

# Exploring the Ten Thousand Islands: 1838

By JAMES W. COVINGTON

Prior to the Second Seminole War much of Southwestern Florida was unknown to the Anglo-Saxon.<sup>1</sup> Some of the coastal islands had been settled by the Cuban fishermen, but there were large sections, especially in the Cape Sable area, which were virtually unexplored and uncharted.

When the fighting flared up in 1835, military and naval patrols moved into the uncharted and unmapped wilderness and the first fairly adequate accounts of the land lying to the south of the Caloosahatchee River were written. One such scouting expedition left Fort Denaud on February 7, 1838, for a trip through the Cape Sable and Ten Thousand Islands area in an effort to strike at the possible flow of arms and ammunition from Cuba to the hostile Seminoles. Although the search was fruitless, much valuable information concerning the remote region was learned and recorded for others who would perhaps make other trips into the area. The report of the expedition, written by the leader, Surgeon-General Thomas Lawson, reads as follows:

(Copy)

Cape Sable  
February 20th, 1838

Pursuant to your instructions bearing date the 4th of this month, I on the 7.th Inst. dropped down the Sanybal River<sup>2</sup> from Fort Deynaud<sup>3</sup> to Fort Dulaney<sup>4</sup> in the Steam Boat Florence with the Companies commanded by Capt. Kosenitz and Lieut. Jacobs, leaving Capt. Baker's company with the horses and other public property to come down in the return Boat.

These last troops having joined me, I on the 11.th Inst. with the three companies (the second now under the command of Lieut. Pew) & Six Delaware & Shawnee Indians,<sup>5</sup> in all two hundred and forty officers & men, put off in the Steam Boat American for Marcos River, which place we reached on the evening of the same day.<sup>6</sup> Immediately on entering the mouth, we attempted to ascend the river; but grounding a few miles up, we backed out from the shore, and dropped down to a point on Cape Romaine,<sup>7</sup> where there was once a Settlement and upon which we encamped.<sup>8</sup> On the next morning I put about ninety officers & men in a Mackinaw,<sup>9</sup> two Scows<sup>10</sup>

and two Small Keel Boats,<sup>11</sup> and with Hosey,<sup>12</sup> the Pilot and Guide, proceeded up the River in quest of the Body of Hostile Indians, supposed to be located on, or to frequent the Islands in the vicinity of Cape Romaine; leaving Capt. Kosenitz with the balance of the troupes to Scour the Country around.

In the course of the day we passed around, or on two sides of a great many Islands,<sup>13</sup> sounding the water as we progressed, and in the evening encamped upon a large Island, on which there was two or three hundred acres of cleared land. Having ascertained by this days operation that the water we were in was not a River, but an immense Bay or Lake, with innumerable Islands in it, having a deep and safe channel through it about eighteen miles in extent, and running from the Western to the Eastern side of Cape Romaine, I at night sent down an officer & the Pilot in one of the Keel boats with instructions to bring up the Steamer, and the troops below, and in the event of an accident to the steamer, to have fresh water brought to us operating above.<sup>14</sup> In the morning we put out again in quest of adventures; but after winding around the Islands without discovering a River or Creek on the main land, and fearing we might be lost in this Labyrinth of Islands, we fell back to a position near our encampment, where we met the Steam Boat, and which soon after anchored near the Eastern outlet of the Lake. Having exchanged the Crews of the boats for a fresh detail of men, I in the evening with Hosey & adjunct Pilot John set out in search of a Settlement Supposed to be on a Creek six or eight miles off, and where it was confidently expected the enemy would be found. After twisting & turning however through the Islands, running sometimes with and occasionally against the current, and through narrow passes from one wide water to another, we in the night found ourselves bewildered; and the guides having declared their inability to proceed farther we reluctantly turned our bows and returned to the Steam Boat.

Being firmly impressed with the belief from several circumstances, (more especially the evident indisposition on the part of the Guides to lead the way) that there were Indians near us, I came to the conclusion of enforcing measures; and making Known my determination to the Guides, I obtained from them a reluctant consent, to try again to find the supposed haunts of the Hostile Indians.

Accordingly in the morning I fitted out a new expedition, taking with me at their particular request almost every officer of my command, and entered once more upon the Search, proceeding up the river. Having traversed the Lakes in various directions, passing & repassing the same Islands,

and running into coves, and through Sloughs into successive Lakes or wide sheets of water, we eventually discerned a bluff point, the wished for land.

The troops having been landed about three fourths of a mile below the Settlement, I quickly formed them & pressed on to attack the enemy in their Town, but to our extreme mortification, on coming into the cleared land, found it to be a village long since deserted. After looking around the open ground without discovering any fresh traces of the Indians, I sent a small party of men up along the banks of the Creek, while I was with the mass of the command struck into the woods in rear of the Town, and proceeding on the verge of a Swamp, we swept around until we gained the Boats. The Detached party soon after coming up, the troops reassembled & we returned to the Steam Boat. The site of this old Indian Establishment is a bluff point of land, descending gradually to a Swamp, perhaps an interminable one, and bounded apparently on one side by a Creek, and on the other by a Cove or an arm of the Lake. The Pilots did not know, & we could not ascertain whether this ground was an Island or a point of the main land jutting into the Lake; but it was evidently in an extreme part of the wide water, and the very place at which the Indians would take post were they in that Section of the Country.

In all these three days operations we found but four places, in this American Archipelago that appear to have ever been inhabited by the Red or the white man. And one only on which there was fresh water. The first was the point on the Cape<sup>15</sup> just within the mouth of the River, and where the first water was found; the Second is an Island a few miles up with bluff banks and high ground throughout, where once was a very large plantation, and upon which the Lemon & Sugar Cane was Cultivated. The third is a large Island about fifteen miles up the Lake with the two hundred and fifty acres of cleared land on it, and where we on the second night encamped. The fourth and last is the Settlement on the Creek where terminated our operations within Lake Marcos.<sup>16</sup> All the other Islands, and the borders of the Lake, except immediately on the Coast, are altogether uninhabitable, being covered with a dense growth of Mangrove bushes, and they are either under water, or completely flooded with Mangrove roots running horizontally from five to ten inches above the Soil, with oysters hanging on them and on the branches of the tree. Judging from what I saw, in my several excursions, I am of opinion that no Indians have occupied this section of country for eighteen months, and perhaps not since the commencement of the war, & that they do not visit it, except by appointment with the Spanish Fishermen at which time they receive their supplies of Ammunition, etc. etc.<sup>17</sup> And

there is reason in this. The Indian no more than the White man can live without fresh water, and he must have the free navigation of the Lake to enable him to obtain it from the Sea Coast.<sup>18</sup> Again the whole Lake and every inhabitable point in it, being accessible to boats from the Sea, the Indians well Know that at any given moment, they could be overwhelmed by numbers and crushed to death by a Single blow.

Depend upon it, the Hostile Indians, at this stage of the war, with their native acuteness and long experience, will not be found in the vicinity of any of our Depots or our navigable Streams.

Their object is, and their Safety depends upon it, to take a position as far removed as possible from our magazines, so as to keep us backing and filling, in other words compel us to fall back for supplies after every advance movement and thereby wear down and kill up the Troops as they successively take the field.

Having gotten all the essential information in relation the Country etc. and satisfied ourselves that there were no Indians about, we immediately after the return of the Troops from the last expedition, raised Steam & passed out of the Eastern mouth of the Channel into the Gulf; and Keeping near the Shore, we had progressed nine or ten miles when a high wind & heavy Sea, coming on us, we were forced to retire within the Islands.<sup>19</sup> Here we were detained by stress of weather thirty-six hours; during this time however, the troops were not idle; for while some were employed in digging for fresh water, others were visiting the several Islands near us with a view not only to pleasure, but also for the purpose of reconnoitering the Country around. The wind at length lulling & the Sea becoming Smooth, we put out again toward the South East, and proceeding about eight leagues, we anchored opposite the mouth of Pavilion River,<sup>20</sup> near which we saw a smoke, and on the banks of which Six or eight miles up, the Pilot stated positively that we would find twenty families of Indians, and perhaps others from the interior of the Country. Manning all the boats as quickly as possible, taking with me all the officers but one, and about one hundred men including the Indians, I rowed off for the shore, and entering the mouth of the River, ascended it to within a mile and a half of the town, where the troops were debarked in order. Having detached at the instance of the Pilots a small party across the River, for the purpose of intercepting any persons who might attempt to escape in canoes to the other side of the stream, and made all other necessary arrangements. We advanced upon the enemy, and in reconnoitering the ground as we neared the cleared land, passed under

cover of the woods, around the village until the head of our column reached the River above. Opening out then from front to the rear so as to cover as much ground as possible, we faced toward Town, and moved in line through the field and passed the houses to the banks of the River. Here again we were doomed to meet with disappointment, for the town was tenanted by no living thing, man or beast, and seemed to have been abandoned twelve months ago. And no one apparently was more mortified than the Guide, who I believe was sincere in what he said, when he tauntingly told me that the Indians were there, and that if I wished it I could have a fight. Having looked into the houses, and surveyed the curiosities around, we returned to our boats, and rowed off twelve miles to the steamer,<sup>21</sup> arriving on board in the night without an accident.

Pavilion River is a beautiful salt water stream, about thirty miles distant from Cape Romaine, wide at the mouth & having about five feet water on the bar. Just within its mouth there are a number of Small Islands; but the Stream narrows as it approaches the Town, to about two hundred yards in width, where also the banks change from Swampy Mangrove land to high ground and fertile soil. The site of this village is very beautiful, being on a sound bluff point immediately in front, and the ground around on both sides of the River are more valuable than any that I have seen in this section of the Country. The only objection to it is, that there is no fresh water on it, or in its vicinity. After this failure I despaired of finding any Indians on the Coast, and under that impression requested the Capt. of the Steam Boat to make for Cape Sable, which place we reached on the 18th Inst. and where I am now located and about to erect a Fort. We are situated on the third and most Southern Point of the Cape; it is accessible at all times, very defensible, and promises to be a healthy position.<sup>22</sup> The first and second, or more northern & western points, I did not like, for the reason that they were not only very bare of timber with which to build a Fort, but also destitute of a harbour; whereas this one has a safe anchorage and harbour formed by the Keys around, with plenty of fresh water on it, and withal is the favorite haunt of the Turtle and other fish. It is perhaps the most beautiful spot on the whole Coast, having a high beach in front, an extensive plain immediately behind, with a dry though thick wood a little further removed to the rear. As there is little or no building timber around, and I have as yet neither horses or proper boats to bring it from a distance, I shall attempt to rear a Fort from the beach; that is with the Sand thrown out of a ditch, saplings or split logs as a face, and fascines as a body, raise a curtain to a star figured spot which will baffle the skill of the Red man to surmount.<sup>23</sup>

From this history of our operations, it will be perceived, that I have not found the Hostial Indians, on Marcos River or the Coast, & captured or destroyed as ordered. I am free to say however, that it was not the fault of the officers and men under my Command, or, of myself that the enemy was not found and brought to action. We went whither as we were told to go, or where from circumstances we were induced to believe that the Indians might be found; and we laboured by day and by night, and suffered not a little for want of fresh water, in order to fulfil your instructions, and meet the expectations of our friends, but all to no purpose.

The Indians were not in the Country, or Providence screened them from our search. Notwithstanding however we have not won laurels for ourselves, or accomplished a great deal for our Country, the expedition was not altogether fruitless. We have ascertained that there is an Inland passage from Carlos Bay to the East side of Cape Romaine, and almost to Cape Sable, for vessels drawing five feet water, & that the whole Coast is full of Islands, affording good harbors and safe navigation to Steam Boats, and by a shorter route than the usual track of vessels outside of the Cape and the reefs. And I have ascertained also, that none others than the Spaniard with the Indian, are acquainted with the Coast. As soon as I can complete the Fort sufficiently to make it defensible by a Small party against an attack from Indians, I shall endeavour to gain the interior of this part of the Country, with a portion of my Command: when it is to be hoped, and I trust, that I shall be able to give you a better account of the enemy.

I am Sir

Very respectfully etc. etc.

Genl. P. F. Smith<sup>25</sup>  
Comm of the troops  
On Sanybal River, etc.

(signed) Th. Lawson<sup>24</sup>  
Surgeon General  
Commander of Volunteers

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John Williams, *The Territory of Florida*, (New York, 1837) has the best pre-Second Seminole War description of lower Southwestern Florida. Hereafter cited as *Williams Territory of Florida*.
- <sup>2</sup> Certainly Lawson meant by the "Sanybal River" the Caloosahatchee as both forts were located on its shores.
- <sup>3</sup> Fort Denaud was established during the winter of 1837-1838 by Captain B. L. Bonneville to serve as a base of supplies for the troops. It was erected at a place two miles from the landing on the Caloosahatchee River. Since it was situated on land which had been owned by a long-time Indian trader named Pierre Denaud, the fort was named in honor of him. D. Graham Copeland, manuscript, Florida State Library II, 800.

- <sup>4</sup>Fort Dulaney was established in November, 1837, at present day Punta Rassa. Forty steamboats were chartered by the government for use during the war. Many were chartered at rates ranging from sixty to four hundred and fifty dollars a day. James F. Sunderman, ed., *Journey Into Wilderness*, (Gainesville, 1953), 277.
- <sup>5</sup>Some Delaware and Shawnee Indians were recruited for service in the Second Seminole War but they were not very helpful as the saw grass and palmettos cut deep gashes on their legs.
- <sup>6</sup>It is difficult to ascertain what the writer meant by Marcos River. Perhaps it was the waterway on the mainland side of Marcos Island.
- <sup>7</sup>By Cape Romaine he probably means Cape Romano.
- <sup>8</sup>Williams *Territory of Florida*, 33, relates how several plantations were under cultivation on Roman Isle. One operated by John Durand of Savannah was located about a mile from the western coast. Corn, peas and melons were the principal products.
- <sup>9</sup>The Mackinaw boats were pointed at both ends and named after Mackinac, Michigan, where they originated. They were popular with persons along the frontier both in the West and South.
- <sup>10</sup>A scow is a large flat-bottomed boat usually used to carry freight.
- <sup>11</sup>Keelboats were from forty to eighty feet in length, seven to ten feet wide, and two feet or more in draught, with sharp ends. It was steered by a special oar and propelled by oars or poles, but occasionally fitted with sails.
- <sup>12</sup>Hosey to the Anglo-Saxon was probably Jose, a Cuban fisherman from one of the islands along the coast, who served as guide.
- <sup>13</sup>This was probably the islands lying to the southeast of Marco Island near Goodland.
- <sup>14</sup>This may have been Morgan Bay.
- <sup>15</sup>Possibly Morgan Pass.
- <sup>16</sup>"Lake Marcos" may have been the area entered through Big Marco Pass or the passageway lying to the south leading to Caxambas Bay and Barfield Bay.
- <sup>17</sup>The military men were certain that the Seminoles were receiving arms and ammunition from Cuba. Infrequently a Cuban was apprehended while visiting the hostile Indians.
- <sup>18</sup>During the Third Seminole War Cape Romano was described as "only place where water can be had." The early settlers used cisterns as a source of water. Several artesian wells drilled on Chokoloskee Island helped provide a ready supply of fresh water during the Twentieth Century. Charlton W. Tebeau, *The Story of the Chokoloskee Bay Country* (Miami, 1955), 9-10.
- <sup>19</sup>The expedition is now definitely within the Ten Thousand Island group.
- <sup>20</sup>Since Pavilion Key is near the mouths of both Huston and Chatham rivers, the name Pavilion could have been applied to either one.
- <sup>21</sup>The Indians told Williams at an earlier period that the snakes prevented them from hunting on the islands. Williams *Territory of Florida*, 50.
- <sup>22</sup>This point probably was the area known as East Cape today.
- <sup>23</sup>The fort erected at Cape Sable was known as Fort Poinsett.
- <sup>24</sup>Surgeon-General Thomas Lawson served during the War of 1812, Mexican War; died May 15, 1861.
- <sup>25</sup>Perrifor Frazer Smith, officer in the Louisiana Volunteers, served in the Mexican War; died in 1858. The above report was found in the General Thomas Jesup Papers, Letters Received, 1836-1838, Office of the Adjutant General, Records of the War Department, National Archives.

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