

From Tampa Bay to Biscayne Bay in 1799

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With an introduction by Dr. Charlton W. Tebeau.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the American Revolution it became necessary to establish a boundary line between the new United States and Florida which had been returned to Spain after two decades of British rule. A longstanding dispute ensued when the Spanish discovered a secret agreement between the United States and England. If England retained Florida the boundary should begin at the mouth of the Yazoo River, about 32 degrees and 28 minutes of north latitude, run thence to the Flint River and down that stream to the confluence with the Chattahoochee to form the Apalachicola, thence to the source of the St. Mary's River and down that stream to the Atlantic Ocean. But if Florida were to be returned to Spain the starting point might be the 31st parallel of north latitude.

Until 1795 the Spanish insisted upon the more northerly line. Then, in the Treaty of San Ildefonso they agreed to the 31st parallel. But when Andrew Ellicott arrived from the United States with his surveyors and a military escort the Spanish refused to surrender the forts north of the new line and let the surveying proceed. Finally, in March 1798 they pulled back and allowed the work to begin. The surveyors reached the Flint River in October of the same year. In that region they found the Indians so hostile they decided to withdraw for the time being, and work at the survey from the Mouth of the St. Mary's to its source, and then to the origin of the Apalachicola. This also produced an even longer standing dispute for it developed that the St. Mary's had three possible sources. Ellicott decided upon the middle one and raised Ellicott's Mound there to mark the spot. The State of Georgia insisted upon the southernmost of the possible sources, which produced a controversy which the State of

Florida inherited, and which was not settled until the American Civil War.

To accomplish the change in procedure Ellicott and his party sailed down the west coast of Florida to Cape Romano and across Florida Bay to Key Vaca. From that point they worked their way in somewhat leisurely fashion up the Atlantic Coast to their task at the St. Mary's River. Ellicott found considerable activity along the Keys and in the Biscayne Bay region. He included these observations along with some comments of a general nature in his report. Between October 29, and November 15, 1799 while he moved up the east coast he produced the account which is here reprinted. Since all of the places and people mentioned are reasonably well known no editorial notes are provided. The Richter Library at the University of Miami provided a photocopy of a copy of the Ellicott *Journal* in its Florida Collection.

Charlton W. Tebeau

FROM THE JOURNAL OF ANDREW ELLICOTT

October 29th. From a meridional altitude of Capella taken after midnight, we appeared to be opposite to Punta Larga, (Cape Roman,) and having a sufficient offing we steered for Cape Sable, the most southern promontory of east Florida, which was seen from the mast head at noon. At three o'clock in the afternoon came to an anchor on the west side of Kayo Ani, or Sandy Key, which is a small island a very short distance south of the Cape. After coming to an anchor, myself and some of the crew, took our boat, and went to the island; where in a very few minutes, we shot about twelve dozen plover. There are some bushes scattered over the island; but what particularly attracted my attention was the amazing piles, or stacks, of the prickley pear, (opuntia a species of the cactus,) the fruit was large and in high perfection: we eat very plentifully of it; but my people were not a little surprised the next morning, on finding their urine appear as if it had been highly tinged with cochineal; no inconvenience resulting from it, the fruit was constantly used by the crew during our continuance among the keys or islands. Though this island is called Sandy Key, and has certainly the appearance of a body of sand; it is little more than a heap of broken and pulverised shells, which were found to effervesce freely with the vitriolic acid, and little or no quartz was perceptible in the solution.

30th. Weighed anchor and sailed to Key Vaccas, or Cow Island, and moored in a small harbour among a cluster of little islands. Stormy all the afternoon. The soundings from Sandy Key, to Key Vaccas, were regular and generally less than nine feet, and on an horizontal stratum of stone, similar to that described between the Cedar Keys, and Kayo Anclote.

31st. Went on shore on Key Vaccas, where our people in a short time killed four deer, of that small species, common to some of those islands. They are less than our ordinary breed of goats.

November 1st. Examined a number of the small islands, they all appeared to be lime-stone, or calcareous rocks, the tops of them were flat, and elevated but a few feet above the surface of the water, and covered with a thin stratum of earth. These rocks are evidently a congeries of petrefactions, in which may be traced a variety of plants, particularly the roots of the great palmitto, or cabbage tree, (corypha or palmitto of Walter). The mud in the harbour where we lay was of a fine white, and resembled lime, or whiting, and was found to effervesce with the vitriolic acid; from which it is probable, that it is no more than shells, and other calcareous matter, levigated by the friction of the particles, produced by the constant motion of the water.

2d. Took some large turtle, and fine fish. Visited by Captain Burns of New Providence whose vessel lay at the east end of Key Vaccas. He was on a turtling and wrecking voyage. Wind still from the east and squally.

3d. Killed some more small deer and salted them up. Calm the whole day.

4th. A light breeze in the afternoon, got under way, and proceeded about five miles along the north side of Key Vaccas. Soundings generally from seven to eight feet; the bottom horizontal rock with a rough surface.

5th. Got under weigh early in the morning, but the wind, being ahead, come to an anchor under a small Key, a short distance from Duck Key. Soundings as before. On the small island there was some appearance of a clear field, manned the boat and went to examine it; but had proceeded but a short distance among the bushes, when I was compelled to return by the incredible number of musquitoes; on coming to the boat, I found the men had jumped into the water to avoid the attacks of those troublesome little animals.

This island is similar to those already described, but surrounded by a greater number of ragged rocks near the surface of the water.

6th. Got under way at eight o'clock A. M. and beat out into the

channel between the Keys and reef, and came to an anchor in a good harbour at the east end of Viper Key.

7th. Made sail early in the morning, and came to an anchor at one o'clock P. M. in the harbour at the north east end of the old Matabombe, where we found it necessary to take in wood and water. This island is noted for affording a greater quantity of good water than any other of the Keys; on which account it is much frequented by the turtlers, and wreckers. The water is found in natural wells about four feet deep, which are no more than cracks or cavities in the rock, and not the effect of art as some have imagined. This island, like those already mentioned, may be considered as a large flat calcareous rock, elevated but a few feet above the water, and covered with a stratum of earth. This is said to have been the last residence of the Coloosa Indians, the original inhabitants of East Florida: From whence they were gradually expelled by the Seminoles, or Wild Creeks. From Matabombe they were taken to the island of Cuba by the Spaniards, and incorporated with their salves. But this measure does not appear to have been taken without provocation: these Indians were remarkable for their cruelty, which they exercised indiscriminately on all the unfortunate people, who were wrecked within their reach on that dangerous coast. The island of Matanza, (slaughter,) which lies about one mile north east from the watering place, was so called from those Indians massacring about three hundred French, who had collected on it, after being wrecked on the reef.

On the north east side of Matabombe, there is a beautiful beach, which has the appearance of whitish sand, but on examination is found to be broken shells, coral, &c.

8th. Spent in taking in wood and water. In the afternoon the schooner Shark, late the property of Messrs. Pantou, Laslie and Company, of Pensacola arrived; being a prize to Lieut. Wooldridge and crew, (of whom mention has already been made), who captured her near St. George's island on her way to Apalachy. The schooner Shark was loaded with provisions, and as we had no meat, our commissary Mr. Anderson made application to the prize master for a barrel of pork; the prize master Mr. Barnet made no direct answer, but said he would see about it the next day.

9th. Got under way at nine o'clock A. M. The schooner Shark done the same. It was previously agreed, that we should anchor together in the evening at Key Rodriguiz, where the prize master was to furnish us with a supply of meat, in return for what flour they had from us on St. George's island. We sailed rather the fastest, and so soon as we came to an anchor in the harbour, she crowded all her sail, and stood over the reef

for New Providence. Thus were we requited for our favours. Soon after we came to an anchor, we were joined by Captain Watkins, who commanded a privateer from New Providence. He behaved with politeness, and furnished me with about five pounds of excellent salt pork.

10th. Wind ahead, were not able to make any way. Our men caught a number of fine fish.

11th. Calm until about eleven o'clock A. M. when we had a light breeze and immediately got under way, proceeded to Key Large, and came to an anchor between the Key and Gulf Stream. At the same time a sloop that we were meeting, came to an anchor about two leagues from us.

12th. About two o'clock in the morning, I was called up to see the shooting of the stars, (as it is vulgarly termed,) the phenomenon was grand and awful, the whole heavens appeared as if illuminated with skyrockets, flying in an infinity of directions, and I was in constant expectation of some of them falling on the vessel. They continued until put out by the light of the sun after day break. This phenomenon extended over a large portion of the West India islands, and was observed as far north as St. Mary's, where it appeared as brilliant as with us. During this singular appearance, the wind shifted from the south to the north, and the Thermometer which had been at 86° for four days past, fell to 56° .

Many ingenious theories have been devised to account for those luminous and fiery meteors, but none of them are so satisfactory to my mind as the *conjecture* of that celebrated chemist M. Lavoisier, who supposes it probable that the terrestrial atmosphere consists of several volumes, or strata of gaz or elastic vapour of different kinds, and that the lightest and most difficult to mix with the lower atmosphere will be elevated above it, and form a separate stratum or volume, which he supposes to be inflammable, and that it is at the point of contact between those strata that the aurora borealis, and other fiery meteors are produced.

About eight o'clock in the morning, the sloop we saw the preceding evening passed by our stern, and upon being hailed answered, "it is a prize;" she was then ordered to come to, to which a person answered "ay," and at about 400 yards from us, hove to, and brought her boat, which was in tow along side; but contrary to our expectation, it was immediately taken in, and the sloop with all her sails set, bore away. Orders were then given to get under way, and give chase, from an idea that it was an American vessel taken by the French, and if possible to retake her, several of her people not having the appearance of Americans

or Englishmen. As soon as we got under sail, a gun was discharged towards the sloop, but to which no attention was paid; but in about one hour we came within rifle shot, when one was discharged, and with such a direction that convinced the crew their safety depended upon coming to; which was immediately done, and we passed under her stern. The master was requested to come to anchor, and bring his papers on board of us. We anchored about rifle shot from the sloop, after which the request was repeated, but one of the persons on board the sloop observed, that the sea was rough, and they had but one oar and a paddle for their boat: upon which our commissary Mr. Anderson took the boat belonging to our vessel, and brought the master and his papers on board. The papers were satisfactory. The vessel and loading were lately Spanish property, and had been taken about fifteen days before by a New Providence privateer near the Havannah, and sent on for Nassau; but got becalmed in the Gulf Stream, which carried her almost to Cape Carnaveral, when the wind served, the master then kept the Florida coast until we met with him. He and his people had been seven days on allowance of one biscuit, and a pint of water each per day, with what fish they could take, which they had to eat without salt. The master took breakfast with me, and when he was ready to return, I directed our commissary to furnish him with a barrel of biscuit, and some salt, upon which he observed, that he had "never before been so fortunately chased and taken." One half of his crew consisted of Spaniards taken on board the vessel, and they all equally had done duty. Immediately after this fruitless adventure, we got underway, and the wind began to blow with considerable violence, which gradually increased until we found it necessary to come to anchor, and were very fortunate in making a harbour near the mouth of Black Caesar's Creek.

13th. The gale continued with violence. Took some fish.

14th. The wind continued very violent until the evening.

15th. The wind violent from the north, until one o'clock P. M. when it shifted in a few minutes, and came from the east; which was the only wind from which we were not protected by shoals, and which would in a short time have rendered our situation extremely uneasy. We got under way as soon as possible, and beat out in order to fall into the northern channel of Black Caesar's Creek; but having the wind and a strong current against us, we did not clear the shoal between the two channels until a few minutes before sunset, and then took the northern channel, which is very narrow at the entrance, not exceeding fifteen yards wide, but gradually widens to more than one hundred, and has between two and an half, and three fathoms water, except at the entrance where there

is but seven or eight feet. We came to an anchor near the mouth of Black Caesar's Creek, which is only the entrance into an extensive sound between the Keys and main land. The sides of the channel are almost perpendicular, like those at old Matabombe, and composed of a soft, whitish mud, which appears to be wholly calcareous.

16th. Capt. Watkins beat up to us; he was the whole day making two leagues, in a vessel calculated to sail on a wind. He had with him the crew of the prize before mentioned; the vessel was wrecked by the violence of the wind the day we left her.

17th. The wind still continued very unfavourable. Took a considerable number of fine fish.

18th. The wind was more moderate, and we got under way early in the morning, and beat along Hawk Channel. In the afternoon were brought to by a New Providence privateer, commanded by Captain William Ball, who had been but a short time from Ireland, and who treated us for some time with a degree of insolence far beyond any thing I had ever before experienced. But after examining my instructions and commission, and viewing the signature of President Washington with all the attention and veneration that would have been paid to a holy relick, he became more moderate, and made us sufficient compensation for his insolence, by presenting us with a fine turtle, and after wishing us a pleasant passage, we parted.

About sunset there was an appearance of a storm, and we came to an anchor in a small, but excellent harbour, where we were defended by shoals from the violence of the sea on every side: before midnight the storm came on.

19th. The storm continued the whole day.

20th. The storm still continued.

21st. Very strong gale from the N. E. Saw a ship early in the morning, (which had certainly missed her way,) nearly on the reef, and in very great danger, but she fortunately wore off.

22d. Got under way, and beat along the sound to the mouth of Fresh Water [Miami] river, which is nearly opposite to the southern part of Key Biscanio.

23d. Went on shore at the mouth of the river, filled our water casks, and gathered a large quantity of very fine limes: a party of our people likewise took their rifles, and went into the country, and were uncommonly fortunate in killing deer and turkies.

Fresh Water River is said to be no more than the outlet to a large lake, but a few leagues distance from the coast. At the mouth it is not more than five or six perches wide, and ten or twelve feet deep, and

middling rapid. The sides are nearly perpendicular, and composed of calcareous stone or rock, similar to that described at Apalachy. This stratum of stone appeared to be very extensive and horizontal.

Key Biscanio is one of the last islands on the reef, and situated in lat. 25° 37' N.

The Florida reef, (as it is called,) appears to consist of a number of coral banks on the outer edge of an extensive stratum of calcareous stone, which extends from the main land, to the edge of the Gulf Stream: the general position of this stratum is nearly horizontal, and is possibly a continuation of that observed at Apalachy. If this should be the case, it may be considered as the base of East Florida, and conform to the general law observed in the disposition of the strata of stone on our western waters.

On this stratum of stone, which serves as a helmet to the southern promontory of East Florida, and defends it from the violence of the Gulf Stream, is situated the whole of that cluster of innumerable islands and shoals, which have been so troublesome and dangerous to navigators.

These islands and shoals, may be viewed as protuberances, (standing on the surface of this extensive stratum,) gradually formed during a period of many centuries, by the constant accretion of calcareous matter. Many of those islands and shoals have evidently had their origin from coral banks, which not only like those of oysters, are known to increase, but to surpass them greatly in magnitude: and it is now reduced to a certainty, that a number of the islands in the South Sea are coral rocks covered with a stratum of earth. It is likewise well ascertained by naturalists, that coral is not, as was formerly supposed a vegetable substance, but a vast collection of small animals which build up those rocky edifices from the bottom of the ocean!

The navigation between the Gulf Stram and Florida Keys, has at all times been considered as very difficult and dangerous, which it certainly is for those not acquainted with it; but with a competent knowledge of the Keys and reef, added to ordinary caution, I know of none more safe for coasting vessels, and others drawing not more than nine feet water. Such vessels as are sailing from the northward into the Gulf of Mexico, and prefer the passage between the Gulf Stream and Florida coast, after entering the reef a few miles north of Key Biscanio, should be careful to give that Key a birth of about one and an half miles, on account of a shoal that makes out from it: it will likewise be necessary to observe, that opposite to the south end of the Key, there are but eleven feet water.

After entering the reef, it will be proper for a careful person to be kept aloft, who will be able for a considerable distance, (at least one

mile,) if the weather should be fair, to discover the coral banks, rocks and shoals, which in some places are numerous, by which means the danger may easily be avoided. It will likewise be necessary on coming to an anchor, which must be done every night while on the reef, to look out for clear ground, otherwise a cable may be fretted off in a few hours by the coral rocks, or other protuberances, and the vessel go adrift.

As a knowledge of this navigation is of very great importance to the mercantile interest of the United States, it is a subject of regret that we have no charts in common use of the reef and Keys, (or islands,) upon a scale sufficiently large and accurate, to be useful. Mr. Gauld's survey of the Dry Tortugas and the Florida reef and Keys, easterly to Key Largo, made by the direction of the Board of Admiralty of Great Britain, may justly be considered as one of the most valuable works of the kind extant, but unfortunately it is little known. From Key Vaccas to Key Largo, I carefully compared Mr. Gauld's charts with the soundings, and perspective view of the Keys, and found an agreement which excited my surprise, and am induced to believe that not a single rock or shoal, so far as the work extends, has been omitted, and that not an error of three feet will be found in any of the soundings. If this work had been completed, it might be esteemed one of the most perfect and useful of the kind. The copy which I had the good fortune to obtain, (and without which it would have been very difficult for me, being not only a stranger to the coast, but no seaman, to have made my way with safety,) I deposited since my return in the office of the secretary of the navy.

Along the Florida Reef, and among the Keys, a great abundance and variety of fish may be taken: such as hog-fish, grunts, yellow tails, black, red, and gray snappers, mullets, bone-fish, amber-fish, margate-fish, barracoota, cavallos, pompui, groupers, king-fish, siber-fish, por-gys, turbot, stingrys, black drum, Jew fish, with a prodigious variety of others, which in our situation we found excellent. Turtle are also to be had in plenty; those we took were of three kinds: the logger-head, hawk-bill and green; the two last are much the best. We likewise found a remarkable species of prawns, which live in great numbers in holes in the rocks: they frequently weigh two or three pounds a-piece, and are improperly called lobsters; they want the large claws that lobsters have. Their meat is harder, and less delicate than that of the lobsters of the northern states.

Some of the Keys or Islands, were formerly very well timbered, but the most valuable kinds, such as *lignum vitæ*, fustick and iron wood, have generally been cut off by the inhabitants of the Bahama Islands.

Key Biscanio is much frequented by the privateers, wreckers and

turtles from the Bahama Islands. At the sound end there is an excellent harbour, and the shore so bold that a vessel not drawing more than ten feet water may be careened with safety. In that harbour we found several of those privateers, wreckers and turtles, by whom we were politely treated, particularly by a Capt. Johnston, who furnished me with seven or eight pounds of salt pork.

Having filled our water casks, salted up some fish, and the wind serving, on the

25th, about noon, we got under way, and proceeded over the reef into the Gulf Stream. Shortly after we had entered the Stream, we saw a vessel bearing down upon us, but did not discover that she was a privateer until she attempted to bring us to by a shot: being determined to make the best use we could of the first fair, strong breeze we had had since our arrival at the Keys, we crowded all our sail, and the privateer did the same, but in two hours she gave up the chase.

I shall now proceed to make a few observations relative to East Florida.

East Florida is but little better than a wilderness, the soil is not superior to that of West Florida, and none of its navigable waters rising in the United States, it does not appear equally interesting. It is nevertheless of immense importance to the United States, being from its peculiar situation, well calculated to give security to the commerce between the Atlantic and western states, and may be considered one of the main keys to the trade of the Gulf of Mexico. On the west side, it affords two remarkably fine harbours: one is known by the name of Hillsborough Bay, (Bay Tompa, or Spirito Santo.) The latitude is stated to 27° 36' N. and the longitude 83° west from Greenwich. It is very capacious, and will admit any vessel over the bar not drawing more than twenty-four feet water.

The first Englishman who explored, and gave an account of this bay was a Capt. Braddock, who commanded a privateer from Virginia, and cruized on the west coast of East Florida, in the years 1744 and 1745: his survey is yet considered as good as any extant.

The other harbour is called by the Spaniards Boca Grande, and by the English Charlotte Harbour, and stated to lay in latitude 26° 43' N. and 82° 30' west longitude from Greenwich.

The Florida Keys and reef, likewise furnish a great number of harbours proper for coasting vessels, and advantageous stations for cruizers; particularly that of Key Biscanio, situated at the northern entrance of the reef, and capable of commanding the whole coasting trade which should take that passage. This being the entrance of the reef,

and the most proper place to depart from in sailing northerly, would be one of the most eligible positions on the whole coast, and perhaps on the continent for a light house.

But instead of any advantage being derived, either to the United States or his Catholic Majesty, from those favourable situations, they serve as dens and hiding places for the privateers and pickaroons of the Bahama islands, by which the trade of both nations has suffered immensely in spoliations: and extraordinary as it may appear, it is no less true, that nearly the whole coast of East Florida, as far as maritime possession gives a right, is under the dominion of the Bahama islands. The coast and islands being uninhabited even by a single solitary settler from Apalachy, almost round to St. Augustine! from which the inhabitants of the Bahama islands cut and carry off, without interruption, as much of the valuable ship timber as they find necessary or convenient.

On the east side of the coast south of St. Augustine, there are a number of small harbours, proper for coasting vessels; but their positions are too badly determined to entitle them to attention.

We have not at this time, one chart of the coast of East Florida, except Mr. Gauld's survey of a part of the keys and reef, entitled to any confidence. The making a survey of the eastern side of it, was submitted by the British government, while his Britannic Majesty was in possession of that country, to M. de Brahm, and the west side to Mr. Gauld; but the labours of those gentlemen have never been communicated to the public! An accurate knowledge of the dangerous shoal off Cape Canaveral, is of great consequence to the commercial interest of the United States. It frequently happens that those places, which from the want of a competent knowledge of them are avoided, when critically examined, will be found to afford places of safety, and good harbours, for such vessels as are driven upon them by bad weather. Such was the case with the Dry Totugas until examined by Mr. Gauld.