



First-Person Testimony



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JOURNAL OF DR. W. H. SIMMONS,
*Commissioner to Locate the Seat of Government of the Territory
of Florida.*

St. Augustine, Sept. 26th, 1823.

Left St. Augustine and reached Buonavista, late at night, the road being impeded with water nearly the whole way. The flats being on the other side, there was no possibility of getting my horses over before the morning. I however passed over myself in a canoe and slept at Vibrillia.

September 27th.—Vibrillia. The day stormy and the river so rough that my horses could not be brought across 'till toward evening when the wind had somewhat abated. Though it had continued to rain at intervals and the weather looked very unpromising, I resumed my journey and proceeded on eleven miles, where I encamped for the night.

September 28th.—Set forward at daylight and arrived at Alachua at sunset after a fatiguing ride of near fifty miles.

September 29th.—Alachua. Felt very unwell, and resolved not to proceed this day.

September 30th.—Found it necessary to procure another pack-horse, and did not obtain one 'till it was too late in the day to pursue my journey.

October 1st.—A rainy day but there being no likelihood of better weather I set out with two guides, two pack-horses, and sufficient provisions for ten days. Having been informed that an Indian, who passed through Alachua before my arrival there, had said that he intended to take the boat from the lower crossing place on the Suwannee and go to St. Marks by water, and that I should therefore have to raft it if I went by that route; I determined to pursue what is called the middle road, which leads over the Santafty near to its junction with the Suwannee, as I understood there was an Indian settlement there, where I could procure canoes to put me over the latter river. After proceeding about twelve miles the weather became so bad that we were obliged to take shelter under some bark camp left by the Indians where we remained over night. Our road crossed the southeastern end of the great Alachua Savannah which at this time did not contain much water, and presented a beautiful expanse of fresh and living verdure. The sink





called the Alligator Hole, at its western extremity, where the waters discharged themselves underground, I have never had an opportunity of examining, but from the testimony of the Indians and negroes it appears that the account given it by Bartram is substantially correct. Happening casually to observe that I wonder where the waters finally vented themselves, one of my guides, an Indian negro, promptly replied that they ran into the Suwannee. On my asking him how he knew this to be the case, he said that some years ago, an Indian bathing near the sink was drowned and his body afterwards found in the Suwannee. I give this story as I received it. If it should be correct, this Savannah, which drains a considerable extent of country, probably joins one of the tributaries of that mentioned river. As the country between the Alachua and the Suwannee is but little known, I shall describe as I proceed such features of it as were presented to me on this route.

October 2d.—Leaving our encampment, we traveled through a region of high, rolling pine land, intermixed with some oak and hickory; the soil generally a yellowish loam. This region extended for about twelve miles, when we reached St. Felasco Lake, a small sheet of water, where commence a beautiful hammock, through which we rode for nearly three miles. The chief growth was of lofty and spreading Spanish oaks, set wide apart, having a fine carpet of verdure underneath. I was informed that it extended a considerable way to the North and South, and forms a very rich body of lands. There was a settlement of Indians on its northeastern border. It bears due West from the Alachua Savannah. On passing through this tract, we again entered upon high pine land of good quality, being interspersed with oak and some hickory. After refreshing ourselves and horses at noon, we recommenced our journey and traveled on till nine at night, in search of water, which is very scarce in this region. We at length met with a small pond where we encamped. Frequent pits or funnel shaped depressions in the soil occurred in this and succeeding days' ride; but no runs of water, though in some instances a pond lying a great deal higher and in their immediate neighborhood, was quite full. Before halting we struck the hammock that borders the Santaffy. It lies but little below the level of the adjacent pine lands, and does not appear to be subject to inundation, or at any rate could be easily freed from it.





The growth is live oak, bay, laurel, cedar, mulberry, poplar, cypress, etc., etc. It rained in the night and we suffered from the want of a tent. I did not bring one from the idea it would prove too heavy an addition to the baggage.

October 3d.—The morning proved clear, and we were on our way by half past six. In about an hour we arrived at a stream running to the northeast. It was of inconsiderable width, but was up to our saddle skirts at the crossing plate. It is one of the tributaries of the Santafty into which it falls near its mouth. My guide called it "Low Creek," and said it headed in a lake on the southwest. There is a Low Creek laid down in Vignolie's map which is represented as heading to the northeast. The sources of the two streams must be in some low region or country intermediate between them. After crossing the stream first mentioned, which has some very good land upon it, we arrived, after little more than an hour's ride, at the Santafty, but found it so high that we could not attempt to cross it without a boat; we therefore determined to go down to a small Indian settlement to the West, where we supposed we could obtain canoes. On reaching the town which consisted of fourteen or fifteen houses, a public square and a ball yard, we found the Indians were unwilling to lend us a boat. A bribe, however, of two dollars, soon occasioned one to be produced. They told us it was necessary to return a few miles south to where there was a crossing place, by which Neamathla had passed over but a few days before and promised to bring the canoe around in time to meet us. We were nearly an hour in reaching the place described to which a trail led from the town, but from no other direction; though this would certainly be the nearest point at which to cross the river from Alachua. We found the river bluff on this shore, but apparently low on the other. It is here bordered by pine lands, and is a bold and broad stream not less than 150 yards wide. It is remarkably rapid and as clear as a fountain. A chain of rich hammock extends from Alachua along the Santafty all the way to its confluence with the Suwannee, and there are high, healthy pine lands to the southwest, which would form eligible sites for settlements, and it appears to me that the neighborhood of this crossing would afford a fine situation for a town. The Indians soon arrived with the canoe, but we were a long time in





getting over, as the river is so broad and rapid that we could not venture to swim over more than one horse at a time and we had five to cross. This place is not more than three-quarters of a mile below where the Santafty enters the Suwannee. The former river is nearly as wide as the Suwannee itself at the place where it falls into the latter. As our horses were very much fatigued from the traveling, swimming and short allowances for food, we proceeded very slowly for the rest of the day, and did not go more than twelve miles, when we stopped for the night. The lands through which we passed (the trail keeping near the river thus far) was a low, sobby pine barren.

October 4th.—We were off at an early hour in the morning and with the exception of two hours' rest at noon, traveled steadily till after sunset. The country was of the same description as that we passed over the preceding day. There occurred numerous small ponds covered with a small species of weed called by the Indians "phitalickney," and which forms a very rich pasture for cattle, so that this otherwise poor region would at least afford a fine range for stock.

October 5th.—Our rate of traveling this day was about the same as on the preceding day. There was no variation in the character of the soil until we reached a remarkable sink, which I called the Rockwell.

Then the land became higher and we passed two rich hammocks on the left or to the northwest (their extent I could not ascertain) and two lakes of an elongated form, which appeared to terminate in low cypress swamps. Our course had hitherto been north and northwest, but from the Rockwell the trail deflects northwesterly and continues in that direction for the distance of twenty miles. We stopped at night near a run of water where our horses suffered much from want of good pasturage. We had heavy showers during the morning and got completely wet.

October 6th.—As our horses have had no corn since we crossed the Suwannee, and the grazing was bad where we encamped, we proceeded today very slowly. The quality of the land did not differ very materially until we arrived at the southern borders of the hammock Champetchee, which stretches east and west between the Suwannee and Ausilly for almost twenty-five miles, and is reported to be from ten to twelve miles in breadth. We





reached after sunset a settlement of King Higo's negroes, where we lodged and succeeded in obtaining corn for our horses. The distance from the place where I crossed the Suwannee up to this point I concede to be not less than eighty miles, though we traveled, as it appeared to me, on the chord of the bow, the river making the curve to the east.

October 7th.—I was informed by an Indian that the direct distance from this settlement to the Suwannee could be easily walked in one day. I could not learn, however, how far the good land extended toward the east. My horses having strayed during the night, I could not get under way till late. At the end of five or six miles the road descended from the hammock into a bay swamp through which we waded nearly up to our saddle skirts for upward of a mile. We slept eight miles on this side of the Ausilly. We passed two or three Indian settlements. This day it rained a little in the morning.

October 8th.—Set out this morning with a prospect of making but a very little way, our horses being worn down and a good deal gaunted, though we had taken great pains to prevent it. One of them, an Indian horse, that would not eat corn, threatened to fail altogether. We proceeded, or rather crept, at the rate of about three miles an hour, and in something more than an hour and a half, came to the Ausilly fork, where one of our smallest horses nearly swam. The breadth of that part of the channel, which was free from canes and cypress, was about seven yards. A mile further on we reached the Ausilly itself, which was now very high. We formed our hide into a boat, which conveyed across our baggage, and swam over ourselves on horseback. We did not swim more than ten yards, but the whole distance from shore to shore is probably about 250 yards; a considerable space, however, on either side is obstructed by canes, logs and cypress trees. The last seven miles of our ride to the Ausilly was through comparatively poor pine land. The Ausilly is the boundary of the country called Champelee or Sampelee by the Indians; and on the other side commences the hammock of Miccasukies. The Ausilly, when I crossed it, was running nearly due South, but I understood that some thirty miles lower down it makes a sudden turn to the west and empties into the sea about fifteen miles from the mouth of the St. Marks. It





runs, before making a turn, for a short distance underground. From the river, after passing a narrow strip of pine land, we rose into a rich hammock, which continued for fifteen miles. It is interrupted at one place by a swamp of something more than a mile in width. We passed through an Indian settlement and several luxuriant fields of corn and peas. Toward night we became bewildered by the number of tracks leading to different Indian towns and wandered about until after nine, when we came up with a small Indian settlement where we encamped, being promised by the people to be put on the right road in the morning.

October 9th.—Our course all this day was through pine lands, some of which was of good quality. We crossed twenty miles on this side of the Ausilly a pretty deep creek five or six yards in width. I ran from the Southeast, emptied into the Ocholochney, and appeared to be subject to extensive inundation from the marks of a recent flood upon its west banks. Toward night we reached a small hammock, where we camped.

October 10th.—Our course lay through indifferent land for the greater part of the day; for ten miles, however, before we reached St. Marks we passed through a fine tract of high, dry pine land, which, being backed by the rich region of the Mickasuckies and near to navigation, would form an eligible situation for a town. At sunset, arrived at the Fort, where I was hospitably received by Captain McClintock and the rest of the officers. I found that Mr. Williams, my colleague, had not arrived. The weather all along was warm and cloudy, with frequent showers.

The soil of the hammocks of Champelee and Mickasukie is a brown loam of from ten to twelve inches thickness, resting on a foundation of red clay. The surface is rolling and intersected by but few runs of water. A few ponds occurred along the trail that I came. The growth consists of the various species of oak, laurel, magnolia, bay, Spanish cedar, sassafras, dogwood, and some beech, the first I have observed in Florida. The undergrowth in most places is principally cane of from ten to fifteen feet in height.

October 11th.—The weather warm and clear.

October 12th.—Very cool and clear.

October 13th.—Again warm, with flying clouds.

October 14th.—Warm, with great appearance of rain.





October 15th.—Violent northeast storm of wind and rain.

October 16th.—Very cool but cloudy and threatening rain.

October 17th.—The weather cool and clear.

October 18th.—Set out with Captain McClintock, commander of the post, for Judge Robinson's on Little River in the hope of meeting my colleague in that direction or of hearing of him. The day was fine and cool enough for frost. We passed through a low pine barren the first part of the way. After traveling about ten miles, we entered upon hammock land of good quality. This did not extend more than a mile when we again passed into high pine land. This continued to the Ocholochney, rising to considerable hills before it reached the river and becoming also poorer. We passed some ponds which are said to be connected with the sources of the Wachulla lying above its head spring. We crossed also two small streams, both of which appeared to be mere leads from one pond to another. We reached at sundown, the ferry of the Ocholochney, where we spent the night under an unfinished shed. The river here is about twenty yards wide and appeared to be much obstructed by logs. The Ocholochney is a narrow but very long river penetrating far into Georgia. There is but very little good land on its eastern side, but there are some tracts of fine quality on its western border.

October 19th.—Crossed the ferry and soon met with good pine land, alternating with strips of hammock, until near Little River, where commences some of the finest land I have seen in Florida. On this side of Little River it is a black hammock, in some places low, but not too much so for cultivation; on the northern side, to which we crossed by a handsome plank bridge, built by Major Robinson, the soil did not vary until near Judge Robinson's, when it became a red loam, resting on clay. This river runs about twenty miles and empties into the Ocholochnie; it appeared navigable. Its head prongs, called the Big and Little Attapulcus, have their sources high in Georgia. The Indians called this region Conchati, signifying red ground, and a chief named Conchatimico, or head man of the red ground, has a settlement somewhere in the neighborhood. I was most hospitably received by Judge Robinson, who has opened an extensive plantation near Little River, where the growth





of everything evinced the raciness of a new and fertile soil. The cotton crop of long staple was superior to any I have ever seen in the Southern States; the average height of the stalks was from ten to twelve feet and many of the plants reached fifteen, yet all were loaded with forms and opening freely. Some rice and cane had been planted, which also flourished well. The Judge informed me that the high land did not produce corn well the first year but very abundantly the second. Cotton did better the first year than corn.

October 20th.—The weather warm and cloudy.

October 21st.—Warm with some rain.

October 22d.—Very cool and clear.

October 23d.—Cool and threatening rain.

October 24th.—Hearing nothing of Mr. Williams, I determined to return to St. Marks, and there wait a week longer, not being able to extend my stay beyond that time, from the unforeseen expenses to which I have been put, and the urgency of many calls I had in St. Augustine. On my way I stopped at Mr. Ellis', four miles from the ferry.

October 25th.—This morning Mr. Williams, in company with Dr. Foster, came up on foot, having arrived at St. Marks by water, after a passage of twenty-four days from Pensacola. As Mr. Williams had not been able to obtain horses at the Fort, I lent him mine to go to Judge Robinson's where he hopes to procure them. In the evening he returned, having been unsuccessful. I now determined that my two guides should walk and we would forthwith commence our survey with the horses I had.

October 26th.—We resolved to take a view of the situation about Tallahassee, which had been represented as high, healthy and well watered. We had received satisfactory information that there were no eligible sites on the Ocholockney. Not having been furnished with any funds by the territory, and traveling being difficult and expensive, it was impossible for us to undertake the minute survey contemplated by the act. We crossed the Ocholockney, and set forward for Tallahassee, pursuing a northeast course. We camped at the end of six miles as we had set out late and it was nearly dark.

October 27th.—Renewed our journey. When near Neamathla's settlement crossed a watercourse running to the North, which the Indians considered as a source





of the St. Marks. This would make the whole course of the river not more than twenty miles. Neamathla and his people appeared much disturbed by our visit, and were inquisitive as to what object we had in view. We told him that we came to search out a spot where the governor and his council could conveniently meet, and that we should not in any way interfere with the Indians. He seemed, however, much dissatisfied. He invited us to spend the night, and in the meantime sent off for an interpreter. The Indians were dancing the snake dance, a superstitious and stated festivity, which was always held in this month. Its object is to lay the serpents before they go out on their great hunting expedition. We slept under the shed of the council house and were disturbed a good part of the night through. I felt a melancholy interest in watching these last exhibitions of the amusements of these poor people, who, by the treaty, were soon to quit the country. In one of their dances called the "mad dance," most of their gestures and movements were highly martial and graceful and served to illustrate the natural elevation and fire of their character. The African dances, on the contrary, were characterized by vulgar and awkward antics, and these circumstances alone evince a great difference of character between the two peoples.

October 28th.—Neamathla again questioned us on the purpose of our visit and on our re-assuring him that we had no design to interfere with the rights of the Indians, he told us we might proceed, but not to tell any of the Indians that he had sent us. We passed to the old Tallahassee town, where Chifixico, chief of the settlement, evinced an equal opposition to our proceeding. He angrily caught up a handful of dirt, and presenting it asked if that was not his land; he then mounted his horse and rode off to Neamathla's to inquire further into the objects of our visit. From the behavior of this chief and other Indians whom we met, I am convinced these people will not be removed without difficulty. From this point we proceeded down to examine the sources of the St. Marks. For the rest of our proceedings I must be allowed to refer his excellency, the governor, to the journal of my colleague, as the vessel sails immediately, which affords the only opportunity I shall have to transmit my document safely to him.

(Signed) W. H. SIMMONS.

