

LEE COUNTY: EARLY DAYS IN FORT MYERS

About 1908, Capt. Francis Asbury Hendry, pioneer of the Fort Myers area, wrote a short booklet about that vicinity of south Florida entitled, A HISTORY OF THE EARLY DAYS IN FORT MYERS. F. A. Hendry was the son of James E. Hendry and Lydia Carlton. Mrs. Frances Kay Hendry of North Fort Myers has contributed a copy of that history.

The first historical account we have of Fort Myers is when it was occupied by the United States military on November 4, 1841. It was abandoned March 21, 1842, being occupied but a few months. The place was named then in honor of Lieutenant John H. Harvie, who had died, probably from campaign exposure, about two months before the place was occupied. From 1842 to 1850 there was nothing known of the place and it appears that it was almost forgotten.

It was February 14, 1850, when General Twiggs ordered Major Ridgely to take command of two companies of regular soldiers and proceed to the mouth of the Caloosahatchee, ascend that river and select the most eligible point on its southern bank and establish a military post, clear away the forest, fortify, unfurl Old Glory to the breeze, and to name the place Fort Myers, in honor of Colonel Abraham C. Myers, a distinguished veteran of the Mexican War and at that time the chief quartermaster of the war department of Florida. This officer, when the war between the states in 1861 became inevitable, like the beloved Robert E. Lee, resigned his commission and cast his lot with the destiny of South Carolina, his native State, and was lost sight of.

While we have lost sight of Colonel Myers, a monument has been erected to his memory in the promising little town of Fort Myers, more to be appreciated than marble and stone. The place selected by Major Ridgely, under orders of General Twiggs, was the old site of Fort Harvie, and re-occupied and given a new name, as above stated. Fort Myers, for eight years, was occupied by the military of the United States, and was the scene of much activity on lines of Indian warefare and Indian migration to the far west.

It was at Fort Myers that Colonel Rector, United States Indian agent, with his delegation of friendly Indians from Arkansas, induced the fearless and indomitable Billy Bowlegs to yield to the scepter of Uncle Sam and turn his back upon his native home, the wilds of Florida, and, with the most of his tribe, migrate to the far west, never to return. That big chief was not scared into the terms offered by Uncle Sam, but he could, savage as he was, read the handwriting upon the wall and interpret correctly. The days of his glory had departed and he gracefully accepted the inevitable.

Then it was that, about June 1, 1858, Fort Myers was abandoned by the United States forces. In 1859 the Fort was occupied by a civil force, an incorporated company from Virginia, under the management of Major James Evans, whose object was to engage in the culture of fruits and in all kinds of plants common to the tropics and this latitude. Many slaves were brought down from Virginia for the purpose of clearing the lands and improving the, fitting them for that promising industry. The great war between the States caused the abandonment of this project, and the place, in line with its eventful history, was again abandoned and became an uninhabited wilderness, exposed to fire and general devastation.

Four years after, and while the destiny of our country was trembling in the scale of uncertainty, the Federal soldiers took possession of Fort Myers and made it headquarters for all manner of mischief common to warfare. Frequent and destructive raids were made far into the interior and into Confederate lines, causing much distress to the devotees of the Southern cause. Large herds of cattle were rounded up by Federal cavalry and driven to Fort Myers and there slaughtered for use by the garrison