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## Uninvited Guests: A Night at Cedar Point Plantation

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## Documents and Notes:

### Uninvited Guests: A Night at Cedar Point Plantation

By Patrick W. Doyle

In October 1817 a mariner's mistake at the entrance of the St. Johns River and a subsequent mishap proved fortuitous in preserving a rare glimpse of plantation life in Spanish East Florida in a time of turmoil. Documents describing these events reveal details regarding the humiliating dispossession of Spanish authority on Amelia Island and its town of Fernandina, first by filibusters led by Gregor McGregor and later by rogues headed by the pirate Luis Aury.

The end of the Napoleonic wars brought an influx of young British officers, reduced to half-pay, returning home at a time of economic distress.<sup>1</sup> Many of these officers were thus open to the "no trifling baits" offered by the Venezuelan agent in London recruiting their services with the Venezuelan patriots in the cause of independence from Spain.<sup>2</sup> The allure of an advanced step in rank with corresponding pay and allowances proved irresistible to some.

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1. John W. Griffin, *Introduction to Narrative of a Voyage to the Spanish Main in the Ship "Two Friends;" The Occupation of Amelia Island by M'Gregor, &c.—Sketches of the Province of East Florida; and Anecdotes Illustrative of the Habits and Manners of the Seminole Indians: with an Appendix, Containing a Detail of the Seminole War, and the Execution of Arbuthnot and Ambrister*, by [Joseph Freeman Rattenbury] (London, 1819; facsimile ed., (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978), 2.
2. [Joseph Freeman Rattenbury], *Narrative of a Voyage to the Spanish Main*, (London, 1819; facsimile ed., (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978), 8.

Earlier in 1817 the Venezuelan agent provided some officers “letters of introduction” directed to any or all of Venezuelan generals: Don Simon Bolivar, Don Santiago Mariño, and Sir Gregor M’Gregor.<sup>3</sup> The ship *Two Friends* carried the recruited military adventurers, the army component of which was called the “1<sup>st</sup> Venezuelan Lancers,” from Portsmouth, England, to St. Thomas, Danish Virgin Islands where they were to await further instructions from another Venezuelan agent.<sup>4</sup>

The failure of the Venezuelan agent to appear and the nighttime disappearance of the *Two Friends* thwarted the expectation of serving in Venezuela.<sup>5</sup> Counseled by the Danish governor that their welcome there was ending and encouraged by the U.S. consul that they should join forces with McGregor at Fernandina, thirty officers decided to go to Fernandina and engaged the American schooner *Mary* for that purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Freeman Rattenbury, Charles Blacker Vignoles, and Richard Longeville Vowell were shipmates aboard the *Two Friends* and on the *Mary*.<sup>7</sup> All three wrote first hand accounts of the voyages. Rattenbury’s account was *Narrative of a Voyage to the Spanish Main in the Ship “Two Friends,”*<sup>8</sup> Vignoles’ writings were in the form of letters to his wife,<sup>9</sup> and Vowell’s account was in *Campaigns and Cruises in Venezuela and New Grenada and in the Pacific Ocean*.<sup>10</sup> However, only Vowell’s book reveals the details of a visit to the plantation discussed below.

It is improbable that the adventurers had any idea of the diverse population of the East Florida province. Since 1790, the Spanish Crown had encouraged immigration from the United States by offering land grants in exchange for occupancy, farming,

3. [Richard Longeville Vowell], Vol. 1, *Campaigns and Cruises in Venezuela and New Grenada and in The Pacific Ocean; From 1817 to 1830: with the Narrative of a March from the River Orinoco to San Buenaventura on the Coast of Chocò: and Sketches of the West Coast of South America from The Gulf of California to the Archipelago of Chilöe* (London: Longman and Co., 1831), 3, 5.

4. Vowell, 1, 5. Rattenbury, 8-9.

5. Rattenbury, 42, 48-49.

6. Rattenbury, 53-54. Vowell, 3-4.

7. Olinthus J. Vignoles, M.A. *Life of Charles Blacker Vignoles F.R.S., F.R.A.S., M.R.I.A., & c., Soldier and Civil Engineer* (London and New York: Longman, Green, and Co., 1889.), 66-67, 78. Charles Blacker Vignoles also wrote *Observations upon the Floridas* (New York: E. Bliss & E. White, 1823), but there is no reference therein to the events described in this article.

8. See footnote 1.

9. Vignoles, 67-72.

10. See footnote 3.

ranching, and improvements. So there were sizable numbers of immigrants and squatters from the United States and elsewhere in addition to the Spanish population, slaves, British holdovers from the prior occupation and Indians. Indeed, this period has been characterized as “the most culturally and racially heterogeneous era of its history until the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>11</sup>

Upon reaching the northern Florida coast, *Mary's* captain stood off what he supposed was the bar of the St. Mary's and futilely awaited a pilot to lead the schooner ashore. Eventually seven officers elected to go ashore in the “jolly-boat” to summon a pilot. The officers were Colonel Donald McDonald, Major Davies, Captains McMullin and Rottenbury, and army lieutenants, Richard Longeville Vowell and Braithwaite, and Lieutenant Thomas of the Venezuelan navy.<sup>12</sup> Expecting a welcome by the insurgents in Fernandina, the officers donned their military uniforms<sup>13</sup> and rowed landward. About a half mile from shore, the boat capsized, and they swam ashore. The men could not return to the *Mary* “. . . as the power of man could not have pulled the boat out against the surf. . . .” The *Mary's* captain saw the mishap and assumed the men had either drowned or had been arrested by the Spanish. Realizing his navigational error he proceeded to Fernandina on Amelia Island, arriving in late October 1817.<sup>14</sup>

The landing party carried with them the letters of introduction addressed to the “. . . proscribed rebels to his Catholic Majesty Fernando, 7 . . . ,” which they understood as “. . . being even worse than useless to us here . . . .” The group “. . . had the severe task to perform of dragging the boat ancle [*sic*] deep in a soft sand, for nearly a league, before we could launch her in smooth water.”<sup>15</sup>

11. Coker, William S. and Susan R. Parker, “The Second Spanish Period in the Two Floridas” in *The New History of Florida*, ed. Michael Gannon (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1996) 158-159, 161.

12. Vowell, 6, 8, 461. If “Rottenbury” is Rattenbury, then either Vowell is mistaken or Rattenbury's account of the events from the time the *Mary* abandoned the landing party and the schooner's arrival in Fernandina is second hand. The volunteers were described as “a party of pleasure” who were “eager to escape from the confinement of a small crowded vessel.” Vowell, 6, 461.

13. Rattenbury described the military uniforms he had seen aboard the *Two Friends* as “. . . green dragoon jackets, trimmed with silver lace, and faced with scarlet; epaulettes, with the rising sun of Venezuela: shackoes mounted with silver lace and gold cord, and surmounted with a yellow and blue plume. . . .” Rattenbury, 15.

14. Rattenbury, 76-77, 313. Vowell, 7.

15. Vowell, 7.

Vowell wrote of the predicament:

This exercise, under a broiling sun, and on empty stomach (for we had confidently reckoned on breakfasting on shore) was beyond measure fatiguing. Added to this, we had before us the disheartening prospect of being imprisoned, perhaps for life, in a Spanish dungeon . . . .<sup>16</sup>

Vowell continued:

After seeing several canoes, all of which made their escape precipitately, scared, probably, "by the nodding plumes," in that unfrequented river, (for we had all, unfortunately put on uniform before leaving the schooner, as we expected to meet M'Gregor) we came suddenly on two blacks, who were fishing at the mouth of a small creek. They were evidently much affrighted at first, supposing us to belong to some predatory expedition from Amelia Island. On hearing us speak English, however, one of them agreeably surprized us, by telling us, in the same language, that his master was a North American planter, who lived a short distance off, up that same creek. They conducted us to a plantation, through woods of majestic live-oak trees. Many of these, we observed, had been stripped of their bark, preparatory to being cut down: and this method, we were informed by our guides, rendered the wood harder and more durable. The owner proved to be an Irishman by birth, of the name of Fitzpatrick, who had been long settled in the country. He was married to a Criolla, or native female; and had a large family. He expressed his surprize at the strange chance, that had procured for him the first visit of his countrymen it had been his lot to receive, during the whole time he had been settled in the plantation. At the same time, though highly delighted to hear news of any kind from Europe, and to have this unexpected opportunity of conversing in his native language, he was in great alarm on our account, lest any intelligence should reach the garrison of San Agustin of our being on that part of the coast; as it would inevitably lead to our detention. He was also,

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16. Ibid.

although he endeavored to disguise his feelings, evidently not without apprehension of the consequences to himself, if it should by any means be discovered to the Spanish governor of the province, that he had harboured insurgents on his plantation, instead of dispatching immediate intelligence respecting them to the nearest military post. He remarked, however, that his negroes were all faithful and attached to him: and, to prevent them from straggling that night towards the forts, he gave them each an extra allowance of rum, which soon set them singing and dancing in the moonlight, to their favorite banjies and guitars.

He concealed us immediately in a barn half filled with cotton, least some accidental visitor might drop in at the house; and, after a hearty supper of fish, venison, wild turkies and parrots,<sup>17</sup> which was sumptuous, considering the remote forests we were exploring, we soon forgot, in a sound sleep, both our fatigue, and the very serious danger that threatened us. Before day-break, our kind host, who had been kept on the watch all night by his anxiety on our account, awoke us, and conducted us to our boat, which he had plentifully stored with provisions and fruit. Then, regretting much that our mutual safety would not admit of his enjoying our company for few days longer, he bid us farewell, having furnished us with one of his slaves, as a guide through the numerous natural canals, which unite the two rivers, St. John's and St. Mary's, and separate the island of Amelia from the main land.<sup>18</sup>

Archibald Clark, the Collector at St. Mary's, received a letter about the arrival of the British soldiers and sent an extract of the letter to W.H. Crawford<sup>19</sup> which was also published in American papers:

"Sir—I hasten to communicate the following information by letter, received from a gentleman residing on the St. John's river,

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17. Vowell could be referring to painted buntings, multicolored birds found in this vicinity. <http://www.wildamelia.com/paintedBunting.htm> (accessed 3/26/08) or the now extinct carolina parakeet.

18. Vowell, 8-10.

19. W. H. Crawford (William Harris Crawford) at the time was the U.S. Treasury secretary. <http://www.treas.gov/education/history/secretaries/wcrawford.shtml> (accessed 3/26/08).

East Florida. The subject, in its bearings, presents considerations of the first importance, as to our political relations with Spain.”

The following is extracted from the same:

“Pablo river, St. John’s Oct. 24<sup>th</sup> 1817.

“About sun-set a yawl boat arrived at the landing, when seven persons came from her, who requested shelter for the night, and some refreshments, stating that they were half-pay British officers of the army and navy, from the island of St. Thomas, on their way to England, *via* the United States; that they had mistaken this bar for St. Mary’s; that they left the schooner. in the offing under that impression, and intended to send her a pilot by the return of the boat. After staying all night, they embarked at day-light, having procured a negro [sic] pilot to conduct them inland to Fernandina.

“Col. M’Donald in thanking me for the hospitality he had received, said he felt bound as a gentleman, to be candid, and accordingly informed me, that he had lately arrived from London at St. Thomas, in the ship “*Two Friends*,” with a great number of officers, and munitions of war in abundance; that he had with him thirty officers on board the schooner; that he would command in this quarter; that they would have men sufficient, and a profusion of every thing necessary for active operations; that they wanted war with Spain, and that he had power to draw on England for 100,000 *l* sterling; that they would have a fine park of artillery, and that all these supplies were actually on their way, or shipping; that a number of gun-brigs and sloops would leave England, reported for the East Indies, but were bound directly here and to South America. That they were much disappointed at learning M’Gregor had left Amelia Island,<sup>20</sup> and that the capture of Amelia was known prior to their leaving England.

“These officers have soldier-like and genteel appearance, and all have their commissions; they said their object

20. This is curious since Rattenbury reported that upon arrival at Fernandina “To our mortification we learnt that M’Gregor had quitted the island, and had gone to the Bahamas . . .” Rattenbury, 78.

in leaving the schooner was to reconnoitre. They have all since arrived at Fernandina.

“I have the honor to remain &c.  
“ARCHIBALD CLARK”<sup>21</sup>

The British soldiers were soon disillusioned and, although a few stayed behind, most of them dispersed, some returning to England, others going to the United States, and some to South America, including Vowell.<sup>22</sup>

William Fitzpatrick’s plantation known as Cedar Point is north of the entrance of the St. Johns river on Black Hammock Island and northwest of the Zephaniah Kingsley Plantation. The site is now in the City of Jacksonville in Duval County.

Fitzpatrick’s ownership of 440 acres at Cedar Point dates from a 1795 grant by Governor Quesada.<sup>23</sup> A copy of the 1809 survey of Cedar Point by Juan Purcell (rotated so that the legend “Caño de Fitzpatrick” can be discerned at the bottom) and a later undated survey by Henry Washington are pictured below. At the top of the Purcell survey the words “tierras cultivadas” appear, along with vertical and horizontal lines indicating planting fields and a box that suggests a structure. With both surveys oriented to the north, the Washington survey confirms the location of the “field” and one structure in approximately the same place, but the Washington survey shows an additional smaller box, most likely representing a barn or other outbuilding.

The people at Cedar Point in 1817 can be imagined from the Spanish census of 1814 listing the inhabitants as William, aged 50, his wife, Susana, aged 46, six children and eleven slaves.<sup>24</sup>

Tabby brick ruins remain at Cedar Point, and Rhena Lynn Shreve who conducted a professional study of the site believes that

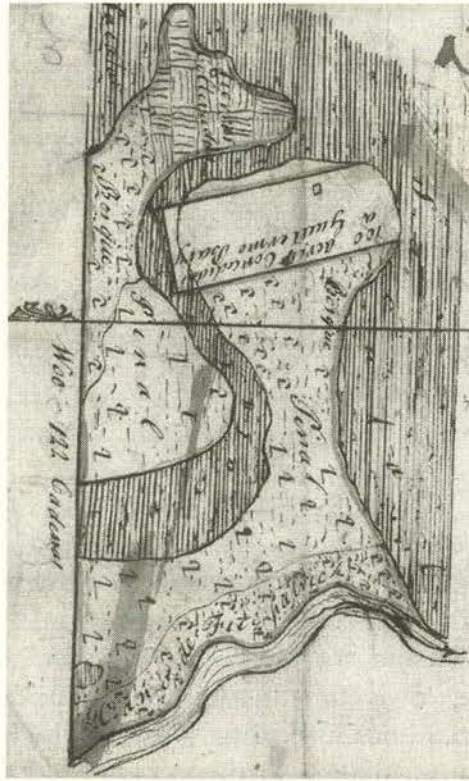
21. Rattenbury, 313-314.

22. T. Frederick Davis, “MacGregor’s Invasion of Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 7 (July 1928): 36; Vowell, 16-17.

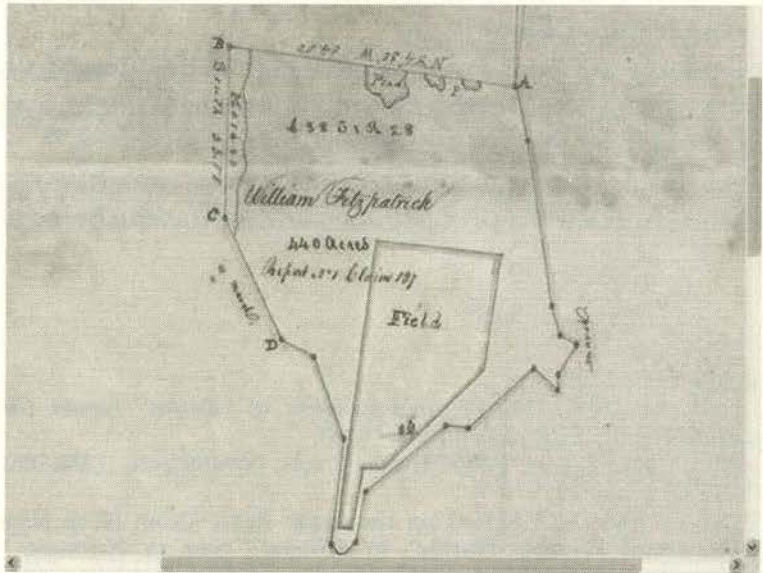
23. American State Papers: Public Lands, 8 vols. (Washington, 1832-1861), IV, 281 (1825).

24. William M. Jones, “A Report on the Cedar Point Ruins, Black Hammock Island, Duval County, Florida” in *Historical Sites in Northeast Florida* (Jacksonville: self-published, 1985), 15. According to Jones, two additional children were born later. The Jones report is found in the William M. Jones Papers, Thomas G. Carpenter Library, University of North Florida.





Purcell Survey, January 2, 1808. *Courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida.*



Henry Washington Survey, Undated. *Courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida.*

the structures were built by Fitzpatrick.<sup>25</sup> William M. Jones, an amateur archaeologist, who conducted an earlier site survey thought that the structures were built after the 1830's during the later ownership by Colonel John Broward.<sup>26</sup> However, Shreve's study is more persuasive.

Jones predicted that Cedar Point ". . . will eventually fall victim to the ravages of the 'land developers,' and the plantation of the Fitzpatricks and the Browards will soon be forgotten."<sup>27</sup> But the cannons of development were spiked: the City of Jacksonville, assisted by grants, purchased 418 acres of the Cedar Point property in 1996, and it is now a part of the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve operated under a partnership consisting of the Florida State Park System, the City of Jacksonville, the National Park Service and a myriad of private and corporate landowners.<sup>28</sup>

25. Rhena Lynn Shreve, "Archaeological Investigations of Tabby Brick Ruins at Cedar Point, Duval County, Florida" (M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 1999), 159. This resource has a detailed historical account of prior and later owners of the property.

26. Jones, 10, 17, 20.

27. *Ibid.*, 22.

28. <http://www.apps2.coj.net/parksinternet/parkdetails.asp?parkid=325> (accessed 3/25/2008).