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The Dade Massacre: Adding New Insights

By LELAND M. HAWES, JR.



Frank Laumer personifies Dade Massacre survivor Ransom Clark on the actual battlefield site.

One hundred fifty years ago this December, two companies of regular Army troops left Tampa's Fort Brooke on a perilous journey. Charged with relieving isolated Fort King, near today's Ocala in the midst of increasingly hostile Seminole Indians, they were well aware of the dangers.

The intended commander of the expedition, Capt. George W. Gardiner, pulled away from the departure at the last minute because of the critical illness of his wife. Thus, by a quirk of fate, Maj. Francis Langhorne Dade took over command and his name became linked forever to the disaster that lay ahead.

Events of that march in December 1835 have provided an overwhelming fascination for Floridian Frank Laumer for more than 23 years. He researched extensively, trudged the same route and wrote the book "Massacre," published in 1968.

Laumer didn't stop there. Almost obsessively, he continued collecting material, adding new facts and insights. He became so involved that he sought and obtained a court order to dig up the remains of Pvt. Ransom Clark, one of the few survivors of the Indian onslaught.

When called upon, as he was by the Tampa Historical Society for its annual banquet this year, he assumes the uniform and persona of Clark, telling events of the march from the rugged soldier's viewpoint.

Laumer, who lives in a stone home on the banks of the Withlacoochee River, not many miles from the massacre site, has been revising his book to include the new findings.

For example, he has discovered correspondence reemphasizing the quandary of conscience faced by Capt. Francis Smith

Belton, commander of Fort Brooke less than four days when a fateful decision had to be made.

Ordered by Gen. Duncan Clinch to send about 200 troops to bolster beleaguered Fort King, Belton agonized that sending so small a detachment was fraught with risk. Since not even 100 men were available when Clinch's order came, he had to delay.

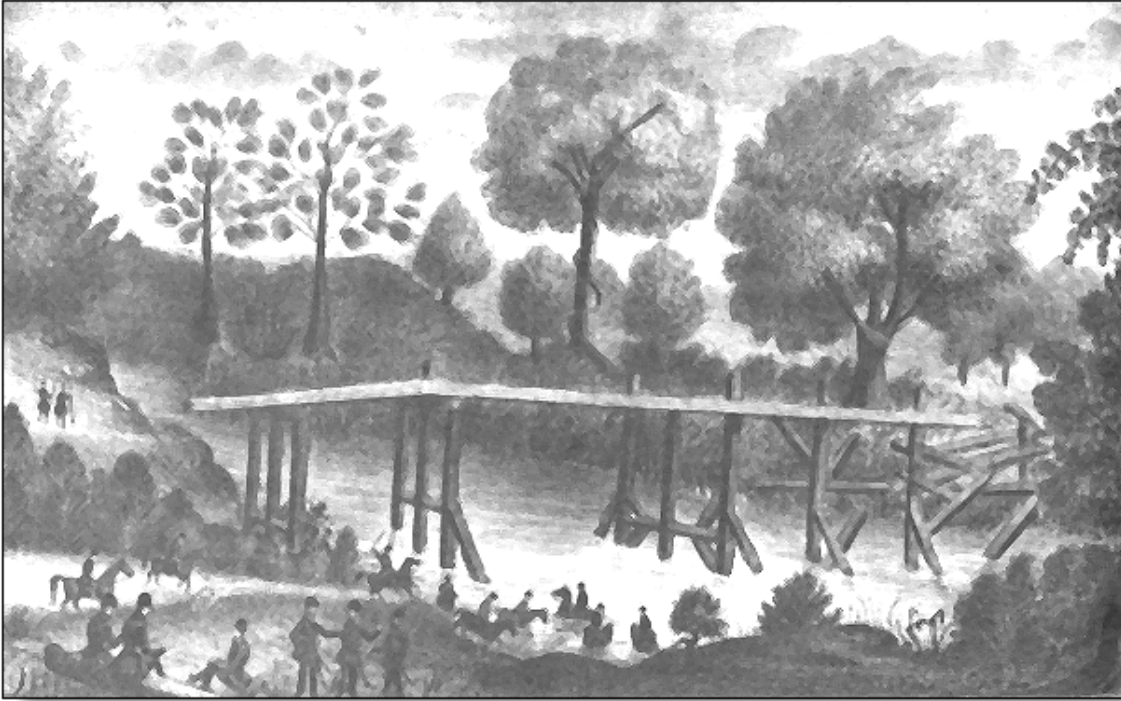
Why was he so worried? Because earlier that summer a group of Indians had been captured, disarmed and horsewhipped by white settlers who contended the Indians had killed some of their cattle. When more Indians arrived, gunfire broke out, three whites were wounded and one Indian killed.

In August a Fort Brooke private carrying mail to Fort King was killed by the Seminoles, his body mutilated and thrown into a pond.

In the thick of the unrest, Belton found communications cut off with Fort King. There was every reason to feel uneasy, disquieted by the assigned mission and apprehensive of an attack on the Tampa outpost, as well.

On Dec. 16, Belton got word that 250 Indians were "lying in wait" for any expedition that might move northward. He was on the verge of sending the only troops he had - two companies, but canceled the plan. He decided to wait again for more help, en route from other areas, including Key West.

At Fort King, Col. Alexander C. W. Fanning believed there were at least 1,000 Seminoles between him and Fort Brooke. In his book, Laumer wrote that Fanning had been trying



-Library of Congress print

A later scene in the Seminole War shows troops at the Withlacoochee River.

to get word through to Tampa, warning how dangerous it would be to send only 100 men on the march.

Then the schooner *Motto* arrived from Key West on Dec. 21, bearing Major Dade and another small detachment of men. Apparently, Belton came to a decision then to fill out the slim ranks with Dade's men and push ahead to fulfill General Clinch's order.

On Wednesday, Dec. 23, 1835, two columns set out - 99 enlisted men, seven officers and a doctor. Belton "was under tremendous pressure to send reinforcements to Fort King," Laumer told me in an interview. "Finally he bowed to his own inner pressure."

There were other subtle pressures as well. Family ties between some of the troops at Fort Brooke and Fort King undoubtedly brought expressions of support such as "We can make it."

Even after sending out the relief expedition, Belton suffered new doubts. Laumer has come across a message sent by courier from Belton to Dade. It reached him on the third day as the march progressed northward of today's Dade City. It carried a crucial question: "Shall you keep on?"

The historian is convinced that if the columns had turned back at that point, the trap would have been sprung immediately. For Seminoles had shadowed every step of the expedition, eagerly waiting for the word to attack.



Frank Laumer (center), William Goza (right) and a USF student (left) marched the same route Dade's troops did

"Indians were jumping around and screaming in the night" as the marchers sought to rest after trudging first to the Little Hillsborough (today's Harney), then to the Big Hillsborough River, where a bridge had been burned and the crossing was a wet one.

Lt. Benjamin Alvord, sent back with a message from Dade telling of the impossibility of towing a six-pounder cannon with oxen, brought messages from two other officers advising how their personal affairs might be settled in the event of their deaths. "They knew they might be doomed," Laumer said.

(Incidentally, when horses were sent to tug the cannon, Captain Gardiner joined the march after all, but he refused Major Dade's offer to take over command at that point. His ill wife had been put aboard the return sailing of the *Motto* to Key West, where better medical assistance was available.)

One desperate hope remained for strengthening Dade's obviously outnumbered men: More troops, under the command of Maj. John Mountford. They were expected momentarily by ship at Fort Brooke. But they finally arrived three days after Dade's departure transport ship bearing some of the men and most of the supplies went astray in the wrong end of Tampa Bay. So any hope of their catching up with the expedition was dashed by fate.

Latimer's account interweaves the information that has emerged on the Indians' plans. Osceola, who had developed as the dominant Seminole militant, was hell-bent upon settling an old score with Gen. Wiley Thompson, the Indian agent stationed at Fort King. (Thompson had placed him in chains during an earlier confrontation.) He wanted to kill Thompson first, before signaling the attack on Dade's marchers.

Impatient Seminoles, trailing the soldiers while waiting for the word, missed several obvious opportunities to ambush at river crossings. "It took Osceola's charisma or whatever to hold them back until he gave the signal," Latimer related. "The Indians were under a kind of control. Osceola had ordered them to keep track of the troops, and they expected him to come down (from the Ocala area) and join them. They were very tempted to knock off the troops, but they held off, wondering where the devil Osceola was."

In the cold December weather, the troops managed to ford the Little Hillsborough, the Big Hillsborough and branches of the Withlacoochee. After crossing the last water obstacle remaining between them and Fort King, Dade and his men felt a false optimism that they had escaped the worst.

"The soldiers had a feeling the bluff had worked," Latimer said. "The first day, they



Reproduction courtesy Historical Association of Southern Florida
Artist Kenneth C. Hughs illustrates the ambush of the soldiers en route to Fort King.

had been really nervous. Then, they became less nervous as they went along."

A chilly drizzle the sixth morning, north of the Little Withlacoochee, brought another decision that added to the disaster ahead. Major Dade permitted the troops to carry their muskets underneath their greatcoats, in order to shield them from the rain. "Dry powder wasn't much use in a wet chamber," Latimer pointed out, but he noted also that the weapons would not be at the ready in case of a surprise attack.

Yet another decision contributed to the impending catastrophe. For some reason, Major Dade chose not to send out "flankers" that Monday morning, Dec. 28, 1835. The men who scouted for signs of trouble on the flanks of the main body were in the main body that day. Yet this was a basic

precaution in the Army's training maneuvers.

Ransom Clark later recalled Dade's words: "Have a good heart. Our difficulties and dangers are over now, and as soon as we arrive at Fort King you'll have three days' rest, and keep Christmas gaily." This was another burst of misplaced optimism, as the troops trudged through tunnellike sawgrass, still 40 miles from Fort King.

As Latimer described what happened next, "a single rifle shot burst the silence." He continued: "Those in the front ranks of the double file who looked to the major gaped in horror. Francis Dade, broad shoulders erect, slumped gently in his saddle like a bag of grain cut in the middle. His elbows, projecting just past his hips as he held the reins, slid forward to his lap, and his black

beard touched the mane of his horse as though in a last brush of affection. His body fell to the side, one black boot dragging across the saddle, silver spur gleaming, and then he was gone - a bullet in his heart and dead before he touched the ground."

The slaughter had started. Darting up from the protective cover of the high grass and palmetto, 180 Indians focused a barrage of gunfire on the troops.

"Surprise was the devastating thing," Latimer commented in the interview. "The men were strung out in the only clearing. They were like ducks in a shooting gallery. The Indians would rise up, take aim, shoot and drop into the grass."

Almost half the contingent was wiped out in the first blasts of gunfire. The stunned survivors fumbled frantically to reach their weapons and tried to take cover behind trees.

The cannoneers at the rear managed to wheel around the six-pounder, aiming blasts of grapeshot cannister wherever they saw an Indian movement. But the Seminoles were concealed and spread out, so the artillery piece proved largely ineffective.

After an hour or so, the first onslaught ended, and the Indians withdrew. The few officers still alive rallied the survivors and they succeeded in chopping down and assembling a makeshift breastwork from medium-sized trees. But this defense seemed to play into the Indians' hands, for it concentrated the outnumbered troops into a relatively small space.

Although the logs provided some protection when the next attack came, the Indians concentrated on the exposed cannoneers,

still firing two rounds a minute, mainly into the pine trees. The 30 soldiers who manned the breastwork were being picked off, one by one.

Among the last to fall was Captain Gardiner, the man originally slated to command the expedition. The firing kept going on and on, with Ransom Clark still aiming his musket despite three wounds. Finally, with a fourth bullet popping into his right shoulder and penetrating a lung, Clark "rolled on his face, lay still," according to Laumer.

When the guns were silenced, Clark "played dead." The Indian leaders, Micanopy, Jumper and Alligator, advanced into the log redoubt picking up weapons and some accouterments.

A grisly scene described by Laumer occurred as the Indians surveyed the white bodies. "A figure suddenly rose up, smeared with blood and yellow teeth bared in a soundless shout," he wrote. "His rising from the dead transfixed the intruders, and while they stared he snatched a rifle from the hand of Jumper's cousin and in a single motion swung it up by the long barrel and back down across the blackhaired skull of the Indian. The heavy butt-plate drove through bone and brains, the momentum sprawling the body into the sand."

The soldier dashed across the log wall, but was soon cut off and shot down by two Indians on horseback.

Of the 180 Indians involved in the attack, only three were counted dead.

After the weapons were collected, the Seminoles turned over the battle area to about 50 blacks, runaway slaves and allies. Clark said they picked up the axes used to fell the trees and used them to chop at the

bodies. "Every throat that moaned was cut, and every heart that beat was stabbed," Laumer wrote.

Ransom Clark was rolled over and robbed of his coat and boots. But his wounds appeared so critical, the scavengers scorned the effort to hack him to death. One last bullet was fired into his shoulder, though.

Clark regained consciousness about 9 o'clock that night, long after the attackers and the plunderers had abandoned the battlefield. Somehow he managed to pull himself within reach of canteens containing water. As he crawled to leave the area, he found a warm body, that of Edwin De Courcy. Able to arouse him, Clark got De Courcy to join him in a tortuous effort to return to Fort Brooke. As they stumbled southward, De Courcy aided the more seriously wounded Clark. But at noon the next day, a single Indian on horseback rode up. Clark took to the underbrush on one side of the road, De Courcy the other. The Indian followed De Courcy and killed him. Clark eluded him, continued his agonized trek to Tampa.

The rugged private from upstate New York made it to safety. Despite debilitating bullet wounds, including a cracked pelvis, he came within a mile of Fort Brooke and collapsed. In the crude hospital of that day, he recovered sufficiently well enough that he was able to join the contingent headed by Gen. Edmund Pendleton Gaines which marched to the battle site two months later.

After the massacre of Dec. 28, 1835, word eventually drifted back that Osceola had struck the same day at Fort King. The Indian agent Gen. Wiley Thompson and several others were killed while eating a meal.

Frank Laumer holds a "deep admiration and respect" for the man he portrays in

reenacting the story of Ransom Clark. Although he has been criticized for having Clark's bones exhumed, he justifies the act by saying it was necessary to confirm Clark's accounts, which had seemed almost incredible.

His escape was "so unbelievable," Latimer said. "With all those other men dead, it seems unbelievable he could have had all those bullets in him and crawled all that distance (about 60 miles)."

Now that the injuries have been confirmed by a disinterested pathologist, Laumer believes there's no room for doubt.

He feels an obligation as well to the rest of the men who died in the Dade Massacre. "I'm concerned about their struggle, and I want to tell it in the most truthful way. They just disappeared, but they ought to be remembered - and they ought to be remembered correctly."

Although the author is doing all in his power to revive the memories of the Army men who died, he makes it plain that his overall sympathies rest with the Seminoles who were being dislodged from their lands.

"Basically, my sympathies and those of any rational observer are with the Indians," he told me. "Between the whites and the Indians, certainly I was with the Indians. They were the injured party in the whole affair. But that doesn't keep one from having sympathy for the men cast into the roles of fighting them."

The lack of a written history from the Indian participants left it "difficult to make much of the battle from the Indian viewpoint," he acknowledged. The oral tradition simply didn't provide much background.

When, in 1962, he and William Goza walked the same road the troops marched in 1835, they met several Seminole Indians brought to the scene by a Miami Herald reporter. When Laumer and Goza asked the Seminoles if they knew any details of the battle, the Indians referred them to their agent, a white man.

Laumer's quest for details is yet unquenched, although he hopes his book revision will benefit by the insights he has gained in recent years.

Although the Dade Massacre gained some attention from the American public at the time it happened, it was overshadowed by another event that occurred two months later in 1835 - the Battle of the Alamo.