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Military Assistant Surgeon's Fort Lauderdale, East Florida Letter

By Steve Kennedy

Authors Note: This is the first in a series of articles presenting letters originating from military forts during the Seminole Wars. I am looking for materials and additional authors to be part of the series. If you would like to write an article, I may be able to help you with research resources. Please remember that military forts may not have had a post office, so you need to look at the dateline or content to tell where a letter may have originated. Contact me at skycopatc@yahoo if you are interested in participating in this project.

Ellis Hughes was born in Baltimore on August 9, 1813. He was a gifted student and graduated from the University of Maryland with his medical degree in 1834. After graduation, his first job was Head of School at the Leon Academy in Tallahassee in 1835 and 1836. He then returned to his alma mater to teach anatomy in 1837. After only a year, he applied to General Joel Roberts Poinsett, the United States Secretary of War, for a commission in the U.S. Army.

In 1838, Dr. Hughes was appointed as an Assistant Surgeon by General Poinsett. After a brief period of duty in the North, he was assigned to Fort Heileman, a U.S. Army ordnance depot established at the confluence of the north and south forks of Black Creek in what is now Clay County. On January 19, 1839, Dr Hughes received

orders to report to Fort Lauderdale (Figure 1). He boarded the steamboat Santee and set off for an eventful journey to New River by way of St. Augustine and New Smyrna. He arrived at Fort Lauderdale on February 15, 1839, to join Company K, Third Artillery, commanded by Captain William B. Davidson.¹



Figure 1. 1856 map showing Fort Lauderdale. (Courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society.)

Continued on page 3

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Military Assisant Surgeon’s Fort Lauderdale,
East Florida Letter**
by Steve Kennedy..... 1, 3-6

Articles of Distinction Awards7

**Lindbergh Spends the Weekend at Flagler
Beach**
by Juan L. Riera 8-11

Edward R. Joyce, Jr. Obituary..... 11

**Pre-Territorial and Territorial Straightline
Postmarks**
by Thomas Lera 12-18

Literature Competition Awards19

**Florida Postal History Society Dealer
Members Contact Information** 20

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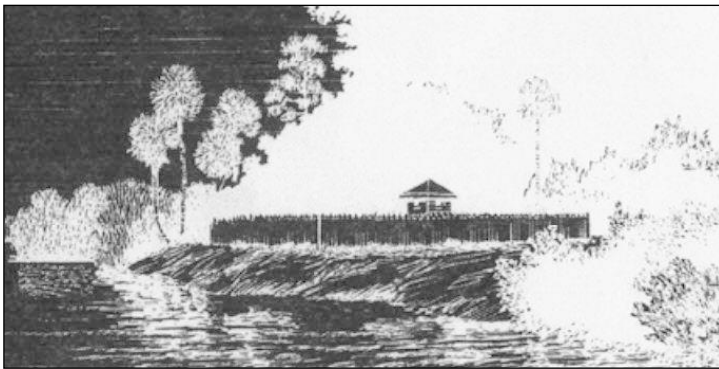
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Dr. Hughes arrived in Florida around the middle of the Second Seminole War which lasted from December 1835 to August of 1842. The war started just after Christmas on December 28 when two companies of soldiers under the command of Major Francis Langhorne Dade were ambushed by Seminole Indians lead by Chief Micanopy during a march between Fort Brooke (present day Tampa) and Fort King (present day Ocala). The Seminoles were increasingly frustrated by the attempts of the U.S. Army to forcibly relocate them to a reservation in Oklahoma. Major Dade was the first to be shot and killed, and only three soldiers were reported to have survived.²

There were three forts named after Captain William Lauderdale who died in 1838 of a pulmonary disorder. He had been commissioned by Andrew Jackson to help remove the Seminoles from Florida. The first and second encampments, **Figures 2** and **3**, were essentially rows of tents surrounded by crude wooden fences, while the



third encampment, **Figure 4**, was a more permanent structure that lasted for three years from September of 1839 to August of 1842. Dr. Hughes spent time at both the second and third forts while he was assigned there.

Figure 2. Artist's depiction of the first Fort Lauderdale located on the north bank of the forks of New River. (Courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society.)

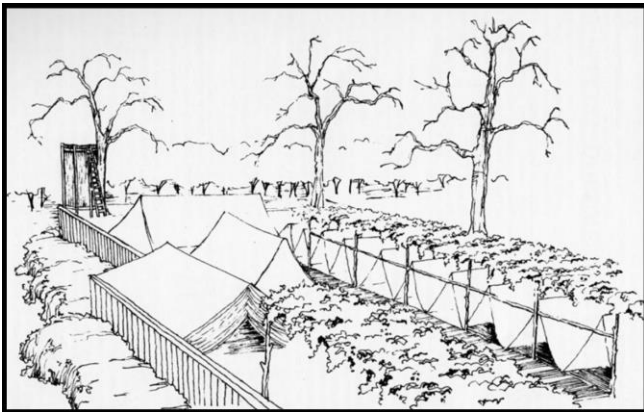


Figure 3. Drawing by Ellis Hughes of the second Fort Lauderdale. (Courtesy of the Broward County Historical Commission.)

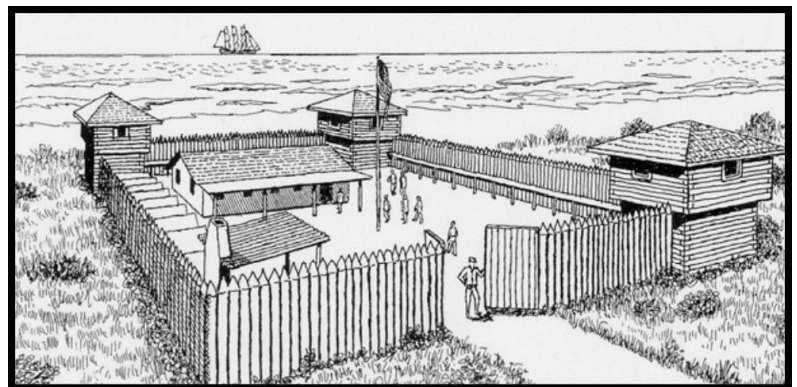


Figure 4. Artist's interpretation of the third fort. (Courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society.)

The oldest known letter postmarked from Fort Lauderdale, East Florida was acquired at an auction by the Ft. Lauderdale Historical Society. It was written by a sutler named William Tucker to his brother George in Agawam, Massachusetts on March 22, 1838. The letter describes the 500-soldier pursuit of two renegade Miccosukee Indians, Wild Cat Alligator and Sam Jones. The cover is on display at the Ft. Lauderdale Historical Society Museum.

The letter shown in **Figure 5** is from the collection of Deane R. Briggs, M.D. It was written by acting commander Lieutenant George Taylor to General Roger Jones, U. S. Adjutant General in Washington, DC. The letter is dated April 2, 1839 and was postmarked one month later on May 2, 1839 in St. Augustine.