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## Fort San Nicholas and the town of St. Nicholas

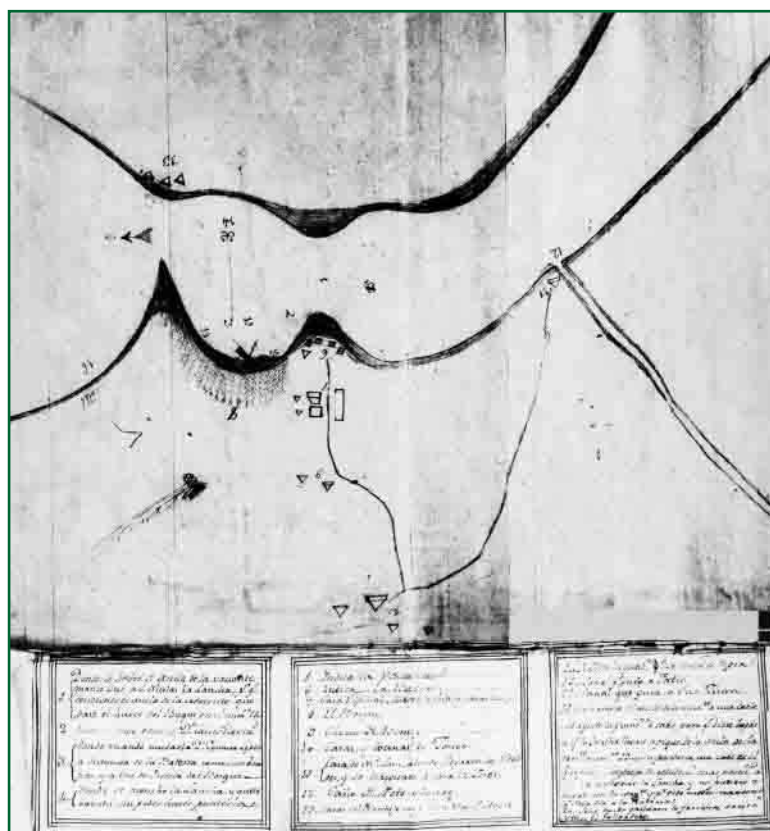
By Philip Eschbach

The town name “St. Nicholas” was derived from Fort San Nicholas (also seen as “San Nicolas”), which was located on the St. Johns River at the “Cow Ford” – today’s Jacksonville. As early as 1740, the Spanish thought General Oglethorpe of Georgia might try to invade Florida, so they built a block house there to defend against an invasion which never came. During the British Period (1763-1783), nothing was done at the site. It was not until 1783, when British Florida was retro-ceded to Spain, that the new Spanish government built Fort San Nicholas on the south side of the St. Johns River at Cow Ford. The British had previously built the King’s Road from New Smyrna to the Georgia border and it crossed the St. Johns River at Cow Ford, hence the need for a protective fort called San Nicholas. It was needed to guard the area from potential threats to St. Augustine from the north.

In 1794, San Nicholas was fortified but a year later it was attacked by a band of rebels from Georgia, led by Richard Lang, and occupied for several days before they returned to Georgia.

**Figure 1** shows a sketch of the fort, circa 1795. In 1802, it was again reinforced by increasing its length and width to more than a hundred feet

on a side, and surrounded with a log palisade. In 1811, there was concern the fort could not provide the necessary protection for the river crossing. The ferry was operated by an illiterate 80-year old widow, and only a few men were in the garrison at the fort. Indeed, on March 20, 1812, the fort was captured and destroyed by rebels



**Figure 1**  
*Hand-drawn 1795 map showing site of Fort San Nicholas.*  
(Courtesy of Florida Memory, State Library & Archives of Florida)

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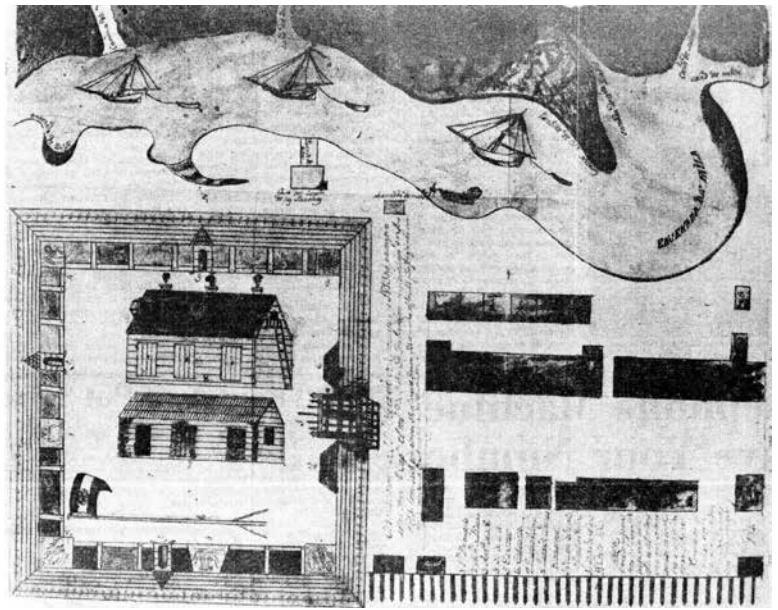
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during the Patriot War in Florida. The “Patriots” were a rebel band of militia formed in Georgia, comprised mainly of Georgians and Floridians who desired to make Florida a U.S. territory with the tacit blessing of President Madison. The whole “Patriot Rebellion” was a failure, ending in 1814.

In 1813, Captain Tomás Llorente was charged with rebuilding and reinforcing the fort yet again, this time with a moat and stockade. **Figure 2** shows Captain Llorente’s 1813 drawing of Fort San Nicholas. Llorente was sent a reinforcement contingent of black soldiers, armed by the Spanish, to help resist any invasion. The Patriots objected to the use of armed former slaves and bitterness ensued. My fourth great grandfather, William Williams, one of the Patriots, sent Llorente a letter on May 6, 1814 (**Figure 3**) at Fort San Nicholas. Earlier in the letter he mentions Mr. Hart several times. It is transcribed as written:



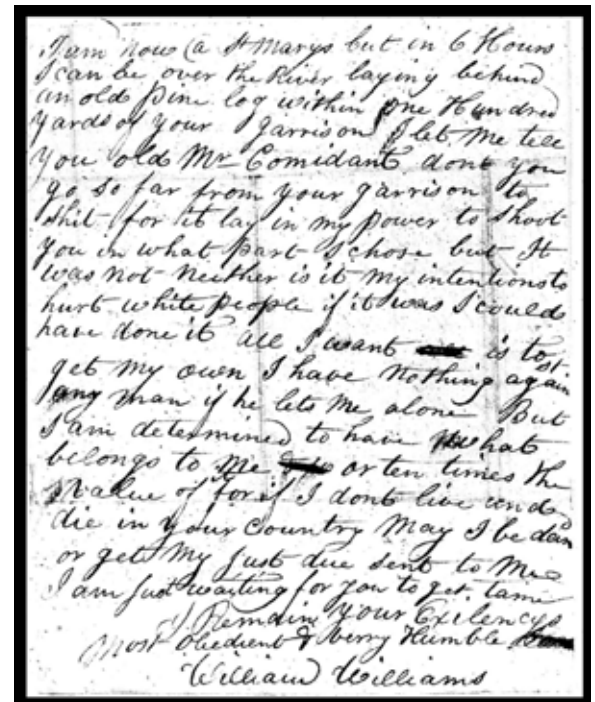
**Figure 2**  
**Captain Llorente's 1813 drawing of Fort San Nicholas on the St. Johns River.**  
(Courtesy Florida Times Union newspaper.)

*I am now at St. Marys but in 6 hours I can be over the River laying behind an old pine log within One Hundred yards of your garrison. & let me tell you old Mr. Comidant (sic), don't you go so far from your garrison to shit – for it lay in my power to shoot you in what part I chose but it was not neither is it my intentions to hurt white people, if it was I could have done it...*

*I Remain your Exilencys (sic) Most obedient & very Humble  
William Williams*

Unfortunately, I only have a copy of the original, much longer letter, and excerpted only the pertinent part. Since there was no postal infrastructure in the area, during this time of the Second Spanish Period, it, as well as the next letter, most likely would have been sent by courier. **Figure 4** (next page) records another letter from Wiliba Hodge dated April 20, 1816, which mentions William Williams, his cousin, Lodowick Ashley and Isiah Hart, founder of the town of Jacksonville and its second postmaster. Apparently Tomás Llorente was still the commandant, as mentioned in the prior letter.

By 1817, the Spanish had abandoned Fort San Nicholas, and in 1820, the Spanish government rejected a petition by local residents to name the community St. Nicholas. A year later, Florida was ceded to the United States. After the Civil War, the area was still known as St. Nicholas, as shown on a period map from 1874, three years after the post office was officially named St. Nicholas. (**Figure 5**). What eventually became St. Nicholas was formerly the property of Francis Bagley and Reuben Hogans



**Figure 3**  
**Copy of the last page of the original letter to Captain Llorente from William Williams.**  
(From the author's file records)