A Report On Fort Diego,
Palm Valley
St. Johns County, Florida

by
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Jacksonville, Florida October 20, 1993
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This writer would like to thank the following persons for their kind assistance:

Ms. Sherzad Davidi of the Research Library, St. Augustine Historical Society; Mr. Kevin McCarthy, Fort Frederica National Park; Mr. Charles Potter; Mr. John Simms; and Mr. Frank Tiller for their on-site assistance; Mr. Robert J. Mier of Orangedale, Florida; Mr. Flavian Mickler and Mr. Robert Henson of Palm Valley for their assistance in the matter of local legend.
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ST. JOHNS COUNTY, FLORIDA

Introduction

Fort Diego, an 18th century fortified ranch house located in the Palm Valley Section of St. Johns County, Florida, is featured in histories relative to Northeast Florida.

Since, however, the actual site of this fort has not been established, it shall be the purpose of this report to point out the place where it was likely situated.

In order to bring this report into proper focus, however, it will be necessary first to discuss the activities of "Diego Espinosa," the builder of the fort; second to describe the attack on this fort by General Oglethorpe in 1740; and, last to present documentary and material evidence relative to this place.

At this time, it should be pointed out that the present Palm Valley Section was originally known as "Diego," presumably named after Diego Espinosa. In time, it was called simply, "Dago," and the nearby seashore "Dago Beach."
Don Diego Espinosa, a citizen of St. Augustine, Florida, was best known because of his involvement in a cattle ranch and a military confrontation which occurred at this ranch.

Diego had established this ranch around 1730, in the present Palm Valley Section of St. Johns County. Soon after, he found that it was necessary to enclose the living quarters of the ranch with a wooden palisade in order to protect his workers from the marauding Indians.

The palisade, some 15 feet in height, was equipped with bastions at two corners to protect the curtain walls, but had no outer defenses such as a dry moat.

Later, the Spanish Governor at St. Augustine spared Diego a small detachment of troops, as well as a complement of small cannon. The place then became known as "Fort Diego."

In 1736, an Englishman, Mr. Charles Dempsey, after visiting St. Augustine, requested that he be allowed to return home by land. The Spanish Governor Moral not only gave him permission but furnished him with a guide.

The guide took him to a fort that had been built by Diego Espinosa, and which was defended by five Falconetes. Dempsey and his guide slept one night in the fort, and it seems that Dempsey was the first Englishman who had ever seen this place.

Had it not been for the above events, it is doubtful Diego Espinosa would have ever been known, except as just another citizen of Spanish Florida.
During the first part of the 18th century, Spanish Florida was attacked no less than six times by the English-oriented Georgia and South Carolina Colonies.

In 1702, Colonel James Moore and Colonel Robert Daniel invaded Florida; in 1703, Moore attacked once again; in 1708 Colonel Barnwell invaded Florida; in 1727, Colonel Palmer attacked the territory. All of the above were from the Colony of South Carolina.3

In 1736, General James Oglethorpe of Georgia, invaded Florida, and in 1740, he attacked once again.

On May 9, 1740, he (Oglethorpe) arrived on Fort George Island with a force consisting of around 448 troops and Indians. Crossing over the St. Johns River, the General sent out a group of Indians to reconnoiter the country to the South. The Indians returned late at night and reported the existence of a fort about halfway to St. Augustine.4

On the 10th, in the morning, the General marched out of camp with the entire company and encamped that night at "Lacanela", about 16 miles distance (Figure 2). He then detached Lieutenant Maxwell with a party of regular troops and a group of Indians under a Mr. Brown to invest the fort, it being about 9 miles further.

On the 11th at the break of day, that party attacked it and burnt a house nearby, but the Spanish fired so strongly upon them that they were obliged to retreat.5

About ten in the forenoon, the General came up with the entire body. He then rode around to view the fort, but the Spanish
continued firing until night, when Oglethorpe surrounded the place with sentries.

On the 12th, in the morning, the General sent into the fort a Spanish prisoner with terms for a possible surrender. The garrison agreed to surrender according to the terms set by Oglethorpe. They marched out; the garrison consisted of 50 men, amongst which was Don Diego Espinsoa.

Lieutenants Dunbar and Sausere entered the fort and took possession, finding the place defended with nine Swivel Guns and two carriage mounted Two-Pounders. They then discovered that the fortification was known as "Fort Diego".

The General ordered a ditch to be dug around Fort Diego. Then leaving a few troops to guard the place, he marched South to continue the assault on St. Augustine.

Fort Moosa, located two miles North of St. Augustine, was found to be abandoned and the troops took possession of the place. Later the General placed Colonel Palmer in command.

The General then caused a battery of cannon to be placed on Anastasia Island and began shelling Fort San Marcos.

The gunners complained, however, that each time they fired the guns, the carriages sank into the soft sand, making it necessary to realign the pieces before firing again.

On June 15, 1740, the Spanish managed to recapture Fort Moosa, killing Colonel Palmer and a number of his men. The remainder of these escaped and found their way back to Fort Diego.

On July 16, 1740, Oglethorpe began to withdraw from Florida and on reaching the St. Johns River, learned that Fort Diego had not been burned, but left intact.

In March, 1743, or three years after Oglethorpe's invasion of
Florida, Mr. Edward Kimber traveled into Northeast Florida and tells of passing the site of Fort Diego:

"At three we arrived at the place, where formerly the house of Don Diego Espinosa stood, which was garrisoned by the Spaniards, and is commonly known by the name Fort Diego. . . There are still some ruins of it left, as a great cross, trench, and slaughter-house for cattle . . . it was quite deserted."

Judging from Kimber's comments above, one can conclude that Diego Espinosa abandoned his cattle ranch after Oglethorpe's invasion.
THE SITE OF FORT DIEGO

Documentary Evidence

Diego Espinosa, a citizen of St. Augustine, was married to Josefa Torres. Diego and Josefa had two known children, a son, Sebastian, and a daughter, Josefa.

In 1797, Josefa, the daughter, wrote her Will at which time she was identified as "Josefa de la Encarnacion Espinosa." In this Will she assigns her nephews, Jose Sanchez and Francisco Xavier Miranda, as her Administrators of her estate.

At that time her estate consisted of the "San Ramon Plantation," and the plantation called "Fuerte de San Diego" (Fort Diego). She had received these properties as grants from the Spanish Government in 1793.

In her Will Josefa bequeathed half of her estate to her brother, Sebastian, and the remainder to her several nephews. In 1819, these heirs sold the Fort Diego tract to Philip Solano, who in turn sold to Anna Pons (Figure 1).

Andres Papy now enters the picture when he acquired this tract, although it is not quite clear as to how he managed this acquisition. In 1824, however, he is asking the U. S. Land Office to confirm to him the 126 acres at the place known by the name of the Fort of San Diego, North of St. Augustine (Figure 4).

The next person known to have acquired the Fort Diego tract was Antonio G. Mier. Again, how or when Mr. Mier fell heir to the Fort Diego Plantation is not known. The time element is not really important to this report since it is known that Mier controlled this tract from sometime in the 19th century until 1949, when it was sold to Flavian Mickler, the present owner.
Material Evidence

During the early 1950's, this writer recovered, immediately North of the tract, an object that appeared to be a hollow explosive round shot. Later a similar fragment was found at the site of San Francisco de Pupa, which was also attacked by Oglethorpe in 1740.

At first, this fragment was thought to also be the remains of an explosive round shot. They were later, however, identified as the remains of hand grenades. Complete grenades of this type may be seen on display at "Fort Frederica National Park," St. Simons Island, Georgia (Figure 3). General Oglethorpe launched his attack on Spanish Florida from this place.

As he stated earlier in this report, the Mier family controlled at least part of Section 42 from the 1900's until 1949, when it was acquired by Mr. Flavian Mickler.

Mr. Robert J. Mier, now of Orangedale, Florida, said that his father was born on Section 42 in 1889, and often told him that he had found several round cannon shot while ploughing his field, immediately West of the Palm Valley Road.

Mr. Robert Henson, Jr., another old resident of the Palm Valley Section, said that as a young boy in 1918, he found a half buried cast iron cannon (Figure 3) in the woods East of their place, this being around 1200 feet from the Palm Valley Road (Figure 1). The cannon, which was rather small, was later moved to the Henson Place, and at yet a later date was placed on exhibit in a store window on Bay Street in Jacksonville. Mr. Henson still has on hand a copy of an article which appeared in a Jacksonville newspaper relative to the cannon.

Mr. Henson was kind enough to point out to this writer, the spot where the gun had been found. This writer, in the company of Mr. Charles Potter, searched the area thoroughly, but found no
evidence that would relate to a complex such as Diego Espinosa's Cattle Ranch and Fort.

A short distance from the place where the cannon was found, however, the site of a late 19th century dwelling was detected. Henson said it was the former home of the "Isaac Silcox" family who occupied this place around 1900.

Assuming the cannon originally came from the site of Fort Diego, a mile and a quarter to the South on the Mier place, how and when did it manage to reach the Silcox property.

In a later conversation with Mr. Robert J. Mier, the mystery was solved somewhat. Mier stated that his mother was the daughter of Isaac Silcox and Isaac was his grandfather. It seems only too obvious that the cannon was given to Silcox by the Miers, as a gift to a family member.

Mr. Henson also told this writer that as a small boy, he and friends often played with several small round shot that were found on the place. Quite likely these are the same cannon shot that Mr. Mier had found in his field. These shot were probably given to Isaac Silcox along with the cannon.

A photograph of the cannon appears in Figure 3 in this report. It is a type of small cast iron cannon, 30 inches in length, and around 150 pounds in weight. It is identified as a Two-Pounder "Falconete" carriage mounted.

Since this Falconete was found in the area near to the site of Fort Diego, there can be no doubt but it is one of the two carriage mounted guns mentioned in Oglethorpe's report.13
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

When Olgethorpe's troops attacked Fort Diego in May, 1740, they undoubtedly were surprised at the intense gun fire they were subjected to, and which prompted them to retreat to a safe distance.

Under normal circumstances, the chances are they would not have met with this sort of resistance. It seemed the Spanish Governor in St. Augustine, had spared Diego Espinosa a sergeant and 16 men who were relieved weekly by the same number. It so happened the relieving party came there the night before the Fort was invested.

Therefore, the Fort was defended by 32 regular troops, along with workers, totaling 50 men. The garrison, armed with nine Swivel Guns, the two-pounder Falconetes and an assortment of small arms, it would have been foolhardy for the attackers to attempt a frontal assault, especially if the Fort Swivel Guns were loaded with grape shot.

As reported earlier in this report, Oglethorpe arrived on the scene and the next day managed to negotiate a surrender, at which time the garrison marched out, along with Don Diego Espinosa.

In conclusion, the tract of land that has been referred to in the Spanish Land Grants as "Fort San Diego" is identified today as "Section 42, Township 4 South, Range 29 East", and is located immediately West of the present Palm Valley Road, at a point one-half mile South of the Palm Valley Landing Road (Figure 1).

The question now arises as to whether Section 42 represents the actual site of San Diego. It seems likely since the tract was referred to by the name "Fort Diego" in 1793, only 53 years after Oglethorpe's attack, and also referred to as late as 1824, when Andres Papy asked the U. S. Land Office to confirm the property to him (Figure 4).

Another bit of evidence that lends credence to the above theory, is the fact that General Oglethorpe stated several times that
from Fort Diego to the "Landing," was three miles. This writer checked the distance and found it to be precisely three miles.

Therefore, in view of the evidence that has been presented in this report, one may conclude that Section 42, immediately West of Palm Valley Road, represents the site of Don Diego Espinosa's Cattle Ranch and Fort.
Figures:

Sub-Castella

FLORIDA

A PLAN of the Town, Castle, and Harbour,

ST. AUGUSTINE,

(and the adjacent Coast of FLORIDA)

with the Disposition of the Forces in the Expedition, under General Oglethorpe,

in the Year 1740.

Island S. Anastasia.
A Two-Pounder Falconete found in Palm Valley, thought to be from Fort Diego.

Grenades exhibited at Fort Frederica. Fragments of this type found at the sites of Fort Diego and San Francisco de Pupa.

Figure 3
TO THE
HONOURABLE THE COMMISSIONERS,
APPOINTED TO ASCERTAIN CLAIMS AND TITLES TO LANDS IN EAST FLORIDA.

The Petition of Andrew Paffy

Respectfully sheweth:

That your Memorialist claims title to a tract of land consisting of one hundred sixty acres, situated at a place known by the name of the fort of San Diego in the month of August, bounded as follows:

Beginning at a marked tree, thence 50 chains to a point, thence 110.88 chains 50 links to a line thence 20.10.35 chains to a point, thence 47.84 chains, to a point, thence 150 chains this line for the lands of Francis Dancer known by the name of the Island, thence North 41 chains to the beginning. The same was sold by a patent of Governor White in virtue of the Royal Order of 24th October 1830, who sold the same to Philip Stilson from the heirs of Said Dancer, and sold again to Andrew Paffy, said Stilson as will be shown by a certificate of conveyance hereunto presented and dated the 7th day of October 1836. Said Patent is filed in the office of Public Archives.

And your Memorialist further sheweth, that he is legally in possession of said lands, and was so before the appearance of this Secretary to the United States.

Figure 4.

That he is a citizen of the United States and resident of East Florida. All of which is respectfully submitted to

Andrew Paffy.
REFERENCES

1. Diego Espinosa, Events in Florida in 1737, Florida Herald Southern Democrat, (St. Augustine, Florida: January 17, 1839).

2. Ibid.


5. Ibid., p 18.


8. Ibid., p 68.


11. Ibid., p 65.

12. Personal Communication with Mr. Robert J. Mier, Orangedale, Florida.