

Seminole Incursions in 1835-1836 Along the Halifax River in Mosquito County

By Phil Eschbach

Most historians suggest that the Second Seminole War began December 28, 1835, with the Dade Massacre, and continued until 1842, even though incursions were already happening as early as November of 1835. Of the three Seminole Wars, this was the most expensive and intense, with the most casualties.

During the war, the federal government sent troops to Florida in an attempt to both stop the Seminole attacks on settlers and to remove them to Oklahoma. This involved action in most parts of the state, from the panhandle to the Everglades. Therefore, to aid the federal troops, local volunteer militias were formed in areas of the state where there were clusters of settlers near towns.

One such militia, called the Mosquito Roarers, was formed to guard the Matanzas, Halifax, and Mosquito Rivers (now the Indian River). These coastal rivers are actually part of a continuous lagoon, with separate sections given different names.



Figure 1. General Josef M. Hernandez.

The Mosquito Roarers were headquartered in St. Augustine and commanded by Brigadier General Josef Marion Hernandez (Figure 1), a local attorney.

Hernandez was born in St. Augustine in 1788, when Florida was under Spanish rule, to Minorcan parents who had been original settlers under British rule in Andrew Turnbull's settlement at New Smyrna. He was educated in Savannah and studied law in Cuba.

In 1814, he married Ana Hill Williams, widow of Samuel Williams. Ana and Samuel had settled and established a successful plantation on the Halifax River in 1803.

After Florida was ceded to the United States in 1821, Hernandez became its first territorial representative to Washington, the first ever Hispanic member of congress. As a militia general, he came under the command of US Army Major General Thomas Jessup in 1835.

The normal procedure was for the local militias to support and coordinate with the regular U.S. Army. The area along the coastal waters below St. Augustine was too thinly populated to station regular troops up and down the river, so the Mosquito Roarers had to guard that area. There were a number of scattered plantations between St. Augustine and New Smyrna.

Prior to 1821, these plantations were on lands granted by the Spanish government. By 1830, after Florida had become a U.S. territory, they came under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

As such, after the change of government, remaining settlers had to verify ownership at the land office.

To keep ownership, they had to prove that they had cleared land, planted crops, built a house and maintained it throughout.

Many had only obtained grants in order to flip them for a profit. If their land remained unsettled, they lost their rights to them, in which case those properties were sold as new grants to new settlers.

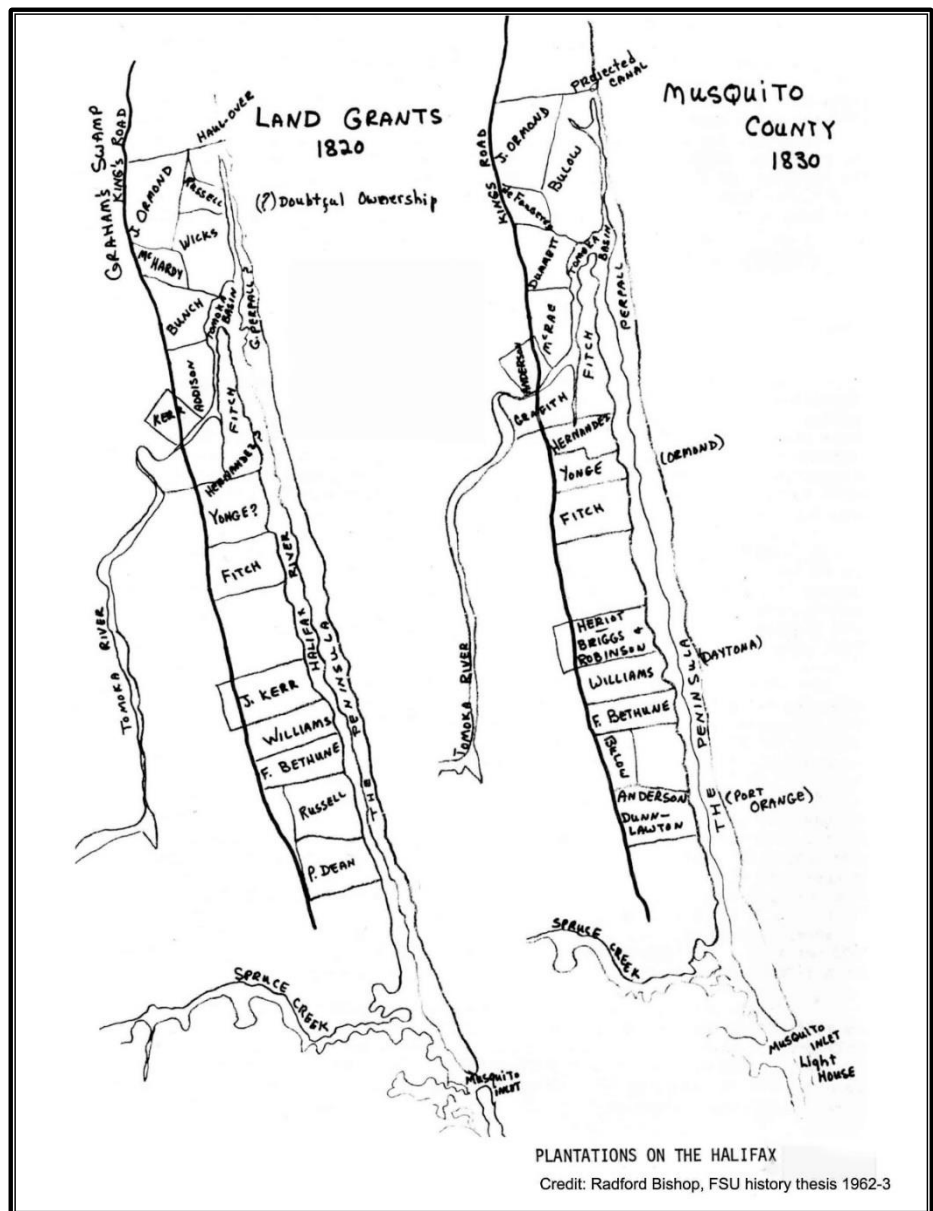


Figure 2. Maps showing 1820 and 1830 land grants.

Many of these transactions were handled by Hernandez, as well as Benjamin Putnam (mentioned later), who specialized in real estate law.

Thus, the difference of ownership between 1820 and 1830 on the Figure 2 maps.

During the British Period (1763-1783), several plantations were established below St. Augustine but most of these were abandoned when Florida was re-ceded to the Spanish in 1783. The Spanish had hoped the British settlers would remain but most left for other British colonies, especially the

Bahamas. After the Spanish relaxed their requirements for residency in the late 1790s, former British subjects began to return and opt for new Spanish land grants.

These plantations had been connected by a road, called the King's Road, originally built during the British Period to connect the lower plantations with St. Augustine and continuing on to the Florida-Georgia border at Colerain. But by this time, over fifty years later, it was little used due to a lack of maintenance. Therefore, the rivers were mostly used for travel and communication.

On December 28, 1835, a company of 110 men, led by Major Francis Dade were massacred in an ambush by approximately 180 Seminoles near today's Bushnell, Florida, sparking the Second Seminole War. Only three soldiers survived to report the details.

Soon after the Dade Massacre, the Seminoles, led by Chief Osceola (Figure 3) began attacking and ravishing remote plantations in central Florida.

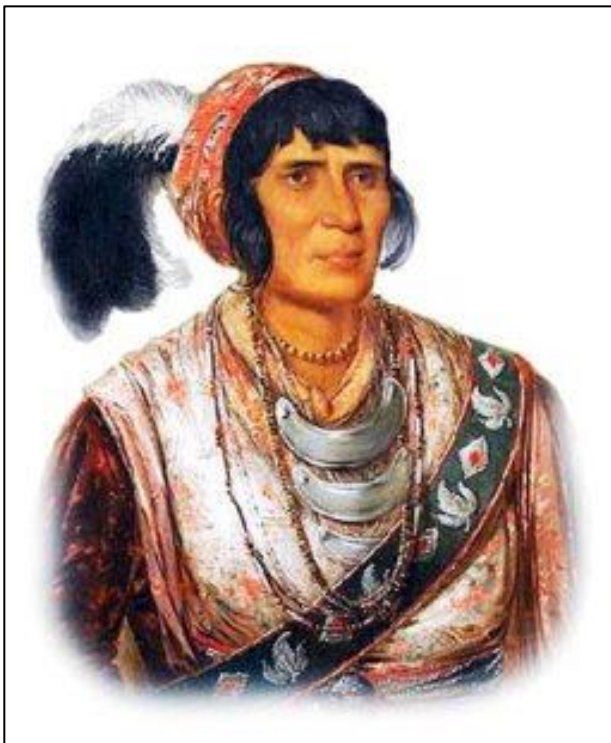


Figure 3. Chief Osceola.

However, his ally, Chief Coacoochee, also known as Wild Cat, began attacking those along the east coast of Florida even before the Dade Massacre. These were very vulnerable to Seminole attacks because they were at a distance from the city center of St. Augustine and in sparsely populated areas.

In early November 1835, Hernandez received information that a large band of menacing Seminoles had arrived in the area of the Cruger-Depeyster Plantation. On November 10, he issued a General Order declaring the eastern district of Florida as being invaded by hostile Seminoles.

When help from Washington was slow, on November 20, he ordered Major Benjamin Putnam to take Companies A and D, commanded by Captains Douglas Dummett

and my ancestor, William Henry Williams, to scour the countryside down to the "Mosquitos" (New Smyrna) and over to Spring Garden on the St. Johns to collect intelligence.

In accordance with this order, during the month of December, Captain Kingsley Gibbs took a detachment of a few men from Companies A and D to scout these areas to gain intelligence on Indian depredations.

Spring Garden Plantation (today's DeLeon Springs) was originally founded in 1803 by William Henry's cousin, William Williams (their grandfathers were brothers), on a 2000-acre Spanish land grant. Williams sold it to his friend and neighbor Major Joseph Woodruff in 1823 for \$3000. Woodruff then sold part of it to Orlando Rees who set up the mill for sugar cane production.

By the time Gibbs' patrols got there, all of Rees's and Woodruff's property had been burned by the Seminoles. Woodruff's brother, Henry, was killed near there by the Indians on December 25, 1835.

About half-way down the coast between St. Augustine and New Smyrna, a temporary militia station was set up at the Bulow Plantation, under protest from its owner Charles Bulow (Figure 4). It had little effect due to the remoteness and distances by land or by canoe to the plantations.



Figure 4. Charles Bulow.

Among the soldiers stationed there were Captain Douglas Dummett (Figure 5), Lieutenant William Henry Williams, Lieutenant James Ormond, and others, led by Major Benjamin Putnam (Figure 6).

Thomas Dummett, an officer in the British Marines, purchased two East Florida plantations containing 3,000 acres in 1825. Dummett sent to the West Indies for a sugar specialist after several failed attempts to produce sugar on his East Florida land. Under the specialist's expert direction, Dummett soon had plentiful cane fields and a busy sugar mill and rum distillery, which included the first steam-operated mill in the area.



Figure 5. Douglas Drummett.

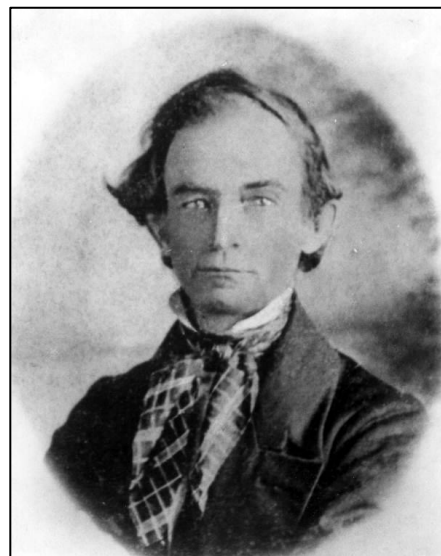


Figure 6. Benjamin Putnam.

Bulowville was established in 1820 on 6,000 acres with 300 slaves, by wealthy Charles Wilhelm Bulow of Charleston, South Carolina, whose grandfather was Baron von Bulow of Wurttemberg, Germany.

The plantation primarily produced sugar cane, but also cotton, rice and indigo. As a young boy, James Ormond was sent there by his mother to study in Bulow's vast library.

The Seminoles attacked and burned Bulowville on January 31, 1836. The fires were so great that they could be seen from St. Augustine. Remnants can still be found today at Bulow State Park (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Bulow Ruins.



Figure 8. Chief Coacoochee.

Days before the Dade Massacre, on Christmas day, Chief Coacoochee (Figure 8) attacked the Cruger-Depeyster Plantation at “the Mosquitos.”

In 1830, partners Henry Cruger and William Depeyster, from New York, purchased a 600-acre parcel and installed a steam powered engine to run a sugar and sawmill, all for \$5000.

The family had been warned by their slaves that they had seen war-painted Seminoles in the area, so they traveled by boat across the River to Dummett’s plantation for safety, along with several other families, including the Andersons of Dunlawton Plantation and the Sheldons (managers of the Cruger-Depeyster plantation).

The ruins of the Cruger-Depeyster Plantation remain today at a public park in New Smyrna (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Cruger-Depeyster ruins.

They all left for the safety of St. Augustine, after which the Seminoles burned Dummett's buildings. Fortunately, Dummett's wife had buried their silver in the back yard, which was recovered after the war.

The only remains of the small Dummett plantation can be found on New Smyrna Beach where lies the grave of Douglas Dummett's son, Charles, strangely in the middle of the street just south of Flagler Avenue (Figure 10).

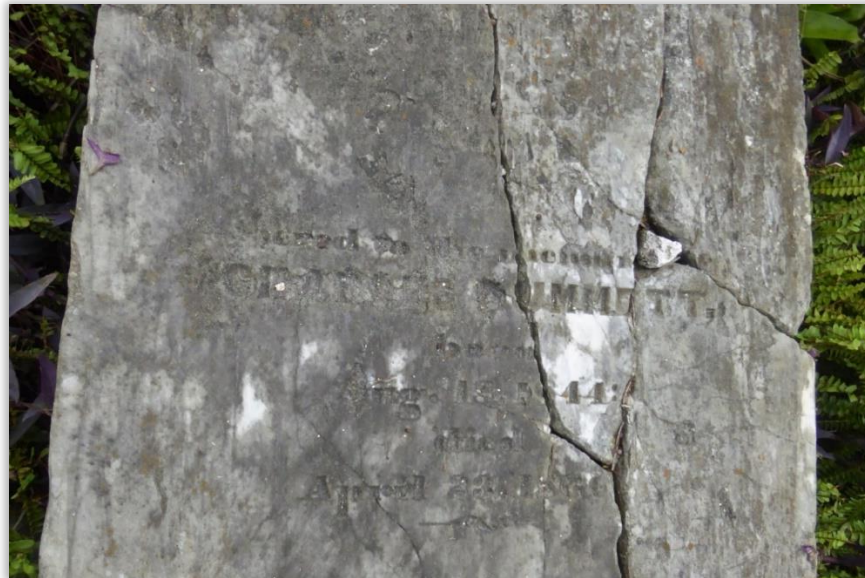


Figure 10. Charles Dummett Gravesite.

The Dummett family also had another plantation on the mainland next to Bulowville which was their primary farm for crop production. The smaller one on New Smyrna Beach was known as their summer house. Both were destroyed in early 1836. The remains of the larger Dummett plantation can still be seen just south of Tomoka State Park (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Dummett Plantation ruins.

Douglas Dummett has been referred to as the “father of the Indian River citrus industry.” It was his citrus plantation on Merritt Island which was the only one to survive the great freeze of 1835. On February 7, the temperature dropped to seven degrees in St. Augustine and hovered there for two days. The St. Johns River froze over for fifty feet from shore and the Ocklawaha River completely froze over. Budding from his surviving orange trees was later used to produce most of the citrus trees of Florida.

Commander V. Bulowville
1st of January 1836

Sir

In obedience with your order of the 1st Inst I proceeded from this place on that day with 10 men belonging to the St. Augustine Guard, with Lieutenants McPhail & Scott, belonging to the same Company Capt Williams with the men belonging to his Command, with Lieutenant Dummett with five men belonging to his command & Lieut. W. A. Williams belonging to the same command - and proceeded to New Smyrna in boats & used all the means that I thought necessary to discover whether there were any Indians in that neighbourhood - but I was not within distance of

By early January, Captain Kingsley Gibbs and his detachment had returned. He made a report on January 4, 1836 to Putnam (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Gibbs to Putnam, January 4, 1836.

He states that he had taken the few men from Captains Williams and Dummetts' commands south to report on the whereabouts of the Indians and their depredations.

On the same day, January 4, Major Putnam then sent a report (Figure 13) to Hernandez that he had retreated from the nearby Rosetta Plantation to set up his new headquarters at Bulowville.

Cantonment Bulowville
4th of January 1836

Sir,

As I removed my head Quarters from Rosetta to this place it becomes necessary to report to you the reasons which induced the step. On Saturday the 29th of December Lieut Solano joined me at Rosetta with his command, three horses completely fagged out and altogether unable to proceed further South as was the intention. I directed him to proceed to Camicfurgus a plantation near to my head Quarters.

Figure 13. Putnam to Hernandez, January 4, 1836.

Rosetta Plantation was formerly owned by the now-deceased Robert McHardy who had married William Henry Williams' sister Caroline. Putnam stated that various refugee families of the lower areas down as far as New Smyrna, including the DePeyster's had come north reporting many encounters with the Seminoles, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, who had burned and ransacked their plantations since early December.

Cantonment Bulowville
9th January 1836

Sir

I send this communication in haste by Sergeant Cooper who will go as an express, the object is to inform you that the majority, say two third, have become very impatient at being continued any longer from their homes and business, and to-day a petition signed by twenty two was sent into me begging permission to go home. I have endeavored to put them off, but how long I shall be able to do so is doubtful; as there are so many I should find it impassible to prevent them by coercive measures.

On January 9, Major Putnam sent another message (Figure 14) to Hernandez asking to relieve them with another militia company, as they had been nearly a month in the wilds of the "Mosquitos" with no relief.

Figure 14. Putnam to Hernandez, January 9, 1836.

On January 1, Hernandez sent a message (Figure 15) to the Secretary of War Lewis Cass in Washington DC begging for more troops.

Head Quarters
2^d Brig. Florida Militia
St. Augustine 11 January 1836

Sir

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of the 26th Ult^o; in which you are pleased to inform ^{me} that the Governor of Florida had been requested to call into service such Militia force as Gen^l Clinch might require, and that it was presumed the arrangements made by that officer, with the troops under his command, would be effectual to prevent or repress any hostilities on the part of the Seminoles -

As in my former communications to you I have had the honor of laying before you the state of the Country and the conduct of the Indians, you will have seen that they required that I should take the responsibility upon myself of ordering into service the 2^d 4th & 6th Regts: of my Brigade. And I would be glad to observe, that if I had not taken the early measures which I did, for holding this part of my Command in readiness for service, it would have been impossible for me to have complied with a requisition of the acting Gov^r of this Territory for a part of it, to cooperate

with

Figure 15. Hernandez to Secretary of War Cass, January 11, 1836.

On January 17, 1836, a few weeks after the Dade Massacre, came the Battle of Dunlawton. This plantation was founded in 1804 by Patrick Dean on about a thousand acres in today's Port Orange, Florida.

Dean was murdered by the Indians during the First Seminole Indian War of 1817-18 and his uncle John Bunch took over the plantation. After his death, his widow gave it to her grandson, John Bunch McHardy, whose father was Robert McHardy, mentioned above. Eventually Dunlawton was acquired by Sarah Anderson whose sons James and George were operating it in 1836.

Word came to the troops stationed at the Bulow Plantation that Indians were attacking Dunlawton. Headed by Major Putnam, militia Companies A and D, numbering around thirty-eight men, rushed to its aid, from nearby Bulowville in three boats, one of which was a large whaler boat.

The war-painted Seminoles were led by Chief Coacoochee. In his headdress, he was wearing a couple of reflectors from the lighthouse at Mosquito Inlet (now named Ponce Inlet).

The lighthouse had just been erected in the spring of 1835, with William Henry Williams as its first keeper. However, the ocean surge in a hurricane on September 18, 1835, undermined the lighthouse and it eventually fell.

Williams was barely able to escape with his family in the middle of the night, leaving behind all their possessions in the keeper's house where the reflectors were stored. Apparently Coacoochee found them in the wreckage and wore them in Battle of Dunlawton.

By the time the militia arrived, the plantation had been burned and plundered. The soldiers saw the Seminoles still ransacking the plantation and rushed up from their boats firing. Initially, the Seminoles retreated but Coacoochee soon arrived with several hundred warriors and the troops were overwhelmed. They retreated to their boats. However, the tide had gone out and the boats were beached.

In the struggle to get them off, several were wounded, including Putnam, Dummett, Williams and Ormond. They abandoned the heavier whaler boat which was too deeply stuck in the mud. Williams' boat was the last one out and in a defiant gesture he dropped his pants and mooned the Seminoles, yelling "kiss my ... [ass]."

James Ormond in his memoirs reports this incident saying "... just then a spent ball took him in the 'sitting down place' leaving a black mark and quite a painful impression, for which he had no sympathy from us." He continued, "So ended the fight at Dunlawton, in which we were completely whipped."

In Major Putnam's official report (Figure 16) to Hernandez, he stated the casualties amounting to six slightly wounded, and four severely wounded. Ned Gould, son of a local judge, was killed, and George Marks swam to safety.

List of the Wounded
Company A. St. Augustine Guards
Major Benj. A. Putnam
Regiments Martin, and Cooper.
Privates Julius K. Reynolds, Bartolo Canosa,
Samuel, Umana, and Charles Thras, severely
Lieut. Geo. B. Mitchell, Slightly
Corporal Brewster and Michael Meligona, Slightly,
Private Simpson Slightly
Company D.
Capt. Douglas Summitt.
Sergeant James Ormond.
Private Sheldon Severely
Benj. Higgins a colored man and a guide of
Capt. Summitt Severely,
Lieut. Wm. Williams and Private McMurchie
very slightly.

Figure 16. Putnam report, January 19, 1836.

Ruins of the Dunlawton Plantation are still seen at Port Orange (Figure 17).

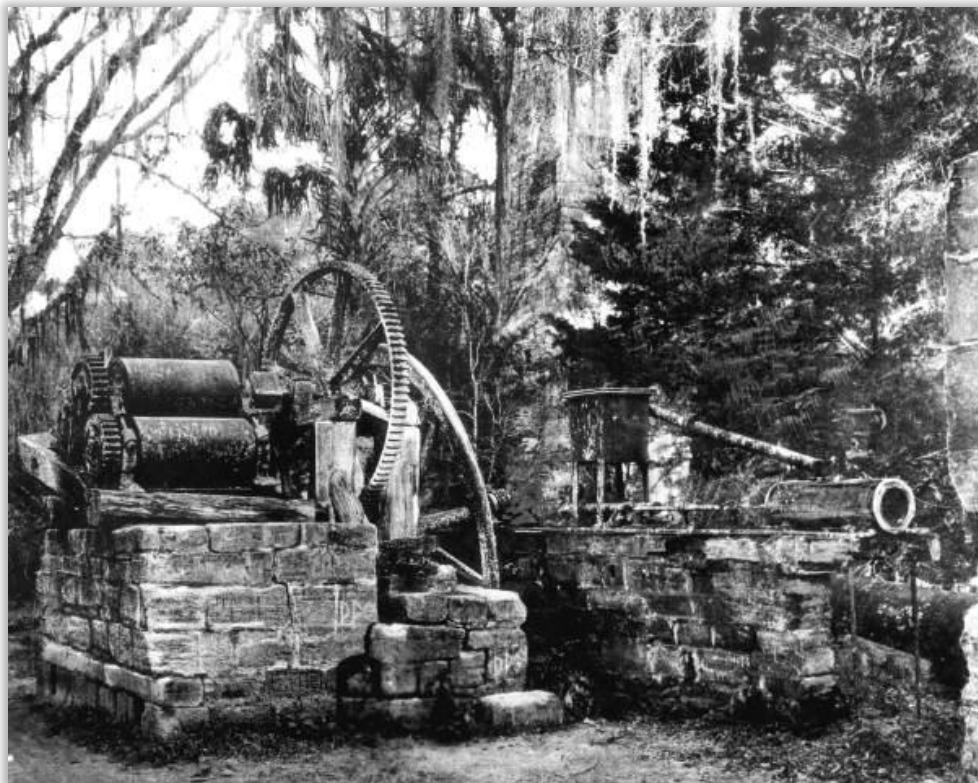


Figure 17. The Dunlawton Plantation sugar mill ruins.

The Orange Grove Plantation was another target of the Seminoles. This was a nearly 4000-acre plantation founded by Samuel Williams in 1803 on a Spanish land grant.

He had first come to Florida in 1776 with his parents and grandfather but temporarily moved with his father to the Bahamas in 1785, moving back in 1803. He was married to Ana Hill with whom he had four children.

This plantation encompassed what is now Daytona Beach on the mainland. One of Samuel's sons, William Henry Williams, inherited it when his father died in 1811.

In 1814, Samuel's widow married General Hernandez and with him had ten more children, one of whom married George Washington's grandnephew, George L. Washington. Hernandez gave them one of his plantations called Bella Vista, known today as Washington Oaks Park.

Bella Vista was originally owned by Lt. Governor of Florida John Moultrie during the British Period, but he abandoned it after the transfer of Florida back to the Spanish in 1783, after which it was acquired by Hernandez. It was also burned by the Seminoles in 1836.

Samuel's son, William Henry, sold the Orange Grove Plantation to his brother, Samuel Hill Williams, in 1830. He was married to his first cousin Mercedes Sanchez, whose brother was Colonel James Sanchez who was Major Putnam's immediate superior. Her other brother, Venancio's son, was married to Dummett's daughter Louisa. Samuel Hill Williams became the aide-de-camp in the militia to their stepfather, General Hernandez. Interconnections between these families were pervasive.



Later in January 1836, one of Samuel Hill's slaves at the Orange Grove discovered that Seminoles were near and tipped off Samuel who sent his family and some slaves quickly to St. Augustine but stayed behind to protect his property.

It was commonly noted in those days that the slaves belonging to Hernandez and Williams were singularly distinguished for their fidelity to their owners.

Samuel spent the night in hiding and at dawn the Seminoles arrived and began pillaging the plantation and burning the houses and barns. Samuel could not offer resistance as he was alone and overwhelmed. He hid behind some bushes and made his escape by swimming in the river undetected till he reached safety (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Samuel Hill Williams hides from Indians.

In 1840, Samuel and his other brother, Theophilous, joined the militia at Newnansville under Colonel William Bailey to fight the Seminoles in north central Florida. Bailey would marry Samuel's sister Eliza Williams and reside in Jefferson County.

The remains of the ruined millworks from the Orange Grove Plantation were hauled to Dunlawton and combined with those ruins to form an exhibit and park that remains today.

Hernandez ordered Major Putnam to remain at Bulowville until January 27 when they were ordered to remove to the safety of Anastasia Island, opposite St. Augustine. Nearly all the plantations south of Dupont's, including Bulowville, were destroyed during the first year of the war.



Finally, on October 21, 1837, Chief Osceola and Coacoochee were captured by General Hernandez at Fort Peyton just southwest of St. Augustine (Figure 19).

They were captured under a flag of truce, which caused an outrage in Congress. Hernandez was court-marshalled but exonerated on the grounds that he was ordered to do so by his superior, General Jesup, pleading that he was just following orders. Coacoochee managed to escape from his prison cell in the fort at St. Augustine and made his way south to continue the war.

Osceola died in prison in Charleston in January 1838.

Figure 19. Site marker of capture of Osceola.

Later in 1837, exhausted from his war efforts, General Hernandez requested release from military duty to return to his private life and try to recover from the loss of his plantations at the hands of the Seminoles. He was released on May 15, 1837, with great praise from his commanding general Jesup.

Thus ended the initial Indian attacks of the Second Seminole War which would continue until 1842. Few of the river plantations along the coast were restored till after the Civil War when many were sold at auction for non-payment of taxes. The Orange Grove Plantation was sold on the courthouse steps in 1861 for back taxes to Samuel Hill William's daughter, Christina Relf who then sold it to Matthias Day for \$8000 in 1870.

In a final note, after the war, US military troops were withdrawn from Florida. Benjamin Putnam was elected Mayor of St. Augustine in 1845, the year Florida became a state. Shortly after 1846, as mayor, he wrote (Figure 20) to Florida's first senator, David Levy, requesting that military troops be sent back to protect St. Augustine's vast stores of guns and ammunition left behind from the recent war.

St. Augustine
To, 28th July 1846.
The Hon. Jas. S. McColl,
David Gulee & Wm. A. Brockenbrough
Senators & Representatives in Congress,

Gentlemen,



I enclose a copy of a resolution adopted this day by the City Council of St. Augustine, instructing me forthwith to communicate to you the present unprotected and defenceless condition of this City by the sudden withdrawal of all the United States Troops from this Port, leaving a large amount of public property including the military Barracks & other public buildings connected therewith, and also a large quantity of public arms without any military guard to protect them, and in a situation holding out both an inducement & temptation to intrepid persons to seize upon the latter & use them to the injury of our citizens; and to urge upon you to bring this matter immediately to the notice of the proper authorities in Washington, and to procure as early as practicable other troops to be sent here to supply the place of those who have been sent away.

It might be unnecessary for me to do more than to enclose this resolution which of itself presents to

Figure 20. Putnam to Levy, July 28, 1846.

The Figure 21 map shows the current location of the major plantations below St. Augustine down to New Smyrna.

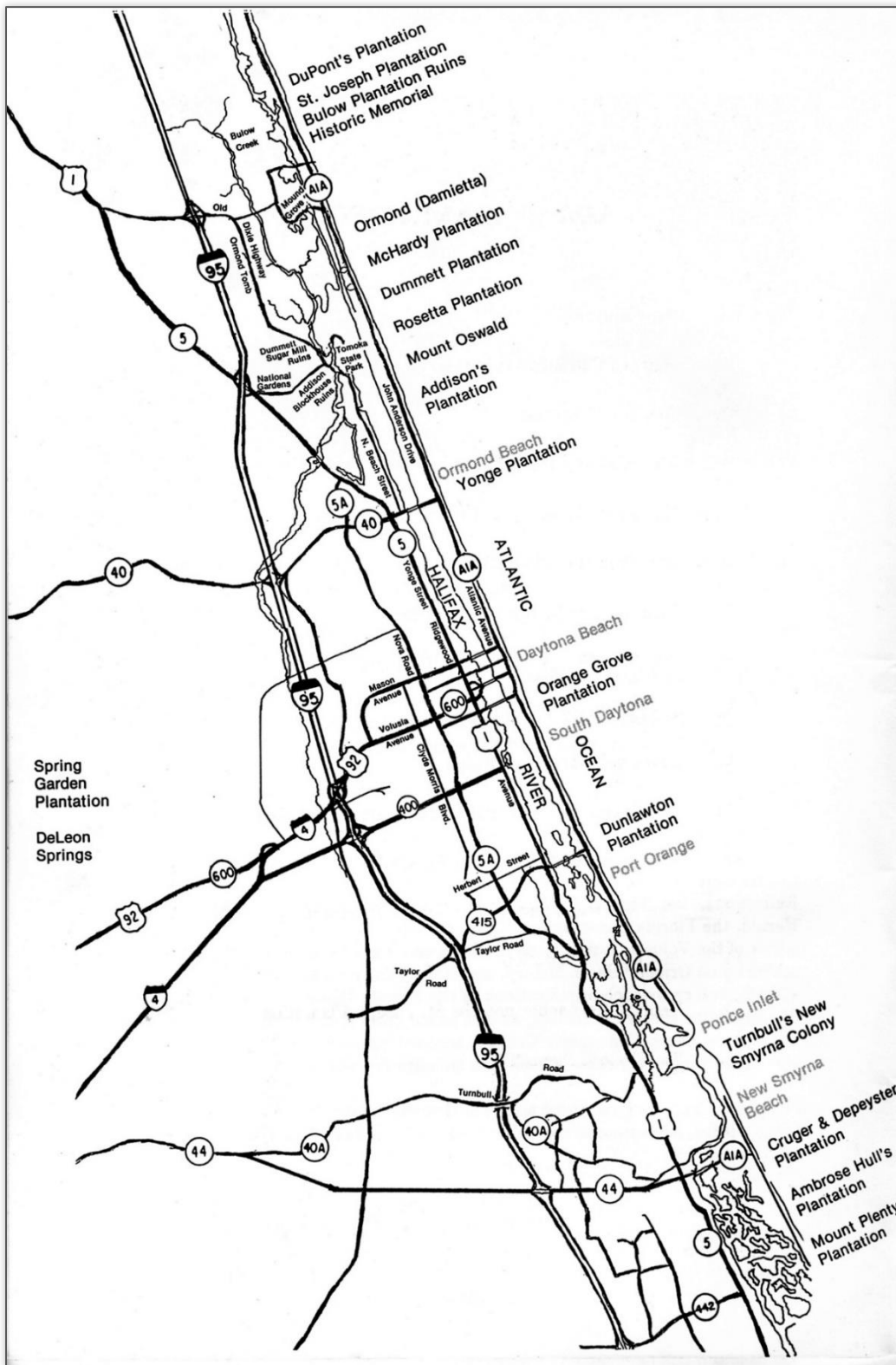


Figure 21. Current location of plantations.

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All color photos of ruins are by the author.