

Apalachicola: Antebellum Cotton Port
by Dorothy Dodd

In 1827, the legislatures of Georgia and Florida passed acts to establish trading towns on the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee River system. The Georgia act resulted in the establishment of Columbus at the head of navigation on the Chattahoochee;¹ the Florida act, in a place of deposit at the mouth of the Apalachicola that became the town of the same name.

Although the legislatures acted independently of each other, they were motivated by the same event, the removal of the Creek Indians from the fertile lands between the Flint and Chattahoochee Rivers in upper Georgia. It was obvious that settlers would rush into that region and that there would soon be a steady stream of cotton seeking an outlet to world markets through the Bay of Apalachicola.

The site chosen for the Florida town was a bluff on the west side of the Bay, known locally as Murder Point.² The Legislative Council, however, in its act of December 29, 1827, named trustees to regulate the affairs of West Point, Bay of Apalachicola, in Washington County. The five trustees were David L. White, Charles S. Masters, John Jenkins, Benjamin J. Bull, and Martin Brooks.³

There had been some commercial activity at the Point since 1822, but not enough to result in the formation of a town. The Brig William and Jane sailed for New York in the spring of that year with 266 bales of cotton, the first ever shipped from Apalachicola Bay.⁴ And in June, Mark Harden was appointed

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collector of customs for the port of Apalachicola.⁵ A visitor to the place the following year said that there were several houses, one of which was occupied by the collector of the port.

The spot was not a desirable residential site, being a pine barren, interspersed with low, wet spots and ponds, and lacking good water. But it had the essential qualification of being the place on the bay most accessible to the channel, which could be navigated by the ships drawing eight feet of water. Vessels of twelve feet draught could cross the bar, but their cargoes had to be lightered to and from shore.⁶

Another undesirable feature of the site was that its ownership was uncertain, and settlers could not secure title to their lots and improvements. This would have been true, however, of any location at the mouth of the river, for the whole area was in the Forbes Purchase, a Spanish land claim whose validity was then under attack in the courts.

In spite of these drawbacks, the settlement grew rapidly. It was incorporated on November 2, 1829, as the Town of West Point,⁷ but the post office established in that year was called Apalachicola.⁸ The Post Office Department's name was more in accord with popular practice, and in 1831 the Legislative Council recognized that fact when it used the name Apalachicola in establishing a special court for the town.⁹

The Council's unusual action in granting a court of common pleas and of oyer and terminer to the town was recognition of the growing commercial importance of Apalachicola. To the merchants of the place, however, it was merely a sop, for what

they wanted and had requested in 1831 was a division of Washington County, with Apalachicola as the county seat of the new county.

There was much justice in their demands, as their town had, in five years, become the most important port in the Territory. The first steamboats, the Fanny, Captain Jenkins, and the Steubenville, Captain Vincent, had appeared on the river in the summer of 1827.¹⁰ By 1832, there were seven steamboats plying between Apalachicola and Columbus. Exports from Apalachicola for the first six months of that year included 16,000 bales of cotton, 491,000 feet of lumber, and 40,000 slaves. Sixty-four vessels entered the port and 67 cleared between January 1 and June 30.

In 1832, the Apalachicolans were gratified by the establishment of Franklin County.¹¹ Apalachicola was, as a matter of course, the county seat. As such it was the place of holding both county and superior courts, the latter of which had admiralty jurisdiction. The town at that time was reported to have "nearly one hundred and fifty houses and stores," with stocks of cotton and other products of the back country valued at a quarter million dollars.¹² The next year, the Commercial Bank of Florida was chartered¹³ and a newspaper was started.¹⁴

By the fall of 1834, the editor of the Apalachicola Advertiser could boast: "Our wharfs present the appearance of a great Commercial City - indeed, our Bay is full of all kinds of craft and has a maritime aspect - four new steamboats have arrived within the last two weeks, intended for the trade be-

tween this place and Columbus, which added to the list, makes the number twelve."¹⁵ A few months later his rival editor predicted "that the day is not remote when Apalachicola will rank among the highest of our commercial cities."¹⁶

Just as their prospects seemed so bright, the Apalachicolans received a staggering blow when the United States Supreme Court decided in January 1835 that the Forbes Purchase was a valid Spanish claim.¹⁷ This placed the residents of the town at the mercy of the Apalachicola Land Company, organized by the successful claimants to administer the Forbes Purchase lands.¹⁸ It was soon evident that the Company and the citizens could not come to terms on the prices to be paid by the latter for the lots they had improved and were occupying. A large group of the residents, therefore decided to pull up stakes and found a rival town on neighboring St. Joseph Bay.

St. Joseph Bay had the double advantage of being outside the Forbes Purchase and of having a better harbor than Apalachicola. Its drawback was that it had no direct connection with the cotton-growing backcountry, and it could not hope to prosper unless the cotton trade could be diverted to it from Apalachicola. The solution proposed was to cut an eight-mile canal from Lake Wimico, a bayou of the river, to the Bay.

The schemes of the dissidents grew grander as they progressed. The canal was changed to a railroad, which was built in record time and began operation, complete with locomotive, on September 5, 1836, making the eight mile trip from the bayou to the Bay "in the short space of twenty-five minutes."¹⁹

The final blow to St. Joseph came with the yellow fever epidemic in the summer of 1841, which practically depopulated the town.

The life of Apalachicola was dependent upon cotton and upon the river which brought that cotton to market. Fortunately, the months when the river was high enough for steamboat traffic coincided with the period when cotton was ready for shipment. The first bale of new cotton, whose quality and price were always noted by the newspaper, was generally received in August.²⁵ The "commercial year" started October 1, and lasted through May, although low water sometimes prevented any appreciable amount of business activity for weeks, or even a couple of months.

According to the United States census of 1840, Apalachicola had a population of 1,022.²⁶ This census was taken in the slack season, and was far from indicative of the size of the town at its winter peak. A count of transients as well as residents, when a special territorial census was taken in March 1838, showed a population of more than 4,000.²⁷ Its composition was constantly changing and was given a distinctly cosmopolitan character by the seamen who thronged the waterfront. During the season of 1842-43, vessels employing 2,425 men arrived coastwise and from London, Liverpool, Havre, Havanna, Genoa, Jamaica, Nassau, Kingston, Porto Rico, St. Jago de Cuba, St. Thomas, Bermuda and Montega Bay, Matausa, Lucca, and Point Petre.²⁸

The editor of the Commercial Advertiser gives a vivid description of the opening of the business season in 1844. "The preliminaries of our next business campaign have commenced,"

he wrote. "Vessels are making their appearance in the bay, and lighters are passing and repassing laden with their omnifarious freight. The ringing of the auction bell - the cries of the auctioneer, and the puffing and blowing of the steamers, as they traverse our waters, reminds us of the busy scenes which will ensue when they come booming down the river with their tall chimneys just peeping over the bales of cotton with which they are laden. ... In a few weeks our wharves will be covered with cotton - our streets filled with people, and places of business and amusement opened, and every inducement held out to those who wish to enter the field of competition and struggle on for wealth."²⁹

The most important contenders for wealth were the commission merchants, of whom 31 advertised in a single newspaper in December 1844. Practically all of them were located on Water Street, and most of them combined their commission business with some other branch of trade and were also grocers, ship chandlers, insurance agents, factors, or auctioneers. There were also usually four or five lawyers and a doctor or two in town during the season, as well as an occasional itinerant dentist, hairdresser, or miniature painter.

As befitted an important commercial city, Apalachicola had a chamber of commerce whose primary purpose was the arbitration of disputes among its members. In 1843, the chamber of commerce awarded five silver pitchers for the best samples of cotton submitted from the Apalachicola River district. The response from the planters was poor, and the competition

apparently was not repeated. The town also had two volunteer fire companies, each of which was in charge of a municipally-owned fire engine, and a militia company, the Franklin Guards.

Places of amusement consisted mainly of billiard saloons, ten pin alleys, and grog shops. There was an occasional circus or traveling entertainer, and, from 1839 to 1844, Apalachicola had a regular theatrical season with a nightly repertoire of popular and classical plays performed by a competent stock company. Boxes were set aside for ladies and their escorts, but the theater undoubtedly drew most of its audiences from the men. On one occasion, the Franklin Guards attended in uniform and received from the lady star of the evening a "splendid standard," presented with an address prepared for the occasion. In a subsequent season, the company gave a benefit performance for Fire Engine Company No. 1.

Christmas and the Fourth of July were the big holidays of the year. Observance of the former was largely private, although the urchins and Negroes of the town had the privilege of greeting everyone with "Christmas gift." The Franklin Guards sometimes turned out to parade with horn and drum.³⁰ When the necessary talent was available, there was a public entertainment of some kind. For instance, in 1840, an "Oratorio" of sacred music was given in the Episcopal Church by Baron de Fleur, "a finished performance on the Organ and Piano Forte." Admission of one dollar was charged for the benefit of the church.

The Fourth was an entirely different matter. The firing of cannon and the ringing of bells started the day in 1844. The

Stars and Stripes streamed from the shipping and the public buildings. In the morning, a program consisting of appropriate prayers and musical selections, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, an oration, and an ode, was held at the City Hall. This occasion was graced by the presence of a large number of ladies, but the rest of the day was a strictly masculine affair.

Dinner was served at the Mansion House at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, at which "the toasts were drank, with firing of cannon, and with many cheers." There were 17 regular, or set toasts, beginning, as always, with "The Day we Celebrate" and ending with "Woman. - In youth our instructors - in age our companions, and at all times our friends." These were followed by volunteer toasts of which 41 were reported in the paper. "Many other toasts were delivered," wrote the editor, "which we regret were not handed in to the committee for publication. The company adjourned at an early hour," he concluded, "well pleased and in good spirits."³¹

On July 12, following this most spirited celebration, the Reverend John H. Smiley delivered the first of a weekly series of lectures on temperance.³² As a result, the Apalachicola Temperance Society was organized November 9, with 12 members. It held regular fortnightly meetings and within six months had grown to a membership of 158.³³ It was sufficiently successful to cause the proprietor of the Sans Souci bar and restaurant to run the following notice in the paper: "Choice Wines and Liquors will always be served out to those who are so unfortunate as yet

to be without the pale of the Tetotal Abstinence Society."

The Reverend Mr. Smiley also organized a debating society for the young men of the town that summer. It probably did not outlast his pastorate in Apalachicola, but for a time, at least, it gravely discussed such engrossing questions as, "Are the brute creation endowed with reason?"³⁴ and, "Is it in the nature of things for Republicanism to become universal and permanent."³⁵

Aside from the annual Fourth of July celebration and such sporadic cultural and moral ventures as the Debating and Temperance Societies, life during the summer months was quiet and leisurely. "We are at length reduced to our summer population," the editor commented late in July 1845, "and in place of the busy crowd, and the noise and bustle that surrounded us a few weeks ago, we scarcely see a loungee in our streets, and all is comparatively calm and quiet..."

"However, what we lost in numbers, is made up by increased sociability, and our time is passed quite pleasantly in reading, visiting, and occasionally a quiet rubber at Whist in the evening. The Aspaleggi Band, too - one of our most praiseworthy associations - have frequent meetings, and enliven the citizens with their delightful serenades. Taking it altogether, we get along very well, considering the scarcity of Ladies among us."³⁶

Apalachicola continued to enjoy the pleasant seasonal rhythm of summer slack and winter bustle until the Civil War, her only ups and downs being caused by fluctuations in the stages of the river and the prices of cotton. She emerged from

the harsh years of war and reconstruction to find that her picturesque and profitable antebellum economy could not be restored, because the cotton trade on which it was based had been diverted from the river to Georgia's railroads.

- ¹John H. Martin, Columbus, Geo., from Its Selection as a "Trading Town" in 1827 to Its Partial Destruction by Wilson's Raid in 1865... (Columbus, Ga., 1874), p.5.
- ²John Lee Williams, A View of West Florida (Philadelphia, 1827), p. 16.
- ³Florida (Terr.), Acts, 1827/28, p. 22.
- ⁴Niles' Register, XXII (June 1, 1822), p. 224.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 288.
- ⁶Williams, A View of West Florida, pp. 15-16.
- ⁷Florida (Terr.), Acts, 1829, p. 49.
- ⁸Lee N. Pickett, Florida Postal History and Postal Markings during the Stampless Period (Palm Beach, 1957), p. 3. The post office was established Feb. 7, 1829 with John P. Booth as postmaster.
- ⁹Florida (Terr.), Acts, 1831, p. 9.
- ¹⁰Pensacola Gazette, April 27, 1827; ibid., July 6, 1827, quoting Mobile Register.
- ¹¹Florida (Terr.), Acts, 1832, p. 45. The first election for county officers was to be held on the third Monday in March 1832 under the superintendence of C.J. Floyd, E. Wood, J.D. Bullock, and E.J. Hardin.
- ¹²Florida (Terr.), Legislative Council, Journal, 1832, p. 102; C.E. Carter, ed. Territorial Papers of the United States, Florida, XXIV, p. 657.
- ¹³Florida (Terr.), Acts, 1833, pp. 86-88. Books of subscription for stock were to be opened at Apalachicola under the superintendence of Robert Beveridge, Edward J. Hardin, William G. Porter, Hezekiah Hawley and John O. Sewall; at Marianna under Richard L. Watson, Joseph Russ, and Peter W. Gautier, Jr.; and at Webbville under Ebenezer J. Brown, Geo. C. Hodges and David Goldstein.
- ¹⁴James Owen Knauss, Territorial Florida Journalism (Deland, Florida, 1926), p. 29. No copies survive of The Advertiser, which was edited by R. Dinsmore Westcott.
- ¹⁵Pensacola Gazette, Jan. 3, 1835, quoting Apalachicola Advertiser.
- ¹⁶Pensacola Gazette, Mar. 4, 1835, quoting Apalachicola Gazette.

- 17 Mitchell vs. United States, 9 Peters 711.
- 18 Apalachicola Land Company, Articles of Agreement and Association, November 28, 1835. n.p.
- 19 James Owen Knauss, "St. Joseph, an Episode of the Economic and Political History of Florida", Florida Historical Quarterly, V (April, 1927), p. 183.
- 20 John Lee William, The Territory of Florida (1837), p. 124.
- 21 Id.
- 22 Apalachicola Gazette, Jan. 18, 1840.
- 23 Ibid., Jan. 4, 1840.
- 24 New Orleans Daily Picayune, Feb. 4, 1841.
- 25 E.g. The first bale of new cotton in 1842 was received August 1 from the plantation of Col. Brown (deceased), of Jackson County and sold for 7 cents a pound. (Florida Journal, Aug. 5, 1842).
- 26 Niles' Register, LIX (Nov. 21, 1840), p. 192.
- 27 Apalachicola Gazette, June 21, 1838.
- 28 Watchman of the Gulf, August 12, 1843.
- 29 Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser, Sept. 30, 1844.
- 30 Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser, Dec. 27, 1845.
- 31 Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser, July 6, 1844.
- 32 Ibid., July 13, 1844.
- 33 Ibid., June 24, 1845.
- 34 Ibid., June 22, 1844.
- 35 Ibid., July 13, 1844.
- 36 Ibid., July 29, 1845.