

Options:[-Early History](#)

(Online Book)

[-Johnsons, The](#)

(Online Books)

Early Settlers of the Big Bend**The Early History of the Big Bend Country
of the St. Marys River of Georgia and Florida****By John A. Outterson**

About the Author:

Dr. Outterson is the proud husband of Viva Jean Johnson of St. George, Georgia. She is a descendent of John Jackson Johnson and his wife, Elizabeth Douglas; early settlers of the Big Bend Country. John Jackson Johnson, in keeping with his Scottish heritage, bravely conquered the wilderness and established a foothold in the Big Bend Country. He served in the Indian Wars and in the early 1840s settled in Traders Hill, Georgia. In 1858, he moved his family across the St Marys River to Nassau County, after he acquired the Spanish Land Grant of Charles Love. John proudly answered Georgia's call to arms and served the Confederate States of America. John was one of early strong-willed pioneers who inspired the people to develop the beautiful Big Bend Country of Georgia and Florida.

Copyright 1998

DeLand, Florida

All Rights Reserved

Permission granted by the author to reprint this book in its entirety on this website, The Crypt, <http://www.camdencounty.org>

Permission granted in person in October of 1999.

[BEGIN]

The Big Bend Country of the St. Marys River is formed by the meandering of the St. Marys River the boundary between southeast Georgia and northeast Florida. The river empties into the Atlantic Ocean at Fernandina Beach but a few miles upriver, the river turns repeatedly forming a big bend. From the ocean the river travels northwest, after a few miles inland turns sharply southward, a few miles later it turns sharply westward and some miles later turns northward to its headwaters in the western part of the great Okefenokee Swamp. The land area on both sides of this big bend of the St. Marys River is called the Big Bend Country and is located in Charlton and western Camden Counties, Georgia and western Nassau and Baker Counties, Florida.

The Big Bend Country of the St. Marys River has a very rich and colorful history. Many of the descendants of the early pioneer families that settled this territory are current residents of the area. Their ancestors were the strong-hearted pioneers who tamed the wilderness, fought the Indians, and cleared and cultivated the land. The tenacity and dedication of these early settlers led to the exploration, opening, development, growth, and progress of the Big Bend Country and contributed greatly to the development of modern Georgia and Florida. To appreciate the contributions of these early pioneers and those who followed, it is necessary to understand the trials and tribulations they experienced in the growth and development of the beautiful Big Bend Country of the St. Marys River.

Ponce de Leon was thought to be the first European to explore the southeastern coast of the North American continent when in 1513 he landed near the present site of St. Augustine. He had been commissioned by the King of Spain to conquer and claim territory in the name of Spain. It is quite possible that previously Europeans had explored the southern coastline. Some think that John Cabot in 1497 sailed down the Atlantic coast possibly as far as Florida. Some years after Ponce de Leon landed on Florida soil, the Spanish government established a garrison at St. Augustine. The Spanish did little to colonize the area so most of Florida remained in the hands of the Indians.

The first white man to extensively explore the eastcoast of Florida and Georgia was a Frenchman, Captain John Ribault, in 1561. During these explorations, he mapped the shoreline, named the various rivers and sounded the harbors. He made no attempt to establish French colonies but later did start a small and short-lived colony a few miles north of the present site of Port Royal, South Carolina.

In the following years, the Spanish established small religious missions at many places northward from St. Augustine to as far north as what was to be called Port Royal in South Carolina. During this period the English were quite active in developing colonies which flourished along the northern Atlantic coast. Spain extended its dominion over the coastal land of southeastern North America, including the peninsula of Florida, and stretched its domain to the Mississippi River. The French established extensive colonies in the land west of the Mississippi River and in what is now Canada. Hostilities with the Indians were a constant problem with all of the colonists.

England was the strongest colonizer and slowly extended its authority southward. Spain resisted the English intrusion into what it considered Spanish territory but was too weak to defend its claim. Early in the 1700s, the English and the Spanish entered into an agreement that the territory between the Altamaha River and south to the St. Marys River was to be neutral territory, later referred to as the "Debatable Land." Neither country

respected the agreement as there were many violations.

As the English settlers continued their advance into Indian country, they pushed the Indians farther south and west with some of the Creek Indians migrating to Florida. They mingled with the survivors of the original Florida tribes and Negro slaves who had escaped into the Spanish land. Years later, about 1750, the Chief of these migrating Creeks broke away from the Creek nation and his group became known as the Seminoles.

During this period, along the Atlantic coast, by diplomacy and force of arms, the English succeeded in driving the Spanish south from the Debatable Lands, beyond the St. Marys River, the present eastern part of the border between Georgia and Florida. Spanish Florida stretched from the eastcoast of the Florida peninsula to the Mississippi River.

In the early eighteenth century the only major English colony in what is now Georgia was in the Savannah area. In 1733, after many military engagements, the Indians ceded this land area to the colonists. During this period, the English were constantly at war with the Indians who resented the presence of the colonists. The English charter establishing Georgia as a colony provided that it would be a refuge, much like the colony of Pennsylvania, for European Protestants who were suffering injustices. The charter of colonization also anticipated that Georgia would become a haven for the less fortunate people of England.

In Britain, England was in the process of extending its domination over Scotland. Many Scots, seeking to escape the yoke of English oppression, took advantage of the opportunities of the New World, especially in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. England extended its control over all of Scotland with the climactic Battle of Culloden in 1746. Many of the Scots who fought under the banner of St. Andrew's Cross and lost their homeland to the English, became a large group of the immigrants seeking a new life in the southern states, especially Georgia. They brought with them their strong feelings for self-determination, desire for independence and a strong work ethic. These personal attributes became the common characteristics of the people of Georgia. They gave Georgians the strength of purpose for the American Revolution, the tenacity to tame the wilderness, the commitment to states rights advocated by the Confederacy, and the stamina to sustain themselves during times of adversity.

In 1754, the English became engaged in what became known as the "French and Indian War" when the French occupied Ft. Duquesne (Pittsburgh) in Pennsylvania. In 1755, the English moved against the French people of Nova Scotia and relocated them to Louisiana. In 1759, after lengthy battles with the French, the English captured Quebec. In 1762, Spain joined France against the English. A peace treaty was signed in 1763, with France ceding Canada and all of its territory east of the

Mississippi River to England. To Spain, its ally, France ceded all of its territory west of the Mississippi River, including the city of New Orleans. With the signing of the peace treaty with France, the English were given navigational rights to the Mississippi River and the right to use the port of New Orleans.

In 1763, the English signed a peace treaty with Spain, the Treaty of Paris. Spain was forced to give up all of its Florida territory in exchange for Havana, Cuba that the English had captured in 1762. Spain was the dominant colonizer of the West Indies and Havana was of greater importance to Spain than Florida. The first thing that the English did was to divide Florida into East Florida, with its center at St. Augustine, and West Florida, with its center at Pensacola.

Also in 1763, the Indians ceded to the Colony of Georgia the land directly west of the Savannah settlement, the land northward for about one hundred and twenty miles along the Savannah River and the coastal land southward to the St. Marys River. Aggression against the Indians continued which resulted in more Indian lands being ceded to the English in 1773. At this time, most of inland Georgia was still Indian land.

The American colonists became increasingly disenchanted with the yoke of English rule and on April 19, 1775, the first shots of the American Revolution were fired at Bunker Hill. In early 1776, France and Spain agreed to provide arms worth a million pounds of silver to support the colonists against their old enemy, the English. In 1778, France signed a treaty of aid with the Americans and sent a naval fleet in support of the American efforts.

During the war the British maintained a garrison of troops at Fernandina Beach in British Florida. A contingent of British troops was dispatched to western Nassau County and proceeded to cross the St. Marys River into Georgia where colonists had declared their independence from England. After a few miles the strong British force was met by a determined force of the Georgia Militia led by the Governor of Georgia, John Houston. Although badly outnumbered the patriots routed the British force. The intruders retreated south across the St. Marys River with the patriots in close pursuit. The British commander collected his forces and made a strategic stand at a place, which later became known as Alligator Bridge, located a few miles northeast of the present town of Callahan. The patriots were defeated but the British were placed on notice that any attempt to invade Georgia would be met with force and would be costly. The British never again during the war attempted to venture into Georgia.

The war continued for many years *with* many of the colonists who were loyal to the Crown, considered traitors by the Americans, retreating to safety in English Florida. By March 1782, the English cabinet came to the realization that the chances of subjugating the American colonists were nil

and agreed to recognize the independence of the Americans. England and the United States signed a peace treaty on September 3, 1783, recognizing the thirteen colonies, with England retaining control of Florida whose boundaries extended from the eastcoast to the Mississippi River.

Many of the British loyalists who had retreated to Florida invested heavily in the colony where they had planned to make their new home. The loyalists were quickly disappointed when England traded Florida to Spain for the Bahamas. The harbor at the mouth of the St. Marys River became an embarkation point for the many loyalist Englishmen who chose to return to their native land.

After Spain took control of Florida, the Spanish maintained the division of East and West Florida with their respective centers at St. Augustine and Pensacola but made little effort to colonize Florida. Spanish East Florida became a sanctuary for run-a-way slaves from Georgia. Many of the English chose to leave Florida and settle in the Bahamas and West Indies. Spain required that all of the remaining settlers swear allegiance to Spain and practice Catholicism, the religion of Spain. Under the same requirements, Spain offered free land to settlers from Georgia but there were few takers. The United States made many efforts to buy Florida from Spain but to no avail.

On November 20, 1790, to attract more settlers to Florida, the Captain General in St. Augustine, following royal orders, offered the following:

That land will be granted only to those who take the oath of fealty, without bothering about their religion, as long as they make no public display of any religion except Catholic; that land granted shall be 1/3 X 2/3 and the long dimensions shall not be laid out on water front of rivers and creeks but towards the interior.

The concession of freedom of religion attracted a few settlers to take advantage of the invitation of the Spanish government. New settlers were bothered by the absence of a clear Spanish policy as to what and how much land to which they could claim ownership.

By order of the Spanish King to partly vary the rules established for concessions and distribution of lands, the Spanish Governor Enrique White, stationed in Fernandina, promulgated the following:

1st, that new settlers shall state the number and sex of their children and those under 8 shall receive nothing.

2nd, to each head of the family 50 acres and the same for each unmarried or single member of the family of both sexes. Also for each slave and each child between 8 and 16 years of age, 25 acres each.

3rd, those employed in the city shall be given land to be farmed by themselves or their slaves.

4th, these concessions shall die as if not made if the parties do not appear to take

possession and cultivate the land within 6 months.

5th, no one can transfer or sell land without permission of the government.

6th, if anyone wants to move, he can arrange with the government.

7th, wood or pasture land shall be conceded and trespassers forbidden.

8th, land granted shall be surveyed to avoid disputes.

9th, anyone who does not cultivate for 2 years may have his land assigned to another after it has been publicly announced.

These concessions brought many new settlers to north Florida. The ancestors of many of the settlers who received the Spanish land grants still reside in the area. In western Nassau County, the family names of Higginbotham, Kingsley and Pickett, whose ancestors were awarded large Spanish land grants, are quite common.

In the years following the Revolutionary War, the citizens of Georgia pushed the Indians farther westward, culminating with the Indians ceding parcel after parcel of their lands. As the Indian lands were opened for development, the land was given to each settler at a rate of two hundred acres and fifty acres for each member of his family at no cost, with the condition that the settler would work the land. War veterans were also given land bounties for their service to the cause. A great deal of speculation and fraud accompanied this land distribution and about 1800 it was stopped.

The government of Georgia was not able to provide the needed protection to the settlers who were constantly harassed by marauding Indians. By 1800, most of the eastern states, Georgia was no exception, had ceded the western lands of their state to the United States on the condition that the United States provide the needed protection of the settlers in the land retained by the states. It was agreed that the western boundary of Georgia would be the Chattahoochee River. In southeast Georgia, the western section of Camden County was acquired from the Indians in 1802 and was distributed among the settlers by the lottery of 1805.

In 1802, the Indians ceded to Georgia a narrow strip of land from south of the Altamaha River to the St. Marys River, which bordered Spanish East Florida. This land was west of the original northern Glynn and southern Camden coastal counties. This new county was named Wayne and embraced the St. Marys River "Big Bend Country" which later was to become Charlton County. In 1805, the southern half of Wayne County was disassociated and assigned to Camden County.

In 1803, Governor John Milledge advanced a new land distribution system of newly acquired ceded Indian lands. This system provided that all newly ceded Indian lands be surveyed and divided into lots of 202 1/2 acres or 490 acres depending on the value of the land. The lots were then

distributed by lottery in which every citizen was eligible to participate. Every free white male citizen of the United States and a resident of Georgia for twelve months was allowed one chance in the lottery. This distribution system was used until the last of the public lands was distributed. About three-fourths of all the land of Georgia was distributed in this manner. This availability of land enticed many settlers from both North and South Carolina to Georgia. They had only to live in Georgia one year and then they were qualified to participate in the free land lottery. The new settlers swelled the population of the state. Georgia in 1790 had a population of about 82,000 people but by 1820 the population had grown to 340,000. Georgia had become the state of opportunity.

The United States still desired to obtain both East and West Florida from Spain but with no success. In 1808, Congress authorized the President to seize and hold for the United States the Spanish land east of the Perdido River so as to provide a security zone from any foreign invader. Troops were dispatched southward through Camden County which was infested with hostile Indians. Upon arriving at the East Florida border, the St. Marys River, the troops found that the river was teeming with British boats smuggling tariff-free goods into the United States. Many of these boats were hauling slaves into the country. Both Georgia and the United States had passed laws making the importation of slaves illegal. In East Florida, the town of Fernandina on Amelia Island, which guarded the entrance to the St. Marys River, was an open port. Goods from all over the world were being smuggled into the country as American ports were closed to foreign ships. Fernandina became a port for smugglers, pirates and a haven for cutthroats and criminals. Many American and Spanish settlers profited from the illegal trade. Florida's Spanish government was too weak to stop this illicit activity.

In 1808, the United States banned the importation of slaves, with the death penalty for its violation. Fernandina became a favorite slave-smuggling port. The American Navy gunboats that plied the waters off the coast were constantly on the lookout for slave traders. The Navy's vigilance crippled the trading in slaves. Facing the death penalty if caught trading in slaves caused many a ship's captain to dump his slave cargo overboard. Without a market for the slaves, many were released and given their freedom in the Fernandina area of East Florida. By 1811, under Spanish control, the town of Fernandina grew to about eight hundred people and became the major port to the markets of east Florida and Georgia. It was not uncommon to find as many as 150 square rigged schooners in the harbor at one time.

In 1812, American troops advanced upon the Spanish stronghold of St. Augustine, only to be repulsed. The American troops by 1813 were withdrawn from Spanish East Florida. The United States with its desire to control Spanish West Florida invited Americans to settle in the area. By

1813, the land between the Pearl River and Perdido River of West Florida was occupied and controlled by Americans although Spain claimed the land. Spain was too weak to resist the takeover.

The War of 1812 brought the blockade of the coastal ports of the United States by British warships. The British captured the town of St. Marys located on the Georgia side of the St. Marys River. From here the British were able to control the river traffic on the St. Marys River. During the war a British flotilla of twenty-three barges loaded with soldiers attempted to travel up the St. Marys River for the purpose of destroying the large Clarke mill located near the present city of Folkston. Captain William Cone of the Georgia Militia with a band of twenty-eight settlers, by secreting themselves along the banks, firing a volley at the invaders, withdrawing to the next vantage point and shooting again, repeatedly, forced the British to turn and retreat to the town of St. Marys. The British losses were staggering. One hundred and eighty British soldiers were killed and an equal number wounded. Captain Cone did not lose a single man. During the remainder of the war the British never again attempted to invade Georgia.

During the War of 1812, the Creek Indians of Georgia aligned themselves with the English against the Americans. The Indians were armed and supplied by the English fleet operating in the Gulf of Mexico. General Andrew Jackson and his army troops from Tennessee marched against the Indians and inflicted heavy losses upon the Creeks and Seminoles.

Andrew Jackson broke the power of the Creek nation. A treaty signed in 1814 provided that a large tract of Indian land in southern Georgia being ceded to the state. This resulted in three very large counties being formed across southern Georgia. From east to west they were Appling, Irwin and Early. In 1818, the Indian land north of Irwin and Appling counties was ceded by the Creeks to form Hare County. Host of the Seminole Indians were resentful of the white men and remained on the land. Federal troops were dispatched to remove the Indians, resulting in the army being fired upon. The troops inflicted heavy losses upon the Indians with the surviving Seminole Indians fleeing into the swamps. This was the beginning of the Seminole Indian Wars.

Many of the American colonists who settled in Florida during Spanish control were slaveholders so that the territory had a mix of people. Florida's eight thousand residents were composed of Seminole Indians, runaway slaves, English loyalists, Spanish colonists, slaves, and free men. The great distances and an inadequate system of transportation added greatly to the difficulty in the governance of Florida. Most travelers depended upon boats so that the various seaports about the state became the major centers of trade. In 1817, to stop the importation of illegal goods, the American troops occupied the port of Fernandina. After being ravaged by yellow fever, the soldiers were withdrawn in 1819.

The strength of Jackson's forces and the inability of Spain to hold and defend its territory led to the Treaty of 1819 in which Spain agreed to cede East Florida and West Florida to the United States. Final ratification of the treaty came on February 19, 1821. General William O. Butler received the province of East Florida from Spain on July 10, 1821, in a ceremony in St. Augustine. General Andrew Jackson received the province of West Florida from Spain in a ceremony in Pensacola on July 17, 1821.

The Spanish troops and governmental officials were transported to Havana. A great number of the colonists chose to remain and become American citizens. Jackson was appointed military governor of Florida. On his first day as governor, Jackson divided Florida into two counties, St. Johns on the east and Escambia in the west with St. Augustine and Pensacola, respectively, the county seats.

In 1822, during the administration of the second governor of Florida, William P. Duval, the territory was divided into four counties: St. Johns and Duval in the east, and Escambia and Jackson in the west. By 1824, a total of eleven counties, including Nassau, had been formed and by 1828, fourteen. Most of these counties were along the northern border of the territory and included from east to west: Duval, Nassau, Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, Leon, Gadsden, Jackson, Washington, Walton and Escambia. Columbia County was added in 1832 with the division of the western part of Duval County.

An Indian trail, much traveled by the Indians, traversed the area from West Florida to the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia, which made the early settlers subject to the ravages of marauding Indians. For protection, the settlers in 1830 constructed a blockhouse on what was called the old Canaday place, near the present town of Moniac at the headwaters of the St. Marys River in Georgia, just north of the border with Florida. The blockhouse was a combination dwelling and fortress that was shared when the Indian attacks came. It was constructed of hewn, heart pine logs about a story and half high. The lower level had several openings large enough to accommodate a musket. The openings were cut in the shape of a "v" to provide for a wide angle of aim. The upper level openings were cut to an even larger "v" to provide for a wider range of sight. During this period, the predatory bands of Seminoles continually harassed the settlers of the region by pillaging, stealing and scalping, which made it necessary to have this type of blockhouse.

Surveying lands ceded by the Creek Indians in Georgia and the lands of newly acquired Florida presented some serious problems. Indians menaced the surveying parties as well as the new settlers to the areas. The United States resorted to building a series of forts across the southern Georgia and northern Florida frontier to provide some degree of protection.

These forts included Fort Gilmer, located near what is now Fargo,

Georgia. Along the "Big Bend Country" of the St. Marys River, Fort Alert was built at a site where many battles with the Indian were fought. Fort Alert was an important trading post for the settlers. The post later became the town of Traders Hill. In 1838, Fort Moniac was constructed on the St. Marys River in Florida across from the town of Moniac which was located in what was then the southeast corner of Appling County, Georgia. This fort served as a center during the Indian Wars and was maintained until the end of the wars in 1842.

In 1835, many of the settlers were called to arms to fight in the Indian War. In 1838, an agreement was reached by the government and the Indians which provided for the removal of the Cherokee and Creek Indians to Arkansas. This mass exodus of about three thousand Indians, called the Trail of Tears, included most of the Indians of Georgia and North Florida. Some Indians refused to participate and escaped into the swamps and wilderness and continued to harass the troops and settlers. For the most part after 1841, the troops were able to control what few Indians remained and the settlers, who had joined the militia, were able to return to their homes. By 1850 most of the remaining Seminole Indians, estimated to be about three hundred, were driven into the swamps of Florida and the Indian problem was considered settled.

During this period, boat traffic became the standard mode of transportation. Ocean and gulf boat traffic accommodated many counties while river boat traffic provided for inland transportation. The Escambia, Apalachicola-Chattahoochee, Suwannee, St. Johns, St. Marys, Satilla and Altamaha Rivers became important inland waterways carrying boats loaded with salt, flour, lead, guns and finished products inland and returning with hides, turpentine, timber, cotton, tobacco and other farm products. Riverboat traffic also brought new settlers to the inland frontiers. Towns developed along these arteries. Cowtown (Jacksonville) blossomed at the mouth of the St. Johns River and became the center of trade and commerce for the settlers of central Florida. The town of Fernandina, which guarded the entrance of the St. Marys River, became even more important as a commerce center. At various places up the river waterways, trading centers developed which allowed the inland settlers to sell their wares and purchase needed supplies.

These centers along the St. Marys River, from east to west, included St. Marys, Coleraine, Center Village, Traders Hill and Moniac. Coleraine, an old Indian village, was the site of the signing in 1796, of a treaty of peace between the United States and chiefs and warriors of the Creek Indian Nation. The Creek Indians were the inhabitants of the area and at the time were constantly preying upon the newly arrived settlers.

For years the St. Marys River traffic established Traders Hill as the most important community of western Camden County and the center of political power. It served the settlers of Appling, Ware and western Camden

counties and western Nassau County, Florida as a trading center. Outgoing boats, loaded with rice, cotton, sugar, hides, turpentine, timber and tobacco, would take these products to Fernandina, Cowtown, Savannah and Charleston for further shipment. The settlers had a waiting market for their products. Highly productive trade routes were established between the states of Florida, Georgia and South Carolina and the countries of England and France.

The early settlers of western Camden County and Nassau County were divided into three groups: farmers who tilled the soil, the forest people who logged and tapped the pine trees for turpentine, and a group who trapped and killed wild game for their pelts. Hauling the farm products from Appling County, located on the western side of the great Okefenokee Swamp, was difficult but the rewards justified the settlers' efforts. There was talk of constructing a canal across the Okefenokee Swamp to connect the St. Marys River with the Suwannee River to aid in the transportation of farm goods to market. Merchants and tradesmen established themselves in Traders Hill to serve the people of this busy area. Traders Hill became the center of civilization for the people living in western Camden and western Nassau counties.

By the early 1840s many prominent families had established themselves in the Big Bend Country. In Charlton County there were the families of Atkinson, Baker, Ballard, Bryant, Cain, Canaday, Chesser, Clark, Crews, Daugharty, Dedge, Douglas, Fleming, Garrett, Geiger, Grooms, Henderson, Hilliard, Hodges, Holzendorff, Johns, John J. Johnson, John M. Johnson (no relation to John J.), Jones, Kenison, Lang, Libby, Lloyd, Lowther, Marr, McCall, McClellan, Mizell, Mumford, O'Steen, Privett, Purse, Raulerson, Roddenberry, Rowe, Sikes, Smith, Stokes, Surrency, Wainright, Wheeler, Vernon, Vickery and others. On the Florida side of the St. Marys River in western Nassau County were the families of Beasley, Bleach, Brandies, Braddock, Crosier, Fernandez, Gibson, Haddock, Higginbotham, Hogan, Isabella, Jones, Kingley, Parmenter, Pickett, Pons, Tanner, Vaughn, Willis and others. In the years that followed many Georgia pioneers moved across the river and settled in western Nassau County.

The people of Georgia, bound by their tenacious work ethic, developed an intense and solid commitment to the patriotism of Georgia. In the 1840s, with the blessing of the citizens, the governor of Georgia indicated to the United States government that war would develop if ever the United States would try to interfere with the sovereignty of Georgia. The Georgia citizens considered serving in the state legislature of Georgia a higher status than serving in the legislative branch of the United States. This attitude caused James Jackson to resign his seat in the United States Senate to accept a seat in the Georgia Legislature.

New settlers from the Carolinas and northern Georgia arrived daily so that

by 1850 it was estimated that there were about two thousand residents in Camden County. Most of them were located in the eastern half of the county but the west had a sizable and growing population. Nassau County, Florida, located on the south side of the St. Marys River was sparsely populated, except the area around the eastern town of Fernandina. The differing lifestyles and aspirations of the people of eastern Camden County and the frontiersmen of western Camden County provided the need for Georgia to divide the county.

In 1854, Charlton County was formed from the western half of Camden County, long considered the poor area of the county. Charlton County was named for the highly respected Judge Robert Milledge Charlton of Savannah, Georgia, who had served as mayor of Savannah for two terms. Traders Hill was designated the county seat and a local government was established. A municipal building, a post office and a jail were constructed. The jail was a tall block building constructed of hewn logs without windows or doors except for an entrance in the center of the roof. To accommodate a prisoner, the roof door would be opened and a ladder lowered to the ground floor below. After a prisoner had descended the ladder, the ladder would be withdrawn and the roof door bolted. A traveling circuit judge, who served many counties, would dispense justice. In the charter establishing Charlton County, superior courts were to be held on Wednesdays in June and Thursdays in December and inferior courts on the first Monday in May and the second Monday in October. With the small population of Charlton County, only a few trials were necessary. The jurisdiction of the courts extended only to the people in Georgia. Often a prisoner in court seeing that he was about to be convicted would bolt from the courtroom, quickly dash to the river and swim across to the Florida side and freedom. Traders Hill served as the center of government and trade for people living on both sides of the St. Marys River, those in Charlton County and those in western Nassau County, Florida.

A story of justice meted out by the early settlers of Charlton County is revealed in the book entitled, *History of Charlton County* by Alex McQueen. An old document, dated September 6, 1858, found in the possession of Erick Johnson, veteran of Florida's Indian Wars and the Civil War, county treasurer for eighteen years and son of one of the very first pioneers to the area, reveals that citizen justice was of vital importance. Apparently two Negro slaves killed a young man who had criticized their work of tapping the pine trees for gum. The slaves laid in wait and as the young man rode by on his horse, they left their hiding place, pounced on the man and pulled him from his horse. They cut him to death with the heavy tools that they used to tap the pine trees for the gum. The slaves cut up the body of the young man and buried it in an isolated place where it probably would have never been found. The young man was missed and the next day a search party was formed. The two slaves were suspected, questioned, readily admitted their guilt and led the search

party to the place where they had buried the body. The two were thrown into the jail to await the next meeting of the superior court that was to be held a few months later. Twice the prisoners escaped from the jail, apparently with some outside help. Each time they were caught and returned to the jail. After the second escape and capture, the people of the community issued and posted a proclamation signed by one hundred and seven men living in the surrounding area, which was about all of the men of the area. The men proclaimed that on the following day at Traders Hill between the hours of noon and one o'clock, the two confessed killers would be hung until dead. The wife of the sheriff stayed up all night guarding the jail house door to prevent another escape. The next morning a scaffold was constructed and at the appointed hour the condemned men were led from the jail to the scaffold. A noose was placed around the neck of each convict by a member of the vigilante court. A long rope was fastened to the trigger of the trap door of the scaffold and each man who had signed the death proclamation placed a hand on the rope. When the signal was given, the men pulled the rope, springing the trap and the two confessed murderers plunged to their death. Erick Johnson was one of those who signed and pulled the trip rope. He was joined by many of the pioneers who have descendants currently living in the area.

The land of Charlton County and western Nassau County was relatively flat, lowland with dense forests of pine trees, oak hammocks and reptile-infested swamps. Clearing the land was a monumental task and revealed a soil composed of coarse sand, incapable of retaining much moisture. This was marginal farming land but lent itself to grazing animals. The pine forests afforded, besides turpentine, wood for construction and a cash-producing commodity for export. Game was bountiful and provided hunters and trappers with a livelihood.

The early settlers of the Big Bend Country, a hearty group, were accustomed to hard work. They were a fiercely independent people, endowed with the determination to be successful, common to those possessed with the frontier spirit. A high percentage of these early pioneers were of Scottish heritage, common to many of the people of the south. They fought the elements, tilled the land, took what was available and made their efforts profitable.

The land on the Florida side of the St. Marys River was slow to develop. The Spanish issued a land grant for a settler by the name of Higginbotham, who was one of the earliest settlers of the area. By 1855, a sizable number of settlers had moved across the river to western Nassau County and developed an area, which later became known as Hilliard.

The threat of the National Congress to impose protective tariffs on foreign goods being imported into the United States and the retaliatory tariffs threatened by England and France caused serious concern to the farmers of Georgia, South Carolina and Florida. They had worked hard to settle

the area and to turn the wilderness land into profitable production. Exportation of cotton, sugar, tobacco and turpentine to England and France had become the lifeblood of the people of these states. The imposition of protective tariffs for the manufacturers of the north was perceived to be a challenge to the sovereignty of the southern states. Retaliatory tariffs by England and France would destroy the south's foreign trade. Georgia citizens were enraged by this attack upon their livelihood and their way of life. Solidarity among the people emerged. The northern tradesmen, who were asking their politicians for protection for their products, were viewed as traitors to the founding core and principles of this country.

The leaders of the political party of Lincoln, who were advancing the idea of protective tariffs, were not looked upon with great favor. The people of the south resented these efforts and showed their disdain at the polls in the presidential election of 1860. Florida bragged that not one person in Florida voted for Mr. Lincoln. With the election of Lincoln, the settlers of Georgia and north Florida felt that their sovereign states rights were being trampled upon.

By 1860, the population of Charlton County had grown to 1,780. The citizens were deeply patriotic to Georgia and were solidly committed to protecting the sovereignty of their state and the concomitant rights. The people of Georgia and Florida were staunch supporters of the formation of the confederate States of America. It is not surprising that with so many people in the south being of Scottish heritage that the flag of the Confederacy bore the Cross of St. Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland. Not long after Lincoln's election in 1860, the War Between the States started.

The people of Georgia and Florida were strongly committed to states rights and were quick to answer the call to arms by their state governments. There were very few Negroes in Charlton County and western Nassau County. For the most part, there were only a few slaves as there were few plantations in the area. The cream of the young manhood of the area took up arms in behalf of the Confederate States of America. In 1861, at Traders Hill there was formed the "Okefenokee Rifles," Company F of the 26th Regiment of the Georgia Volunteer Infantry, Army of Northern Virginia. Recruits for this company were drawn from Charlton and western Nassau Counties. Charlton County was also represented, along with the counties of Glynn and Camden, when the 1st Company of the 4th Military District was formed. Many of the young men of Charlton County joined their contemporaries in western Nassau County and enlisted in the units of Company D, Tenth Florida Infantry and Company K Second Florida Cavalry.

During the war a Federal gunboat with troops made its way up the St. Marys River from Fernandina for the purpose of destroying property and

bringing fear to the hearts of the inland citizens. A defensive force of local militia was quickly assembled. Men were stationed behind the trees, lining the Georgia and Florida banks of the river. The Confederate militia poured continuous rifle fire upon the Union intruders. The defenders would reload, run ahead of the gunboat, hide behind a tree and again pour fire upon the invaders. Under the onslaught of so much rifle fire, the Federal gunboat had little choice but to turnabout and return to Fernandina. During the war Federal troops never again tried to invade Charlton and western Nassau Counties.

In the spring of 1864 General Sherman and his Federal forces invaded Georgia from Tennessee with the prime objective to burn and destroy and take the city of Atlanta. Union Forces occupied Fernandina and Sherman was bringing the war closer to Charlton and western Nassau Counties. During the last week of May, with the thought that their homes and farms might be threatened, most of the remaining men of the area left their families and farms to enlist in a regiment of the Florida Reserves which was being formed at Lake City. This large group of men from western Nassau and Charlton Counties was formed into Company G of the First Florida Reserves. The regiment was pressed into service to guard against the aggression of Sherman's forces but to little avail. In the last days of the war many of the men went AWOL rather than surrender to the Union Forces. The Federals designated Lake City and the city of Madison as the places for the surrender of troops of this company. Those who surrendered were paroled during the third week of May 1865. Many years later Florida granted a pension to the soldiers and their spouses of those who did not go AWOL.

Many brave young men of Charlton and western Nassau Counties did not return, having given their lives on the battlefields of Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and other far off places. Almost to the man, the men who stayed behind joined the local state militia to defend their state from the foreign invaders of the north. During the war the citizens suffered at the hands of Union sympathizers and Confederate deserters who stole peoples' horses, mules and cattle and sold them to the Union troops stationed at Fernandina, Florida.

Many men of the Georgia and Florida State Militias participated and gave their lives in the lost-cause defense of Atlanta and in action against the Union forces of General Sherman in their march to the sea. The wide destructive swath across Georgia of killing, pillaging, burning and widespread destruction of farm animals, crops and structures by Sherman's forces caused a deep, unforgiving resentment in the hearts of many southerners which was to last for years.

Following the war a large number of northern entrepreneurs and carpetbaggers descended upon the south. Farmers and stockmen from northern Georgia moved into the Big Bend Country. A large number of

operators from Virginia and the Carolinas developed turpentine plants and sawmills in Charlton and Nassau Counties. Many Negro workmen were imported from other parts of the south to work in these industries.

Times were very difficult for the people of Georgia under Federal military rule since much personal and real property had been destroyed and productive lands lain to waste by the Federal forces. Foreign trade, which was so important to the people of the south before the war had been, for the most part, terminated. The foreign markets for cotton, tobacco and sugar had been closed. With the devastation that the war brought and the loss of foreign markets, the people of the area were poverty stricken. The people, especially the settlers of Charlton and western Nassau Counties, like the rest of Georgia and northern Florida, had difficulty sustaining their families.

Military rule in southern Georgia and northern Florida ended in 1867, with local civil government returned to the voters. These voters included male southerners that requested and were granted amnesty and swore allegiance to the Union, carpetbaggers from the north and the newly freed slaves who had been granted voting rights. Many southerners refused to humble themselves to the Union and held steadfastly to the cause of the Confederacy, the deep belief in the sovereignty of the state was right. Therefore few white southerners had their civil rights restored and had little say in governmental matters. The withdrawal of Federal troops in 1877 put an end to the carpetbagger and Negro governmental rule of Georgia and Florida.

During this reconstruction period, Charlton and western Nassau counties were spared many of the indignities that were suffered by the citizens of Camden and eastern Nassau Counties. There were few Negroes in the Big Bend area so the people were spared the embarrassment and humiliation imposed by having Union military officers and carpetbagger and Negro civil authorities ruling their daily lives.

The old way of life was gone and farming was reduced to the foodstuffs the settlers could raise for their family's consumption. The people turned to the only resource available for their livelihood, the great pine forests. The widespread cutting of the virgin forests began. Much of the beautiful pine tree woods of Charlton and Nassau Counties was laid to waste to produce cash to sustain the citizens. Talk was renewed for the construction of the canal across the Okefenokee Swamp to connect the St. Marys River with the Suwannee River for moving farm products but the poverty of the times chilled those efforts. During these years the population of Charlton County had grown very little so that by 1880 it stood at about 2,154.

Just prior to the war, railroads, a new method of transportation, were introduced to Charlton County and western Nassau County. After the war, use of railroads was expanded and the impact as a viable transportation

system grew more and more apparent. The years following their introduction, the once mighty St. Marys River began to lose its importance as a viable waterway except for floating logs downstream for processing. Those once important centers of commerce along the St. Marys River were only memories. With the expansion of the railroads came new centers of commerce such as Folkston, Moniac and St. George in Charlton County and Hilliard and Callahan in western Nassau County, Florida, all located along the main rail line. The railroads made it possible to move large shipments of timber harvested from the forests of Charlton and Nassau Counties.

During the 1880s, after civil rights were returned to the white southerners and the yoke of military occupation was lifted, a renewed spirit became evident in Charlton and Nassau Counties. With the widespread cutting and shipment of timber came prosperity to the area. Cuyler W. Hilliard with his son-in-law James S. Bailey acquired the timber rights on 12,000 acres of virgin forestland in western Nassau County. A tram railroad was constructed from the area near the St. Marys River to the town of Hilliard in Nassau County where Mr. Hilliard had built a sawmill.

The town of Hilliard was the eastern terminus of the tram railroad that connected with the main north-south railroad line of the Savannah, Florida and Western Railroad. The tram railroad opened up western Nassau County for the harvesting of the virgin pine forests. In Charlton County the trees were cut and the timber transported to Folkston where sawmills were established. Folkston became a shipping center for the milled lumber on the Savannah, Florida and Western Railroad.

By 1900, Nassau and Charlton Counties were in their golden period. The population of Charlton County had grown to about 3,600 and by 1910, over 4,700. With the cleared land caused by the loss of the forests, economic interests turned to farming and developing towns. Housing developments sprung up in Charlton County to accommodate retiring people from the north. One such development was located a few miles north of Folkston and another at St. George. A massive advertising campaign in Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania was conducted to recruit retirees. A special effort was made to attract Union veterans of the War Between the States to these developments.

In western Nassau County the cleared forest lands in and around the town of Hilliard were purchased by the Cornwall Farm Land Company. The company platted the land in the area and conducted an aggressive sales campaign in the north to sell small tracts of land for pecan, fruit and small truck farming. The railroads brought hundreds of people from the north to the area. Small farms were cultivated and pecan tree groves planted. Houses sprung up and businesses flourished. The area prospered with land sales and housing developments.

By 1910 business opportunities began to wane as fewer and fewer people were attracted to the area. Shortly after, an exodus started as many of the newly arrived citizens began returning to their northern hometowns. People left in large numbers, homes and farms were abandoned and businesses failed. Years of cutting reduced the forests so that few trees were available for harvesting or tapping for turpentine. By 1920 a period of stagnation afflicted the area and the livelihood of those who remained became marginal. For a number of years limited timber cutting and turpentine collecting activities continued but the way of life of the remaining families was very hard to endure. For many years the area was beset with difficult times.

The strong will of the people sustained them during these hard times for they were endowed with the tenacity and strong commitment to the work ethic that prevailed among their ancestors, the early settlers of Georgia and Florida. With the introduction of planned planting, cultivating and harvesting of pine trees, the land of Charlton and western Nassau Counties once again became productive. Pine tree farming brought back a semblance of prosperity to the people and became a major economic activity of Charlton and western Nassau Counties. It is interesting to note that some of the pecan trees planted shortly after the turn of the century are still producing pecans for the people of the area.

[END]