the site’s historical significance. Yet, National Register coordinator Barbara E. Mattick rejected the application because of the lack of “physical

19. Ibid.

20. Spear, “Group: Halt plans while we look for historic fort.”

21. Sandra Mathers, “Concrete may be hiding fort where a city was born,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 2 October 1997. In 1998, another option was considered when the Orange County Sheriff’s Office expressed interest in the lab; Sandra Mathers, “Sheriff eyes old Navy lab,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 26 March 1998.

22. Mathers, “Concrete may be hiding fort where a city was born.”

23. Mathers, “Sheriff eyes old Navy lab.”

24. Julie Zagars, ed., *Preservation Yellow Pages: The Complete Information source for Homeowners, Communities, and Professionals, Revised Edition* (New York, 1997), 36; Antoinette J. Lee, ed., *Past Meets Future: Saving America’s Historic Environments* (Washington D.C., 1992), 37.

integrity and a definite and justifiable boundary.”²⁵ She encouraged “further archaeological testing on the private lands in the area, perhaps with grant funding,” and suggested potential sources for a grant, including the Florida Department of State.²⁶

The proposal, *Survey Excavation and Designation of Second Seminole War Site*, was submitted to the Department of State’s Bureau of Historic Preservation on December 15, 1998. The group requested \$35,000 to help maintain a budget for the excavation and survey of the Fort Gatlin site, which was targeted to begin in July 1999. Formal efforts to preserve Fort Gatlin fell short, however, when the grant was denied²⁷

When the Fort Gatlin Historical Group sought to find out why the grant had been rejected, they discovered that the State Department would not fund both an archaeological survey and excavation within a single grant.²⁸ According to the founder of the Fort Gatlin Historical Group, Linda Stewart, the State wanted to fund several smaller projects instead of focusing available funds on one or two larger projects. In order to receive funding, the group would have to submit separate grant applications.

Meanwhile, use of the lab property remained in question. In the early months of 1998, Edgewood City Council members voted to ask the county for two of the smaller buildings in order to move the City Hall and Police Department out of their shared building on Larue Street. This option for the property had been considered since 1997, but Edgewood’s hesitation had only confused the issue. By the time that the city finally requested the property, too many other options had become available.²⁹

The Fort Gatlin Historical Group continued the search for a suitable occupant who would both secure the property and preserve the site for public use. Group members and local residents such as Linda Stewart and Lowrie Brown wanted the lab turned over to a government agency or converted into a county storage facility, thereby stalling redevelopment and assisting in the preser-

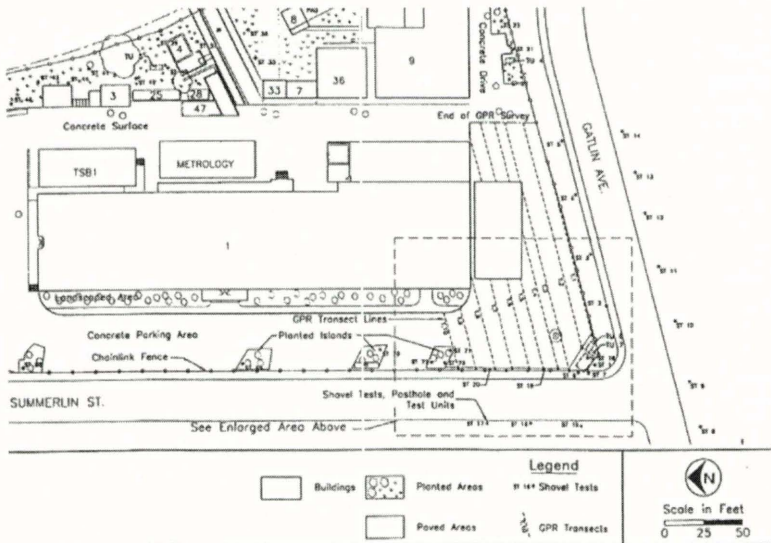
25. Barbara E. Mattick to Linda Stewart, 1997, in *CID*.

26. *Ibid.*

27. “Survey Excavation and Designation of Second Seminole War Site Grant Proposal,” in *CID*.

28. Linda Stewart, telephone interview by author, Orlando, Fla., 29 October 2000.

29. Sandra Mathers, “Edgewood wants sound lab for City Hall,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 8 February 1998.



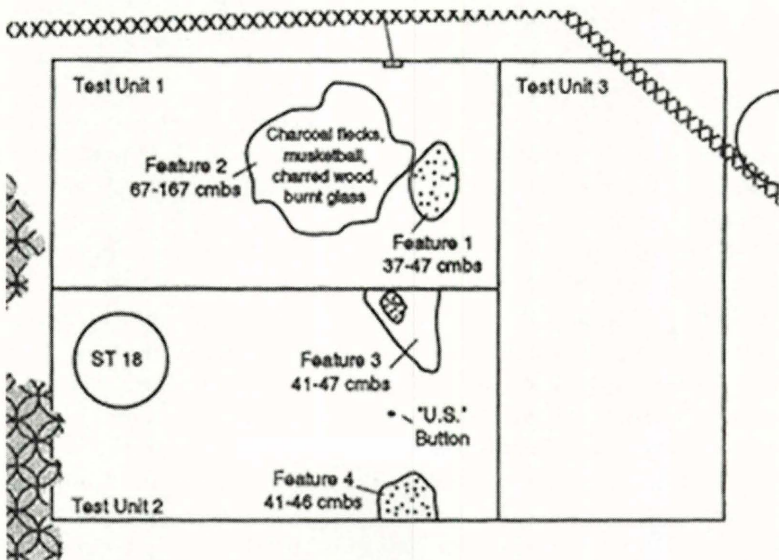
Survey map of the Naval Research Laboratory. The dotted outline represents the area believed to have been the site of Fort Gatlin. From Anne V. Stokes, *An Archaeological Resource Assessment Survey of Naval Research Laboratory Underwater Sound Reference Detachment, Orlando, Orange County, Florida* (n.p., 1997), 28.

vation of the site.³⁰ Stewart promoted what some scholars of preservation have referred to as “adaptive use,” the idea that support for preservation can often be obtained when one can show that the property will remain useful for and within the community.³¹ Edgewood had demonstrated such adaptive use with its proposal to convert the buildings for civic use and transform some of the land into a park. But Edgewood City Council members were unwilling to pay the costs.

One year later, while the Fort Gatlin Historical Group awaited word concerning the grant application, the Orange County School Board secured a deal with the county for sole possession of the

30. Ibid.

31. Arthur P. Ziegler Jr. and Walter C. Kidney, *Historic Preservation in Small Towns: A Manual of Practice* (Nashville, 1980), 49; Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity* (New Brunswick: N.J., 1996), 110; Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia, 1996), 189-190.



Detailed findings of the 1997 archaeological survey at the presumed site of Fort Gatlin. Note discoveries of a musketball and a "U.S." button. From Anne V. Stokes, *An Archaeological Resource Assessment Survey of Naval Research Laboratory Underwater Sound Reference Detachment, Orlando, Orange County, Florida* (n.p., 1997), 56.

Navy Research Laboratory.³² The property would be handed over free of cost along with an additional \$300,000 to defray renovation costs.³³ The Fort Gatlin Historical Group and local residents applauded the decision. School officials supported promoting and preserving the historical and educational significance of the site.³⁴ The School Board pledged cooperation to assist the Fort Gatlin Historical Group, the University of Central Florida, and the Orange County Historical Society in reapplying for necessary state grants to allow more thorough excavations.³⁵

The School Board's decision represented both an actual and a moral victory for the Fort Gatlin Historical Group. Preservation is

32. Kevin Spear, "Navy lab in Orlando may resurface as school offices," *Orlando Sentinel*, 25 March 1999; idem, "Orange schools get navy's ex-sonar lab," *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 April 1999.

33. Idem, "Orange schools get navy's ex-sonar lab."

34. Idem, "Navy lab in Orlando may resurface as school offices."

35. Mark Andrews, "Old buttons, maps point way to Orlando's origins," *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 May 2000.

often sparked through fear of the immediate danger and loss of a particular part of history, although this criterion alone is not sufficient to sustain actual efforts. "Patriotic education" through visitation to preserved sites promotes preservation and justifies the efforts of the preservationist.³⁶ Converting the site into part of the country's educational system would provide direct access into Orlando's past by way of field trips and projects.

Transformation of the site from the Naval Research Laboratory into the offices of the Orange County School Board remains delayed, however, by the massive chemical cleanup. School Board District officials maintain that the property will be safe by the end of the summer of 2002. Even clean up efforts have become complicated. The State Historic Preservation Office has deemed the asbestos tiles in the lab corridors and lobbies and the creosote wood-block floor of the main building to be historic.³⁷

As adaptive use and preservation have been delayed, concerns have heightened over the ultimate fate of the Fort Gatlin site. Several residents who favor the project are quite elderly, and Linda Stewart fears that if they should pass away, far less sympathetic owners might purchase the land and further stall plans to secure physical boundaries for the National Register. Still, there are promising circumstances as well. The site is very much the same as it was in 1997; the Naval Sound Lab and the concrete parking lot were not demolished or disturbed. Stewart and the Fort Gatlin Historical Group are thankful for this, especially the intact nature of the parking lot which they believe is covering precious artifacts that lie about two feet below the surface.³⁸ The prospect of determining boundaries based upon the presence of archeological remains, and the Orange County School Board's willingness to assist in recovering them, have kept the group optimistic.

What then can be said of the community effort to preserve part of Orlando's past? Preservation, some scholars have noted, promotes solidarity through the recognition of a collective past and integrates societies by providing a positive example of valued

36. Charles B. Hosmer Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* (New York, 1965), 264-66.

37. Mary Shanklin, "Pollution, fumes, asbestos plague new school offices," *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 March 2002.

38. Stewart interview.

life-styles.³⁹ A 1998 survey conducted by the Fort Gatlin Historical Group revealed that an “overwhelming” majority of three hundred responses by “our neighbors” supported efforts to create a historical park. As Linda Stewart phrased it, the Fort Gatlin project had become “a serious, community based effort to see this property converted into a park with all of its unique historical, architectural and archaeological characteristics brought to life for all the citizens of Orange County.”⁴⁰ And many of those “neighbors” would “accept reuse of the main structure for public benefit to make it financially feasible.”⁴¹

In early 1998, an *Orlando Sentinel* article about the Fort Gatlin Group and its efforts was republished in *Timucuan Trails*, a newsletter for the Central Florida Anthropological Society. Accompanying it was a call for volunteers to assist in the anticipated survey of 1998.⁴² Author, Sandra Mathers explained the group’s desire “to pursue this [historic] designation on the grounds the site is broader than just the Navy Property” and stressed the importance of the area as a historical landmark for Orlando.⁴³

When archaeologist Anne Stokes, principal investigator for Southeastern Archaeological Research Inc., began uncovering artifacts from the era of the Second Seminole War on the lab property, the “neighbors weren’t surprised. They’ve been turning up everything from cannonballs to belt buckles and bones in their yards for years.”⁴⁴ Stewart bragged of “200 artifacts from the fort’s era unearthed by the archaeologist in a 15-square foot landscaped area at the corner of the lab property as ample evidence of historical value.”⁴⁵ When Stokes discovered “a post hole containing some wood and charcoal” that appeared to date to the period of the 1830s, excitement abounded. Unfortunately, Stokes’s final

39. Barthel, *Historic Preservation*, 154; Nathan Wenberg, *Preservation in American Towns and Cities* (Boulder, Colo., 1979), 217.

40. “Edgewood Position on the Reuse of the Naval Sound Lab,” in *CID*.

41. “A Presentation Given By the Fort Gatlin Historical Group,” in *CID*.

42. Mary Antinozzi, ed., “Timucuan Trails: News From the Central Florida Anthropological Society, Fort Gatlin Update,” January 1998 in *CID*.

43. Sandra Mathers, “History buffs remain determined to find fort,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 22 December 1997.

44. Andrews, “Site’s key to Orlando History: Fort Gatlin.”

45. “Timucuan Trails: News From the Central Florida Anthropological Society, Fort Gatlin Update,” in *CID*.

report on the lab site, released in September of 1998, proved inconclusive as to the post hole's historic value.

The mild successes of 1998 did not dampen enthusiasm. Local residents, such as Shaw Craig, agreed to allow excavation of their properties.⁴⁶ Cyrus H. Sharp Jr. wrote Stewart that "we support your intentions wholeheartedly and will gladly cooperate with your plans for excavation and recovery of artifacts on our property."⁴⁷

The Fort Gatlin Historical Group also solicited political endorsement of the grant application. All six District County Commissioners sent letters of recommendation to the Division of Historic Resources, as did Bill McCollum and John L Mica, Florida members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Daniel Webster, Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives.⁴⁸

As time passes and the status of Fort Gatlin remains unresolved, the Fort Gatlin Historical Group's demographics will become increasingly important.⁴⁹ At its peak, the group consisted of twenty active members, with an average age of sixty-five. At several community meetings, which exceeded two hundred people, the youngest attendees were at least thirty years old. This, Stewart hopes, will quickly change as young people from the Orange County School system become involved.⁵⁰ Stewart and the group think this will breathe new life into preservation efforts and help teach Central Florida's youth that their past is not only important but attainable.⁵¹

The fruition of their efforts is close at hand, but the Fort Gatlin Historical Group and the community it has come to represent must acquire the necessary funding to begin the survey and excavation of the presumed site of Fort Gatlin. Preservationists know that for their efforts to be successful, they must make their projects popular to inspire public officials' support, attract like-minded individuals or organizations, and raise morale in the community and "enliven its spirits."⁵² To date, this has been the achievement of the Fort Gatlin Historical Group.

46. Shaw Craig to Linda Stewart, in *CID*.

47. Cyrus H. Sharp to Linda Stewart, in *CID*.

48. "Survey Excavation and Designation of Second Seminole War Site Grant Proposal," in *CID*.

49. Stewart interview.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*

52. Ziegler, *Historic Preservation in Small Towns*, 60-61.