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Santa Fe Canal from Waldo to Melrose

By Phil Eschbach

The first settlers in the Waldo area were the Sparkman family who came in 1819, while Florida was still a Spanish territory. They were burned out by the Seminoles but rebuilt on the shores of Lake Alto. Florida became a U.S. Territory in 1821 and John Bellamy was contracted to build the first official state road from St. Augustine to Tallahassee in 1824. He used his own slaves to build the road, which had to be 20 feet wide with tree stumps cut no more than 12 inches from the ground so wagons could straddle them.

The town of Waldo was on the Bellamy Road close to the intersection with the Micanopy Trail, which was an old Indian trail from Georgia to Micanopy. The community was named Waldo by David Yulee who ran a railroad through the community.

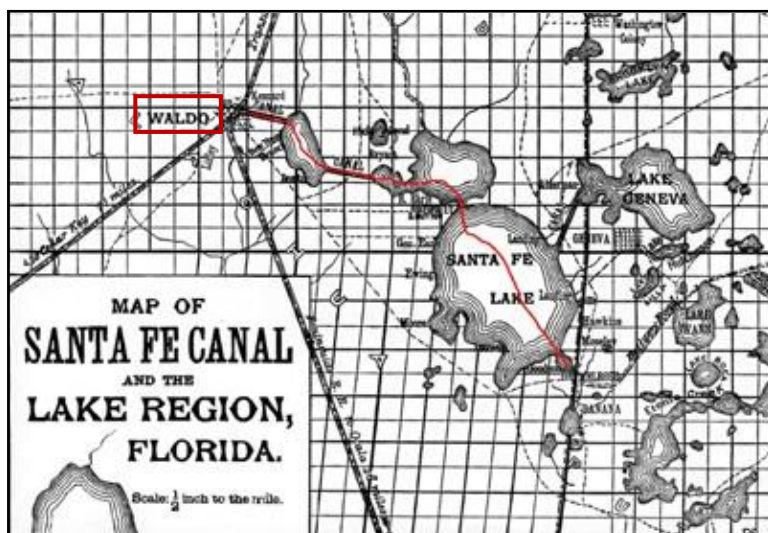


Figure 1

Late 1800s map showing the Santa Fe Canal from Waldo to Melrose through Lake Alto.

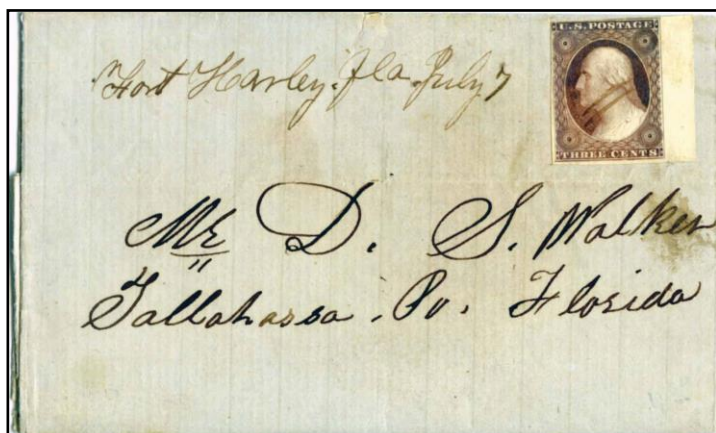


Figure 2

Cover to Tallahassee [sic] from Fort Harley [Harlee].

Yulee's railroad became the first major railroad in Florida, completed just before the Civil War, running from Fernandina to Cedar Key. Yulee renamed the town in honor his friend, Dr. Benjamin Waldo, who was not a resident of the town.

Because the town now had a railroad and the population increased, a post office was established there on August 5, 1858 in favor of the Fort Harley office that was closed on April 15.

Continued on page 3

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The rails had been disturbed during the war and were not restored until August of 1865 when postal service was begun again by Postmaster Samuel Kennard. At the end of the war, it was in Waldo that Jefferson Davis' papers were confiscated. Soon the agriculture industry began to revive.

The town of Melrose was at the southeast end of Lake Santa Fe and connected to Waldo by the Bellamy Road, which was a dirt road and well rutted. It was a long ride between the towns, over four hours to haul produce, and soon there was talk of building canals to connect the waterways between the towns so that passengers and freight, as well as the mails, could be transported more easily between the two. Waldo had the nearest railroad connection to the northern states.

Melrose was chartered in 1877, and plans that same year were made to start digging the canals with the charter of the Santa Fe Canal Company. The engineer for the canal project was Ned E. Farrell.

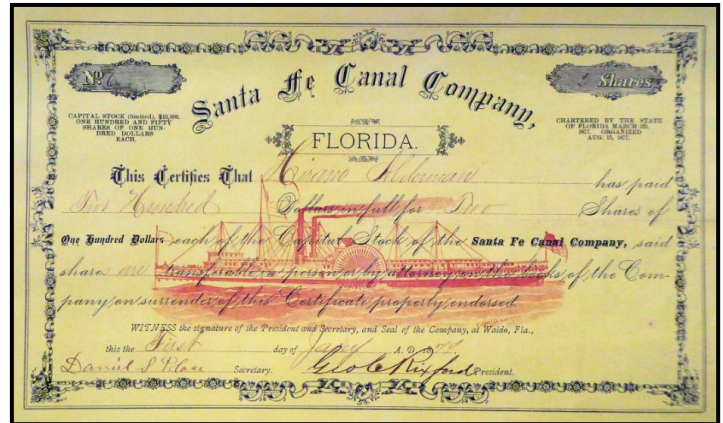


Figure 3
Santa Fe Canal Company stock certificate.

The postcard in **Figure 4** has the unusual Waldo octagon postmark dated Jan 5, 1888. The reverse has an extremely uncommon magenta steamboat agent marking Ned E. Farrell, Santa Fe Canal, Waldo, Florida Jan 6, 1888, placed likely onboard or at the docking in Melrose of the steamboat. It is the only known example of a Santa Fe Canal agent marking.



Figure 4
Waldo octagon postmark. Reverse shows Ned E. Farrell agent marking.

One canal would be needed from the town of Waldo for a short distance out to its nearest lake, Lake Alto. A rail spur was constructed to the dock on the Waldo Canal which would connect to the lake. Then a longer canal was needed to connect Lake Alto with Little Lake Santa Fe, a distance of a couple of miles. This was done with a dredge (**Figure 5**) which was built in Waldo by Mr. Elgin who also designed the first paddle wheeler called the *F.S. Lewis*, a 70-foot-long steamer which had two decks (**Figure 6**).

The canal was 30 feet wide and 5 feet deep and was completed in 1881. The *F.S. Lewis*, with Captain S.C. Barker in command, was ill-fated. On its first trip, it broke a drive shaft and was never able to stop at the intermediate town, Earleton, for mail delivery because its draft was not shallow enough. Earleton was on Big Santa Fe Lake, which connects with Little Santa Fe Lake through a wide pass. After only a few trips, the boiler on the *F.S. Lewis* caught on fire, tipped over, and the vessel sank in 1884. It was a loss of \$6,000 and it was uninsured.