

POLK COUNTY: EARLY HISTORY OF FORT MEADE

The following history was prepared by Mr. Max Reif. He had the first telephone company and hotel at Fort Meade. It is contributed by Mr. Mabry Carlton of Wauchula, Florida.

Fort Meade has a history dating back almost a century - long before the white man's feet trod the ground. Its site was an Indian camp. There are still traces in old fields of their cultivation. Their main crops seem to have been corn and tobacco. The bluffs overlooking Peace River, which afforded them an unobstructed outlook for miles in every direction, the country on both sides of the river being bare of timber, were a favorite spot for their meetings and conferences with the chiefs of other tribes. Many a pow-wow has been held there and even as late as the year 1858, at the end of the last Indian war in Florida, Bowlegs, the chief of the Seminoles, on this very spot, smoked the pipe of Peace with General Scott of the U. S. Army. Up to only a few years ago, the oak under which these representatives of two races so much differing from each other in their views, one standing for the past, the other for the future, for progress and civilization, still stood high and proud, a shining mark and sentinel; but alas: the vandalism of time and the march of an exacting civilization proved too much for the "Peace Oak" and the sturdy tree has joined the sturdy sons of a heroic race in the happy hunting grounds.

And into this section, before it had a name even, a veritable paradise of grazing lands, fertile acres, plenty of running streams stocked with brim, perch, bass, drum, channel catfish, the woods peopled with all sorts of wild game: deer, quail, turkeys, bear, wolves, catamounts, ducks & bees, virtually overflowing with "milk and honey", came the white settlers. The first ones of whom there is a record, were Capt. F. A. Hendry, who is still living in Lee County, and Lewis Lanier; the former settled on the banks of a creek 2 miles north of here and which today yet bears the name of Hendry Creek. Lewis Lanier, who is now dead many years leaving many descendents, amongst them a granddaughter the late Mrs. Stephen M. Sparkman, set out an orange grove on the banks of Peace River, which was already bearing fruit in 1851 when the U. S. Government established a fort here and named the site "Fort Meade", thus honoring for his valient services a subaltern officer, Lt. Meade, who rose to the commander-in-chief of the U. S. Armies during the Civil War. To make this country accessible, to open communication with the outer world, for the purpose of hauling their ammunition, guns & their supplies, the troops built a road, as straight as the bird flies from Tampa to Fort Meade and beyond to other forts south on both sides of the river. Many sections of this road are still in existence and frequent use, after over 80 years they still testify to the thoroughness of the work done, and serve as a model and example to our modern roadbuilders.

After the coming of the troops, safeguarding them from the depredations of the Indians, there was an influx of white men, mainly from the upper part of the state and from southern Georgia. Some of these sturdy pioneers, who entered an unknown region, a hostile wilderness, where they were to have many a bloody encounter with their red foes and rivals for the land of a modern Canaan, and even some of them losing their lives in defense of their homes and their families, were George W. Hendry, Marion Hendry, Willoughby Tillis, Thomas Underhill, J. L. Skipper, Streaty Parker & brothers, William McCullough, Robert Prine, William Brooker, John H. Hollingsworth, the Whiddens, the Carltons, all of whom left many descendents who today rank amongst the best men and women in a community noted for its standing for law and order, for morality and intelligence, for thrift and prosperity, for progress and improvements.