JESUP'S STRATEGY,
THE FOUNDING OF
FORT LAUDERDALE
AND THE ROLE OF
LIEUTENANT COLONEL
JAMES BANKHEAD

by JOE KNETSCH

The founding of Fort Lauderdale has always held fascination for the historians of Broward County. Dr. Cooper Kirk became so interested that he worked many years researching and writing the biography of Major William Lauderdale that remains the standard work on the subject. Kenneth Hughes has written well on the campaigns that led to the founding of the fort(s) named for the major, and added greatly to our knowledge of the episodes which culminated in the final campaigns against the Seminoles in southeastern Florida. Nevertheless there remain several unknown factors in the founding of the original fort on New River, and confusion in the primary documents intensifies these mysteries. The following will attempt to penetrate some of these unknowns and bring to light some of the little-known players in the drama of the founding of Fort Lauderdale, especially Lieutenant Colonel James Bankhead.

The context of the founding of the forts along Florida's Atlantic coast has been explored in depth by Kenneth Hughes in his earlier pieces on the Second Seminole War in south Florida. Briefly stated, Hughes points out that the fortifications were constructed as the troops of General Thomas Jesup moved south to attempt to capture the forces of Sam Jones and other Miccosukee and Seminole leaders. He also correctly argues that Jesup's movements were coordinated with those of forces sent up the Caloosahatchee River under Persifor Smith and those coming down the Kissimmee under Zachary Taylor. A fourth column of soldiers, mostly Florida militia and other volunteers, was led by Colonel Joseph Hernandez and combed the grounds.

In late 1837, Major General Thomas Sidney Jesup, commanding United States troops in Florida, designed and launched a campaign intended to force the Seminoles into the southern tip of the peninsula where they could presumably be surrounded and captured. Jesup's campaign, stretching over the winter and spring of 1838, resulted in the Second Seminole War's first large scale military operations in south Florida and the establishment of a number of army posts, including Fort Lauderdale. Although Major William Lauderdale is remembered as the founder of the fort named in his honor, the man primarily responsible for carrying out Jesup's plans in the New River area was the major's successor, Lieutenant Colonel James Bankhead, a capable officer whose activities in what is today Broward County have been largely overlooked.

In this article, former Broward County Historical Commissioner and frequent Broward Legacy contributor Joe Knetisch examines Fort Lauderdale's significance and Bankhead's role in Jesup's campaign. Dr. Knetisch is currently historian with the State of Florida's Department of Environmental Protection in Tallahassee.
between the Atlantic Ocean and the St. Johns River. These converging columns were designed to entrap the Indians in southeastern Florida and prevent them from attacking settlements to the north. The movements of these troops and the establishment of posts to provide shelter and storage facilities for them provides the broad context for the construction of the fort on New River.

A more detailed look at the troops involved and the correspondence of the leaders show that the planning and execution of these movements was very intricate from the outset. General Jesup, as quartermaster general for the U.S. Army, devised the plan of attack and sought to bring it to fruition in the campaign of 1837-38. The success of the operation depended upon proper reinforcements, well-executed tactical movements, and timely deliveries of troops and supplies to the required destinations. In true Burnsian fashion, these plans often went awry. Instead of the steady, metered, rhythmic arrival of men and supplies, the general experienced the frustration of seeing his plans sink with the boats in the Jupiter Inlet, while the boats ordered specifically for this mission arrived from the St. Johns piecemeal, when they arrived at all. Forage for the animals lagged woefully behind schedule. And, to add further insult, the men suffered greatly for want of shoes and thus could not march further south in pursuit of the enemy after the Battle of the Loxahatchee. Few things could have frustrated a general of Jesup's caliber and background more thoroughly than the inability of the suppliers to get goods to the front.

Problems with the specially built boats, ordered from Philadelphia and New York, arose almost as soon as the troops left Fort Mellon. In December of 1837, Jesup wrote, "In relation to the boats at Fort Mellon, which you supposed were ready for service when the troops moved, General Eustis informed me this morning that Lieut. Collins had reported to him that not more than six of them were serviceable. Let the large Macinac [sic.] boats be sent up—the bulwark boats. We shall have to rely on oars and poles for our supplies." To understand the supply problem in some depth, it will be useful to explain what was entailed in establishing a forward depot for operations against the Indians of Florida. In a letter of January 2, 1838, two months prior to the founding of Fort Lauderdale, General Jesup wrote to Lieutenant C. O. Collins, the assistant quartermaster for the troops operating in Florida at that time, detailing the needs of such a post:

The accompanying list of Articles should be provided and kept at the advanced depot.

I have ordered Major Brant to send one hundred and fifty packsaddles—this will leave two hundred and fifty to be provided for.

... Memorandum of articles required to be kept on hand at an advanced depot, a copy sent to Major Whiting with the foregoing letter, viz;

400 Cast Steel Axes
2 dozen hand hatchets,
500 pounds double 10d nails,
2000 horse shoes, with nails,
20 iron wedges,
200 pounds of spikes
20 Broad Axes
20 Froes
6 Crosscut saws,
6 dozen crosscut saw files,
3 sets of Black Smiths tools complete,
12 iron wedges,
20 coils of Rope for packing,
2 dozen drawing Knives,
1" Grind Stones, half fine,

1837 military map of peninsular Florida, showing the relatively unexplored state of the southern portion of the territory when Jesup began his campaign.
half coarse,
800 packing Bags,
400 Blankets for Pack
Saddles
2 Dozen Nail Harnesses,
6 in Giblets assorted,
[number blurred] Hand
saws
100 [illegible] files,
1 in Foot Adzes . . .

And this listing reflects only
half the articles named. Other items
of note included wood rasps, augers,
2,000 pounds of iron, chisels, “2 Large
Ferry Ropes,” scythes, oakum, caulking
irons, cane knives, “400 pack-
saddles,” pitch for boats, and, finally,
“Tarpaulins to cover stores at all tem-
porary advanced posts.”

The amount of planning and execu-
tion to get these materials to the
front lines was considerable. Conside-
ring all of the possible hazards to
travel and communication during the
campaign, it is a tribute to the
Quartermaster’s Corps that any post
was successfully established. When
one considers that this campaign was
designed to encircle the enemy in
southern Florida by creating a num-
ber of posts out of which to operate,
the enormity of the task becomes
apparent.

The immediate cause of the estab-
lishment of Fort Lauderdale as an
advanced post was the frequency of
reports that Sam Jones was en-
camped at the headwaters of New
River. General Jesup related that
another reason a New River post was
needed was the murder of two sol-
diers on the river during a recognized
truce. As Jesup reported:

Major Lauderdale had been
detached with a company of the
3rd artillery, and two hundred
Tennessee volunteers, to explore
the country south, and to estab-
lish a post at New river. Previ-
ous to his arrival there, two of our
people had been killed by some of
Toskegee’s warriors. We were
then in the midst of a truce; the
Indians were afterwards cap-
tured, and the property of
the murdered men found upon them.
Hearing from the Indians who
had come in, that Appiaicca [Sam
Jones] was in the everglades near

New river, I ordered General
Eustis to proceed to that point
with additional force; but, in con-
sequence of depredations com-
mitted by the Indians in Middle
Florida, his destination was
changed, and he was sent to the
northern frontier of the Territory;
and Lieut. Colonel Bankhead,
with a strong detachment of the
1st and 4th artillery, was ordered
to New river.

Jesup’s report leaves out the de-
tail that prior to the appointment of
Lieutenant Colonel James
Bankhead, Lieutenant Colonel Ben-
jamin F. Pierce was to have set up
the advance post south of Fort Jupi-
ter. However, Pierce was incapaci-
tated at the time, and Bankhead re-
ceived the assignment.

Lieutenant Colonel James
Bankhead, the man who was to join
Lauderdale on New River, was an
experienced officer with service dat-
ing back to June of 1808. A native of
Virginia, he saw extensive service in
the War of 1812, rising to the rank of
colonel during that conflict. He re-
mained in the regular U.S. Army as
a captain of infantry following the
war, but was soon breveted to major
of artillery on December 2, 1815.
Bankhead was no stranger to Florida;
he had been in charge of United
States forces at Amelia Island when
the pirate Luis Aury was expelled in
1818, and had retained control over
Fernandina until the end of U.S. oc-
cupation. This command also en-
gaged him in the defense of Lieu-
tenant Frederick Griffith, who was sued
for seizing slaves at Fernandina
while under Bankhead’s command.
Bankhead was promoted to lieu-
tenant colonel on April 26, 1832, and
assigned to the Fourth Artillery at
that time. As noted in Jesup’s re-
port, cited above, it was while serv-
ing with the Fourth Artillery that he
was ordered to the command on New
River.

There can be little doubt that
the first official army post established
on New River was the camp founded
by Major William Lauderdale. How-
ever, some question remains as to
whether this post was initially a
“camp” or a “fort.” The diary of Cap-
tain Robert Anderson offers the best
evidence as to the nature of the evol-
ution of this position when he called
the place “Fort Lauderdale” on March
6, 1838. That this was Jesup’s inten-
tion is made clear by the general’s
Special Order No. 74, dated March
16, “The new post established on New
River...will be called Fort Lar-
dale.” Yet, until the picketing was
commenced on April 11, every other
reference in Anderson’s diary is to
“Camp Lauderdale.”

Kenneth Hughes has noted that
when Lieutenant Levin Powell’s na-
Major General Thomas Sidney Jesup (left) and Lieutenant Colonel James Bankhead (Bankhead portrait courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).

val command joined Lauderdale he established “Camp Powell” on the south bank of the New River. A letter from General Jesup to Major Lauderdale dated March 3, 1838, while the latter’s command was still en route from Fort Jupiter, indicates that from the outset the general considered whatever facility the major would establish to be an official post. Jesup wrote, “I learn from Capt. Webster that a number of Indians, principally women and children, are in the vicinity of New River. I wish you to communicate with them, and require them to encamp near your post on the River.” As noted earlier, Jesup’s official report indicated that Lauderdale had been sent to New River with the expressed intention of establishing an official post. Nevertheless, on March 28, Lieutenant Colonel Bankhead was ordered to cut off direct use by the Indians of the old cootie and hunting grounds on New River by establishing his command further upriver, implying that the location of Lauderdale’s camp was not satisfactory:

Colonel,

The Major General commanding has received your letter of the 25th instant reporting your operations against that party of Indians at the head of New River and in the Everglades. He directs me to say that he desires you will take a position with your command as high up the river as possible in order that as much as practicable to narrow their limits and prevent them from re-occupying the main land. If they can be kept to the glades and be prevented from hunting and the opportunity of making Countee, it is hoped that the want of subsistence will soon drive them to listen to the terms prescribed them. The command will remain in the position which you may select until further orders, which will be duly communicated.

The question that arises from this letter is, did Bankhead establish a new post up-river from that created by Lauderdale? Unfortunately, the Anderson diary, which contains a sketch of the fortification and describes the location as one eighth of a mile above “Cooly’s patch,” mentions no other post or encampment which could be construed as a different location for Fort Lauderdale.

A final clue to this mystery can be had from the fact that Jesup’s March 28 letter preceded the replacement of Bankhead by Lieutenant Colonel William S. Harney by only three days. The letter directing Harney to Fort Lauderdale is dated March 31, 1838, and the Anderson diary indicates that Harney arrived on April 2. Anderson indicates no further movement of the post from its original position, and no letter from Harney has been found to signify a change of location from that first established by Major Lauderdale. Therefore, despite Jesup’s suggestion to the contrary, one can logically conclude that the position of Fort Lauderdale did not change from that established by the man for whom it was named.

Thus, it was from the original site of the fort that Lieutenant Colonel Bankhead led his forces into the Everglades to tangle with the Indians in the Battle of Pine Island. As the “Skirmish at Pine Island” has been discussed in earlier editions of the Broward Legacy, there is little need to cover it here.

However, returning to General Jesup’s overall strategy, it can be seen that the intended purpose of having Bankhead establish his command higher up the river was to cut off supplies of cootie and game to the Indians. When looked at in its broadest context, this strategy is in keeping with the concept of containing the Indians within the confines of the Everglades. Once the ring of fortifications and depots was established, Jesup envisioned a general squeezing of the Indians from all fronts. Troops from Persifor Smith’s column, established at Fort Center on Fisheating Creek and at Fort Keais near the Big Cypress, would push the enemy south and east into the waiting arms of the troops from the southeast coast and guard the escape routes to the Big Cypress and other western south Florida haunts. Colonel Zachary Taylor’s forces would push down the Kissimmee to control the northern and eastern shores of Lake Okeechobee from Fort Bassinger and Fort McRae. Any movement of the enemy to the south would be intercepted by troops under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Lawson from his post on Cape Sable or by forces stationed at Fort Dallas on the Miami River. In this respect, the little engagement at Pine Island takes on a much more important aspect than generally recognized be-
cause it forced the Indians under Sam Jones to retreat from the coast, where they could receive supplies, and pushed them deeper into the Everglades, where the army thought it was establishing an entrapment.

Bankhead was well aware of his commander’s concepts. On March 29, 1838, he wrote:

I enclose an important sketch of the country between the Hillsboro and Miami River... If the Indians driven from Pine Island have gone north west toward Okeechobee, it would be absolutely impossible to pursue them in that direction, but if they have gone south, which I shall soon ascertain, I will pursue them; and at the same time advise Lt. Col. Lawson at Cape Sable of it with the directions to him to move with his command northerly. I shall hear from Hallek Hadjo on his return in what direction they have gone.18

This idea of pushing the Indians further into the Everglades, and either starving them out or driving them into the arms of the awaiting troops from surrounding posts was well communicated by Jesup to his subordinates, and they attempted to carry this plan into full operation. Unfortunately for the general, the Indians were more adaptive to their situation than he anticipated and much more elusive than ever conceived. No matter how hard Jesup’s subordinates, including Bankhead, Lauderdale, Smith, and Taylor, tried, they could not force the Indian foe into some preconceived corner where all resistance was futile.

As early as March 30, 1838, Jesup was beginning to realize the futility of attempting to corner the Indians in the Everglades. In one of the more telling letters in the adjutant general’s correspondence, Jesup wrote to Colonel W. I. Mills:

Colonel,

... The war will continue, how long is uncertain, but at all events, until the whole race of Seminoles be exterminated; for while a warrior remains we have him to fight.

I do not believe the enemy can ever concentrate again, they are broken and dispersed, and if we can prevent all intercourse between them and the white population, or rather the blacks and the Spanish fishermen, and thus cut off their supplies of ammunition and clothing, they may ultimately be destroyed if we cannot pick them up.

I think a corps of Rangers should be raised in Florida of about six companies. They should be mounted and stationed at convenient distances from each other along the frontier. They should be kept in constant motion, never allowing the enemy to rest for a moment. This corps should be raised entirely in Florida and the southern counties of Georgia, it should be raised for the war, and each man should in addition to his pay and emoluments, be allowed a quarter section of land in receiving an honorable discharge after the termination of the war. I wish you would see your Delegate on this subject. I will write to him in a few days.19

The thinking reflected in the above statement can be readily identified with that shared by Senator Thomas Hart Benton and other expansionists who were to formulate the Armed Occupation Act of 1842 a little over four years later. By 1842, Jesup was back in Washington and William J. Worth commanded the troops in Florida, where he was busy recruiting forces to settle along the frontier of the peninsula. The “Delegate” referred to in Jesup’s above quotation was none other than David Levy Yulee, whose work on behalf of the Armed Occupation Act has long been recognized.

Jesup’s thinking about a possible war of extermination also re-
fllected the reality of frontier Florida. The long, harsh, and brutal Second Seminole War became the longest and most expensive in both casualties and costs of any Indian war in American history. The vicious nature of the war, the constant attacks, ambushes, and ruthless killing of women and children by both sides took a toll on the collective psyche. The push for the removal of the Seminoles and their allies continued into a Third Seminole War which lasted an additional three years, from 1855 to 1858.

One of the men lucky enough to escape the confines and brutality of Florida was Lieutenant Colonel James Bankhead. Rising to the rank of full colonel in July of 1838, he was cited for meritorious conduct in relation to his Florida career. Although passed over for promotion early in his career, being labelled, "an intelligent man, but not a good officer," he soon found himself on the southwestern frontier. By March of 1847 he had been promoted to brigadier general and was cited for gallantry and meritorious service during General Winfield Scott's campaigns in the Mexican War. During the Vera Cruz operation, Bankhead was part of Scott's "little cabinet," along with Colonel Joseph Totten, Lieutenant Colonel Ethan Allen Hitchcock, and a young captain of engineers named

Robert E. Lee. Bankhead's service included administrative care of Cordoba and Vera Cruz, where he distinguished himself as an able and very efficient administrator, whose fairness under wartime conditions even won praise from the Mexicans forced to endure the conquest. General James Bankhead did not have to endure the anguish experienced by many of his Mexican and Florida War compatriots during the American Civil War. He died on November 11, 1856, widely respected and beloved by his fellow officers.

2. Ibid. See part 1, page 39 for Hughes' discussion of this specific campaign.
3. The majority of correspondence regarding this campaign is found in "Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series), 1822-1860, Record Group 94, Roll 167, I-J, 1-90, National Archives Microcopy 567, Washington, D.C., 1964. The most telling letter concerning the supply of shoes to the troops, sent by General Jesup to Lieutenant Powell on January 28, 1838, states: "In consequence of more than four hundred of the foot troops being without shoes, and General Eustis having expressed the opinion that the greater part of them would be entirely disabled by the saw palmetto, in forty-eight hours, I have been compelled to postpone my movement south until a supply of shoes be obtained, or until the first regiment return, when all the men who have shoes will be put in march." From here on out, this correspondence will be referred to as LRAG, with names of the correspondents, date of letter, and roll number.
10. Heitman, Historical Register, 189.
12. Hughes, "Warriors From the Sea," part 1, 42.

17. Anderson, "Diary," 13-15; and LRAG, Roll 167. A thorough search of this correspondence found no further reference to a move of the fort site.
21. Heitman, Historical Register, 189.
23. Heitman, Historical Register, 189.