

ST. JOHNS TOWN

(A paper from the Jacksonville Historical Society)

St. Johns Town was born of the American Revolution. Located a few miles up the St. Johns River, near St. Johns Bluff, it was a convenient location for British Loyalists fleeing the Georgia and South Carolina colonies. Florida was then a British possession and refugees from the war came to East Florida, bringing their slaves with them, apparently hoping to establish plantations a new. Dr. Wilbur H. Siebert, in his *Loyalists in East Florida*, stated that the white population of East Florida was more than doubled by the influx of Georgians, and the black populations was increased by one-fourth or more. In reference to St. Johns Town, or St. Johns Bluff as it was also called Siebert wrote: With the coming of loyalists from Savannah and Charles-ton many of them settled about the mouth of St. Johns River and built "an extensive place" six or seven miles up the river on Hesters or St. Johns Bluff, which rises precipitously seventy feet above tide water and fronts toward the mouth of the river. The site of this town was a tract of two hundred acres owned during most of the 1770's by William Hester. A early as June 1771, Hester had sold a lot to a settler, and about 1779 conveyed the rest of the tract to Thomas Williamson. Williamson had divided it into town lots, each as a rule with a frontage of seventy-five feet and a depth of one hundred and twenty feet. He called the lots facing the water "bay lots" and named the two streets with which he provided the town Water Street and Prince's Street, the latter being at right angles to the former. The first dwellings erected were small log houses, but when the refugees began to flock in in the summer and autumn of 1782 numerous frame houses, with detached kitchens and other structures, were hastily built. The town which soon numbered about three hundred houses . . . had two taverns, a public house, a livery stable, a dry goods shop, a storehouse for "coarse and wet goods," a shop where plantation tools could be bought, and even a small free masons' lodge. During eight months the town had a "practitioner of Physick" in the person of Dr. Hugh Rose, who came from Charleston and by his practice in his new location "cleared about 200 guineas." St. Johns bluff was in a fair way to become soon "a place of some consequence." Beyond St. Johns Bluff and up the river the stretch of country contained many of the best plantations in the province, which produced among other things quantities of naval stores and lumber for export. The new town was expected to become the center of this trade. Squadrons of transports landed their throngs of refugees here, and numerous victualing ships unloaded great piles of barrels, boxes, and other receptacles filled with provisions of all kinds for the people who disembarked here and in large part for those who disembarked at St. Augustine . . . St. Johns had trebled in size and reached a population of fifteen hundred of more (by the end of 1782). It was a fine harbor, and was the business and shipping center for the stretch of country along the St. Johns River . . . Then suddenly the favorable prospects of the flourishing village vanished. Thomas Williamson could sell no more of his town lots, and was left with one hundred and

ninety- eight of them on his hands. In some cases he had not received the money for those he had parted with. At length he took down his own dwelling house and shipped it to Jamaica. Some of his fellow townsmen also dismembered their houses . . . with a view of sending them to one of the Bahama Islands, or some other destination. By 1785 the village of St. Johns Bluff was a deserted place. The purpose for which St. Johns Town was founded and its sudden evacuation in 1783 when the population moved on to British Bahama or Jamaica after the cession of Florida back to Spain, is quoted above from *Loyalists in East Florida*. This work, published by the Florida State Historical Society in 1929, is in two volumes. The first is Dr. Siebert's narrative based on the documents contained in the second. It is hoped that readers will be intrigued to read further into the little-known British period of our history. Copies of these volumes may be found in the larger libraries of the state and in many private collections. The documents consist principally of papers relating to claims against the British Crown for losses sustained by British citizens of East Florida resulting from the cession of the colony to Spain in 1783. There were 372 claims (a few from the British West Indies) amounting to £647,405 of which £170,351 was paid. Itemized claims cover the loss of land, homes and household goods, slaves, crops, livestock, boats, business establishments and income, all described in detail. In these papers virtually the whole story of the colony is told: The granting of land to new settlers, laying out of plantations by slaves and settlers, the building of towns and the cultivation of "various crops such as Indian corn and provisions, sugar cane and rice, the setting out of groves of orange, lemon, shaddock, peach, pomegranate, and other fruit trees and the widespread manufacture of indigo, resin, turpentine, tar, and pitch." St. Johns Town is mentioned frequently in the documents. The following extracts give a glimpse into life there. George Tallack, ship carpenter " . . . resided for several years at St. Johns Bluff, where he by his Industry Acquired a Comfortable living which Maintained him and his family very Comfortably, Consisting of a Dwelling house and Kitchen with many other Improvements in the Market on the bay, of St. Johns Bluff, found to be every way convenient for Trade, Valued at fifty pounds Sterling, also a New frame of a house purchased at Twenty five pounds to be erected where (he) intended to Settle for his life time, together with a Boat Valued at eight pounds . . ." Stephen White " . . . resided in the Province of East Florida about Nineteen years, as an Inn & Publick house keeper, Dealer and Horse hirer — first at St. Augustine, and after- wards at the town of St. John's; and by his honest Industry acquired to himself and family a comfortable living, and like- wise some Property . . . A large Bay Lot of land in the Town of St. Johns — Freehold with a large new dwelling House, Kitchen Stables, Store house & a Garden brought to a State of good Cultivation the whole compleatly inclosed and in good substantial order—£300 . . . Four Negroes . . . valued at £100... Three Horses —£19... Three canoes worth £5 . . . Loss of business by which (he) maintained his family, and saved at the rate of £200 per Annum, and evidently increasing" . . . (the amount of this claim to be determined by commissioners appointed for this purpose). Hugh Rose, Esq., Practitioner of Physick "... Says that he arrived at St. John's Bluff the latter End of December 1782 & quitted it

about August 1784. That he there purchased a Lot of Land in January 1783 of Thomas Williamson & gave £. 30 Sterling for it . . . That the whole Lot was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an Acre divided by a Street of which he enclosed $\frac{1}{2}$ an Acre with a post & rail fence & built a framed dwelling House 20 feet by 16 Shingled Roof boarded in the Inside two stories high & 3 rooms on Each floor, a front store House for dry Goods Shingled Roof boarded & floored about 16 feet Square a back Store House about 50 feet by 15 for Coarse & wet goods not floored, a Kitchen 15 feet by 10 Stable & outhouses roofed with long shingles which were not so Valuable as others. That these buildings were finished about the beginning of May: That he can't ascertain the Ex- pence of them, but that he hired two White Carpenters 2 Months at a Dollar & a half per Day for Each; two Black Carpenters about one Month at a Dollar per Day for Each & two working Negroes Employed about 6 weeks in bringing Materials at $\frac{1}{2}$ Dollar per Day for each. That he found all his Men in provisions during the time they worked with him...

" Mr. John McDonald ". . . Says That he came to St. Johns Bluff about December 1782 & left it in July 1784. That he kept a Tavern there Bought a Lot of Land $\frac{3}{4}$ of an Acre about 8 Weeks after his Arrival of Thomas Williamson agreed to give him £30 for it & gave note of hand for that Sum & paid £15 of it . . . The Agreement was that if the Money was not paid in 2 Years he was to charge £ 10 per Ct. for it. Says That he inclosed the whole Lot with a Post & rail fence & built a Dwelling House (which was finished about the latter End of April 1783) 29 feet by 19 a Ground floor &: Garret not boarded glazed Shingled roof & a Store House which was but small, a Kitchen rather larger & a separate Room Shingled roof, not lined & about 8 feet square for a free Mason's Lodge . . ." The documents include a listing of some of the expenses of the colony from the accounts of British Governor, Patrick Tonyn. Among these are three items of special interest: ". . . Bill dated 28th of February 1775, payable to Charles Wright Esquire or Order, being in part payment of a sum specified in a Contract for laying out and Making a Road from St. John's River at the Cowford to St. Mary's River . . . £100." Bill dated 11th of July 1775 "payable to Daniel Curvoisie for sundry Repairs to the Ferry House at the Cowford — £30 11's... and "....Bill dated the 19th of June 1777, payable to Joshua Yallowly, in part for sundry Repairs on the Road leading to the Cowford at St. John's." (Could this "Ferry House" at the Cowford have been the first structure on the site of the city of Jacksonville?)

EDITOR'S NOTE: A search for the site of St. Johns Town, employing a radio detecting device, indicates that it lay immediately east of the eastern boundary of the Fort Caroline National Memorial property and extended eastward an undetermined distance. Erosion of the shoreline at this location has undoubtedly washed away a portion of the site. Artifacts found at the site are in the custody of Dr. John Goggin. University of Florida, for study. Among the recovered items

known to date from the colonial period were two brass shoebuckles, a brass button, two wrought iron ladle handles and an ax head.