

# Army Surgeon Reports on Lower East Coast, 1838

By JAMES F. SUNDERMAN

Young Jacob Rhett Motte, descendant of two distinguished and colorful South Carolinian families, graduated with an A .B. degree from Harvard University in 1832. Disappointed at his failure to receive an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, he returned to his home in Charleston. There he entered the Medical College of South Carolina and served his apprenticeship under the direction of a Doctor J. E. Holbrook.<sup>1</sup> Upon the completion of his medical studies he became a citizen M. D. at the United States Government Arsenal in Augusta, Georgia.<sup>2</sup> A yearning for a military career finally led the young physician to Baltimore where in March, 1836, he was examined by the Army Medical Board. His application for a commission as Assistant Surgeon was approved on March 21, and around the first of June he was ordered to active duty with the Army in the Creek Nation.<sup>3</sup>

For seven months he participated in the so-called Second Creek War in Georgia and Alabama—an action which was nothing more than the employment of about 10,000 regular and volunteer troops in a giant round-up of the demoralized and dispossessed Creek Indians.<sup>4</sup> Early in 1837 he was transferred to the Army in Florida and for the next fourteen months took part in the campaigns against the Seminole Indians.

During his period of service with the Army in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida, Motte faithfully kept a journal in which he recorded, in a fascinating style, his travels, experiences, activities, observations and impressions. The bulk of Motte's Journal deals with Florida during the early years of the Seminole War, 1837-38.

After participating in the campaigns in north and east Florida, Motte was assigned to the east wing of the Army which, in 1837, was converging on South Florida attempting to penetrate and capture or destroy the Seminole and Mickasukie Indians who used its fastnesses as a haven of refuge.

To accomplish this objective the Army had proceeded south from St. Augustine, establishing bases and supply depots at such places as New

Smyrna, Fort Anne( at the Haulover), Fort Pierce, Fort Jupiter, Fort Lauderdale, and Fort Bankhead (on Key Biscayne). Having established bases of operation, General Thomas S. Jesup, Commanding General of the Army in Florida, ordered Colonel William S. Harney, with fifty picked dragoons (armed with the new Colt repeating rifles), to proceed south from Fort Jupiter to find Sam Jones and his band of resolute and vindictive Mickasukie Indians. Colonel Harney proceeded south to Fort Lauderdale where he was reinforced by several companies of artillery. Continuing on his southward trek, Colonel Harney established his encampment several miles south of Fort Dallas. At this place Assistant Surgeon Motte rejoined Harney's small command.

The following excerpt from the Motte Journal (chapter 34) is an account of the subsequent expedition:

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Col. Harney in pursuance of his intention to attempt a surprise upon *Abiaka* (Sam Jones),<sup>5</sup> in his Southern retreat, had ordered a part of the detachment under his command to be in readiness for proceeding in small boats along the coast towards the southern extremity of Florida. Accordingly on the evening of the 21st April about 8 o'clock, the party selected for this secret expedition embarked in fifteen canoes, and immediately got under way, proceeding along the coast in the open sea; a rather hazardous position for such small and frail boats; but from the character of this part of Florida horses could not be used as means of transportation, and with difficulty could the men get along even without any extra rations. The party consisted of Col Harney with his fifty picked Dragoons armed with Colts' rifles, and Lt. [Robert] Anderson<sup>6</sup> of the 3d Artillery with part of his company armed with muskets.<sup>7</sup> Lt. A. Rutledge of the 1st Artillery and myself comprised the Colonel's staff. We pursued our course all night, both to avoid being seen by the enemy, and in hopes of detecting their position by the light of their camp fires. At daylight the following morning we found ourselves about twenty miles south of Cape Florida, without having seen any signs of the foe during the night. With the view therefore of looking for them on foot, we approached the shore for the purpose of landing; but from the nature of this part of the Florida coast, we found it impracticable to effect our object, the coast presenting as far as the eye could see, at low, and at high water an inundated shore, protected from the sea by a natural breakwater of tangled mangroves, their roots forming a perfect network higher than the knee, and thereby rendering these swamps, even where accessible, places of most laborious locomotion. The entire coast about there

seemed to be formed of one mass of Mangrove islands packed in upon each other, and separated from the water of the everglades by a lagoon, fresh or salt, by turns it was said, according as the waters of the glades or the tides of the ocean prevailed. We succeeded in finding a narrow strip of beach, it being low water, upon which we rested for awhile by stretching our cramped legs, while the men endeavoured to make some coffee, which was very much needed after the night's fatigue.<sup>8</sup> Near this spot we discovered a freshly impressed mocassin track, and in hopes of catching the individual who made it, we started off with the intention of following it up to its termination. We continued our pursuit for a distance of several miles through the mangrove swamp, constantly wading in water which was from knee deep to waist deep, and occasionally stumbling over the network of roots hid beneath its surface whenever we neglected to raise our feet to a sufficient elevation in stepping. Such a fatiguing mode of locomotion soon exhausted us, and finding it a difficult task to keep the tracks which were under water—in sight, we returned to our boats. Again embarking we pushed off, and proceeding along the shore in search of a suitable landing place, after going three miles northwards discovered a part of the coast free from Mangrove, and where the country back off the beach appeared open and having a growth of pine. We there landed and encamped, having drawn our boats upon the beach for better security against the force of the sea. We were fortunate in hitting upon this spot, for we there found a remarkable spring of fresh water, of the coolest and most delicious flavour I ever drank. This spring was remarkable from the circumstance of its being upon the beach considerably below high-water mark, and consequently covered by the salt-water twice every twenty-four hours.<sup>9</sup>

On the 24th April, we started on foot for the interior in search of *Abiaka*, with a part of our detachment, taking in our haversacks one days rations, and leaving as guard for the boats and camp the rest of our force, under charge of a sergeant. Our first six miles progress was through a saw-grass prairie, when we struck a trail which led us to an Indian camp that had not been long deserted.<sup>10</sup> We were at first somewhat bothered by the numerous trails leading from this place, and knew not which to take, until after a careful examination we selected the one which presented signs of being the most and the last trodden, when following it up, we pursued our way through a pine-barren, the ground being formed of coral-rocks jutting out in sharp points like oyster-beds, which caused us great suffering by cutting through our boots and lacerating our feet at every step, as much as if we were walking over a surface from which protruded a thick crop of

sharply pointed knives. The whole of this part of Florida seemed to present this coral formation protruding through the surface of the earth, and which rendered it impracticable for horses, and almost impracticable for men unless well shod. We were puzzled in guessing how the moccasined Indians got over such a rough surface, until we subsequently ascertained that they protected their feet from the sharp rocks by making their moccasins of alligator hide when in this part of Florida. We suffered also very much for want of water, not a drop even of that which was stagnant to be met with in this parched up region. We consequently suffered more under the excessive heat of the sun's rays from this absence of everything like moisture. It was certainly the most dreary and pandemonium-like region I ever visited; nothing but barren wastes, where no grateful verdure quickened, and no generous plant took root,—where the only herbage to be found was stunted, and the shrubbery was bare, where the hot steaming atmosphere constantly quivered over the parched and cracked land,—without shade,—without water,—it was intolerable—excruciating. Oh! for the murmur of some brook,—and the chirp of some solitary bird to break the stillness and dreary aspect of the place! But there was neither brook, nor bird, nor any living thing except snakes to be met with. About 1 o'clock P. M. we emerged from this rocky pine-barren, and were doggedly following the Indian trail across a prairie when a distant but loud and repeated shout struck upon our ears.<sup>11</sup> It could be none but a hostile shout; and immediately after, while we were rounding a small projecting point of woods, there arose to our view from the edge of the prairie right before us, and a mile distant, the smoke of an Indian camp. We could see that a terrible sensation prevailed the camp, and considerable excitement prevailed there, caused by our sudden and miraculous appearance in their vicinity, for the warriors appeared to be seizing their arms for defense while the women were bundling up their packs for flight. We lost no time in preparing for attack, and dividing our small party into three divisions, we immediately charged forward at double quick, one consisting of the Artillery under Lt. Anderson extending to the left to intercept the Indians in flight, the second, of part of the dragoons, to the right for the same purpose, while the third under Col. Harney accompanied by this staff advanced directly for the enemy. As we approached near, we found the Indian warriors with rifle in hand standing behind trees awaiting us, and on getting within the open pine-forest, we followed their example, and each of us taking to a tree immediately commenced our fire upon the enemy. The Indian warriors held their ground for some time, but finally began gradually to retreat from tree to tree; as they fell back, we advanced

in the same cautious manner, only leaving the shelter of one tree to seek another nearer the enemy. In this way we followed them up some time, until finding that we were pressing them too hard, they at last broke cover and ran. We gave chase, and in the ardour of pursuit our men became scattered in all directions, in small parties of two or three, and in the most extended order. At one moment Col. Harney was left with only Rutledge and myself, the Indians keeping up a brisk fire and yelling in every direction. One of the warriors more courageous than the rest, stood out in open ground before us, and throwing up his arms yelled out his defiance, until the whistling of a ball from our Colonels repeating rifle, warned him off in a most expeditious manner, for it told him that he was in dangerous proximity to a good marksman. By the rapid firing and loud yelling of the Indians heard in the direction in which Lt. Anderson with the few men of his company had gone, and by their delay in joining us, the Colonel was apprehensive they had encountered the enemy in greater force than themselves, and therefore ordered all hands to proceed to their assistance. On approaching the spot it was found that the Indians having retreated in greater force in the direction where Lt. Anderson was with his party of only ten men armed with muskets had hemmed them in, and were keeping up a hot fire, and would no doubt have soon destroyed the whole of them had they not received timely assistance, for nearly all their ammunition was expended when rescued. This desultory fight lasted two hours and a half, from the moment we discovered the enemy, until we found ourselves in complete possession of their camp. We captured one prisoner only, owing to the difficulties of making rapid progress over the rocky ground with our lacerated feet; and not possessing the experience of the Indians in locomotion over such a surface, they beat us in running. We left another Indian on the ground, shot through the body.

The enemy being taken so much by surprise, had to decamp without carrying off their chattels, which we found in their camp strewed about everywhere, as they dropt them in their hurried flight. We found any quantity of cooking utensils, coontee-graters, bows and arrows; also large supplies of prepared coontee or arrow root, and some fresh venison, as well as skins of cattle, bear, and deer, and of alligators; the latter for making mocasins in which they traverse these rocky parts of the country. Among other things we found a bag of gun-powder.

After the severe march of the morning, and the fatiguing exertions of the fight, we found ourselves too wearied to return to our boats without some previous repose; so after supping upon the enemy's coontee and

venison, our own scanty rations having given out, we built large fires, and not having any blankets with us lay down upon the bare ground around them, their genial warmth very necessary during the excessively cold nights, which in temperature were diametrically the reverse of the days.

Upon questioning our prisoner, we ascertained that this was *Abiaka's* encampment; and that he himself had been present when we first appeared, but ran away from the prospect of being captured. We counted twenty-five fires in their camp; and allowing three warriors,—which is the usual proportion,—to each, the Indian force must have amounted to seventy-five warriors, exclusive of women and children. Our captive gave this as the number in camp at the time of our attack, consisting of Seminoles and Micasukies. Although when first captured, our prisoner was very much depressed at the loss of her liberty, she soon got over her distress, and talked and laughed as freely as with her own people. She stated herself to be a niece of my friend *Blue-Snake*,<sup>12</sup> and from her having at least a pound of silver ornaments on her person, I should have judged that she belonged to the nobility. She told us that *Abaika* had upwards of a hundred warriors, altogether, and that this was the same party that Col. Bankhead had attacked on Pine Island in the everglades. A short time before our arrival at New River; and also informed us, that if he had continued the pursuit one day longer, he would have come upon the whole tribe, without the possibility of their escaping. We also learned from her, that *Alek-Hadjo* the chief of the Indians whom we captured at Jupiter,<sup>13</sup> and who afterwards had been sent out from Fort Jupiter with five other Indians, to persuade the rest of his people to come in, were met at the South Fork of the *Coontee-Hatchee* or *New River*, and the whole of them shot dead by a party of their own people, who accused them of being spies for the whites, and did not therefore deserve to live.<sup>14</sup> When asked if she knew where *Abiaka* would retreat to with the party we had just routed, she gave it a sherr opinion, that they would take refuge on some island in the *Oahatka*, or ocean; evidently meaning some of the numerous Southern Keys.

On the 25th April, the morning after the above skirmish, we returned to our boats. In consequence of several of our men being taken sick, and there being no means of carrying them over the sharp rocks, our progress was very slow and tedious. The night had been very cold, and the men not having their blankets with them, the contrast of temperature with the burning days, easily accounted for the sickness, which was much augmented in suffering by the absence of water. When within a mile of our boats, I found my strength fail me; and completely knocked, I was compelled to

knock under, not being able to budge one step further, my boots being cut like ribbons and my feet severely lacerated by the sharp rocks. I threw myself on the ground, feeling perfectly indifferent at the time as to what should become of me; but Lt. Arthur Rutledge who would not quit my side, persuaded me after resting awhile, to make some exertion, and with his friendly assistance I was enabled to regain our boats long after our party had reached them.

On the 26th April, we remained quiet, to recruit ourselves after the recent fatigue; and on the 27th, a part of us embarked in seven canoes to proceed south on an exploring expedition among the islands or Keys. The party consisted of Col. Harney, Lt. Rutledge and myself, with the Colt's-rifle company. Lt. Anderson being left in command of the Artillery to guard the other boats and camp. We commenced our voyage early in the morning, and continued all day progressing in a Southerly direction. About sun-set we attempted to land, but found it impracticable on account of the dense mangrove swamps. Night overtook us in the canoes, not being able to find a place to land; and long after dark while cruising about in search of a landing, we discovered a small rock near Key Largo sufficient to hold a part of our men. Making fast our canoes to the rock, as many as could stretched themselves on its hard surface for repose; the rest spent the night in the boats.<sup>15</sup>

On the morning of the 28th observing a small schooner at anchor a few miles off the Key, some of us were sent to board her to ascertain what she was doing there, but she proved to be only a wrecker, of whom, so many infest this dangerous coast, seeking a hardy livelihood from the misfortunes of others. We also saw another schooner at anchor further out, engaged in the same business; and still further off, near the distant horizon, appeared a ship heading north in the gulf-stream. In returning to shore, or rather to the rock, the Colonel amused himself in harpooning the denizens of these waters, through whose clear depths they could be distinctly perceived, slowly moving about. Among others he succeeded in securing an immense *Sting-ray* and *Whip-ray*, the latter so called from the length and appearance of its tail. On regaining the rest of our fleet at the rock, the whole command was got under way, and we took up the *line of sail* for our encampment, without being able to see or hear anything of the enemy. Having fine fair-wind, we dispensed with our oars and raising sail, made such rapid progress, that we reached camp a little after sunset of the same day.

On the morning of the 29th April, our whole detachment embarked in the canoes, and in consequence of our rations being expended, returned to



Camp Center at Lewis' settlement near Key Biscayne, which we reached a little after sun-set of the same day.<sup>16</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> *The Christian Register*, July 24, 1869; *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, IV, 1903; and the introductory remarks in Arthur H. Cole (ed.), *Charleston Goes to Harvard, Diary of a Harvard Student of 1831* (Cambridge, 1940).
- <sup>2</sup> Jacob Rhett Motte, "Life in Camp and Field," manuscript in the Florida Historical Society Library, 106 (cited hereafter as Motte, MS).
- <sup>3</sup> *Army and Navy Chronicle*, May 5, 1836.
- <sup>4</sup> For an account of the causes and prosecution of the Second Creek War see: "The Report of Thomas H. Crawford and Alfred A. Balch, appointed to investigate the causes of the Creek Indian Hostilities under a resolution passed by the House of Representatives on July 1, 1836," *Executive Document 154*, 24th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, 1837); Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman, 1941), 72-107; and James F. Sunderman, "Life in Camp and Field, The Journal of an Army Surgeon, 1936-38," unpublished Masters Thesis, 1949, University of Florida, xvii-xlvi.
- <sup>5</sup> Abiaka or Sam Jones was the head chief of the Mickasukie Indians. He was an old man, near seventy years and a self-declared prophet and medicine man. Violently opposed to emigration, his advice and opinions were highly regarded due in great measure to the Indian regard for age. His territory was in the neighbourhood of Lake Okeechobee. The active war chiefs in the Big Cypress Swamps, along with the sub-chiefs and the warriors religiously abided by his decisions believing that he ". . . could make known the approach of troops, find game, and control the seasons, heal the sick, or inflict disease upon any one—even death." Declaring eternal hostility and cruelty to the whites, he planned many of the Indian attacks, fired the first gun, and then retired. After the capture of Osceola, King Philip, Euchee Billy, Micanopy, Toskegee, Halle-Hadjo, and many other warrior chiefs in late 1837, Sam Jones became the head and front of the hostile Seminoles. Much importance was therefore placed upon his capture or destruction. John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusions of the Florida War* (New York, 1848), 99, 252, 318-319; Motte, MS, 140.
- <sup>6</sup> First Lieutenant Robert Anderson, a graduate of the Military Academy in 1825, was promoted to Brevet Captain in April, 1838, for gallantry and successful conduct in the Florida War. He was cited for meritorious conduct in the battle of Molino del Rey, during the Mexican War, and promoted to Major. For his gallant defense of Ft. Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, in 1861 (the action which precipitated the Civil War), Major Anderson received a promotion to Major General. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, from its Organization, September 29, 1789 to March 2, 1903*, House Document 446, 57th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, 1903), I, 164.
- <sup>7</sup> A few weeks prior to the departure of Colonel Harney and the dragoons, Samuel Colt, the inventor of the repeating rifle, arrived at Fort Jupiter with a number of his new rifles. He submitted them for examination and testing to a Board of Army Officers appointed by General Jesup for that purpose. The Board reported favorably upon the performance of the weapon which was described by a group of Indians, who witnessed the testing of the gun, as "great medicine". The Army immediately purchased fifty of the new rifles and placed them in the hands of fifty picked dragoons. Motte, MS, 231-232, original "Order Book of General Thomas S. Jesup," manuscript in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, 12.
- <sup>8</sup> The troops undoubtedly landed at a small beach about two miles north of Black Point. See Soil Conservation Map 35, Everglades Drainage District, Washington, 1946.
- <sup>9</sup> Many springs in this section of Florida, including various bayside springs are no longer flowing due to the lowered water tables. An example of this is Mangrove



Springs at Coconut Grove which “. . . supplied water for the United States Fleet at Havana in 1898 . . . flowing at 100 gallons per minute.” Today it no longer exists. C. W. Lingham, and others, “Springs of Florida,” *Florida Geological Survey Bulletin Thirty-One* (Tallahassee, 1947), 65.

The troops landed in the present Cutler Hammock, a large part of which is encompassed in the Deering estate, directly east of Perrine, Florida. This is the only spot on the coastline of Biscayne Bay where pine-land approaches to the waters edge. Before the water table in the Everglades was lowered there were many springs located in this vicinity. The location is easily found on the Soil Conservation Map 35,

- 10 Leaving their bayshore camp, the troops ascended the transverse glade which today crosses highway No. 1 immediately south of Howard and one mile north of Rockdale. These transverse glades were strips of low lying productive soil stretching like fingers through the rocky pine land from the coastal area into the Everglades. In wet weather they were inundated and the Seminoles used them as canoe trails, and in dry weather as foot trails. Today the transverse glades are productive tomato growing areas. See Soil Conservation Map 35.
- 11 After proceeding for over six miles the troops left the transverse glade and struck out across the rocky pine land to the edge of the Everglades. The rim of the Everglades was the favorite camping spot of the South Florida Indians. This specific location was undoubtedly a few miles south-west of the present Dade County Hospital. The information concerning the transverse glades area and the probable route of this expedition was furnished by Dr. John M. Goggin, a native of Miami and a professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Florida.
- 12 Blue Snake was a chief of the warlike Tolofa tribe of Seminoles. In September, 1837, while acting as a courier from the hostile Coa Hadjo to the captured King Philip, who was imprisoned in St. Augustine, Blue Snake was seized by the Army. He promptly volunteered his services as a guide and scout for the troops. While serving in this capacity he and Assistant Surgeon Motte became good friends. *American State Papers, Military Affairs* (Washington, 1861), VII, 848; Motte, MS, 130.
- 13 About five hundred prisoners, including Indians and Indian negroes, were seized on the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd of March. They had been camping near Fort Jupiter under the flag of truce awaiting word on a petition they had sent to Washington requesting they be permitted to retain a small part of the Everglades and remain in Florida. Twice before General Jesup had violated the flag of truce, justifying his action on the grounds of military expediency and the ever present Indian characteristic of deception and trickery. Jesup to Poinsett, July 6, 1833, in Sprague, *op. cit.*, 195; *Niles National Register*, September 8, 1838, and Motte, MS, 230.
- 14 The Seminoles claimed the murder of their chieftain was a Mickasukie plot and offered their assistance in finding Sam Jones and his Mickasukies. *Savannah Republican* as quoted in the *Apalachicola Gazette*, May 17, 1838.
- 15 In the days of the Spanish galleons and privateering, according to tradition, the rock was used by pirates as an anchor for their ships. An iron pin, driven into the rock, served to hold fast the anchor ropes.
- 16 Camp Center was undoubtedly located near the spring known as the Devils Punch Bowl, a few hundred yards south of the present Rickenbacker causeway in Miami. This was a spring flowing out of a round pot hole in the rocks at the base of the cliffs near the south end of Brickell Hammock—between the present S. W. 25th Road and the north end of the Deering estate.

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